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## What Israel has done

Can Israel be a state like all others? That is the true question of its existence, writes **Edward Said**



Despite Israel's effort to restrict coverage of its extraordinarily destructive invasion of the West Bank's Palestinian towns and refugee camps, information and images have nevertheless seeped through. The Internet has provided hundreds of verbal as well as pictorial eyewitness reports, as has Arab and European TV coverage, most of it unavailable or blocked or spun out of existence from the mainstream US media. That evidence provides stunning proof of what Israel's campaign has actually (has always) been about: the irreversible conquest of Palestinian land and society. The official line (which the US, along with nearly every American media commentator has basically supported) is that Israel has been defending itself by retaliating for the suicide bombings that have undermined its security and even threatened its existence. That claim has gained the status of an absolute truth moderated neither by what Israel has done nor by what in fact has been done to it.

Plucking out the terrorist network, destroying the terrorist infrastructure, attacking terrorist nests (note the total dehumanisation involved in every one of these phrases): the words are repeated so often and so unthinkingly that they have therefore given Israel the right to do what it has wanted to do, which in effect is to destroy Palestinian civil life with as much damage, as much sheer wanton destruction, killing, humiliation, vandalism, purposeless but overwhelming technological violence as possible. No other state on earth could have done what Israel has done with as much approbation and support as the US has given it. None has been more intransigent and destructive, less out of touch with its own realities, than Israel.

There are signs, however, that the amazing, not to say grotesque, nature of these claims (its "fight for existence") is slowly being eroded by the harsh and nearly unimaginable devastation wrought by the Jewish state and its homicidal prime minister, Ariel Sharon. Take this front-page report, "Attacks Turn Palestinian Plans Into Bent Metal and Piles of Dust" by the *New York Times*'s Serge Schmemmann (no Palestinian propagandist) on 11 April: "There is no way to assess the full extent of the damage to the cities and towns -- Ramallah, Bethlehem, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Nablus, and Jenin -- while they remain under a tight siege, with patrols and snipers firing in the streets. But it is safe to say that the infrastructure of life itself and of any future Palestinian state -- roads, schools, electricity pylons, water pipes, telephone lines -- has been devastated." By what inhuman calculus did Israel's army, using 50

tanks, 250 missile strikes a day, and dozens of F-16 sorties, besiege Jenin's refugee camp for over a week, a one square kilometre patch of shacks housing 15,000 refugees and a few dozen men armed with automatic rifles and with no defences whatever, no leaders, no missiles, no tanks, nothing, and call it a response to terrorist violence and the threat to Israel's survival? There are reported to be hundreds buried in the rubble Israeli bulldozers are now trying to heap over the camp's ruins.

Are Palestinian civilians, men, women, children, no more than rats or cockroaches that can be killed and attacked in the thousands without so much as a word of compassion or in their defence? And what about the capture of thousands of Palestinian men who have been taken off by Israeli soldiers without a trace, the destitution and homelessness of so many ordinary people trying to survive in the ruins created by Israeli bulldozers all over the West Bank, the siege that has now gone on for months and months, the cutting off of electricity and water in all Palestinian towns, the long days of total curfew, the shortage of food and medicine, the wounded who have bled to death, the systematic attacks on ambulances and aid workers that even the mild-mannered Kofi Annan has decried as outrageous? Those actions will not be pushed so easily into the memory hole. Its friends must ask Israel how its suicidal policies can possibly gain it peace, acceptance and security.

A monstrous transformation of an entire people by the most formidable and feared propaganda machine in the world into little more than "militants" and "terrorists" has allowed not just Israel's military but its fleet of writers and defenders to efface a terrible history of suffering and abuse in order to destroy the civil existence of the Palestinian people with impunity. Gone from public memory are the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948 and the creation of a dispossessed people; the conquest of the West Bank and Gaza and their military occupation since 1967; the invasion of 1982 with its 17,500 Lebanese and Palestinian dead and the Sabra and Shatila massacres; the continuous assault on Palestinian schools, refugee camps, hospitals, civil installations of every kind. What anti-terrorist purpose is served by destroying the building and then removing the records of the Ministry of Education, the Ramallah Municipality, the Central Bureau of Statistics, various institutes specialising in civil rights, health and economic development, hospitals, radio and television stations? Is it not clear that Sharon is bent not only on "breaking" the Palestinians, but on trying to eliminate them as a people with national institutions?

In such a context of disparity and asymmetrical power, it seems deranged to keep asking the Palestinians, who have neither army, nor air force, nor tanks, nor defences of any kind, nor functioning leadership, to "renounce" violence, and to require no comparable limitation on Israel's actions. Even the matter of suicide bombers, which I have always opposed, cannot be examined from a view point that permits a hidden racist standard to value Israeli lives over the many more Palestinian lives that have been lost, maimed, distorted and foreshortened by long-standing Israeli military occupation, and the systematic barbarity openly used by Sharon against Palestinians from the beginning of his career in the 1950s until now.

There can be no conceivable peace, in my opinion, that does not tackle the real issue: Israel's utter refusal to accept the sovereign existence of a Palestinian people that is entitled to rights over what Sharon and most of the people supporting him consider exclusively to be the land of Greater Israel, i.e. the West Bank and Gaza. A

profile of Sharon in the 6-7 April issue of the *Financial Times* concluded with this extremely telling extract from his autobiography, which the *FT* prefaced with "he has written with pride of his parents' belief that Jews and Arabs could live side by side." Then the relevant quote from Sharon's book: "But they believed without question that only they had rights over the land. And no one was going to force them out, regardless of terror or anything else. When the land belongs to you physically... that is when you have power, not just physical power but spiritual power."

In 1988, the PLO made the concession that the partition of historical Palestine into two states would be acceptable. This was reaffirmed on numerous occasions and certainly again in the Oslo documents. *But only the Palestinians explicitly recognised the notion of partition. Israel never has.* (This is why there are now over 170 settlements on Palestinian lands, why a 300-mile network of roads connecting them to each other and totally impeding Palestinian movement exists (according to Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition, it has cost \$3 billion and has been funded by the US), why no Israeli prime minister, from Rabin on, has ever conceded any *real Palestinian sovereignty* to the Palestinians, and why of course the settlements have increased on an annual basis. The merest glance at a recent map of the territories reveals what Israel has been doing throughout the peace process, and what the consequent geographical discontinuity and shrinkage in Palestinian life has been. In effect, then, Israel considers itself and the Jewish people to own the land of Israel in its entirety: there are land ownership laws in Israel itself guaranteeing this, but on the West Bank and Gaza the network of settlements, roads, and no concessions whatever on sovereign land rights to the Palestinians serve the same function.

What boggles the mind is that no official -- US, Palestinian, Arab, UN, European, or anyone else -- has challenged Israel on this point, which has been threaded through all of the Oslo documents, procedures and agreements. That is why, of course, after nearly 10 years of "peace negotiations," Israel still controls the West Bank and Gaza. They are more directly controlled (owned?) by over 1,000 Israeli tanks and thousands of soldiers today, but the underlying principle is the same. No Israeli leader (and certainly not Sharon and his Land of Israel supporters who are the majority in his government) has either officially recognised the occupied territories as occupied territories or gone on to recognise that Palestinians could or might theoretically have sovereign rights -- that is, without Israeli control over borders, water, air, security on what most of the world considers Palestinian land. So to speak about the "vision" of a Palestinian state, as has become fashionable, is mere vision alas, unless the question of land ownership and sovereignty is openly and officially conceded by the Israeli government. No Israeli government ever has made this concession and, if I am right, none will in the near future. It needs to be remembered that Israel is the only state in the world today that has never had internationally declared borders; the only state not the state of its citizens but of the whole Jewish people; the only state where over 90 per cent of the land is held in trust for the exclusive use of the Jewish people. That it is also the only state in the world never to have recognised any of the main provisions of international law (as argued recently in these pages by Richard Falk) suggests the depth and structural knottiness of the absolute rejectionism that Palestinians have had to face.

This is why I have been sceptical about discussions and meetings about peace,

which is a lovely word but in the present context simply means that Palestinians will have to stop resisting Israeli control over their land. It is among the many deficiencies of Arafat's terrible leadership (to say nothing of the even more lamentable Arab leaders in general) that he never made the decade-long Oslo negotiations focus on land ownership, and thus never put the onus on Israel to declare itself constitutively willing to give up title to Palestinian land; nor did he ever ask that Israel be required to deal with *any* of its responsibility for the sufferings of his people. Now I worry that he may simply be trying to save himself again, whereas what we really need are international monitors to protect us, as well as elections to assure a real political future for the Palestinian people.

The profound question facing Israel and its people is this: is it willing juridically to assume the rights and obligations of being a country like any other, and forswear the kind of impossible land ownership assertions for which Sharon and his parents and his soldiers have been fighting since day one? In 1948 Palestinians lost 78 per cent of Palestine. In 1967 they lost the last 22 per cent, both times to Israel. Now the international community must lay upon Israel the obligation to accept the principle of real, as opposed to fictional, partition, and to accept the principle of limiting Israel's untenable extra-territorial claims, those absurd Biblically-based pretensions, and laws that have so far allowed it to override another people completely. Why is that kind of fundamentalism tolerated unquestioningly? But so far all we hear is that Palestinians must give up violence and condemn terror. Is nothing substantive ever demanded of Israel? Can it go on doing what it has without a thought for the consequences? That is the real question of its existence: whether it can exist as a state like all others, or must always be above the constraints and duties of all other states in the world today. The record is not reassuring.

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