

Review

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Said, Edward. 2000. *The End of the "Peace Process": Oslo and After*.
New York Pantheon Books.



Edward Said

Edward Said's consistent argument in *The Question of Palestine, The Politics of Dispossession, Peace and Its Discontents* has been that what needs to be addressed with regard to the Zionist-Palestinian conflict is an alternative representation that is necessarily secular in its treatment of the Palestinian and Jewish questions -- an alternative that never denies the rights of a people, one that guarantees total equality, and that abolishes apartheid, Bantustans and separation in Palestine. In contrast with the main-stream media's ahistorical (mis)representation, his argument is a historical one. It is a reading which maintains that any attempt to understand the Oslo Accords, their consequences, and the power mechanisms that had led to them, needs a re-reading of the close relationship between Zionism, American Imperialism, and Arab reactionism.

The End of the "Peace Process" is about the current situation in post-Oslo Palestine. Has Israel, under the Ashkenazi Zionist Labour government, decided to recognize the Palestinian people as a people when it signed the Oslo accords? Are the Oslo accords a radical change in Zionist ideology with regard to "gentile Palestinian non-Jews?" Do the accords guarantee the restoration of a long-lasting comprehensive peace? And does the current leadership of the PLO represent the political and national aspirations of the Palestinian people? These are the kinds of questions Said tries to answer. He sums up these answers in what seems to be the jest of his book: "no negotiations are better than endless concessions that simply prolong the Israeli occupation. Israel is certainly pleased that it can take the credit for having made peace, and at the same time continue the occupation with Palestinian consent" (p.25).

When this book was written, the Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak supported the idea of the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state, or rather a Bantustan in most of the Gaza strip and parts of the West Bank. Said holds that the programme of Barak's One Israel government did not challenge the current status quo, nor did it allow the Palestinian people to exercise the minimal of their national and political rights. Barak's clear

platform during the elections, which he confirmed in his first victory speech included his "red line concessions": *NO* return to the borders of 4th of June/1967; *NO* dismantling of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza strip and the West Bank; *NO* return of Palestinian refugees; *No* backing down on Jerusalem as "the undivided, eternal capital city of Israel"; and *NO* unilateral declaration of an independent sovereign Palestinian state that can have a military on the western bank of the Jordan river.

The "safe passage" that was established last year between Gaza and the West Bank is not free of "interference from Israeli authorities," as mentioned in the Oslo accords. Israel issues the new "magnetic cards"-- South African pass -- required by Palestinians to travel on this "passage." Besides, Israel reserves the right to arrest any Palestinian "suspect" on this route. Thus, the opening of the "safe passage" does not change the enforced divisions between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank -- divisions which have been enforced by Israel since 1991.

Further, in shocking statistics Said shows how the "dovish" government of Barak accelerated settlement expansion and land seizure in the occupied West Bank. Said, thus, concludes that what Barak's "dovish" government was fighting for was the preservation of settlements, the maintenance of control over the Palestinian occupied territories as a part of the "Land of Israel," and the dominance of Palestinians through other Palestinians.

Hence, the Palestinian state that Barak accepted was a Bantustan, a canton, a demilitarized state that lacks the necessary components of a sovereign, independent state, that is, a state that has a dependent economy, that lacks unified territory, and has no military power. But the real reality of what the Israelis were doing was putting the Palestinians on confined and controlled reservations, carefully and intensely restricting them from being able to even visit the great bulk of what just a few years ago was their country. According to Said, this is a state that will be accepted by the official leadership of the PLO who, by signing the Oslo Accords and the Wye River Memorandum, has completely surrendered to Israel

The Oslo accord was claimed to be the first step towards self-determination and an independent state. But it is clear now -- six years after the famous ceremony at the White House -- that no independent, sovereign state in the short run will be established because Oslo simply ignored the existence of the Palestinian people as a people. And if any Palestinian intellectual speaks out about this great injustice, s/he is automatically accused of "terrorism" and "incitement." Hence the banning of Said's *Peace and its Discontents* in the Palestinian occupied territories.

Said argues convincingly, as he did in his previous books, that the Oslo Accords do not guarantee the establishment of a sovereign, independent state, nor the return of the refugees; nor the demolition of all Jewish settlements, and compensation for those who lost -- and are still losing -- their homes, lands and properties; nor the release of all political prisoners; nor the opening of all checkpoints; nor free elections after the withdrawal of all Israeli soldiers from the territories which have been under occupation since 1967 . . . etc.

The Gaza Strip, however, is seen by the PA as one of three building blocks of an independent state, although it is geographically separated from the second block, i.e. the West Bank. The third block -- Jerusalem -- is under total Israeli control. None of the Palestinians in the occupied territories believe that the different "semi-autonomous" zones in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank -- that is, the ones that fall under category A -- can lay the foundation for an independent state even if the boundaries of such a state are declared unilaterally.

Said compares the current situation in Palestine with apartheid South Africa. The tribal chiefs of the South African Bantustans used to believe that they were heads of independent states. The ANC, despite its many compromises with the National Party, never accepted the idea of separation and Bantustans. He maintains that the Palestinian leadership, on the other hand, at the end of the millennium, boasts of having laid the foundation for a Bantustan, claiming it to be an independent state. This is undoubtedly the ultimate thing Zionism can offer to its "Other" after having denied her/his existence for a century, and after that same "Other" has proved that s/he is human. For Zionism's continued presence in Palestine, the "Other" must therefore be assimilated and enslaved without her/him being conscious of her/his enslavement. Hence the granting of "semi-autonomous" rule over the most crowded Palestinian cities, and hence the logic behind Oslo.

Nonetheless, Said is not against a political solution in principle. On the contrary, he holds that a minimum fair solution at this stage must be based on resolutions of international legitimacy which accord the Palestinian people some of their rights -- i.e., self-determination, establishment of an independent state, return of dispossessed refugees and Jerusalem, and the removal of the Jewish settlements. However, ironically, what the Oslo Accords have led to is a situation that was not envisaged by its signatories, that is, the extreme difficulty -- not to say impossibility -- of establishing a sovereign independent Palestinian state on 22% of historic Palestine. Hence his defense of the establishment of a secular democratic state in Palestine-Israel in which ALL citizens are treated equally regardless of their religion, sex, and colour. A comprehensive peace, for him, means that Israel -- which dispossessed 800,000 Palestinians in 1948, occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Golan, and Sinai in 1967, annexed Jerusalem and Golan, invaded Lebanon in 1982, expropriated Palestinian land, built settlements, killed more than 2000 Palestinians during the Intifada (1987-1993), uprooted trees, assassinated Palestinian leaders, banned books, demolished houses, closed universities -- should acknowledge the right of Palestinians to exist as a people, their right to self-determination and to a sovereign, independent state -- not to say their right to human life. What Said finds "astonishing" is how far, after 52 years, supporters of Israel will go to suppress the fact that these years have gone by without Israel restitution, recognition, or even acknowledgment of Palestinian human rights and without connecting that suspension of rights to Israeli official policies.

So, for Said coexistence in Palestine-Israel is unachievable at the present moment because Israel is NOT the state of all its citizens, but rather the state of Jews entitled to the "entire land of Israel," and because there has been no serious attempt on the Israeli

side to acknowledge the right of the "other" to exist as an equal partner. How are Palestinians whose entire territory was occupied and society destroyed, and who now live under worse conditions, and whose leadership has acknowledged Israel's right to exist, supposed to deal with the American-Israeli understanding of "comprehensive peace?" How are they supposed to coexist with a state that still has not declared its boundaries? To put it differently, has there been any change in the colonialist and exclusivist behaviour of Israel that indicates that it is somehow prepared to (co)exist in the midst of the Arab world? These are the kinds of questions that Said thinks need to be addressed instead of blaming the victims for the mere fact of being victims. At the core of comprehensive peace is justice, non-discrimination and equality -- qualities that Israel denies all Palestinians.

Said again proves that he is the kind of controversial public intellectual who speaks the truth to power. As he puts it in his discussion of the role of resistance: [it] only takes a few bold spirits to speak out and start challenging a status quo that gets worse and more dissembling each day" (p.26). This book is, therefore, a Gramscian manifestation of the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.