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ARABS AND JEWS

EDWARD W. SAID*

During 1970 and 1971 a reasonably articulate Arab in the United States would frequently be asked to participate in public discussions on the Middle East question. On one occasion I was preceded to the lectern by an Israeli speaker who, I thought then, had the lack of irony to say that it was the Arabs that had always seen themselves as the chosen people. Obviously this heedless remark was a later embarrassment to him as a Jew, and it was easy to mock him with his own observation. This incident isn't perhaps of tremendous value now, except that it did come back during the anxious and confusing days of the fourth Arab-Israeli war. You began to realize that what as an intellectual of secular persuasion you have always believed, that there is really no such thing as a divinely chosen race, has a disquieting additional meaning. No, the Jews are not a chosen people, but Jews and Arabs together, one as oppressor and the other as oppressed, have chosen each other for a struggle whose roots seem to go deeper with each year, and whose future seems less thinkable and resolvable each year. Neither people can develop without the other there, harassing, taunting, fighting; no Arab today has an identity that can be unconscious of the Jew, that can rule out the Jew as a psychic factor in the Arab identity; conversely, I think, no Jew can ignore the Arab in general, nor can he immerse himself in his ancient tradition and so lose the Palestinian Arab in particular and what Zionism has done to him. The more intense these modern struggles for identity become, the more attention is paid by the Arab or the Jew to his chosen opponent, or partner. Each is the other.

I can recall that as a child before 1948 in Palestine and Egypt the foreigners with which I was surrounded here and there stood out with a hard and almost

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cold difference from me. The Englishman or the Frenchman or the Greek had recognizable patterns of speech and even dress, gestures unique to each, and so on. Yet the Jew, whether he was Egyptian, Palestinian, Italian or British, seemed to seep through those harder identities and be mixed up with mine. Usually of course, nothing was said, but there was a felt correspondence between us nevertheless. Maybe this experience was not common to many Arabs: I don't really know. Now, however, there is a corporate Arab-Jewish identity, so overlaid with events, with insults, wars, humiliations and fear, all those seeming inevitabilities; but there are only the rarest occasions for judging how in victimizing each other — most often at the instigation of imperialist powers — we have shared little except conflict and a gradually diminished human reality.

Every Arab has his own national identity to protect his spirit from the fraying ordeals of Arabism-Israelism, that ugly padlock of one-against-one tension. For the Egyptian there is an unbroken national Egyptian history that has endured for eighty centuries; this is a sovereign life whose richness astounded even Herodotus. For the Palestinian perforce his national identity is an embattled resistance to dispossession and extinction; yet for most of the world he has seemed like cigarette ash, moved from corner to corner, threatened always with irreversible dispersion. How many partisans of Jewish immigration to Israel recognize that every penny spent for that purpose also buys a Palestinian more time as an exile from his country?

However, all Arabs have suffered both in the Middle East and in the West. The Arab is seen as the disruptor of Israel's existence, or, in a larger view, as a surmountable obstacle to Israel's creation in 1948. This has been part of the Zionist attitude toward the Arab, especially in the years before 1948 when Israel was being promulgated ideologically. Palestine was imagined as an empty desert waiting to burst into bloom, its inhabitants minimized as inconsequential nomads possessing no stable claim to the land and therefore no cultural permanence. At worst, the Arab today is conceived of as a bloody-minded shadow that dogs the Jew and that interrupts the smoothly flowing "democracy" of Israeli life. In that shadow — because Arab and Jew are Semites — can be placed whatever latent mistrust the Westerner still feels towards the Jew. The Jew of pre-Nazi Europe has split in two: a Jewish hero, constructed out of a revived cult of the adventurer-pioneer, and the Arab, his creeping, mysteriously fearsome shadow. Thus isolated from his past the Arab has seemed condemned to being local colour or to chastisement at the hands of Israeli soldiers and tourists, kept in his place by American Phantom jets, American cluster bombs and napalm, and UJA money.

If I may digress here for a little it is to point out that the Arabs and Islam have always been a singular problem for the largely Christian West. As an

instance there is the attitude of the West to Islam during the Middle Ages, the great age of Islamic civilization, roughly from the ninth through the eleventh centuries. This attitude is the subject of a book, *Western Views of Islam During the Middle Ages*,[1] by the Chichele Professor of Modern History at Oxford, R.W. Southern. To the Western thinkers who tried to understand Islam and the Arab achievement a great problem constantly supervened: how to explain a religion, a society, a civilization which in many ways parallelled that of the Christian West, yet which was, on the one hand, immeasurably more mature, powerful, and civilized, and on the other hand, a civilization which was immeasurably different and non-Christian. "In understanding Islam," Southern says,

> the West could get no help from antiquity, and no comfort from the present. For an age avowedly dependent on the past for its materials, this was a serious matter. Intellectually the nearest parallel to the position of Islam was the position of the Jews. They shared many of the same tenets and brought forward many of the same objections to Christianity. But Christian thinkers had at their disposal an embarrassing wealth of material for answering the Jewish case; and the economic and social inferiority of the Jews encouraged the view that their case could be treated with disdain. Nothing is easier than to brush aside the arguments of the socially unsuccessful, and we can see this verified in the melancholy history of the Jewish controversy in the Middle Ages.... But Islam stubbornly resisted this treatment. It was immensely successful. Every period of incipient breakdown was succeeded by a period of astonishing and menacing growth. Islam resisted both conquest and conversion, and it refused to wither away. (pp. 4-5)

Even during the comparatively remote period of which Southern speaks we have the Western habit of associating the unfamiliar with the inferior — how ironically prophetic of the Arab-Israeli conflict of today as it is also of the implicit attitude of identifying Jew with Arab.

I point this out with the intention only of showing that the relation between Islam and Arabs on the one hand, and the West on the other has a long and unhappy history. Not infrequently, as Southern says, Judaism and Islam were considered together as more or less interchangeable problems. In referring to all this I do not by any means wish to characterize the present political relationship between Arabs, Jews and the West as something reducible to a doctrinal problem in the Middle Ages. I wish only to show that the impoverishment of the Arab and of Islam, as well as Judaism, at the hands of the Christian West has behind it a long and complex background of unsatisfactory dealings. In part it is this background that illuminates the commonly accepted view of the Arab that is found in the West today, where — as I said a while ago —

[1] Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

the Israeli appears as the champion of Westernism and modernity and democracy, whereas it is the Arab who is subservient, obscure and strangely to be feared.

Although in many ways, the war from the Arab viewpoint went better than one had expected — and this sense of restored self-esteem is something it would be hypocritical ever for an Arab to deny — there are strong reasons for thinking of this war in particular as having been a very dangerous business indeed. I am not thinking exclusively, or even principally, about dangers of its escalating into World War Three, or of the increased risk of superpower confrontation. It is entirely to have been expected that the US would request funds for aid to Israel and for Cambodia simultaneously, and for President Nixon to use the war to divert attention from his shady misadventures. The risks taken by superpowers, the mindlessness and the lack of respect for human issues, are risks of course, but they seem less immediate to me at this point than other ones. For so unusual and eccentric a conflict as the one between the Arabs and Israel breeds unusual and eccentric consequences. In the past and even now one such consequence has been the total absence of engagement; each side denied the other, each in his own way. Since 1967 this has been far less true of the Arabs than it has of the Israelis; I think that one can say this as an Arab quite honestly without fear of being accused of nationalist pride. From the governments to the people there seemed a growing willingness, perhaps because there was no real option, to deal with the unpleasant fact of Israel's presence. It is probably this willingness that accounts for the far more popular and determined sort of struggle that Arabs are presently waging on the field today. At last the Arabs have discovered that Israel, and Israel's strength, are *real*, which means that Israel can be fought and fought bravely if necessary. There is no mythology here.

For the Israeli since 1967 there seemed to have emerged two kinds of Arabs: one, the intransigent rebellious type of fellow, the so-called terrorist, the wicked enemy of Israel, and two, the good Arab, the reasonable man, with whom it was always pleasant to flirt, to exchange left-wing ideas, dovish sentiment, and so on. Yet in neither case was there a determination to open up the questions about which the conflict, from the Arab side at least,turned; there was no willingness, for example, seriously to discuss the rights of the Palestinians, except after all the pieties about Jewish statehood had been pronounced, all the necessities of maintaining the Law of Return and other undiscussable privileges of that sort. All talk of the right of Palestinians was thereafter invalidated, and such talk seemed only to be a way of standing with Israel's strength and, at the same time, maintaining a good conscience.

If this seems a harsh statement, and if it discounts too much the often-courageous stand of Israelis who were critical of their government's policy

of the illegal occupation of Arab territories, the denial of the Palestinian's existence, and so on, nevertheless I believe it is right to say that such positions in Israel were always hampered by something called "realism." Realism dictated that any talk of seriously modifying the immigration laws and the completely Jewish institutions of the state was tantamount to being a fool or a knave or a traitor or all three. Realism, one was very often told by realists, was taking the country's mood into consideration, the fervent nationalism, the unchangeable characteristics of the state of Israel as it was presently constituted, and even Jewish racism. Those were realities with which one was not supposed to argue since they had the force of reality, of history, and — even though it wasn't always mentioned — the force of military power. Realism therefore was the uncrossable line, rather like that formidable Bar-Lev line, which assured one that here at last was something absolutely secure and powerful, and it — far more than Arab good intentions or promises or whatever — guaranteed reality. So one could discuss Palestinian rights rather as one could discuss the question of the annexation of the Sinai, as a choice one might or might not make, depending on the attractiveness of the argument put forward on its behalf, and above all, on its realism.

Many former doves in Israel and perhaps in America have now seen that they were wrong and "unrealistic." That is, they feel that if what they had argued for had become state policy, then Israel — so they say — would now be fighting Arabs in the streets of Tel Aviv. As an instance there is a letter to the *New York Times* of October 17, 1973 by a whole team of high-flying (former) doves, including Shlomo Avineri, Jacob Talmon, and Gershom Sholem. Here are some typical excerpts:

> We, the undersigned, have always used our right as free men to express our views on our country's policies, both external and internal; and some of us have disagreed with some of these policies in the past. The real issue today, as it was in 1967, is the determination by Egypt and Syria to destroy Israel....
>
> The Egyptian and Syrian attack against us on the Day of Atonement has led us to the painful conclusion that the policy of the present governments of the Arab states is to go to any length to destroy Israel....
>
> The Arab doctrine of prior agreement by Israel to withdraw from territory is illogical and unacceptable. Everyone of us is wholly convinced that our very existence today is due to the fact that this doctrine was rejected by us. The way in which the Egyptian and Syrian attack was prepared and launched must convince the world that this rejection was thoroughly justified...

This is a very strange realism indeed. For the state policy was precisely *not* to yield an inch, not to engage the Arabs in any serious way except as bodies to be raped and spaces to be entered violently at will, and it was that same

realistic policy that led to the latest war. For instead of seeing that the realism of the situation since 1967 is that one cannot by sheer sightless force impose one's will on anyone, no matter how badly beaten, the neo-realists see instead that realism calls for more, not less, stubbornness and realism of the old variety. As if all the bombing done by the Nazis in World War Two, and all the US bombing in Vietnam had anything for their effect but a strengthening of the people's will to resist. As if the Bar-Lev line was anything more than an invitation to Egypt to cross it and attempt rightfully to retake her occupied territory. *This* realism is something missing from the conflict even now. And it is this missing realism, this missing chapter in the history of Israel's existence among the Arabs, that is very dangerous.

All of us in the United States have witnessed the sometimes appalling spectacle and sound of media coverage of the latest conflict. Most of the time it seems as if we are watching either a football game, with favourites and villains, hometeams and visitors, or as if we are watching a horse opera, with marshalls, Indians and bad guys. Language is out of all touch with reality. Arabs, always mobs of them, faceless, voiceless, dark, and frightening, are always *claiming* to have done something. Israelis, who look like Bohemians of some sort, *are* doing things; the interviews are uniformly of some clever glib fellow like General Herzog, or a friendly infantryman from the Bronx. Bombing, napalming, strafing of Arabs is perfectly all right, for isn't it with Arabs that American bombs were designed to deal, using clean hands, as with a sub-human other? How hard it is to watch the silent faces of Arab suffering on the anonymous ruthless face of American TV! When the Israelis cross the Golan Heights they are going "into Syria," as if the Golan were somewhere else. But one is constantly struck by one theme: the hardship endured by the Israelis, and always their hope and optimism. This isn't a war, it's a pastime: at least that's the impression one gets, as if fighting Arabs was like ridding the backyard of a few miscellaneous pests. On one occasion during the war's second week, an irrepressible CBS reporter steps up to an obviously dead-tired Israeli soldier (an American) and asks him, whether after eleven days in the field it's worth it. "Yes" comes back the answer, "if it's the last time anything is worth it." Earlier in the war the answer wasn't quite so weary; usually one heard things like, it'll be over in a couple of days, we'll break their bones, then we'll be home for the weekend. Now, a more resigned note creeps in: for the last time, anything is worth the effort. There are several interpretations possible for this change in tone. But mainly, I think, one gets the feeling that the realism of the present situation is that once we beat the Arabs this time, they will never never dare come near us again.

Let me give one more example of this realism, or rather, this extraordinary absence of realism. One of the classical texts on Zionism is Arthur Hertzberg's

anthology called *The Zionist Idea, A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Meridian Books, New York, 1960). The book is a six-hundred page compilation of excerpts from the principal figures in the history of Zionism, from Alkalai and Kalischer to Ben Gurion, Silver and Weizmann. The readings cover a span of about a hundred years, precisely those years during which Zionism went from a theory to a movement. An astounding fact is that in this six-hundred page book there are scarcely a dozen pages that refer to Arabs, that so much as mention them as in some way constituting, for a part of the hundred years in question, half and more than half of the question of Palestine. This is no hastily thrown together book of readings. It is intended as a reliable and scholarly guide to the most representative as well as the best of Zionist thought. And this book, as with the major thrust of Zionism, has absolutely nothing to say about the Arabs whose presence in Palestine must have reminded the Zionist from time to time of another people on the land, and there for a long time. Aside from Magnes, Jabotinsky, and Buber, Arabs are less even than an incidental difficulty to the Jewish question, which, in every other case, is remarkable for the sustained and the often profound attention it receives from the thinkers, ideologists and theorists that Hertzberg anthologizes.

This is "realism." For behind this sort of thought and practice is an even more intensified disengagement from reality. Can anyone seriously believe that another defeat will make all the Arabs stop bothering Israel and go away? Yes, people seriously believe that, even a whole nation believes that. As if the effort were no greater and no more difficult than ridding a small area of a nest of unwanted rodents. Has it occurred to no one to say to those people: if you beat the Arabs this time, the next time will be a shorter interval away than you expect? That continued tyranny does not break the will or the back of a people, and that popular resistance grows, rather than lessens, with every blow? Even American intellectuals who had the freedom to make these truths apparent never, or very rarely, did — once again, because in the interests of realism it was better to repeat the tired truths of Israeli official realism.

But to be honest amongst ourselves as well, we must say what about this war has been a threat to us. Not that we might lose because we have learned how to deal with defeat. But that, in parallel with the Israelis, we will start to believe that our Middle East can be restored to us either by war or by negotiation as a pristine, unspotted land, free of its past enemies, ours for the taking. That is out of the question. There is no future that is entirely free of the past, and there is certainly no future without an adequate understanding of the present. For the Arab today there must be an understanding that years and years of war with the Israelis, possibly with the great powers as well, will not bring a utopia in the end. Certain processes, which inhere in the struggle, must be acknowledged. First of all, there can be no struggle on the popular

or on the individual level without drastic changes. This is a truism. Among these changes the giving up of certain ideas, at very great cost, is one of the most difficult to endure. We must give up, once and for all, the idea that we shall have a Middle East that is as if Zionism had never happened. The Israeli Jew is there in the Middle East, and we cannot, I might even say that we must not, pretend that he will not be there tomorrow, after the struggle is over. This is something very obviously to be faced directly and immediately by the Palestinian who has always fought for his right to be there. It is not for me to say what the right of the Israeli Jew is or should be, but *that* he is, that he exists with an obviously special attachment to the land is something we must face. We must face it directly, and not through the distorting glasses of an imperialist project which, alas, is the only way we have had to face it; quite justly we have rejected it on the grounds that such a vision scants us completely. But how then do we face it? We cannot avoid the continued presence between us and the Israelis of distrust, war, and even the deepest hate. Those cannot be wished away simply, but they can be isolated and seen as secondary attributes of the struggle, the result of circumstances in which Palestinian Arabs and diaspora Jews were victims of powers and historical circumstances that made either violence or the total absence of any sort of meaningful engagement the only two alternatives.

This latest war was a result of such conditions and circumstances. It has made violence on the field of battle the only acceptable language to both sides and the only language understood by the world at large; this idea is not mine alone, for I find it in the editorial declaration, put more approvingly than I would, made on the front page of *al-Nahar* (Beirut), October 8. The violence of war, however, brings very limited results, despite the heady feeling that combatants get as they fight. I myself despise the violence of war. It would seem that one of the perceptions Israelis now have about violence in the past should be that violence of that kind obstructs vision and impedes understanding. These limitations of war apply no less to the Arabs. War leaves the major tasks still very much to be undertaken. But for the past several years, particularly here and generally among diaspora Jews and expatriate Palestinians and Arabs, there have been taking place other sorts of violence which are more productive and perhaps even creative. I am not speaking here of hijacking, kidnapping, robbery, or other forms of free enterprise of that kind, for those, I think, lead politically and morally to nothing. The violence I have in mind is the activity that takes place when, for instance, a Jew or an Israeli is forced psychologically and morally to confront the fact of the Palestinian's presence before him, his presence as a human and political and national and moral entity with which he, as a Jew and as an Israeli, must deal, and to which he must answer. War today has made such a confrontation

possible of course, as never before since 1948, but I believe that we cannot stop there: just as we must not forget that during those black years since 1967 it was mainly the Palestinians who kept our spirits alive. There has to be acknowledgement of the human and the political reality which includes both Arabs and Israelis for the reason alone that their day-to-day reality includes the other as foe and as presence. This is the kind of realism that I would oppose to the Israeli pseudo-realism of which I spoke a moment ago. It is a realism that takes in as much as possible of what has happened, of what has been felt and experienced, on both sides. It will take in the dense human reality which has hitherto been denied by one side to the other, and it encompasses not only the discovery of this reality but also the political and emotional pressures — of memory, of war, of threats, of humiliation, of fear above all — whose impressions on all our spirits are very deep. In the United States such confrontations, such interhuman violence of a constructive type have taken place, and I would urge no Arab to shrink from it. Without the Israeli and the Jew most of our twentieth century Arab history is not fully intelligible. Israel has made us more clear to ourselves, in ways we have not liked, in ways that we have justly resisted — but the fact of Israel's role is to be acknowledged nevertheless. If Israel cannot rise to such challenges, if it is doomed to the moral and political dullness that every day violated the Judaic prophetic traditions, *there is no reason at all* why we should so fail! We must not fail.

Thus a major and dangerous consequence of this war is that these reckonings of Arabs with Israelis and Jews might not take place. One reason, as I have said, is the hindering violence of war itself, which gives a combatant the sense that all is solved, or solvable, by war. A second is the setting of this war, which is not simply in the Middle East, but obviously in the media, on the world stage, amidst great power rivalry, and all up and down the great, even unlimited dimensions of history. In other words this war is dangerous not because it might spread to include more participants, but because it will spread to include more elements and perspectives that also obscure the vision, impede understanding, and finally blunt one's humanity. I mean, quite frankly, that this war takes on the symmetry of a blood feud, one side retaliating for the evils of the other, while the roots of the struggle get forgotten and become unknown to those who struggle the hardest. An Arab becomes only a reaction to an Israeli, and an Israeli only a killer of Arabs. As Yeats put it speaking of such a situation: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." Such a war can appeal, and indeed often does appeal, to the worst in one — I've already spoken of the base feelings of latent anti-Semitism that emerge as the world watches us, the sense that in watching Jews and Arabs killing each other one is watching a fun gladiatorial contest, that there is "our" side and "their" side, and so on. We must not

forget that loss of life, and terrible expenditure of blood and treasure on both sides, has taken place; and, however much it concerns an idea in conflict with another, it is over a land whose place is both central and absolute for the Arab and the Jew. One of Mahmoud Darwish's short poems can be read as a reminder to both sides that the land is in some measure theirs together: the excerpt I shall read comes from a collection entitled "Diary of a Palestinian Wound," and it is dedicated to Fadwa Toukan.

> This is the land that sucks in the flesh of martyrs;
> Summer's returns are wheat and flowers.
> Worship the land!
> In its bowels we are salt and water:
> But on its breast we are a wound, warring.

The perspective of the poem is a long one and a cyclical one almost; I take it as an invitation to see the struggle in Palestine as a joint one, a struggle that devastates and which, from this long perspective, also enriches the land's moral and human worth to its people. For those of us who, for one reason or another, have lived at some geographical distance from the struggle there is no need, however, to consider ourselves outside the struggle, or apart from it in any serious way. For those of us who believe very strongly that there can be no long-term solution of the problem of Palestine without the reckonings of which I have been speaking, then our perspective must include ourselves as participants in the struggle, in its devastating and enriching aspects, in certain very specific ways. In the first place, I believe that each of us must feel called to contribute to the discussion on the crucial issues facing the Arabs at large. By this I mean that we avoid the following of party lines, or more important, of vague general ideas — like Arab unity, or peace with justice — and turn instead to a committed investigation of, and involvement in precisely the kind of Arab world in which we would like to live. This is especially true, it would seem, of Palestinians who have not often realized, I think, that the Palestine for which they have struggled and continue to struggle is yet to be made, is still in the making. For most people Palestine is but a word or an idea; it must descend from that ideal world and enter the world of actuality without much more delay. And only the potential citizens of Palestine can initiate and sustain such a process, give it precise shape and determine its content.

In the second place I would say that we must work at establishing a workable system of relationships that will enable us to connect profitably our past with our present and our future. My feeling is that too many of us have felt that our past is too distant, our present too unpalatable and our future too hazy; we have felt that our traditions are cumbersome and worn out, daily life too trivial, and our potential much beyond our capacities for realization.

Perhaps the problem is that we rely too heavily upon the perceptual modes we have learned, under stress, from the West. Who is it today who can seriously say that he is not thoroughly tired of the sterile debates on such subjects as the conservative and the orthodox movement in Islam, or the Westernizers and the reactionaries, or British interests versus Russian interests, and on and on? The answer is not simply to speak happily of Arab development and Arab oil, but to put ourselves politically and spiritually in the closest touch with our resources, which may be orthodox or modern or neither, but which cannot be something toward which we are sullenly hostile. Of such resources I would say the principal ones are neither oil nor money but rather our staggeringly complex cultural system, which accommodates an infinite series of particular experiences, experiences sectarian, topographical, political, religious, historical, and sociological, with a general Arab-Islamic world-view; and, a second principal resource, the almost unparallelled access we have as a modern people to the traditions of a rich past. There can be no people whose modern birth took place in so short a time and with such remarkable natural and material wealth, and at the same time incorporated within its modern life so much of its stable traditionalism. These two resources alone require human, social and political exploitation of a sort that will occupy many future generations.

In the last place, and at the risk of sounding perhaps a little conservative, I would say that a wide perspective must necessarily take into account the present state of affairs, not as something to be lamented or joked about, but something about which to be concerned. There are institutions, from governments to school systems to legal processes, in the Arab world and amongst Arab communities here whose functioning at present may be unsatisfactory but whose necessity, even as a minimum, is very serious. I think also, for example, about those Palestinian Arab institutions now functioning in the occupied territories such as Bir Zeit College. Such things cannot be abandoned while we research the theory of revolutionary practice in the New Jerusalem. There are realities of power and government with which we, as the most revolutionary group perhaps, cannot afford to misunderstand or be ignorant of. I think that we face a real test of our vision as we set about dealing with these presences, not as something to be put aside until the correct plan or the most perfect solution happens upon us, but more or less as a call upon our inventiveness and generosity and our intelligence. Each one of us I suppose has a hold on him of some urgency in the contemporary Arab world or in contemporary Arab life; it is that hold with which one must begin, not with a vague theoretical desire to reform the world, nor, as I have been saying about the Israeli, with a very definite wish to exclude all but the small part of reality which obsesses one. From that beginning on our involvement gets more specific and more

strong, and this takes place in ways that I haven't the opportunity now to describe. But what I have tried to describe is the fairly complex and rich process which connects Arabs with each other and with Jews in what is now a terrible and costly struggle but which, one can hope, will turn out to have been a step made during the long revolution.