Reflections on Twenty Years of Palestinian History

Edward W. Said


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Two decades after Black September (1970), the main aspects of Palestinian life remain dispossession, exile, dispersion, disenfranchisement (under Israeli military occupation), and, by no means least, an extraordinarily widespread and stubborn resistance to these travails. Thousands of lives lost and many more irreparably damaged seem not to have diminished the spirit of resilience characterizing a national movement that despite its many achievements in achieving legitimacy, visibility, and enormous sustenance for its people, against staggering odds, has not discovered a method for stopping or containing the relentless Israeli attempt to take over more and more Palestinian (as well as other Arab) territory. But the discrepancy between important political, moral, and cultural gains on the one hand, and, on the other, a droning ground bass of land alienation is at the heart of the Palestinian dilemma today. To speak of this discrepancy in aesthetic terms as an ironic one is by no means to reduce or trivialize its force. On the contrary: what to many Palestinians is either an incomprehensible cruelty of fate or a measure of how appalling are the prospects for settling their claims can be clarified by seeing irony as a constitutive factor in their lives.

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Paradox and Irony: The PLO and Its Environment

As I write in the aftermath of the Gulf war, the United States Secretary of State James Baker has just completed his third trip to the region and is setting out on another, his aim the settling of the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and its Palestinian-Israeli component in particular. In the Arab states he has visited, he was reported to have been told by every senior official with whom he spoke that no improvement in the Arab states’ essentially nonexistent relationships with Israel could be expected until the question of Palestine was seriously addressed. Yet at the same time, the PLO is being hypercritically snubbed throughout the Arab states of the coalition, Palestinians of the occupied territories are experiencing even greater hardships because of the disruption of funds from the Gulf, and the situation of Palestinians resident in the Gulf states is precarious. Most dramatically, the entire Palestinian community in Kuwait has been undergoing severe tribulations, with torture, deportation, arbitrary arrests, and summary killings the order of the day; leaving aside the immeasurable material losses to this community and its dependents in the occupied territories, there is the additional fact that the restored Kuwaiti authorities have announced that those Palestinian residents who left Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation will not be allowed back, leaving tens of thousands of refugees in a Jordan already severely overburdened. Those who have remained face astringent measures, among them further deportation and imprisonment, against them.

Thus the averred moral and political centrality of the Palestinian issue to official Arab discourse is scandalized by the actual relationship between the Palestinians as a real people, political community, and nation on the one hand, and the Arab states on the other. This particular contradiction takes us back to 1967. For the emergence of the Palestinian movement after the June War was fuelled by a wish to compensate for the dreadful performance of the Arab armies against Israel. In an important sense, then, the critical, almost abrasive relationship between Palestinian activity and the Arab state system is structural, not incidental. With the rise of the PLO in the late 1960s came such things as a daring frankness, an unusual new cosmopolitanism in which figures such as Fanon, Mao, and Guevara entered the Arab political idiom, and the audacity (perhaps even brashness) attendant upon a political movement proposing itself as capable of doing better than many of its benefactors and patrons.

Yet we should not mistake this structurally critical relationship and speak about it only as an antithetical one. True, when we think of the conflict between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian guerrilla groups in 1970-71, or the various duels between the PLO and the Lebanese army in the early 1970s, or the terrible Sabra and Shatila massacres of 1982, or the current antagonism between the PLO, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and, of course, Syria, the implicit tensions do seem to have taken dramatically unpleasant forms. But there is a whole other dimension that needs to be recalled as well.
All Palestinians have known that their principal constituency is Arab, and that their struggle exists in an overwhelmingly Arab and Islamic environment. No less important in the critical relationship, therefore, is the symbiosis and sympathy between the Arab and Palestinian causes, the way in which, for example, Palestine has come to symbolize what is best and most vital in the pan-Arab tradition of cooperation, dramatic energy, and spirit. But here, too, paradox and irony are evident. Doubtless the post-Shukairy PLO that has come to be dominated for two decades by Yasir Arafat initially saw itself as Arabist in the Nasserist sense. But, early on, the organization involved itself in at least three and perhaps even four or five other circles of influence regionally and internationally, not all of them congruent with each other, not all of them basically similar. First was the Gulf, which since 1948 has been central to the economics and demographics of the Palestinian forward march. This brought not only the largely conservative political outlook of many of the rulers into a rapprochement with the PLO that lasted for years, but also two other factors, each of which imparted an ideological inflexion of significant note: money and Sunni Islam. Second was the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the immediate bond struck between the Khomeini regime and the PLO. This brought in important state support for Palestine from a non-Arab branch of Shia Islam that was associated with an extremely volatile quasi-millenarianism startlingly to be reflected in sections of the PLO membership. And if the Iranian convergence was not enough, there remained a third element, the organic link between the Palestinian struggle and most of the progressive, oppositional movements within the Arab world, from Egyptian Marxists, Nasserists, and Muslim groups, to a whole variety of large as well as small parties, personalities, and currents in the Gulf, the Fertile Crescent and North Africa.

A fourth, and particularly striking, circle of influence might be the world of independence and liberation movements. Some day the history of exchange and support between the PLO and such groups as the African National Congress, SWAPO, the Sandinistas, as well as the anti-Shah revolutionary Iranian groups will describe an extraordinary chapter in the twentieth-century struggle against various forms of tyranny and injustice. No wonder that Nelson Mandela, for example, averred publicly that opposition to apartheid and adherence to Palestinian rights were essentially a common cause, and no wonder that by the end of the 1970s there was not a progressive cause that did not identify with the Palestinian movement. Moreover, by the time of the 1982 Lebanese invasion and the intifada, Israel lost virtually all the political high-ground it had once occupied; now it was Palestine and its people that had gained the moral upper hand.

The point about all these often bewildering confluences is not that they worked badly or well, but that they worked at all, given the tremendous number of extremely unsettling forces latent in relationships between the Palestinians and a number of Arab states. Still, large patches of history since 1970 can be interpreted as deriving from conjunctures that are held to, then
put aside with animosity and recrimination, then sometimes resumed. The Palestinian-Jordanian relationship in the early 1970s was deeply antagonistic, with great loss of life and property; a decade or so later it had become, while admittedly guarded, cordial, with a Jordanian-Palestinian entente sufficiently mutual to permit an Amman meeting in 1984 of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the idea of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation and even confederation, and so forth. Syria's presence in the movement has been equally oscillating if not always as forgiving—several PNC meetings were held in Damascus, and in the early days of the Lebanese civil war there was a military alliance, but since things went sour in the early 1980s they have not been restored. With Egypt and Iraq there was never armed conflict, but there have been severe ups and downs, the most recent of which put the PLO and Cairo at odds, partly over the PLO's alliance with Iraq, which began well before 2 August 1991 and which was occasioned by the drift away from Palestinian support in the major Arab states during the mid-1980s. As for Lebanon, there the story is a truly tangled one, in which surrogates of the Arab states, Iran, or Israel, in addition to local militias and parties, waltzed with or actively fought the Palestinians, who were formally driven out in 1982 and (as I write) are now back, adjusting uneasily to a post-Taif Lebanon effectively administered by the Syrian army.

Two themes emerge from this shifting story of an extremely uncertain, but inevitably involving, environment. First is the absence of a strategic ally of Palestinian nationalism. The second is a sort of obverse to the first, namely, the undoubted presence over the decades of a relatively independent Palestinian political will. And indeed, the immensely convoluted road travelled by the Palestinian national movement suggests that the will was wrested from the environment. Thus at the 1974 Rabat Summit just after the October War, the PLO was named "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." At the 1984 PNC held in Jordan the idea being celebrated was that after the ghastly Palestinian engagement with the Syrian army in North Lebanon, Palestinians could hold a National Council meeting despite Syria's adjacency and its leader's claims to hegemony over regional strategy. But the most egregious example of the Palestinian exercise of independence was the 1988 PNC meeting in Algiers, in which an historical compromise was enacted by Palestinians who now saw their fight for self-determination located in a partitioned Palestine. At the same time, a Palestinian state guided by a set of enlightened constitutional and wholly secular principles was also declared in Algiers.

Changes and Transformations

We should not, I think, scant the impressive generosity of vision, the audacity of leaps, the daring of certain formulations, that stand out as the Palestinian will has been slowly forged. In other words, it has not just been a matter of Palestinian accommodations to reality, but often a matter of actually
either anticipating or transforming the reality. By the same token, it would be
wrong to deny the schooling effects of the international environment on the
countenance of Palestinian politics.

The most noticeable result of these international effects was, of course, the
transformation of a liberation movement into a national independence move-
ment, already implicit in the 1974 PNC notion of a state and national author-
ity. But there were other important changes, such as acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338 (unnecessarily fetishized as evil incarnate by Pales-
tinian orators for almost a generation), a period of realignment with Egypt
after Camp David, and the acceptance of the Baker Plan in 1989-90. When
we put these accommodations next to the history of stubborn refusals that
preceded them, we will be surprised at how, given the intensely lived back-
ground of Palestinian loss and suffering, these Palestinian declarations and
leniencies stand out for their qualitative elevation and the genuine hope they
carry for reconciliation with the Jewish people. They contain a longstanding
project for political, rather than military, settlement with a difficult enemy,
given the realization made along the way that neither Israelis nor Palestinians
really have a military option against the other. But what also stands out is the
implacability of the answering Israeli refusal to acknowledge, deal with, or
come to any sort of understanding with Palestinian nationalism.

This point needs emphasis. Even though one would have wished that Pal-
estinian acceptance of Resolution 242 might have taken place a decade ear-
lier, or that there had been a less strident tone to Palestinian rhetoric about
"armed struggle" during the 1970s and 1980s, or that Palestinians saw their
role as in fact bringing the Arab world together rather than in driving it fur-
ther apart (especially during the Gulf crisis), there is no question that the
overall thrust of Palestinian policy has been moderating rather than escalat-
ing in demands and dreams. The fact is that under Arafat, Palestinian poli-
tics have worked their way in from the peripheries to the center of an
international consensus on coexistence with Israel as well as on statehood
and self-determination; at the same time, the Israeli position has gone in the
opposite direction, moving from the craftily apparent moderation of Labor
governments to the hardening maximalist extremism of successive Likud-
dominated governments after 1977. Today, for example, far-right Greater
Israel zealots and ideologists like Shamir, Sharon, and Arens almost appear
to be centrists in a cabinet that includes Yuval Neeman and a representative
of the Moledet Party, which openly subscribes to the mass "transfer" of
Palestinians out of Palestinian territory. Thus the presence of Arafat has
steadied the course of Palestinian politics—domesticated it, some would
say—whereas exactly the reverse has occurred inside Israel. And one should
not fail to note that when we speak here of Palestinian politics under Arafat,
we are referring not just to a handful of peace activists or oppositional sports,
but to the Palestinian mainstream, formalized and coalesced in the declara-
tions of the Palestine National Council, which represents the Palestinian na-
tion at its highest legislative and political level.
Along with this change there has also been a reversal of roles on the discursive and symbolic level, about which I shall have more to say presently. Ever since its founding in 1948, Israel has enjoyed an astonishing dominance in matters of scholarship, political discourse, international presence, and valorization. Israel was taken to represent the best in the Western and biblical traditions. Its citizens were soldiers, yes, but also farmers, scientists, and artists; its miraculous transformation of an "arid and empty land" gained universal admiration, and so on and on. In all this, Palestinians were either "Arabs," or anonymous creatures of the sort that could only disrupt and disfigure a wonderfully idyllic narrative. Still more important, Israel represented (if it did not always play the role of) a nation in search of peace, while the Arabs were warlike, bloodthirsty, bent on extermination and prey to irrational violence, more or less forever. By the end of the 1980s, the images were brought into closer correspondence with reality, and this through a combination of aggressive counteractivity, excellent scholarship and research, political resistance of the kind that the intifada raised to a very high level and, of course, the increased brutality and political vacancy and negativism offered by official Israel. Although most of this change was due to Palestinian activity, it is of great importance here to note the signal contribution of many Jewish, and even Zionist, groups and individuals, inside as well as outside Israel, who through revisionist scholarship, courageous speaking out for human rights, and active campaigning against Israeli militarism, helped to make the change possible.

Another factor must be added to this survey of change: the extraordinary paramountcy achieved by the United States of America. One way of looking at how the selectively present role of the U.S. in the early 1970s was metamorphosed into what is without doubt the most massive institutional presence of any outside power in modern Middle Eastern history is to compare Henry Kissinger's role on the one hand with the cementing of a strategic alliance between Israel and the U.S. during the Reagan years on the other. Kissinger conducted shuttle diplomacy and statesmanship with noisy fanfare. He did help to negotiate the end of the 1973 war, and he did bring about Sinai II, as it was called in 1975, and he did lay the ground for the Camp David accords. Yet even though the U.S. offered Israel a massive battlefield resupply in 1973, and even though there were associations and all sorts of joint efforts between the two countries, the presence of the Soviet Union as well as U.S. interests actively pursued in some of the Arab states prevented anything like an institutional connection between the two countries. So while Richard Nixon was embroiled with Watergate, and Kissinger's self-promotions and peregrinations were tireless, Israel was not the principal focus of U.S. attention during the 1970s; levels of aid were high but not yet astronomical; the competition between Egypt and Israel was still absorbing; the cold war, Latin America, and Vietnam were still high priorities.

By the end of the period that brought Ronald Reagan to office in 1980, things were very different. Egypt and Israel were bracketed together so far as
foreign aid legislation, and to some extent public perception, were concerned. Alexander Haig had given Israel a green light in Lebanon. (Contrast this with Jimmy Carter's stern admonishment to the Begin government during its 1978 Lebanese incursion that the Israeli army had to quit, which it immediately did.) By the time George Shultz took office in the summer of 1982, the groundwork had been laid for the largest single deal to be struck between the United States and any foreign government on foreign aid, military assistance, and almost unconditional political support. And this while Israel's expropriation of Palestinian land continued apace, while thousands of Palestinians lost their lives to Israeli violence, and while Israel's lawless disregard of UN resolutions, the Geneva and Hague Conventions and international human rights norms continued undeterred. Although the practice had begun when Daniel Moynihan had been America's UN ambassador, the United States now stood alone with Israel in the world organization, often defying common sense and humanity with outrageous positions. During the summer of 1982, with the Israeli siege of Beirut continuing unstopped, with literally hundreds of air sorties flown unchecked and the city cut off from electrical, water, food, and medical supplies, a UN Security Council resolution calling on Israel to let pass humanitarian supplies was vetoed by the U.S. on the grounds that it was "unbalanced."

The best American indices of how close the countries had become was, first, the proclamation in 1984 by the head of AIPAC that in the Reagan period the U.S. Congress had become the most pro-Israel in history (and the one subject to sanction if members did not comply, as was the case with Rep. Paul Findley and Senator Charles Percy, both of Illinois) and second, that U.S. aid had risen geometrically from an average of $70 million per year in the 1960s to over $3 billion per year fifteen years later. These figures say nothing about such matters as intelligence sharing (which Jonathan Pollard's arrest in 1985 seems to have done very little to limit or subject to further control), military strategic planning, and all sorts of joint activities in the less savory regimes of the third world (as documented by researchers Jane Hunter and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi).

The extraordinary interventionary powers of the U.S. in the Middle East had even more dramatic, more highlighted visibility in such episodes as, for instance, President Carter's successful negotiation of the Camp David Accords, the subsequent return of Sinai to Egypt, and a treaty of quasi-normality between Israel and Egypt. And, of course, the U.S. armed military intervention into the Gulf region in August 1991, following Iraq's illegal invasion and annexation of Kuwait. Never before had so many U.S. troops been brought to the area (the 1958 and 1982-83 Lebanon incursions pale in comparison) and never since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century had such devastation been wrought upon a sovereign Arab state by an outside power. Thus, for better or for worse, and like a fact of nature, the United States stands unopposed by any significant state power in the Middle East. Its enormous interest in Gulf oil, the political (and mostly frozen) status of the
area, and its favorable geostrategic leverage over any and all: none of these is now seriously in jeopardy. Only the seething discontent of various disadvantaged or alienated groups—most prominently, of course, the Islamic associations—still have the potential of nudging things somewhat and, less likely, of overturning them completely. Only in its scandalous complicity with Israel in violation of UN resolutions does the U.S.'s juggling of double standards keep it provocatively before even its staunchest allies, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, embarrassed and perpetually disaffected.

The Palestinians and Western Discourse

As far as Western awareness of Palestinian rights is concerned, it is noticeable that things began to change for the better from the moment the PLO emerged as the authentic leadership of the Palestinian people. Expert commentators such as Thomas L. Friedman of the New York Times have argued that the Palestinians owe their new relative prominence in Western consciousness to the fact that their opponents were Israeli Jews, but the fact is that the shift came about because of what Palestinians did constructively to change their status, and because of what was done in reaction by Israeli Jews. It was after the rise of the PLO that Palestinians were treated for the first time by the media as independent from the collective “Arabs;” this was one of the first results of the 1968-70 period when Amman was the eye of the storm. Thereafter it was Beirut that attracted attention to the Palestinians. The climax of this period was the siege of Beirut, lasting from June until September 1982, with its grisly outcome in the Sabra and Shatila Camp massacres of mid-September just after the main body of PLO combatants had been forced to leave the country. But it was not only that Palestinians fought back, which they did. It was also that they projected a vision, if not always a clear program, and in their own lives turned themselves into a nation in exile rather than a loose collection of individuals and small-scale groups living here and there.

There is also the considerable importance of the Palestinians' extraordinary success in having their cause adopted by others, intelligently exploiting the multiple levels of significance affiliated with Palestine, no ordinary geographical spot. Here it is expedient simply to list the places, both cultural and political, upon which Palestine was projected by the mobilized and coordinated work of Palestinians and the PLO: by the early 1970s Palestine and the PLO were central to the Arab League and of course the UN. By 1980 the European Community had declared Palestinian self-determination to be one of the main planks of its Middle East policy, though there did remain differences between countries like France, the Scandinavian states, Spain, Italy, Greece, Ireland, and Austria on the one hand, and Germany, Holland, and above all the United Kingdom on the other. Meanwhile, transnational organizations like the OAU, the Islamic Conference, the Socialist International, UNESCO, the Vatican, the various international church organizations, as
well as an innumerable host of NGOs all registered the cause of Palestinian self-determination with noticeable emphasis, many for the first time. Whereas some of these groups were able to extend their support into counterpart or branch American groups, there was always, in my view, a serious lag between what happened outside the U.S. and what occurred in it, between the frank support for Palestinian self-determination that occurred in Europe and the gingerly acceptance of Palestinian rights reformulated in the counterpart American position so jesuitically as to elude the censorious thought-police of the Israeli lobby.

Thus it is still the case in the United States that the major television networks contact the Israeli consul to clear the names of possible pro-Palestinian participants on any major program; note, however, that it is a relatively new thing to have Palestinians at all. It is still the case that AIPAC and its constituent groups organize protests when Palestinians speak, have published enemies lists, have prevented television programs from appearing. It is also the case that under pressure, prominent artists like Vanessa Redgrave are punished for their positions, and that a whole slew of publications refuse to publish either anything even mildly critical of Israel or any Arab or Muslim voice that has not openly identified itself as anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. What I am trying to suggest, therefore, is the still depressed nature of public discourse in the U.S., which lags dramatically behind its counterparts in most of Western Europe and, of course, in the Third World. The symbolism of Palestine is still so potent as to enlist amongst its enemies total denial and occlusion, as when theater performances are canceled because they either show Palestinians sympathetically or because Zionism is portrayed critically (Hakawati by New York's Public Theater, or Jim Allen's play Perdition at London's Royal Court Theatre) or when books are published arguing that the Palestinians do not really exist (Joan Peters's From Time Immemorial with its fraudulent quotations and concocted statistics), or when crude attacks are mounted to portray Palestinians as the inheritors of Nazi anti-semitism.

As part of the campaign against Palestinians, there has been the vicious semiotic warfare conducted against the PLO as representative of the Palestinians. Suffice it to say that the Israeli position, too often echoed by the U.S., is that the PLO is not a fit interlocutor because it is "only a terror organization." In fact, Israel will not negotiate with or recognize the PLO precisely because it does represent the Palestinians. Thus for the first time in the history of conflict one party to it arrogates to itself the right to choose both negotiating teams. That such arrant nonsense has been tolerated by Israel's friends is incredible. But it has had the unilateral effect of allowing Israel to hold up negotiations for years and has also allowed some governments (some of them Arab!) to play the international shell-game of looking for suitable or alternative or acceptable or moderate or proper Palestinian representatives.

The intricacies of what is or is not tolerable in representations of the Palestinians in American civil society need not detain us further. The main point is that because the Palestinian struggle for self-determination became so no-
ticeable and was conducted on so unmistakably national a scale, it entered U.S. discourse, from which it had been absent for a long time.

One other major point has to be elucidated. Terrorism has been the watchword here, that invidious association between individual and organized actions of Palestinian political terror and the whole of the Palestinian national movement. I would put it this way. To date the principal and quite justified Palestinian fear is of the negation that can quite easily become our fate. Certainly the destruction of Palestine in 1948, years of subsequent anonymity, the painful reconstruction of an exiled Palestinian identity, the efforts of many Palestinian political workers, fighters, poets, artists, historians and the like to sustain Palestinian identity—all these have teetered alongside the confounding fear of disappearance, given the grim determination of official Israel to hasten the process, to reduce, minimize, and ensure the absence of Palestinians as a political and human presence in the Middle Eastern equation. To this there have been the Palestinian responses that began in the late sixties and early seventies such as airplane hijackings, assassinations (as at the Munich Olympics, Maalot, and later, the Rome and Vienna airport massacres by the Abu Nidal group in 1985), and other such adventures, of which one of the most immoral and stupid was the record compiled by Abul Abbas in the 1985 Achille Lauro killing of Leon Klinghoffer and the 1990 Tel Aviv beach assault. That these can be condemned by Arabs and Palestinians today is an indication of how far beyond them a justifiably anxious community has travelled in political maturity and morality. Yet that they occurred at all is not surprising, and is written, so to speak, into the scripts of every national movement (especially the Zionist one) trying to galvanize its people, attract attention, impress itself on an inured world consciousness.

However much one laments and even wishes somehow to atone for the loss of life and suffering visited upon innocents because of Palestinian violence, there is still the need, I think, also to say that no national movement has been so unfairly penalized, defamed, and subjected to disproportionate retaliation for its sins as has the Palestinian. The Israeli policy of punitive counterattacks (or state terrorism) as publicly announced by responsible spokesmen has been to try to kill 100 Arabs for every Jewish fatality. The devastation of Palestinian refugee camps, hospitals, schools, mosques, churches, and orphanages in Lebanon; the summary arrests, deportations, house destructions, maimings, and torture of Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza; the use of poisonous dehumanizing rhetoric by senior Israeli politicians, soldiers, diplomats, and intellectuals to characterize all Palestinian acts of resistance as terrorist and Palestinians as nonhuman (cockroaches, grasshoppers, two-legged vermin, etc.), these and the number of Palestinian fatalities, the scale of material loss, the physical, political, and psychological deprivations, have tremendously exceeded damage done by Palestinians to Israelis. And, I must add, the remarkable disparity or asymmetry between, on the one hand, the position of Palestinians as an aggrieved, dispossessed, and sinned against people and, on the other, Israel as 'the state of the Jewish
people" and the direct instrument of Palestinian suffering is both great and greatly unadmitted.

Here, then, is another complex irony: how the classic victims of years of anti-semitic persecution and Holocaust have in their new nation become the victimizers of another people, who have become therefore the victims of the victims. That so many Israeli and Western intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have not faced this dilemma courageously and directly is, I believe, a *trahison des clercs* of massive proportions, especially in that their silence, indifference, or pleas of ignorance and noninvolvement perpetuate the sufferings of a people who have not deserved such a long agony. Surely if no one can come forth and say yes, the Palestinians actually do deserve to expiate for the historical crimes committed against the Jews in Europe, it must also be true that not to say no, the Palestinians must not be allowed to go through these ordeals any longer is an act of complicity and moral cowardice of singular dimensions.

But that is the reality. How many ex-politicians or actively engaged intellectuals still say privately that they are horrified by Israeli military policy and political arrogance, or that they believe the occupation of the territories is inexcusable, and yet say little or nothing in public when their words might have some effect? And how cynical, even sadistic, is the performance of American presidents who celebrate the bravery of Chinese, Russian, East European, Afghani dissidents in fighting for freedom and yet utter not a word of acknowledgement that Palestinians have been fighting the same battle at least as bravely and resourcefully as the others? For that is the essence of the two-decade Palestinian effort: the struggle to have the Palestinian drama recognized for what it is, a political narrative of unusual and even unprecedented difficulty, valiantly engaged in by an entire people. No other movement in history has had so difficult an opponent—a people recognized as the classical victim of history. And no other liberation or independence movement in the postwar period has had so unreliable and at time murderous a set of natural allies, so volatile an environment, so grudging a superpower interlocutor in the U.S., so absent a superpower ally in the USSR (at least since Moscow effectively abandoned the Palestinian cause in deference to the U.S. and Israel). And all this experienced by the Palestinians without any territorial sovereignty anywhere, with dispersion and dispossession remaining the lot of the entire nation, subject to punitive laws in Israel and the Arab countries, discriminating legislation, unilateral (and unappealable) edicts that run the gamut from deportation and shoot-on-sight orders to airport harassment and verbal abuse in the press.

**U.S.-Palestinian Relations**

In all this, U.S.-Palestinian relations have been exceptionally complicated and exceptionally unsatisfactory, largely the somewhat lackluster end product of U.S. domestic politics. In 1975 Kissinger accomplished the feat of pre-
cluding American dealings with the PLO, just at the moment of course when
the PLO had begun to modulate its international position by placing impor-
tant emphasis on the UN. (Arafat’s only visit here—he was prevented from
returning in 1988 by Secretary Shultz under pressure by American Jewish
organizations and in violation of the UN’s agreement with its host govern-
ment—was in 1974.) That prohibition, based variously on the PLO’s refusal
to accept 242, its repeatedly alleged participation in terrorism, and various
other moral conditions of the sort never extended to Israel, also made it im-
possible for PLO members to enter the country; in 1988 the Grassley amend-
ment sought by congressional fiat to forbid the PLO from any dealings in the
United States, and required the closing of the Palestine Information Office in
Washington as well as the PLO’s observer mission at the UN (this latter
attempt was defeated in U.S. District Court, and the UN office remains open).
In the summer of 1979 U.S. Ambassador to the UN Andrew Young was
forced to resign because he had in effect a brief social meeting with Zuhdi
Terzi, the PLO delegate at the UN.

Until late 1988, this crippling inhibition on any contact at all between
representatives of the U.S. and of the Palestinian people remained in force,
largely at the behest of the Zionist lobby in concert with right-wing Israeli
governments. One should not mistake the true character of this inhibition,
which in fact was an extension of the longstanding, increasingly violent offi-
cial policy of total hostility to the Palestinian people, as a people, and to its
representatives. (On the West Bank and Gaza, for example, it was forbidden
to mention the word “Palestine,” to display the Palestinian flag, or even to
use the colors of the flag which some U.S. commentators crudely labelled the
“PLO flag” despite the fact that both the flag and its colors antedate the
existence of the PLO.)

Nonetheless—and here we leave the realm of intention and enter once
again that of fact—there were U.S.-Palestinian contacts, most of them of
some immediate benefit, ironically enough, to the U.S. Thus, during the
early to mid-seventies the PLO protected the American Embassy in Beirut,
and when large numbers of American dependents were evacuated from Bei-
rut by sea in 1976, the operation was carried out under the care of Palestinian
guards. In 1979 thirteen American hostages were released from the Ameri-
can Embassy in Tehran, entirely due to Chairman Arafat’s intercession. Nu-
merous contacts between the PLO and the U.S. took place, all of them
through third parties, most of them secret.

Rarely were such contacts to Palestinian advantage, however. For at least
ten years one sensed an almost plotted dyssynchrony between the U.S.
and the Palestinians, two worlds moving in parallel, yet according to different
agendas, with different rhythms, answering different pressures. In the U.S.
the Palestine question was always secondary to massive American interests in
the Arab states and of course to Israel; indeed one could go as far as saying
that Palestine was a domestic American issue, dominated since 1948 almost
without demurral anywhere in society by the Israeli lobby. It is true, as al-
ready noted, that with the emergence of the Palestine national movement, the Palestinians began to insinuate themselves in the American consciousness, albeit to a considerably lesser degree than was the case in the Third World or Eastern and Western Europe. The galling irony is that very little net effort was expended by the PLO upon improving its position in the U.S. Rather, Palestine became an independent issue there, thanks first to local Palestinian and Arab-American efforts. Second, one would have to mention the work of independent and liberal (or left) opinion, organizations, and individuals who constitute the anti-war, anti-imperial opposition in the U.S. Third, one should note the influence of some American Jews, and a small number of American-Jewish organizations like the short-lived Breira, or the various groups in support of Peace Now, and anti-war resisters and the like in Israel. In other words, the battle in America was almost exclusively an American one, with which, alas, the PLO seemed insufficiently concerned, either through lack of attention, or, later when indifference could no longer be argued, lack of knowledge. Neither is excusable, about which I shall speak in a moment.

Despite significant changes in American attitudes towards the Palestine question, it would be wrong to see the short-lived PLO-U.S. ambassadorial dialogue in Tunis that began in December 1988 and ended in mid-1990 as anything more (again, ironically) than a sliver chopped away from a large wall of American rejectionism, cosmetically presented as an on-going commitment to “the peace process.” Whatever achievement there was to be enjoyed by Palestinians when the U.S. granted the dialogue dissipated when even the most optimistic took considered note of the humiliating ritual they had to go through before the dialogue was signalled by the obdurate and incredibly indulgent (to Israel) George Shultz. (One shouldn’t pass up the opportunity to say that when he took up his post from the unregretted Alexander Haig in July 1982, Shultz was considered to be vaguely pro-Arab; years of his business dealings through Bechtel and friendly contacts with many Arab, even Palestinian, business associates had predisposed people to thinking of him as somehow sympathetic to Arab concerns. Yet in time he became perhaps the most pro-Israeli of all secretaries of state, a puzzling, not to say infuriating disappointment to his former friends.) Shultz required that Arafat repeat a series of sentences written by the State Department renouncing terrorism, accepting Israel, and embracing Resolution 242, as if only a public procedure of Palestinian penance and a formal undertaking of good behavior (normally unthinkable in the world of politics and diplomacy) would suffice. Never in the ensuing dialogue did the U.S. accept the notions of Palestinian self-determination, the right to statehood, or redress for Palestinian claims against Israel. When the dialogue was “suspended” by Secretary James Baker, the pretext given was the idiotic and quite pointless Abul Abbas raid against Tel Aviv beaches in which there were only Palestinian casualties. A more realistic reason for the suspension was the pressure of the
Israeli lobby, and the by-now routine official American lack of generosity to the most sorely tried and abused people in the Middle East.

Even so, fairness requires that the Palestinian side of the sorry tale also be subjected to rigorous analysis. Here an attitude of almost incredible insouciance, mis-timing and miscalculation, as well as a stark refusal to concentrate diplomatic and political efforts in the U.S., appears to have characterized the PLO's way of dealing with what in effect is its major non-Middle Eastern field. In the aftermath of Camp David, a number of private initiatives kept a confidential dialogue going between the Carter administration and the PLO in Beirut. In 1979, for example, it would have been possible and even certain that a PLO-U.S. dialogue could have been swiftly and advantageously established were the organization to have accepted Resolution 242 along with a lengthy "reservation," that is, a clause entering Palestinian objections that the Resolution does not in its original 1967 form say anything about Palestinian rights. This initiative was mystifyingly turned down, although Jimmy Carter himself had been the first president to pronounce the words "a Palestinian homeland," early in 1977. If I may speak from personal experience, I can also attest to numerous attempts by Palestinian and other friends resident in the U.S. to engage the leadership's commitment to the idea that a full-scale, detailed, and sophisticated sensitivity to what was happening in the U.S. be maintained, nurtured, and developed: this never came about. Official Palestinian representations in the U.S. remained skeletal and the complicated currents that run through American society, its institutions, and its history have never really informed or changed or inflected (except in an extremely approximate manner) PLO attitudes to and/or dealings with the U.S.

Much of the problem comes from the stern reality that Palestinian politics are essentially Arab politics, whereas the U.S. and Western Europe inhabit a totally different world, in which, for example, the media, academy, and research institutes of civil society play almost as important a role as the central government in political society. Rarely is the contrast between the two worlds so apparent as when Chairman Arafat has appeared on television. His difficulties not only with the language, but with the whole presentation of self and image, have regularly been used to his disadvantage; this is scarcely less true when any of his adjutants have appeared. The net result therefore has been a general under-representation of Palestine, something a good deal less effective than the results achieved in the heightening of Western opinion due to the intifada. But this differential is even more maddening when we recall that over the past decades Western, and particularly American, public opinion has risen steadily in favor of a Palestinian state and the end of Israeli occupation.

By Way of Assessment

And yet fairness once again enjoins us to recognize that retrospective analysis always favors the analyst, doing little more to the participants than paint-
ing them on the whole ungenerously. Recent Palestinian history is full of bad
turns and even catastrophes to which at the time plausible alternatives were
only theoretically possible and in fact unrealizable. Who knows whether at
the time a confrontation with the Jordanian army could have been avoided?
Or whether the PLO’s trajectory while resident in Lebanon could have re-
mained disentangled from the country’s spiralling rush to civil war; or
whether the ravages of the Israeli invasion of 1982 could have been bypassed;
or whether the costly price of alienating Syria, with the attendant PLO insur-
rection of 1983, the war of the camps in the mid- to late 1980s, and the
continuing contest with Syria’s president need have been paid? Or whether,
finally, the disastrous results of the PLO’s tilt to Iraq, which began at least
two years before the invasion of Kuwait, might have concluded differently,
and with the horrendous Palestinian losses on nearly every front unincurred?
It would seem to me that the full irony of regional political dynamics always
became crushingly apparent when the Palestinian drive towards self-determi-
nation and statehood took concrete form, that is, when the Palestinian com-
ponent came up inevitably against one or another sovereignty, attracted its
attention, brought it to bristling confrontation, and was too late to stop. The
irony is that as an expression of national self-determination Palestinian activ-
ity was largely extraterritorial (without territorial sovereignty) and therefore
always lived a sort of substitute life somewhere other than Palestine. This
made it vulnerable, not to say completely exposed, to sometimes furious
hostility.

Exile is thus the fundamental condition of Palestinian life, the source of
what is both over- and underdeveloped about it, the energy for what is best,
say, in the components of its remarkable literature (Habibi’s Pessoptimist, the
novels of Kanafani and Jabra, the poetry of Rashid Hussein, Fadwa Tuqan,
Samih al-Qassem, Mahmoud Darwish, the work of numerous essayists, his-
torians, theoreticians, memoirists) and in its extraordinary network of com-
munications, associations, and extended families. And with all that has gone
Palestine’s intractability. Partly because of its cultural, religious, and histori-
cal depth, partly because it abuts on so many interests both local and interna-
tional, the cause of Palestine has remained for two decades the one
uncooptable, undomesticated and fierce national cause still alive, to its ad-
herents a source of unrealized hope and somewhat tarnished idealism, to its
enemies a goad and a perdurable political alterego that will neither go away
nor settle into amiable nonentity.

Yet no one, no Palestinian, no Arab or Israeli, would have suspected, I
think, that the twenty years that began with the horrors of Black September
could have gone on to produce both so dazzling a set of accomplishments
and so terrible a series of disasters, the two extremes united by the fact that
Palestinians were at the center of both, without an inch of Palestinian land
actually liberated. One hardly knows what name to give this peculiar form of
historical experience, but its main features should be rehearsed briefly. After
1948 the Palestinians were either dispersed, or what few of them remained in
their historic patria were submerged in a new state decidedly not theirs. Three decades later the PLO had spearheaded a massive effort at national self-reconstitution. An impressive array of institutions that answered to Palestinian needs in the fields of health, education, industry, research, military power, and law had transformed the lives of all Palestinians, no matter where they resided. At the center of this stood political institutions like the PLO's Executive Committee, the Palestine Central and National Councils, and a decent, though unevenly competent, apparatus of political representation. The leadership has been remarkably enduring, albeit horribly scarred by various assassinations of prominent and sometimes brilliant leaders whose loss significantly diminished Palestinian capacities: Ghassan Kanafani, Kamal Nasser, Kamal Adwan, Yousef Najjar, Abul Walid, Abu Jihad, Abu Iyad, Abul Hol. The mournful role-call must also include the numbers killed in Europe, men like Naim Khidr, Ezzedine Qallaq, Said Hammami, Issam Sartawi, Majid Abu Sharrar whose political sanity, was as much the target of terror as their formidable personal talents.

Although the Palestinian community was dispersed and relocated in so improbably large a set of locals, there was a requisite constancy at the center as personified by Yasir Arafat, a tragic figure of quite extraordinary political stripe. Much of the feuding between parties, constituencies, Arab regimes, much of the redoubtable enmity of Israel and the U.S., much of the incoherence and sometimes anarchic internal convolutions of the movement, were reduced and often brought into line through Arafat's maneuverings. He achieved a sort of dual personality: one, as the undoubted and instantly recognizable symbol of Palestine, and two, as the political leader with the laurels, privileges, as well as drawbacks that that sort of personality entails. Among his most valuable contributions is the air of relative democracy that characterized Palestinian political processes (when contrasted with the Arab environment: Arafat is the one leader who remains popular with his people). His shepherding of the nation-in-exile towards coexistence with Israel is perhaps his most lasting achievement. He has been open to a large number of Jews from Israel and the diaspora, he has established a mode of interaction between people that, while it always places him at or near the center, makes possible a sort of communication between leadership and ordinary people largely unknown in the Third World. Although he is vilified to an unprecedented degree in the West, the sober truth is that almost alone of post-colonial liberation movement leaders, Arafat has in fact abated sectarian or intra-Palestinian violence; he has endured the carping of Palestinian as well as other critics with astonishing patience, and has never allowed what might be his own sense of political orthodoxy to quash or stifle the presence of a quite lively political heterodoxy within Palestinian life.

He has also presided over Palestinian losses of major proportions. It would be incorrect here for me to try to assess blame or apportion responsibility for any of these: all I am saying is that during his two decades of leadership the Palestinians have endured not only the continuing loss of ter-
ritory to Israeli settlers on the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, but also the tragic military and civilian losses of the 1982 Israeli invasion, the terrible fall-outs that came as the result of the Camp David Accords and the Gulf crisis of 1990-91. I must leave to later historians and political scientists the balance-sheet of his leadership with regard to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria: that there were dreadful consequences for Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, and others cannot be doubted. The exodus from Beirut which followed so much destruction, so much hate, misunderstanding and waste—all this constitutes a major blot on the Palestinian record.

But, one finds oneself saying finally, the Palestinian political leadership did in fact draw the correct lessons from the intifada, which began in late 1987 and which continues as I write. Every Palestinian feels pride that, at the end of two decades of difficult and laborious effort, so splendid a national insurrection against injustice should have arisen in the occupied territories. The intifada provided a blueprint for Palestinian political and social life that is lasting—relatively nonviolent, inventive, brave, and confoundingly intelligent. Based on noncoercive norms of behavior that contrast stunningly with Israeli practices against Palestinians in the territories, the intifada soon became the model for movements of democratic protest not only in countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan, but also in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. Where Israeli troops shot, beat, and harassed civilians, the Palestinians devised modes for getting around and crossing barriers; where the civil and military authorities forbade education or agriculture, the Palestinians improvised alternative organizations to do what was necessary; where the injunctions of a still largely patriarchal society held women in thrall, the intifada gave them new voices, authority, power. From the intifada went the inspiration and the force that transformed diaspora Palestinian caution and ambiguity into clarity and authentic vision: this of course was embodied in the 1988 Algiers PNC Declarations.

Yet as the intifada progressed, two other actualities entered Palestinian life, weakening it and imposing new burdens. One, of course, was the Gulf crisis, which although it summoned Palestinian mediation efforts also embroiled the whole nation in a ghastly morass. Today the Palestinian communities of the Gulf are orphaned, many Palestinians are again homeless, their assets gone, their futures radically uncertain. As has been pointed out by Walid Khalidi and others, there were deep failures of principle and leadership, some Palestinian (who could least afford it), some Arab, some American. The result is today an international and to some degree Arab isolation of the PLO, and a general blow to the entire Palestinian nation from which recovery is uncertain and, when it occurs, long in coming.

The second actuality is the enormous number of Russian Jews now emigrating to Israel. Here we must note the United States’ imposition in 1989 of quotas for admitting Soviet Jews (this following Israel’s 1987 request to stop granting refugee status to Soviet Jews) and its closure of the processing centers in Vienna and Rome, thus making it extremely difficult for Soviet Jews to
go any place but Israel. This entailed therefore the sudden presence of many thousands of Russian Jews as landed immigrants to Israel at the very moment that the alienation and disenfranchisement of the Palestinians were at their most glaring. Vociferous cries rose asserting the prerogatives of Greater Israel, while many urgent appeals were directed at the U.S. and the wealthier Jewish diaspora groups for financial support. That this meant that the demographic balance dramatically disfavored the Palestinians, that it placed more pressure (along with the answering and warlike compliance of the ever obliging General Sharon) to implant more illegal settlements on the West Bank, that it made the time factor singularly punishing to the Palestinians, all this was plain to see.

Suddenly it seemed that a belated messianic impulse coursed through Zionism, and with it the attendant woes that it brought to the already long-suffering Palestinians. Now, however, it was 1991 and not 1947 or 1948. It no longer seemed to matter that since the intifada began international public opinion had rendered the Israelis as sullen and brutal killers, their “vision” nothing more than cruel punishment administered to defenseless civilians. What mattered more was the supervening force and power of the settlement drive, the continuing diplomatic quagmire, the painful disarray and demoralization not only in Palestinian but also in Arab ranks after the Gulf war. In short, there has been no deterring or containing the influx of perhaps 750,000 to one million Jews, and as ever Palestinians will pay the price.

However, neither Israelis nor Palestinians have a military option against the other. The task for the Palestinian people is to assure its presence on the land, and by a variety of means to persuade Israelis that only a political settlement can relieve the mutual siege, the anguish and insecurity of both people. There is no other acceptable secular, that is, real alternative.