

Article by Edward Said: After Survival

Thinking ahead

Saturday, April 6th, 2002

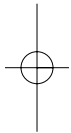
Edward Said

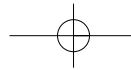
After survival, what happens? Edward Said offers thoughts in a time of tragedy
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Anyone with any connection at all to Palestine is today in a state of stunned outrage and shock. While almost a repeat of what happened in 1982, Israel's current all-out colonial assault on the Palestinian people (with George Bush's astoundingly ignorant and grotesque support) is indeed worse than Sharon's two previous mass forays in 1971 and 1982 against the Palestinian people. The political and moral climate today is a good deal cruder and reductive, the media's destructive role (which has played the part almost entirely of singling out Palestinian suicide attacks and isolating them from their context in Israel's 35-year illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories) greater in favouring the Israeli view of things, the US's power more unchallenged, the war against terrorism has more completely taken over the global agenda and, so far as the Arab environment is concerned, there is greater incoherence and fragmentation than ever before.

Sharon's homicidal instincts have been enhanced (if that's the right word) by all of the above, and magnified to boot. This in effect means that he can do more damage with more impunity than before, although he is also more deeply undermined than before in all his efforts as well as in his entire career by the failure that comes with single-minded negation and hate, which in the end nourish neither political nor even military success. Conflicts between peoples such as this contain more elements than can be eliminated by tanks and air power, and a war against unarmed civilians -- no matter how many times Sharon lumberingly and mindlessly trumpets his stupid mantras about terror -- can never bring a really lasting political result of the sort his dreams tells him he can have. Palestinians will not go away. Besides, Sharon will almost certainly end up disgraced and rejected by his people. He has no plan, except to destroy everything about Palestine and the Palestinians. Even in his enraged fixation on Arafat and terror, he is failing to do much more than raise the man's prestige while essentially drawing attention to the blind monomania of his own position.

In the end he is Israel's problem to deal with. For us, our main consideration now is morally to do everything in our power to make certain that despite the enormous suffering and destruction imposed on us by a criminal war, we must go on. When a renowned and respected retired politician like Zbigniew Brzezinski says



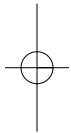


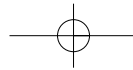
explicitly on national television that Israel has been behaving like the white supremacist regime of apartheid South Africa, one can be certain that he is not alone in this view, and that an increasing number of Americans and others are slowly growing not only disenchanted but also disgusted with Israel as a hugely expensive and draining ward of the United States, costing far too much, increasing American isolation, and seriously damaging the country's reputation with its allies and its citizens. The question is what, in this most difficult of moments, can we rationally learn about the present crisis that we need to include in our plans for the future?

What I have to say now is highly selective, but it is the modest fruit of many years working on behalf of the Palestinian cause as someone who is from both Arab and Western worlds. I neither know nor can say everything, but here are some of the handful of thoughts I can contribute at this very difficult hour. Each of the four points that follow here is related to the other.

1) For better or for worse, Palestine is not just an Arab and Islamic cause, it is important to many different, contradictory and yet intersecting worlds. To work for Palestine is necessarily to be aware of these many dimensions and constantly to educate oneself in them. For that we need a highly educated, vigilant and sophisticated leadership and democratic support for it. Above all we must, as Mandela never tired of saying about his struggle, be aware that Palestine is one of the great moral causes of our time. Therefore, we need to treat it as such. It's not a matter of trade, or bartering negotiations, or making a career. It is a just cause which should allow Palestinians to capture the high moral ground and keep it.

2) There are different kinds of power, military of course being the most obvious. What has enabled Israel to do what it has been doing to the Palestinians for the past 54 years is the result of a carefully and scientifically planned campaign to validate Israeli actions and, simultaneously, devalue and efface Palestinian actions. This is not just a matter of maintaining a powerful military but of organising opinion, especially in the United States and Western Europe, and is a power derived from slow, methodical work where Israel's position is seen as one to be easily identified with, whereas the Palestinians are thought of as Israel's enemies, hence repugnant, dangerous, against "us." Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has faded into near-insignificance so far as the organisation of opinion, images and thought are concerned. America (outside of Palestine itself) is the main arena of battle. We have simply never learned the importance of systematically organising our political work in this country on a mass level, so that for instance the average American will not immediately think of "terrorism" when the word "Palestinian" is pronounced. That kind of work quite literally protects whatever gains we might have made through on-the-ground resistance to Israel's occupation.

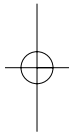


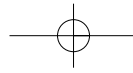


What has enabled Israel to deal with us with impunity, therefore, has been that we are unprotected by any body of opinion that would deter Sharon from practicing his war crimes and saying that what he has done is to fight terrorism. Given the immense diffusionary, insistent, and repetitive power of the images broadcast by CNN, for example, in which the phrase "suicide bomb" is numbingly repeated a hundred times an hour for the American consumer and tax-payer, it is the grossest negligence not to have had a team of people like Hanan Ashrawi, Leila Shahid, Ghassan Khatib, Afif Safie -- to mention just a few -- sitting in Washington ready to go on CNN or any of the other channels just to tell the Palestinian story, provide context and understanding, give us a moral and narrative presence with positive, rather than merely negative, value. We need a future leadership that understands this as one of the basic lessons of modern politics in an age of electronic communication. Not to have understood this is part of the tragedy of today.

3) There is simply no use operating politically and responsibly in a world dominated by one superpower without a profound familiarity and knowledge of that superpower -- America, its history, its institutions, its currents and counter-currents, its politics and culture; and, above all, a perfect working knowledge of its language. To hear our spokesmen, as well as the other Arabs, saying the most ridiculous things about America, throwing themselves on its mercy, cursing it in one breath, asking for its help in another, all in miserably inadequate fractured English, shows a state of such primitive incompetence as to make one cry. America is not monolithic. We have friends and we have possible friends. We can cultivate, mobilise, and use our communities and their affiliated communities here as an integral part of our politics of liberation, just as the South Africans did, or as the Algerians did in France during their struggle for liberation. Planning, discipline, coordination. We have not at all understood the politics of non-violence. Moreover, neither have we understood the power of trying to address Israelis directly, the way the ANC addressed the white South Africans, as part of a politics of inclusion and mutual respect. Coexistence is our answer to Israeli exclusivism and belligerence. This is not conceding: it is creating solidarity, and therefore isolating the exclusivists, the racists, the fundamentalists.

4) The most important lesson of all for us to understand about ourselves is manifest in the terrible tragedies of what Israel is now doing in the occupied territories. The fact is that we are a people and a society, and despite Israel's ferocious attack against the PA, our society still functions. We are a people because we have a functioning society which goes on -- and has gone on for the past 54 years -- despite every sort of abuse, every cruel turn of history, every misfortune we have suffered, every tragedy we have gone through as a people. Our greatest victory over Israel is that people like Sharon and his kind do not have the capacity to see that, and this is why they are doomed despite their great power and their awful, inhuman cruel-





ty. We have surmounted the tragedies and memories of our past, whereas such Israelis as Sharon have not. He will go to his grave only as an Arab-killer, and a failed politician who brought more unrest and insecurity to his people. It must surely be the legacy of a leader that he should leave something behind upon which future generations will build. Sharon, Mofaz, and all the others associated with them in this bullying, sadistic campaign of death and carnage will have left nothing except gravestones. Negation breeds negation.

As Palestinians, I think we can say that we left a vision and a society that has survived every attempt to kill it. And that is something. It is for the generation of my children and yours, to go on from there, critically, rationally, with hope and forbearance.

