

What price Oslo?

Due weight given to decades of Palestinian suffering, to the enormous human costs of Israel's destructive policies: this, writes Edward Said, is the only possible framework for negotiations

THE television images on Al-Jazeera have been burningly clear. There is a kind of Palestinian heroism in evidence there that makes this the story of our time. An entire army, navy, and air force supplied munificently and unconditionally by the United States have been wreaking destruction on the 18 per cent of Gaza afforded Palestinians after ten years of negotiations with Israel and the US. Palestinian hospitals, schools, refugee camps and civilian residences have been at the receiving end of a merciless, criminal assault by Israeli troops huddled inside their helicopter gun-ships, F-16's and Merkavas, and still the poorly armed resistance fighters take on this preposterously more powerful force undaunted and unyielding.

- fighting terror, no matter how much wealth, and lives, and destruction is involved. Swept away are all the Enlightenment precepts by which we attempt to educate our students and our fellow citizens, replaced by a disproportionate orgy of vindictiveness and self-righteous wrath of the kind that only the wealthy and the powerful, it would seem, have the right to use and act upon. No wonder then Sharon feels entitled (by emulation and derivation) to do what he does when in the greatest democracy on earth, laws, constitutional rights, writs of habeas corpus and reason itself are consigned to the rubbish bin in the pursuit of terror and terrorism. As educators and as citizens, we have failed in our mission by allowing ourselves to be bamboozled in this way, without so much as an organised public discussion about a defence budget that has shot up to \$400 billion while 40 million people remain without health insurance.

Israelis, Arabs and Americans are told that love of country requires such expenditures and such destruction because a good cause is at stake. Nonsense. What is at stake are material interests that keep rulers in power, corporations making profits, people in a state of manufactured consent, just so long as they don't get up one morning and start to think about where, in this mad technologised rush to bomb and kill, we are going.

Israel is now waging a war against civilians, pure and simple, although you will never hear it put that way in the US. This is a racist war, and in its strategy and tactics, a colonial one as well. People are being killed and made to suffer disproportionately because they are not Jews. What an irony! Yet CNN never refers to "occupied" territories (always rather to "violence in Israel" as if the main battlefields are the concert halls and cafes of Tel Aviv and not in fact the ghettos and besieged refugee camps of Palestine that have already been surrounded by 150 illegal Israeli settlements). For the past ten years, the great fraud of Oslo was foisted on the world by the US, with hardly an awareness that only 18 per cent of the West Bank were given up, and 60 per cent of Gaza. No one knows geography and it's better not to know, since the reality on the ground is so astonishing, considering the verbal hoopla

and self-congratulation.

And that pseudo-pundit - the insufferably conceited Thomas Friedman - still has the gall to say that "Arab TV" shows one-sided pictures, as if "Arab TV" should be showing things from Israel's point-of-view the way CNN does, with "Mid-East violence" the catch-all word for the ethnic cleansing that Israel is wreaking on the Palestinians in their ghettos and camps. Has Friedman (or CNN for that matter) ever tried to point out the difference between an attacking army fighting a colonial war on the territory of the people it has occupied for 35 years, and the people defending themselves against that butchery? Of course not, for indeed why should Friedman ever bother to say honestly that there is no Palestinian occupation, there are no Palestinian F-16s, no Apache helicopters, no gunboats, no Merkava tanks, in short, no Palestinian occupation of Israel. So much for Friedman's credentials as an honest commentator and reporter who has utterly failed, in unadorned terms, to explain the US view or to understand the Arab and Palestinian cause. Can he not see that he and his writings are part of the problem, that in their maudering self-justifications and the dishonesty in which he shows no sign of the self-criticism he keeps hectoringly expecting of others, he actually aggravates the ignorance and the misperceptions rather than reducing them? Poor journalist and educator, he.

The picture you get here is that Israelis are battling for their lives instead of for their settlements and military bases on the occupied lands of Palestine. No maps have been run for months in the American media. On 8 March, hitherto the bloodiest day for Palestinians of the 16-month Intifada, CNN's main evening news specified the death of 40 "people" and failed even to mention the death of several Red Crescent workers killed while their ambulances were prevented by Israeli tanks from getting to the wounded. Just "people," and no pictures of the hell they've been living in this the 35th year of military occupation. Tul Karm is undergoing a siege of sieges with 24 hour curfews, electricity and water cut-off, systematic round-ups and the removal of 800 young men, the wanton smashing of refugee

houses, wholesale destruction of property (and I'm not speaking of nightclubs or sports facilities but of shacks and lean-tos that furnished twice displaced refugees with hovels for bare subsistence) and limitless cases of sadistic cruelty to unarmed and undefended civilians who are pushed and beaten and left to bleed to death, women allowed to give birth to stillborn babies while they wait needlessly at Israeli roadblocks, old men made to strip and take off their shoes and walk barefoot for a gum-chewing 18-year-old waving around an M-16 that my taxes have paid for. Bethlehem, its town center and university destroyed, flattened at 5,000 feet by valiant Israeli bombers swooshing in with their marvelous F-16's which I've paid for too. Balata camp, Aida and Dheisheh and Azza Camps, the tiny villages of Khadr and Husam, all battered into rubble without even a mention by the US press, whose New York editors so obviously have no problems with it, with a few exceptions here and there. The uncounted dead and wounded, the unburied and unassisted, to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of lives maimed, distorted, catastrophically marked by wantonly caused suffering, all of it ordered at a safe distance from the action in leafy, calm West Jerusalem by men for whom the West Bank and Gaza are distant rat holes filled with insects and rodents that must be "subdued" and driven out, taught a lesson in the accepted jargon of Israel's superb military. On Tuesday, in the biggest attack of all, Ramallah has been invaded and is being ravaged by 140 Israeli tanks, thus completing Israel's reconquest of the already-occupied Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian people are paying the heavy, heavy unconscionable price of Oslo, which after 10 years of negotiating left them with bits of land lacking coherence and continuity, security institutions designed to assure their subservience to Israel, and a life that impoverishes them so that the Jewish state could thrive and prosper. In vain during those 10 years did some of us warn that the distance between the US-Israeli language of peace and the appalling realities on the ground was never bridged, never even intended to be bridged. Words and phrases like "peace process" and "terrorism" took hold

without reference to any real referent. Land confiscations were either overlooked or referred to as "bilateral negotiations" that were taking place between a state consolidating its hold on territory it wanted at all costs, and a mediocre set of unformed negotiators whom it took four years to acquire, much less use, a reliable map of the land they were negotiating over. The worst misrepresentation of all is that in the 54 years since 1948, never has a narrative of Palestinian heroism and suffering been allowed to emerge. We are all depicted as violent fanatic extremists who are little more than the terrorists that George Bush and his cabal have imposed on the consciousness of a stunned and systematically misinformed population, aided and uncritically abetted by an entire army of commentators and media stars - the Blitzers, Zahns, Lehrers, Rathers, Brokaws, Russerts, and their ilk. The Israeli lobby is scarcely needed with such faithful disciples trailing happily in its ranks.

But now that the Saudi peace proposal has become the point of discussion and of hope, it is necessary, I think, to put it in its real, as opposed to its supposed, context. First of all, this is the re-cycled Reagan plan of 1982, the Fahd Plan of 1983, the Madrid plan of 1991, and so on; in other words, it follows a series of plans many times put forward which in the end both Israel and the US have not only refused to implement, but have actively torpedoed. The way I see it, the only negotiations worth having should be on the phases of a total Israeli withdrawal and not, as was the case with Oslo, bargaining over what pieces of land Israel was willing very grudgingly to give up. There's been too much Palestinian blood spilled, too much Israeli contempt and racist violence dispensed for any serious return to Oslo-style negotiations brokered by that most biased of honest brokers, the United States. Everyone is aware, however, that the old Palestinian negotiators haven't given up on their dreams and illusions, and that meetings have been occurring throughout the raids and bombings. But I would argue that due weight be given to decades of Palestinian suffering and the real human costs of Israel's destructive policies before any negotiations accord undue status to Israeli governments



Giant plumes of black smoke bellow from a slum housing area burning on 12 March 2002 in downtown Phnom Penh.

that have trampled on Palestinian rights the way they have demolished our houses and killed our people. Any Arab-Israeli negotiations that do not factor in history - and for this task a team of historians, economists, and geographers with a conscience are needed - are not worth having, just as Palestinians must now elect a new set of negotiators and representatives in the hope of salvaging something from the present calamity.

In short, in whatever meetings that now occur between Israeli and Palestinian representatives, the gravity of Israeli depredations against our people has to be given attention and not simply brushed aside as so much past history. Oslo, in effect, pardoned the occupation, excusing it for all the buildings and lives destroyed over the first 25 years of occupation. After so much further suffering, Israel cannot be excused and allowed to walk away from the table with not even a rhetorical demand that it needs to atone for what it did.

I will be told that politics is about what is possible, not about what is desired, and that we should be grateful to get even a small Israeli pullback. I disagree strongly. Negotiations can only be about when the total withdrawal will take place, not what percentage Israel is willing to concede. A conqueror and a vandal cannot concede anything; he must simply return what he's taken and pay for the abuses that are his responsibility to bear, just as Saddam Hussein should and did pay for his occupation of Kuwait. We are still a considerable distance from that goal, although in the meantime, the extraordinary unbecoming bravery of all Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank has in effect politically and morally defeated Sharon, who will lose his seat in the not too distant future. But, that in two decades his armies can invade Arab cities at will, killing and sowing destruction without so much as a collective Arab peep speaks reams for the Arab world's leaders.

Lastly, what the various Arab rulers who are so delicately silent now while Palestine is being raped on TV think they are doing, I don't know, but I can imagine that deep in

An eye witness account from Ramallah

TZAPORAH RYTER

WE are under a terrible siege and people are being massacred by both the Israeli army and armed militia groups of Israeli settlers. They are shooting outside at anything that moves. I am urgently pleading for as much outside help as possible to help save lives here. I arrived in Ramallah Thursday before the last. I had come back for a visit to the Palestinian city where I had been previously living and studying. On Thursday afternoon, the Israeli army began sealing off each entrance to Ramallah and there were rumors that they planned to invade.

people, hunting them like that in the fields.

When night fell, Israeli tanks began to invade and also we saw Israeli troops coming on foot from the valley, and surrounding our house. I could hear them calling to each other in Hebrew. They were against our door and all around. They were firing everywhere a barrage of bullets and there was tank fire. We had to lay on the floor and keep silent. We stayed there, on the floor, for nearly four days in the darkness.

We knew that our circumstances were better than others because old people or infants or people with medical emergency needs had no help. It was very cold, with most families packed all in one room. Some people are without life sustaining medicines like insulin, and they are altering their doses dangerously if they have any medicine left to take. People are becoming dangerously sick from lack of food and water and heat. The fear and terror only makes things worse, but it cannot be avoided.

In the daytime, we heard them shooting people in the streets, and could hear them screaming and



Arrested Palestinians are checked for weapons in the courtyard of a school in Tulkarem on 8 March 2002.

screaming. No ambulance was allowed through. Then their screams stopped and there was just silence. They keep taking doctors and medics, just now another call. Again, this time the wife of a doctor telling us her husband has been taken from the ambulance.

Large groups of people have been found in rooms, shot dead, there are blood marks where they have lined people up on their knees and shot them, with their ID cards laying on top of them. They are taking people from their homes, blindfolding them, removing their clothes, taking them away or lining them up and shooting them against the wall.

People are making phone calls and saying that these soldiers and militia have come in and are shooting people and then the line cuts off. The numbers of these killings I fear are much greater than the numbers confirmed in the press, because the human rights offices and the media centers have been stormed, and everything is shut down. No one can move without almost certain chance of being shot by the Israeli snipers, who are everywhere. The Israelis are demanding that all journalists leave Ramallah and today another foreign journalist was shot. They do not want any more Internationals here and are deporting people. It seems quite clear that they do not want eyewitnesses which is only heightening my own fears. The hospitals have also been surrounded and invaded and Israeli troops are taking the injured people and interrogating them. Today a woman, a patient, tried to walk out from hospital. The Israelis shot her in the neck and killed her. The Palestinian Ministry of Health is saying that they fear the spread of diseases because of the number of

unburied corpses. The numbers are only growing in reports of the mass killings here and Israeli troops continue to round up people. People are calling frantically, missing a relative and we do not know where they have been taken, including children.

The numbers we have now exceed 600, and we are estimating between 700 and 800. All human rights groups and legal advocates are being denied any information of where the detained are being held. From what we know confirmed is that 10% of those taken so far have been children under age 18. When I went outside, there were cars all shot up and hit by multiple bullets and shells in the middle of the road, un parked. There must have been people in them but I don't know where their bodies are.

There are no reports of them, but they must exist. This afternoon the Israelis suddenly lifted the curfew, suddenly announcing that everyone had two hours to go out to get food.

Even though the Israeli army said it had lifted the closure for two hours - in which we still were not able to transfer medical supplies and still was not long enough to everything that was badly needed - the Israelis continued shooting people in the streets indiscriminately on their way, so people were running around trying to make it to the store or find a safe route only to have to run back home again. It was an added cruelty and terror tactic in this macabre situation, a sick joke: starve people and then shoot them when they try to find food with your permission. In an apartment building in Beitunia neighborhood where I used to live, they took 60 people who were my neighbors, including several families, and pushed them

into one room since last night. The Israelis told them that they are to be used as "human shields", as the apartment building is across from a building that they were invading.

This is a massacre. The foreign delegations tried to get in but were turned back, the International Committee of the Red Cross is trying to help but they are being ignored. Please help. I am not only scared for myself and for people here, but if this cannot be stopped, I am truly scared for all of humanity, for a world in which we send men to the moon but cannot stop ethnic cleansing.

On the news in America, we see hardly anything of demonstrations. What are you doing over there? There do not seem to be any reports of what is happening. In truth, it's got to stop. Please go out to the streets, please demand a response from your representatives. Be loud, march up to the capitals, refuse to leave until the Israelis withdraw. Act now! Tell them the Israelis are murdering innocent people whose only crime is being born in their own homeland, a Palestinian under a military occupation.

Demand international protection for the Palestinian people, scream that this is an affront to humanity and that it is time that the US not only stop supporting Israel, but that the US stop its abuse of human rights within its own borders. This is about all of our struggles. For the love of God, please stop this slaughter. Please help.

Tzaporah Ryter is an American student from the University of Minnesota. He is currently in Ramallah. Ryter sent his eye witness account on email.

I am Israel

HASHEM SAID

I am Israel - I came to a land without a people for a people without a land. Those people who happened to be here, had no right to be here, and my people showed them they had to leave or die, razing 480 Palestinian villages to the ground, erasing their history.

I am Israel - some of my people committed massacres and later became Prime Ministers to represent me. In 1948, Menachem Begin was in charge of the unit that slaughtered the inhabitants of Deir Yassin, including 100 men, women, and children. In 1953, Ariel Sharon led the slaughter of the inhabitants of Qibya, and in 1982 arranged for our allies to butcher around 2,000 in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

I am Israel - carved in 1948 out of 78% of the land of Palestine, dispossessing its inhabitants and replacing them with Jews from Europe and other parts of the world. While the natives whose families lived on this land for thousands of years are not allowed to return, Jews from all over the world are welcome to instant citizenship.

I am Israel - in 1967, I swallowed the remaining lands of Palestine - the West Bank and Gaza - and placed their inhabitants under an oppressive military rule, controlling and humiliating every aspect of their daily lives. Eventually, they should get the message that they are not welcome to stay, and join the millions of Palestinian refugees in the shanty camps of Lebanon and Jordan.

I am Israel - I have the power to control American policy. My American Israel Public Affairs Committee can make or break any politician of its choosing, and as you see, they all complete to please me. All the forces of the world are powerless against me, including the UN as I have the American veto to block



Yasser Arafat looks through papers at his bureau in his West Bank headquarters in Ramallah.

any condemnation of my war crimes. As Sharon so eloquently phrased it, "We control America".

I am Israel - I influence American mainstream media too, and you will always find the news tailored to my favor. I have invested millions of dollars into PR representation, and CNN, New York Times, and others have been doing an excellent job of promoting my propaganda. Look at other international news sources and you will see the difference.

I am Israel - and you Palestinians want to negotiate "peace"? But you are not as smart as me; I will negotiate, but will only let you have your municipalities while I control your borders, your water, your airspace, and anything else of importance. While we "negotiate," I will swallow your hilltops and fill them with settlements, populated by the most extremist of my extremists, armed to the teeth. These settlements will be connected with roads you cannot use, and you will be imprisoned in your little Bantustans between them, surrounded by checkpoints in every direction.

I am Israel - with the fourth strongest army in the world, possessing nuclear weapons. How dare your children confront my oppression with stones, don't you know my soldiers won't hesitate to blow their heads off? In 17 months, I have killed 900 of you and injured 17,000, mostly civilians, and have the mandate to continue since the international community remains silent. Ignore, as I do, the hundreds of Israeli soldiers who are now refusing to carry out my control over your lands and people; their voices of conscience will not protect you.

I am Israel - and you want freedom? I have bullets, tanks, missiles, Apaches, and F-16's, to obliterate you. I have placed your towns under siege, confiscated your lands, uprooted your trees, demolished your homes, and you still demand freedom? Don't you get the message? You will never have peace or freedom, because I am Israel.

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Israeli canons are put on stand by along the Israel border with Lebanon on 5 April 2002 in Tal Fakhar.