

History and the Meaning of the Disaster:  
Arab and Palestinian Politics from  
1948–1993

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Was Arab independence a dream, or for a brief moment did it really happen? If one were to apply a sporting metaphor to the Arab situation, the Arabs are not the runners in a relay race but the baton. For a brief period in the 1950s they appeared to be running on their own; but the changeover was merely fumbled by the British and French, and now the baton has been passed on to American hands. Almost at the end of the twentieth century the Arab people appear to have no more real freedom than they did at its beginning. They are being claimed by a form of imperialism little different in essence from the old, by a 'new world order' resting on the military and economic domination that has ensured the success of American policies for the past two decades, just as it ensured the ascendancy of Britain and France a century ago. American interests are now served by a range of client governments extending from the Gulf to North Africa, and including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. The United States and Israel are now able to refashion the Middle East according to their own interests.

The capitulation of Egypt through the Camp David agreement (1979) and the equally significant collapse of the Palestinian position in the 'interim agreement' reached between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership (1993) are striking achievements on the road to a 'reconstructed' Middle Eastern order. In the absence of any countervailing force following the collapse of the USSR, the United States and Israel are now free to do what they want in and with the Middle East, from attacking Iraq again if the need arises to punishing Syria should it fail to join the 'peace process'. The 'interim agreement' reached between Israel and the PLO

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leadership is the golden key that will simultaneously enable Arab governments to unburden themselves of the vexatious 'Palestinian problem' and Israel to enter lucrative Middle Eastern markets. Based on the ability to impose solutions, the 'interim agreement' deliberately circumvents Palestinian rights as they are described in international law: every critical issue is excluded and every landmark United Nations resolution dealing with the rights of the Palestinians ignored. And even so far as it goes, the facts Israel is busy creating on the ground indicate that it has no intention of vacating even the last remnant of Palestine. Since the signing of the agreement the number of settlers in the West Bank has increased from 120,000 to 140,000 and, as of May 1996, a further 60,000 acres of land has been expropriated for such purposes as 'quarries' and 'nature reserves'. West Bank Palestinians estimate that 73 per cent of their land has now been seized. More roads and housing units are being built and 'Greater Jerusalem' is being extended even deeper into West Bank territory (Salt, 1994-5: 27). Not for the first time in the twentieth century a treaty is being imposed on the people of the Middle East: a treaty that they seem to have no choice but to accept.

### The Arab State System

The Palestinian problem cannot be separated from the weakness of the Arab state system any more than the weaknesses of the latter can be understood apart from the deliberate dislocation of Muslim societies (Arab, Persian, Ottoman, Central Asian, African) by European governments in the nineteenth century. Superior firepower made the outcome inevitable wherever Muslims and Europeans came into open conflict; but to occupy as well as invade, the assault on the integrity of Muslim societies had to be comprehensive. Cultural engineering went hand in hand with the overthrow of governments, the penetration of economies and the adaptation of agricultural systems to meet European needs. The means differed but not the end: although Britain did not seek to emulate France's *mission civilisatrice* in Algeria, its educational policies in Egypt after the occupation in 1882 actually had the objective of restricting education and preventing the emergence of a rebellious native class. 'I want all the next generation of Egyptians to be able to read and write', wrote Lord Cromer. 'Also I want to create as many carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers etc. as I possibly can. More than this I cannot do' (Mansfield, 1971: 140). Egyptians were to be given enough education (primary and secondary) for them to be taken into the administration as clerks; but higher learning was

regarded with the greatest suspicion. 'With few exceptions the British were unsympathetic to proposals for establishing an Egyptian university. They feared it would do even more to foster nationalism than the law school', which was regarded as a 'breeding ground' for nationalism and French-inspired subversion (Mansfield, 1971: 144–6).

The peoples of the Middle East resisted as well as they could; but the unity that Jamal al-Din al-Afghani saw in the nineteenth century as the stone that would shatter the 'glass house' of European power was never realised, despite continual uprisings against the French and the British in the Middle East and Africa and against the Russians in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The attempts of reformers to meet the West on its own terms (by importing European systems of government, law and education) disrupted traditions, to the dismay of many Muslims: if Islam did not describe their societies above all else, what did?

For many, the answer was secularised nationalism. What form it should take was far from certain, even in the twentieth century. There were specific loyalties to specific territories, sharpened by foreign occupation, but at the same time there was the desire to liberate the 'Arab nation'. The impossibility of separating Islam from the historical concept of the Arabs as a 'nation' (an interpretation even secular nationalists shared) immediately raised problems for Christians and other religious groups. And even apart from religion, just how were the Arabs to be defined? There were many who did not regard themselves as Arabs at all (the Maronites of Lebanon and, in the twentieth century, the followers of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party); indeed, all the Arab territories had a specific past that predated Islam and Arabism and provided an alternative pole of identity.

This search for identity was made immeasurably more difficult by continuing foreign occupation and domination in all its forms. The links between political domination, economic exploitation and cultural subversion over almost 200 years are clear: through the Treaty of Balta Limani (1838), the British finally managed to break down the tariff barriers Muhammad Ali had erected around cotton, sugar and tobacco and undermine the attempts of the Egyptian ruler to achieve the economic and industrial self-sufficiency he realised must be the cornerstone of political independence. Increasingly beholden to the British for financial advice, by 1876 his successors (especially the Khedive Ismail) had plunged Egypt so deeply into debt that Britain and France intervened to protect the interests of their bondholders. The country's finances were reorganised under a system of dual control, which redeemed the situation largely at the expense of the already

impoverished *fellahin*: 'the main burden fell on the long-suffering *fellahin* and it soon became apparent that Egypt was being squeezed dry' (Mansfield, 1971: 10). Indebtedness – and Egypt was not the only country unable to meet its obligations to external financial interests even in the nineteenth century – increased the country's vulnerability (as the construction of the Suez Canal and the sale of Egypt's shares in the canal company to Britain had already done) and paved the way for invasion and occupation in 1882.

A similar situation of indebtedness in Istanbul forced the sultan to issue the Decree of Muharram (1881) allowing the European powers to control whole sections of the Ottoman revenue through the Public Debt Administration. Throughout the region foreign financial control and penetration of Middle Eastern economies undermined local industries and, given the organic connections between different sectors of society in their craft and religious organisations, subverted society at its very foundations.

For those Arab lands that had not yet known European occupation the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 meant merely a change of masters. Everything the Western powers did was calculated to advance their own interests at the expense of those they were supposed to be governing as a 'sacred trust of civilisation'. This is how the League of Nations described the obligations of the 'advanced nations' to 'those colonies and territories . . . not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world' in the Middle East, Central and South-West Africa and even 'certain of the South Pacific Islands'. Humbly accepting the territories they themselves had just parcelled out (for, even more than the United Nations in its early days, the League of Nations was a European club), the new masters of the Middle East then began creating the institutions that in their own interests they would eventually have to destroy. The history of the constitutional monarchy in Egypt from 1922 is punctuated by the repeated intervention of the British in the workings of government. The credibility of parliament and the political parties and the authority of the king were all mortally weakened: so much for the sacred trust.

In Iraq the British created a monarchy and a political system that they manipulated in the same fashion. Oil, imperial communications and Iraq's position at the head of the Persian Gulf shaped British policy in the same way that geographical position and the canal did in Egypt. The monarchy was created by Britain, the king was imported from outside, and Iraq was turned into a source of cheap oil for the home country and a bastion of regional influence. Here, as in Egypt, there could be no trust in a system manipulated by a foreign power in its

own interests, any more than there could be in pliant politicians aligning themselves with 'the West' against communists and 'radical' nationalists across the region.

With the French the picture was much the same. The French began by dividing Syria (from which Palestine had already been separated) and establishing in Lebanon a territory and a regime that politically and demographically made confrontation and the civil wars of 1958 and 1975 inevitable. In the Syrian hinterland, with the aim of disrupting the Arab nationalism that they associated with Sunni Islam, the French created separate administrative enclaves that conformed to ethnic and regional divisions. They also brought minorities into the administration and the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* in disproportionate numbers (van Dam, 1981: 18); and finally, they gave away the province of Alexandretta to Turkey: again, nothing further from the 'sacred trust' undertaken by France on behalf of the Syrians could be imagined.

The mandated territory of Palestine constituted a special case, with independence to be delayed until such time as the 'Jewish homeland' had been built up and the overwhelming Muslim and Christian majority overcome. But by supporting the Zionist programme against the wishes of the Palestinian population – 'Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land', wrote Balfour (Ingrams, 1972: 73) – Britain further poisoned its own wells throughout the Middle East.

Thus did the modern Arab state system emerge. Here were societies whose older identities had been cast aside in favour of a secularised, unfamiliar and somewhat ambiguous nationalism. Here were states, political parties and individual leaders struggling to establish their legitimacy against the mutually irreconcilable aspirations of powerful European states. The outcome was the undermining of the hopes of the liberal nationalists that a balanced Middle Eastern order could emerge from the colonial period. Their humiliation at the hands of their colonial masters, their inability even to begin to deal with the massive social and economic problems that faced them, encouraged the rise of new ideological formations (Muslim, Arab nationalist and communist) and military cliques that saw no future in a dubious parliamentary process. The result was the 'radicalisation' of Middle Eastern politics after 1945 and the rise of regimes dispensing with open parliaments and imposing development from the top down.

The exhaustion of the European powers in a second war finally gave the Arabs their chance to make a run for real independence.

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Unfortunately, the same developing power vacuum invited someone else to fill it. Unable to prevent the victorious European powers from soaking up the region's territory and resources in 1918, the United States had subsequently won the richest prize of all – Saudi Arabia. Soviet power (was it ever as great as the Western media led their readers to believe?) brought the United States into the Middle East in increasing strength after 1945. Determined to protect the region from 'communist subversion', the United States ended up carrying out numerous subversive programmes of its own in the years ahead. Operation Ajax, the successful overthrow of the Mossadeq Government in Iran in 1953, and Operation Straggle, the failed conspiracy against the Syrian Government in 1956, are two of them – as well as providing military and economic aid to favoured governments. Of a less official nature, the CIA had so many Arab politicians on the payroll at one stage, including the President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Lebanon and the Prime Minister of Jordan – that 'if the CIA blanketed the rest of the Middle East the same way we'd soon be out of key politicians for CIA personnel to recruit' (Eveland, 1980: 250). Money for the Lebanese President was delivered directly to the presidential palace in a suitcase: 'soon my gold De Soto with its stark white top was a common sight' (Eveland, 1980: 252, also 217–23).

In the last two decades, playing on the cupidity and weakness of Arab rulers as successfully as the British and French did for more than a century, the United States has succeeded in creating a dependent state system in the Middle East. But this has been at the cost of an increasingly aggravated social environment arising from economic inequities, the unrepresentative nature of Arab governments and the knowledge that the United States ultimately calls all the shots in the Arab world. Even where there is an ostensibly open electoral system Arab governments are largely regarded by their own electors as being manipulative and corrupt. Their inability to take collective action in the name of an identifiable Arab interest, despite the obligations imposed upon them by membership of the Arab League, was demonstrated most painfully after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, when they could not even agree to meet, let alone agree on a course of action. They are frequently guided more by tribal, dynastic, sectarian and even family considerations than the interests of their people or 'the Arab world' – but the alarms are already sounding, and nowhere more loudly than in those countries bound most closely to the interests of 'the West'.

The Islamists have made immense gains in Egypt in the past decade, and only by debarring both the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasserist

groups from direct participation in the political process can the National Democratic Party Government of Hosni Mubarak be assured of retaining its grip on power. Chronic economic problems continue to have a corrosive effect on the political structure: while the economy 'seldom seems destined for sustained growth or complete collapse' (Roy, 1990: 161), indebtedness has returned Egypt to the days of the khedives:

Foreign indebtedness now heads the long list of issues that have traditionally plagued Egypt. It looms as possibly *the* problem of the 1990s, raising serious questions about the country's future financial integrity. In the past twelve years Egyptian debt has increased tenfold to its present level of approximately \$53 billion – about \$42 billion in public and private sector debt and \$11.4 billion in military debt. In total indebtedness Egypt now ranks seventh in the developing world. In terms of government-to-government debt it ranks number one (Eveland, 1980: 250).

The United States is now Egypt's major trading partner, but while Egypt has 'benefited' from 'an uninterrupted and substantial flow of aid on highly concessionary terms' (Handoussa, 1990: 122), the cost has been high. The reduction of subsidies and the IMF's ideological attack on the public sector through 'reforms' – what Handoussa calls 'the indiscriminate condemnation of public enterprise' – has brought about a sharp increase in unemployment, a decrease in real income and a sense of 'unprecedented crisis, not only in the management of its [Egypt's] massive foreign debt but also in the finance of basic goods and services for over one third of the population who remain below the poverty line' (Handoussa, 1990: 122-3). And while 'free trade' dictates that the Egyptian market remain wide open to imports, strict quotas imposed on Egyptian manufactured goods (mostly cotton and textiles) have proved to be 'a major impediment to the growth of these exports to the United States and EEC markets' (Handoussa, 1990 : 119). Transformed through its dependence into an American client state, does Egypt have much if any more freedom of action than it did under the Khedive Ismail 120 years ago?

In Saudi Arabia, another supposed pillar of Western interests and Gulf security, fiscal mismanagement, corruption and the willingness of dissident *ulama* to challenge an autocratic system are bringing the system to the point of crisis. The Gulf conflicts (an officially admitted \$25 billion funnelled to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and \$40 billion to get Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait) and profligate spending on arms that Saudi Arabia does not have the capacity to use (arms buying falls somewhere between \$12 billion and \$18 billion annually) have

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plunged the country into foreign debt of \$60 billion. In 1980 Saudi Arabia was earning \$100 billion a year (\$300 million a day); by 1994 its annual income had fallen to \$40 billion, much of it draining away into the arms industries of Britain, France and the United States: the Yamama 2 deal with Britain alone is estimated to involve between \$60 and \$150 billion (Aburish, 1994: 201), of which hundreds of millions of dollars have already been paid out in 'commissions'. To a small but increasing number of Saudi dissidents their government is no longer tolerable.

Like a totting carcass the House of Sa'ud is beginning to decompose. The reality is ignored by its members and their friends and as usual the people who are the source of decay are the last to admit their inability to halt it. For the first time ever the failures of the House of Sa'ud's internal, regional and international policies have converged to undermine it. Most significantly and dangerously it is the irreversible internal pressures -- the willingness of the Saudi people to gather under an Islamic banner and their demands for a substantial change in the way they are governed -- which are almost out of control (Aburish, 1994: 303).

Saudi Arabia has another government which will not -- indeed *cannot* -- defend Arab interests where they come into conflict with the ambitions of the United States and 'Western interests' generally.

These developments -- in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and indeed across the Middle East -- should be taken as portents of the changes that are likely to come. Edward Said has referred to the 'mass uprisings' of the 1980s (in Iran, the Philippines, Argentina, Korea, Pakistan, South Africa, eastern Europe, China, the West Bank and Gaza) and the way they 'all challenged something very basic to every art and theory of government, the principle of confinement'. Against the power of governments 'the unresolved plight of the Palestinians speaks directly of an undomesticated cause and a rebellious people paying a very high price for their resistance' (Said, 1993: 396). It is not simply the state of the economy in a particular country, or corruption, or the unrepresentative nature of governments, or a specific historical question such as the fate of the Palestinians or the globalisation of Arab economies, but all of these issues combined that are taking away from the Arabs as people the right to define themselves, control their own territory and resources and determine their future. Applying this dilemma to any other people in history, can it be imagined that it would continue indefinitely?

### The Palestinians

When Israel was created in 1948 the historian Constantine Zurayk applied the expression '*al-Nakba*' – the disaster – to the dispossession of the Palestinians from their homeland and the creation of a Jewish state in their place. No one then could have predicted how much worse the situation would become. Arab and Palestinian resistance to the imposition of Israel on the Middle East led to the wars, which the Arabs were destined to lose because of the complete asymmetry in the power balance between themselves and Israel and its Western backers. Not only the rest of Palestine but the territory of surrounding states was occupied, with the civil war in Jordan (1970) and Israel's onslaught on Lebanon (1982) adding to Palestinian and Arab difficulties. With the signing of the 'interim agreement' between the PLO and Israel in 1993 the region has been brought to another watershed in its modern history. By an increasing number of Palestinians – possibly the majority now – the agreement is regarded as one of the most serious blows they have experienced since 1948.

Upon its formation in 1964 the PLO based its strategies on armed struggle and the establishment of a secular democratic state for Muslims, Christians and Jews to replace the exclusivist 'Zionist entity' in Palestine. By 1974 – in the face of vehement opposition and considerable personal danger – the Palestinian mainstream had begun moving reluctantly towards accepting Israel as a *fait accompli*. This change of direction was opposed by virtually all groups on the left: two of its earliest public proponents (Said Hammami and Issam Sartawi) were assassinated for expressing their views.

The 'two-state' solution was developed stage by stage from 1974 to 1988 without any reciprocal gesture being made by either Israel or the United States. Not once in this period did the United States use its immense leverage to restrain or punish Israel for its continual breaches of the very international conventions and laws that the United States was sworn to uphold. The United States Government regarded the territories seized in 1967 as occupied, yet did nothing (as it could have done by scaling down arms and economic aid) to stop Israel from settling them. Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the use of proscribed weapons (cluster bombs) was met not with sanctions, but with even higher levels of military aid. Furthermore, American policies on the Middle East were indistinguishable from those of Israel itself: surely never before in history had such a small tail wagged such a large dog. American involvement in Middle East 'peace' efforts after 1967 was based on state-to-state relations and what Israel wanted rather than the core Palestinian issue: UN Security Council

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Resolutions 242 and 338 were singled out for their importance, although neither refers to the Palestinians except indirectly as 'refugees'. Those UN resolutions that actually set out the rights of the Palestinians were studiously ignored, the object being to arrive at a settlement without the participation of the Palestinians rather than with them. The celebrated remark by President Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'bye-bye PLO', accurately summed up the dismissive American reaction to the risks being taken by Palestinian 'moderates'.

The refusal of Israel and the United States to deal with the PLO completely undermined the organisation's gradualist approach as well as the personal standing of its executive chairman; but not even capitulation by an Arab leader seems to be enough for Tel Aviv and Washington. When Anwar al-Sadat went to Jerusalem in 1977 he claimed to have the objective of a 'comprehensive settlement' in mind: had Israel responded in kind his extraordinary gesture could have led to one. At Camp David, Sadat 'offered Israel peace, security, normal relations with its neighbours and whatever international guarantees it chose provided it withdrew from the territories occupied in 1967 and allowed the Palestinians to establish their own state. None of these preconditions survived the grinding months of negotiation' (Seale, 1988: 307).

Instead, Israel manipulated both Sadat and President Carter, taking advantage of Sadat's isolation and playing on Carter's rapidly diminishing domestic support. Where the negotiations touched on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip at Camp David, Menachem Begin agreed to grant autonomy to the people but not the land. This insistence that the land must remain under Israeli control and open to Jewish settlement foreshadowed the agreement imposed on Yasser Arafat in 1993. For agreeing to surrender the territory it had occupied in Sinai Israel was handsomely rewarded with more weaponry and a 'memorandum of understanding' that bound the United States even more tightly to its support. By removing Egypt from the 'confrontation states' Israel's hands were freed for action elsewhere: in Lebanon, which it invaded in 1982; and in the occupied territories, where Begin accelerated settlement programmes; the two were indeed tied together, the invasion and crushing of the PLO designed as a salutary lesson to the Palestinians of the West Bank.

The diplomatic path followed by Arafat from 1974 led to accolades in the international arena (the appearance by the PLO Chairman before the UN General Assembly and the diplomatic recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by an increasing number of governments), but nothing from Israel, until

the PLO leader effectively surrendered nearly twenty years later by recognising Israel's 'right' to exist without extracting from Israel acknowledgment of the Palestinians' claim to have a state of their own. As others are doing, Yasser Arafat – stateless in Gaza – is no doubt reflecting now on the fate of those who take 'risks for peace' in the Middle East.

Israel is now using this agreement to consolidate its position in Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied territories at the small cost of giving the Palestinians 'autonomy' in carefully selected areas. There is nothing in the text of the 13 September 1993 agreement to justify the numerous declarations by Arafat that the Palestinians are finally on the way to a state of their own. The position of both the Israeli Government and opposition is that there will never be a Palestinian state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river; that settlements will not be dismantled; and that Jerusalem will never be shared. These assertions are supported by what is happening on the ground: the expropriation of land and construction of houses on the West Bank continue unabated, and plans are under way 'to extend greater Jerusalem virtually to Jericho with vast construction projects, plans for tourist sites along the northern shore of the Dead Sea, some \$700 million of investment in new roads to connect settlements with Israel and each other, bypassing Palestinian villages and towns' (Chomsky, 1994: 264). Steps are also being taken to 'obliterate the official border (the Green line) by settlement and road building' (Chomsky, 1994: 264). While the Palestinians are granted minimal autonomy, the object is clearly a form of territorial fragmentation that would eliminate the possibility of their ever having sufficient territory to create a viable state. Ultimate control of the territory, its foreign relations, its economy and its natural resources (most critically water) would remain in the hands of the Government of Israel.

Needless to say, the rights of the Palestinians ejected from their homeland during the formative stage of Israel's history are not to be taken into account at all in this 'peace' process: indeed, according to reports from the United Nations, a bloc of countries including Egypt are planning the rescission of all General Assembly resolutions 'critical' of Israel; this action would 'eliminate resolutions on Palestinian national rights, human rights violations under the military occupation, Israeli settlements, Israel's refusal to renounce nuclear weapons, Israel's (virtual) annexation of the Golan Heights etc.' (Chomsky, 1994: 265). For the first time – as well as now referring to the West Bank and Gaza as 'disputed' rather than occupied territories – the United States has voted against Resolution 194 of 11 December 1948, affirming the right of expelled Palestinians to return or otherwise to be repatriated

(Chomsky, 1994: 219). And according to Mark A. Bruzonsky (1994: 8), former Washington representative of the World Jewish Congress, Israel is now working towards the ultimate diplomatic prize of United States recognition of Jerusalem as its capital.

While their fate is being decided for them, West Bank and Gaza Palestinians continue to suffer at the hands of settlers and the military. In the first eight days after the massacre of thirty Muslim worshippers at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron in February 1994, thirty-three more Palestinians were killed by the Israeli military and, while the town was put under curfew, armed settlers continued to swagger around the streets as before. Their bullying and intimidation is designed to let 'the Arabs' know 'who the true rulers in Hebron are' (Chomsky, 1994: 258). The attempt by the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to distance his government from the embarrassment of the Hebron massacre and the actions of 'extremist' settlers ('sensible Judaism spits you out') does not change the fact that the Labor Government remains committed to the West Bank settlements, which the Labor Party and *not* Likud sanctioned in the first place: former Foreign Minister and now Prime Minister Shimon Peres has given repeated assurances that Israel has 'no intention of destroying existing Jewish settlements in the territories' (Peres and Arye, 1993: 27). Naturally the people stay, too. 'It would be unthinkable to force them to leave, unless we wanted to risk a civil war', writes Peres (Peres and Arye 1993: 26).

Within a year of the 'Declaration of Principles' being signed its fragility was even more evident than at the start. The continuing Palestinian reaction indicates that Arafat has accepted conditions that not only the 'extremists', who are the staple diet of the Western media, but also the Palestinian mainstream find unacceptable. 'In Gaza and increasingly in the West Bank Palestinians who once regarded Israel as the sole enemy have come to see the Palestine Liberation Organisation and its chairman, Arafat, as another enemy', Youssef M. Ibrahim wrote recently in the *New York Times*. He added:

Arafat, 65, his 10,000 PLO policemen and the few hundred PLO bureaucrats and supporters he brought with him from exile in Tunis are sinking into deeper isolation, becoming the object of derision and distrust. In the short space of time since he arrived here in July after three decades of struggling from Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia, Arafat is finding little warmth among Gazans and evaporating support among Palestinians on the West Bank. It amounts to a state of open rebellion to which he has responded with repression and helplessness.

The Fatah militia and the PLO policemen, in the graffiti scrawled on Gaza walls, are now denounced as 'Israel's loyal servants' and Arafat's 'dogs'. The killing of fourteen demonstrators by Palestinian police in Gaza, and the armed attack by Arafat loyalists at the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon, which took ten more Palestinian lives, caused anger across the Middle East. At Ain al-Hilweh, as elsewhere among Palestinians, Arafat's opponents were not just the Islamic activists, but older-style nationalists who were the backbone of the Palestine movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Even the Fatah Central Committee, in a statement whose signatories included the Palestine National Authority's Economic Minister Ahmad Qutay (Abu Ala) and Foreign Minister Faruq Qaddumi, described the killings in Gaza as a 'massacre'.

The inability of the Palestine National Authority to attract more than a fraction of the promised international aid has compounded Arafat's problems in the occupied territories. He is criticised from within for his authoritarian methods and compromised from without by the humiliating way he is treated – not as the leader of a prospective Palestinian state, but as Israel's regent in territories it remains determined to control in all important aspects. As the limited scope of the autonomy Israel is prepared to grant the Palestinians becomes even clearer a resurgence of resistance to both Arafat and Israel seems inevitable.

### **The Fate of Israel**

It is with feelings of the profoundest gratification that I learn of the intention of His Majesty's Government to lend its powerful support to the re-establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. . . . I welcome the reference to the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. It is but a translation of the basic principle of the Mosaic legislation: 'And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex [oppress] him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself' (Lev. xix 33, 34) (Ingrams, 1972: 13).

Several years ago the American Jewish writer Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht wrote a book called *The Fate of the Jews*, in which she draws attention to the contradiction between the ethics of the early Jewish prophets and Zionism. 'Ethics, not monotheism or chosenness, was the Jews' great contribution to religion', she writes. Beginning with the Decalogue, and reasserted by Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and

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Jeremiah: 'the transcendent concern of the prophets was social justice' – plus, inevitably, a revulsion at power and its trappings. The triumph of power at the cost of ethics led to disaster in Jewish history, with Judaism surviving 'not because of its kingdoms but because of its teachings'. Tracing the history of the modern political Zionist movement, and moving through the breaches of international law and ethics that have characterised the rise of Israel, the author writes that 'Zionists executed the psychological coup of the century by taking Palestine from the Arabs and then pretending Jews were Arab victims'. Dispersion and exile have so scattered the Jews that the ethical imperative is the 'single link' that binds them; but now 'that single link is in danger of being smashed by Israel'. Israel

is not the Messiah but the Golem. Created to save the Jews it has turned on its creators, corrupting and destroying them by its very success at making them a nation like all others. Judaism as an ideal is infinite; Israel as a state is finite. Judaism survived centuries of persecution without a state; it must now learn how to survive despite being a state. . . . American Jews who care about Israel are concerned that it has made a covenant of death with its Masada mentality and reliance on direct action . . . not since the fall of the Second Temple have Jews been such an engine of death and destruction (Feuerlicht, 1984: 249–50).

What Feuerlicht's book succeeds in drawing out is the inconsistency between 'Jewish ethics' and the gradual fulfilment of the Zionist programme in Palestine from the late nineteenth century onwards. In a book first published in 1987, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947–1949*, Benny Morris, drawing on Israeli state archives, chronicled the deliberate expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland and the seizure of their land or – in the euphemistic language of the settlers – its 'liberation from the hands of tenant farmers' (Morris, 1989: 55). As valuable as the book was in confirming what the Palestinians already knew, Morris avoided the important question of prior intent going back as far as Theodor Herzl. The notion of transfer was propounded by both Herzl and Weizmann as well as the lesser figures who surrounded and followed them; indeed, the objective of removing land from Muslim and Christian ownership and labour was already being realised by the Jewish National Fund. There were many who had misgivings on moral grounds: the early Zionist colonial administrator Arthur Ruppin admitted that it was difficult 'to realise Zionism and still bring it constantly into line with general ethics' (Elmesiri, 1977: 132), but he eventually came to the conclusion that there was 'no alternative' to confrontation with the local people if the

Zionist programme was to be carried forward. The inability to buy more than a fraction of the land created a series of contradictions. It was soon obvious that a 'Jewish state' could not be established in Palestine except through force, and even the presence of the people and their ownership of the land would have to be overcome – as it eventually was when Palestinians were herded out of their homeland in 1948.

Against the ideological background and the strenuous efforts to clear the land of its people in 1948, the dispossession of the Palestinians can hardly be regarded as an accident or as a 'miraculous simplification of our task', as Weizmann would claim. To describe an armed uprising by a settler minority against the indigenous majority as a 'war of independence' subverts the meaning of language. Certainly it is a queer notion of democracy that rests on the prior expulsion of the indigenous majority; and indeed, only by being specifically anti-democratic did the Zionist programme in Palestine have any hope of being realised – a fact that Israel's imperialist backers acknowledged at the very beginning: 'The weak point of our position is that in the case of Palestine we deliberately and rightly decline to accept the principle of self-determination' wrote Balfour. '[I]n Palestine we do not even propose to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country ...' (Ingrams, 1972: 61/73).

To the initial costs of establishing Israel – the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians, the expropriation of their land and property and its parceling out for 'socialist' *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, the destruction of 350 of Palestine's 450 villages, and the seizure of land even from those Palestinians who remained in Israel, theoretically under the protection of the law – must be added the attacks on the population of surrounding countries that followed. The loss of civilian life in southern Lebanon (occupied for seventeen years) continues until the present day. In the Palestinian territories seized during the 1967 war the humiliation of the people by religious fanatics protected by the military and encouraged to 'redeem' the land forms an additional layer of their torment.

The Israeli annexation of Jerusalem following the seizure of the eastern half of the city in 1967 has been stamped with the same disregard for ethics and human rights. Homes and even villages on the outskirts of the city have been bulldozed, and land has been taken from Muslim and Christian Palestinians to make way for Jewish settlements. In 1977 a delegation from the National Lawyers Guild of the United States visited the Jewish Quarter of East Jerusalem:

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where a ten year Israeli Government plan calls for reconstruction and substitution of Jewish families for Palestinians. By 1975 more than 6,000 Palestinians had been evicted after being offered some compensation and their homes were destroyed; 200 Jewish families had already moved in while only 20 Palestinian families remained. Delegation members also visited the Wailing Wall in the Old City. A large, paved open space adjacent to it required the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian homes and removal of more than 4,000 Palestinian residents (National Lawyers Guild, 1978: 14–15).

The 'Judaisation' of Jerusalem, the attempt to obliterate its Palestinian identity, and the 'thickening' of the 'Greater Jerusalem' area to include much of the West Bank has continued relentlessly. Slowly the boast made by Menachem Begin in 1983 is being realised: 'Gradually we have been managing to erase the physical distinction between the coastal area and Judea and Samaria . . . We haven't completely succeeded yet. But give us three or four or five years and you'll drive out there and you wouldn't be able to *find* the West Bank' (Aruri, 1984: 23, emphasis in original). Not since France invaded Algeria in 1830 has a Middle Eastern territory been so comprehensively colonised, its land parcelled out among the *colons* and its people reduced to such utter helplessness.

The final thread in this strand is the unequal status of the Palestinians who are now citizens of the state of Israel. They have equal rights neither in theory nor practice. They have the freedom to vote as they choose, but they can never have full equality in what the preamble to Israel's Declaration of Independence describes as the 'state of the Jewish people', simply because they are not Jewish. The 'Law of Return' granting citizenship rights to Jews who have no physical connection with the land while denying the right of return to Palestinians who actually lived there until 1948 further delineates the essentially second-class status of Israel's 'Arab minority'. Behind the democratic façade they do not enjoy the same rights and access to services: Ian Lustick's *Arabs in the Jewish State* is only one of many books that draw attention to the institutionalised discrimination in Israel and the legal means by which it is upheld. Discriminatory indices emerge at every level. In the economy, 'to the structural and institutional factors involved in the continued backwardness of the Arab sector must be added the neglect of the government and its discrimination in favour of the Jewish sector with respect to development projects of all kinds' (Lustick, 1980: 183). Village services, health and education all show the same pattern. The ineligibility of Muslims for military service again underlines their essentially second-

class status, because 'the possession of veteran status is a prerequisite to a wide variety of jobs and public assistance programmes' (Lustick, 1980: 94).

The pattern of discrimination naturally extends to Jerusalem. As Israel Shahak (1986: 1, emphases in original) has written, 'only Jews have a right to permanent residence in Jerusalem as a *natural* right . . . the state of Israel does not recognise the right of an Arab or another non-Jew to live in Jerusalem *even if he was born there*'. Towards the end of 'Judaising' Jerusalem the state has also introduced a series of 'laws' designed to remove property from the hands of its Muslim or Christian owners and hand it over to Jewish settlers, 'including those who are known for their most aggressive and racist attitudes towards Arabs'. The government's decision to bar non-Jews from living in the Jewish quarter, 'which is much larger than the old Jewish Quarter following requisitions and evacuations' (Shahak, 1986: 2), was backed by a Supreme Court judge when a Palestinian resident appealed against his eviction. On the other hand, Jews are encouraged to settle in Muslim districts. Such discriminatory measures are opposed by Israeli 'moderates'; but, as Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri (1977: 169) has observed, 'the Jewish citizen in the Zionist state, whether he is for or against racism, benefits from institutional *de jure* discrimination'.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, apologists for the state of Israel continue to insist on the ethical nature of Zionism. Harold Fisch refers to its 'uncompromisingly ethical dimension' and puts the question: 'Can one dare to suggest that with regard to the Jewish–Arab struggle there is a marked difference in the conduct of the struggle on both sides? At the risk of seeming illiberal one must affirm that there is such a difference. The simple truth is that Israelis normally refrain from attacking civilians; Arabs normally do not' (Fisch, 1978: 143).

Even before the invasions of Lebanon and the *intifada* these claims were patently absurd. Through force the state of Israel was created and through force it has been maintained. Now even Yasser Arafat has been forced to cry 'uncle' (Chomsky, 1994: 229) and run up a 'typewritten white flag' of surrender, as the author of *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas Friedman, wrote with obvious satisfaction in the *New York Times* on 10 September 1993. Israel has extracted the grand prize of recognition from Arafat without having to give it in return (the recognition of the PLO as a negotiating partner in no way equates to the recognition of a state) and without having to make any commitments about settlements, Jerusalem, the rights of the 1948 generation of refugees or those who came after or indeed the long-term future at all.

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But surely this is the way of the world: Israel has 'won' and is entitled to enjoy the fruits of victory; why should it be different from any other country – and if it were different could it still survive? Furthermore, surely, what makes history tick is not moral power but *actual* power (and ultimately firepower). The victorious powers in 1939–45 might have had right on their side; but it was not this that defeated the Nazis. The North American Indians, the aboriginal population of Australia (the list is endless) undoubtedly had right on their side, but not the might, and eventually went under. In the Middle East all agreements negotiated over the region over the last century have ultimately been based on the same logic of power. Thus the outcome in Palestine was inevitable: nothing the Palestinians could have done, agreeing with Western governments or opposing them, could have prevented these governments from doing precisely what they wanted to do. And setting up Israel in Palestine was what they wanted to do. Here Israel emerges as the fortuitous beneficiary of their ambitions, beginning with the British: Theodor Herzl simply wandered into their machinations and made himself useful.

But power is obviously a double-edged weapon. The strategic balance between Israel and the Arab states has already changed significantly. One day the Middle East state system as it is now constituted might no longer exist. The Islamic movements are working to change not just governments but systems across the Arab world. They have made striking gains. In many respects they have filled the gap created by the collapse of secular Pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960s. They are feared and vilified in the West largely *because* they represent the aspirations of many Arabs to be free of external domination.

### Conclusions

Palestinian concessions leading up to the recognition of the Jewish state have given Israel the opportunity to make a real peace with the Palestinians, but it can only be based on a full withdrawal from the territories seized in 1967 and a political accommodation over Jerusalem. This is what the Palestinians themselves say they want, and both the Arab and the broader Islamic worlds would follow their lead; but, from everything the Government of Israel is saying (and allowing), it is clear that full withdrawal (military and settler) from the occupied territories is not on the cards. By using the Declaration of Principles to exploit Palestinian weakness even further Israel is losing an opportunity of historic magnitude. No process based on the consolidation rather than the weakening of the Israeli presence in the occupied

territories (including East Jerusalem) can be called a 'peace' process. The present process is withering on the vine because Israel is using the Declaration of Principles as a screen behind which the seizure of land and the building of settlements in the West Bank is continuing as before.

Yet the Israeli leadership shows no signs of understanding that the moment lost might never be regained. In the nineteenth century the ability to conquer and hold vast territories convinced the 'Anglo-Saxon race' – not to speak of the French or the Russians – of their moral superiority over those they ruled. The approach of 'the West' and Israel in the twentieth century is suggestive of the same assumptions. There is the same sense of outrage when the Arabs struggle against their preordained fate: the 'Mohammedan fanatics' who troubled the imperialist powers more than a century ago have become the 'Islamic fundamentalists' of today.<sup>4</sup> And as for the Palestinians, Western power (largely and latterly American) has made it possible to ignore their cries for justice. They are now being driven even further towards the atomised fate suffered by native societies in the nineteenth century: there is still talk among the 'extremists' of 'transferring' the Palestinians, but, even if this is no longer possible, the scope of development, the building of settlements and the redefinition of 'Greater Jerusalem' to place large parts of the West Bank within its municipal boundaries are calculated to demoralise the Palestinians so that, sooner or later, they will drift away and become human detritus.

But the Palestinians are a sophisticated and resourceful people, and 'Palestine' is unlikely to go away as an Arab cause. Indeed, the fate of the Palestinians is somewhat emblematic of the broader Arab fate: to be rendered powerless by unrepresentative governments, themselves rendered powerless by their dependency on external forces. The asymmetry between American and Israeli power on one hand and the weakness of the Arab state system on the other now threatens the sense among Arabs of who and what they are. The rapid growth of a nativist movement centring on religious belief is a sign of their refusal to accept this imposed fate.

The implications for Israel have been drawn out by Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht and others. What Israel has gained temporally, through power, Judaism has lost metaphysically and ethically. The crimes of the state (and considering a long and terrible record they can be described in no other way) have in their turn bred hate and a long sequence of bloody reprisals. The shock of what Israel did in Lebanon led Feuerlicht and others to point to the need for Jews to affirm their own identity independently of Israel. As she has written: 'The Israelis are surviving but not as Jews' (Feuerlicht, 1984: 250).

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The ethical solution to the problems arising from the creation of Israel is present in United Nations resolutions acknowledging Israel's right to exist but setting out territorial limitations and the rights of the Palestinians as well. The 1993 Declaration of Principles represented another stage in the historical attempt to bury them – but when the Palestinians begin to emerge from this especially bleak period of their history, with whom will Israel then deal and what will there be left to talk about? Not the refugees, not Israel's return to the borders set by the United Nations in 1947, not the return to the 1967 borders, not the settlements in the West Bank, not Jerusalem and not a Palestinian state. As long as these questions are off the agenda, peace – real peace and not the imposed peace of 1993 – will be off the agenda too.

The nuclearisation of the Middle East underlines the dangers surrounding the success or failure of these negotiations. Although Israel routinely asserts that it will not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the region, it is common knowledge that it has some two hundred nuclear warheads stored across the country. After the first disastrous week (as it certainly was for Israel) of the 1973 war, the government began preparing to deploy them; and there is obviously a terrible risk that they will be used at some time in the future. Israel's nuclear power is the cause of great alarm in the region, and was the reason for the reticence of Arab governments to make a fresh commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) when it came up for renewal in 1995. Instead of working towards a nuclear-free Middle East, the United States Government makes a lot of noise about Iran's nuclear *potential*, while quietly working to enhance Israel's nuclear capacity. As recently as 1995 the Clinton Administration approved the delivery of nine super-computers to Israeli universities: their purpose is to simulate the launching and detonation of nuclear weapons without the need for an actual test. There can be no doubt that the Arabs will be compelled to match Israel's nuclear power. 'Don't expect any country which is really fearing another country not to resort to all means of self-defence', the Deputy Secretary General of the Arab League, Mr Adnan Omran, said recently. 'If they have a nuclear bomb you have to have a nuclear bomb whether secretly or not.'

The air attack that destroyed the Osirak nuclear installation in Iraq in the 1980s is a clear signal of what Israel will do if another Arab country (or Iran) develops a nuclear weapons programme. As the Arab states must develop their own nuclear deterrent, a nuclear crisis seems inevitable some time in the future. The paradox, as the British correspondent David Hirst has written, is that 'an Israel unwilling to make

true peace because of its nuclear and conventional edge may one day find its very existence threatened'. According to Adnan Omran: 'Remember [that] nuclear war will eliminate Israel from the map but it will not eliminate the Arab nation from the map.' This is the 'Samson option', the roof of the temple being pulled in over Israel and its enemies, the ultimate nightmare that cannot be discarded as long as Israel is strengthening its nuclear weapons capacity and forcing Arab governments to begin their own programmes. Only through a genuine reconciliation between Israel and the Arabs can these dangers be averted; only through reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians can there be this broader settlement; and only through Israel removing itself entirely from the Palestinian territories seized in 1967, taking the refugee problem seriously and finding a formula for Jerusalem that meets Palestinian aspirations as well as Israeli can there be a durable Israeli–Palestinian settlement. Unfortunately, buoyed up by its military superiority and the continuing support of the United States, Israel is still seizing land, still settling, still consolidating its hold over Jerusalem and still driving real peace further into the distance. When Theodor Herzl founded the World Zionist Organisation in the late nineteenth century, he predicted that a Jewish state would be established in Palestine within fifty years. He was right, but will it still be there after the next fifty? The historic choices are now in the hands of the Israeli people and their government.

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