



BOOK REVIEW: THREE BOOKS ON THE ISRAELI- PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

*NOTE: The following book review by JAY MURPHY appeared in a slightly different form in **In These Times**, May 13, 1996.*

BOOKS UNDER REVIEW

Peace and Its Discontents,

by Edward W. Said, Vintage Books, 188 pp. \$12;

The Obstruction of Peace: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians,

by Naseer H. Aruri, Common Courage Press, 370 pp. \$18.

Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land,

by Meron Benvenisti, University of California Press, 260 pp. \$24.95

Peace When?

by Jay Murphy

For a pair of groups that operate without any discernible political strategy or strong popular support, Hamas and Islamic Jihad perhaps still have reason to gloat. Their bombings of February 25, March 3 and 4 that killed 62 Israelis succeeded in halting, if not mortally wounding, an already precarious and profoundly troubled peace process. Palestinians now find themselves in a state of siege much harsher than any enforced before. The Israeli closure of the Palestinian territories imposes daily losses to the battered Palestinian economy of at least twice what international donors have provided; general economic activity has fallen off by 60 percent since the closure; and in a new twist of fate, Palestinian security police act in tandem with the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), storming universities and arresting students.

Medical clinics have closed across the Occupied Territories due not only to the restriction of movement but also to the lack of medicines, even though such distribution was not banned even during the height of the Gulf war or during the intifada. "This is the worst siege we have been in," says Palestinian spokeswoman and newly elected Legislative Council

Member from Jerusalem Hanan Ashrawi. This is total isolation. Nor does Ashrawi see any hope of diplomatic relief: There are no talks, there is no peace process. They have been unilaterally suspended and violated by Israel, which acts as if it is a unilateral process, that there is no partner.

The question of whether Israel will continue to accept the flow of cheap Palestinian labor into the country, which brings an estimated \$2.5 million a day into the territories, pales in significance next to the larger problem of how to jump-start Palestinian economic life. "What little industry we have is collapsing," Ashrawi says. An outspoken critic of the Oslo peace agreements, flabbergasted at the Palestinian concessions that went into them, Ashrawi now sees the chickens coming home to roost. Yet according to Ashrawi, the current impasse stems not so much from the flaws of the Oslo I and Oslo II as from the Israeli refusal to comply with the most miniscule things specified in the agreement. Among the lapses are the Israelis failure to release of Palestinian political prisoners, to guarantee basic human rights, and to allow safe passage and freedom of movement among Palestinian areas. Meanwhile the building and expansion of settlements proceeds apace, including a new one sanctioned by the Labor government in East Jerusalem.

The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has not improved conditions any under Arafat's rule. The PNA maintains a 20,000-member police force in Gaza alone making for a 50-to-1 citizen to police ratio, the highest in the world. PNA officers have moved to censor publications critical of the Oslo accords, while detaining citizens indiscriminately in their searches for suspects in the Hamas bombings.

Palestinians in Gaza who have lived longest under PNA rule have seen health and sanitary conditions worsen. Sara Roy, who has studied Israeli strategies of "de-development" in the Occupied Territories, estimates that 33 percent of the Palestinian poor in Gaza became so after the Oslo accords. Many Gazans sought to use the forum of the Palestinian elections in January to challenge the corruption and overweening bureaucracy of the PNA. Some popular resentment of the PNA was already surfacing in the West Bank just prior to the January vote -- graffiti in Nablus read "No to the Gazan occupation!"

So far, the many critics of the "peace process" have been ostracized from the mainstream U.S. press. American coverage of the Palestinian opinion simplistically pits the terrorist opposition (Hamas) against the peace camp, to the exclusion of any other view. One of the only positive developments of the current crisis may be that it will force the press to give Oslo critics their long overdue hearing, now that the process has run aground in a manner many of them foresaw quite clearly.

Peace and Its Discontents is a collection of a number of crisp, eloquent editorials against Oslo I and II by the most prominent defender of Palestinian rights in the United States. Peace and Its Discontents, as Edward Said says in his introduction, is "the first of my books to have been written from start to finish with an Arab audience in mind." Of the 21 essays and single interview collected here, only four were previously published in American journals. Said's writings for al-Hayat and al-Ahram are unfailingly focused, direct, and anti-imperialist.

Despite this especially horrid period for Palestinians Said can summon up a bracing, unexpected optimism. Recent changes in the region's balance of power present a unique opportunity for the Arab world to develop its own mind. "It will certainly never develop at all if we are still dependent on the Great White Father...[T]he point is that he has come to the

end of his reign."

Said spices his searing commentary on the "peace process" with telling personal vignettes, such as his 1992 visit with Yasir Arafat as the PLO chairman recuperated from a 1992 plane crash in the Libyan desert. Watching TV coverage of the 1992 Israeli elections, Said realized that Arafat had so little in the way of a long-term political strategy that he "felt he was staking his entire future on Rabin's electoral win." This reliance on "wagering on the other" is what led the Palestinians to their present state of "defeat of the will," Said contends.

Fiercely and with some exasperation trying to right a historical record that is "breathtaking in its dishonesty," Said is nothing if not acerbic about Rabin, consecrated in death by the Western media as a "man of peace" but reviled by Said as a "raging hawk" guilty of "ethnic cleansing." Nor is Said any easier on Arafat: "Poorly educated, megalomaniac, and now living in the terminal dream world of all petty dictators, he cannot and never will be reformed."

On the other hand, his warm tribute to figures like Sara Roy, a Jewish decipherer of the "de-development" and dispossession of Gaza whose parents were Holocaust survivors, or Hanna Mikhail, (the enigmatic Abu Omar vividly described in Jean Genet's posthumously published, poetic meditation on his time among the Palestinians Prisoners of Love), who represented the best of the once free-wheeling Palestinian revolution infuse the book with a vibrancy and immediacy that goes a long way toward establishing the "authentic intellectual idiom" Said calls for in the region's cultural and political discourse.

Many books have exhumed the murky diplomatic history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (among the most recent is Norman Finkelstein's *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*). But Naseer Aruri's *The Obstruction of Peace* pays especially close attention to the United States' historic interests and policy goals in the region. Aruri's narrative moves soberly, systematically, and inexorably in explicating how the Oslo I and II agreements finally fulfill the United States' long-coveted goal of being the Middle East's unilateral superpower, in league with its Israeli ally. As Aruri notes, the realization of this ambition undercuts nearly a half-century of U.N. resolutions and international law, creating a situation where "U.S. policy becomes, in effect, a substitute for international law."

Aruri points out how the Gulf war was nothing if not decisive in weaning away many Arab countries as well from their own adherence to the U.N. and "international consensus" on the issue that called for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. That approach had been affirmed in a long string of Arab summits in Rabat (1974), Fez (1982), Amman (1987), and Algiers (1988). Saudi Arabia, Aruri records, after the Gulf war even fielded a proposal for a Palestinian state in Jordan, much like the Reagan plan of 1982.

In Aruri's view, the region's most dangerous development is the creeping legalization of the military occupation -- an occupation that Israel still has not owned up to. Now legal niceties and diplomatic euphemisms are giving this fiction the force of law. The Clinton administration recently shifted from the use of the descriptive term "occupied" to the more discreet "disputed" in referring to Gaza and the West Bank. (An earlier Israeli euphemism was "controlled territories"). Madeleine Albright, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., spelled out the logic of this shift on June 30, 1993 when she stated "We simply do not accept the description of territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 war as 'occupied Palestinian territory.'...this language could be taken to indicate sovereignty -- a matter which both Israel and the PLO have agreed must be decided in negotiations on the final status of the

territories."

In other words, the concessions Israel manages to wring out of the enfeebled PLO are the final word on the status of the territories, not U.N. resolutions 242, 338, or the host of other U.N. rulings that recognize the national rights of self-determination for Palestinians, that their territories were conquered by force, and that Israel has responsibilities under any number of human rights conventions concerning the treatment of a population under military occupation.

According to U.N. resolutions, Israel is obligated to leave the territories; under the new agreements, they leave not as a matter of compliance with international law, but only if they want to. The Clinton administration, for the first time in history, has gone so far as endorse the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, widely condemned by most nations in the world, including the U.S., and maintained, contrary to even statements under the distinctly pro-Israel Reagan and Bush administrations, that settlement activity is not illegal.

While Arafat fatuously speaks of the Palestinians' "friend in the White House," Aruri knows that Bill Clinton is more like what Yediot Ahronot columnist Nahum Bernea ironically dubbed him -- "the last Zionist." This historic shift in the Clinton administration is symptomatic of the moving into major foreign policy positions for the first time of Zionist policy wonks like Martin Indyk and Samuel Lewis; Indyk as key Middle East officer in the National Security Council and then Ambassador to Israel, Lewis as director of policy planning in the State Department.

Aruri is acute in analyzing U.S. domestic politics in this age of "pax-Americana, pax-Israelica," where Congress, with members beholden to right-wing Jewish organizations and Israel's Likud, intervenes in foreign policy, taking positions to the right of the Israeli government itself. Aruri shows the contours of this profound retrenchment and lack of sympathy with the Palestinians that has now become dominant in American political life.

Aruri, like Said, seems to underestimate the popularity of Arafat in the "autonomous zones" (polled at 58 percent after Oslo II), as well as Palestinian support for the peace accords themselves. Many, if not most, Palestinian citizens perceive the accords as a poor bargain, but the only way to move ahead. Yet his most damning criticism, that the agreements make Arafat and the PNA an "enforcer" that answers more to Israel and the United States than to their own people, now has come all too vividly and painfully to pass.

Meron Benvenisti is that rarest of figures in the Middle East: a convinced Zionist Israeli who also grasps the true proportions of the Palestinians' rather miserable predicament. A former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Benvenisti's West Bank Data Project was such a rich source of information and so useful that he won the respect of an unlikely range of critics, from resident New York Times orientalist Thomas Friedman, Fouad Ajami, the most frequently quoted Arab in the American press, as well as the incorrigible Israeli human rights activist Israel Shahak.

Benvenisti objects to a solution of "national ghettos" that divides the land, and tries to hold out for an "intercommunal" solution to intercommunal hatred and strife within a "common geopolitical framework." In explaining the September, 1993 agreements Benvenisti stresses the "post-ideological" nature of the new Israel, which has developed the impatience with political conflict typical of many Western consumer societies. And in some contrast to critics like Said and Aruri, who imply the Palestinians gained nothing from the accords, Benvenisti

emphasizes that most Israelis took the recognition of the PLO as a seismic shock, posing as it did the at-least implicit acknowledgment of another people with some claim to the same land.

Benvenisti outlines his own personal struggles of head and heart in regard to this seemingly interminable conflict, described his own shock at the "historic handshake" on the White House lawn, and yet offers a brutal summation of the original peace agreement: "I admit that it did not occur to me that the Palestinians could reach such a state of weakness and go through a period of such desperation that they would recognize defeat and allow those who had brought catastrophe upon them to dictate the conditions of their surrender."

Benvenisti, who begins his book with an account of the Oct. 8, 1990 massacre on the Temple Mount, is deft at showing how political or ethnic conflicts become all-embracing religious ones. He is particularly good on the history and applicability of "population transfer" to the conflict, as well as skewering what he sees as the hypocrisy of the Peace Now brand of the Israeli left. During the Gulf war, Benvenisti thought the "Israeli left was a bit unmannerly, indecorously overeager, in the speed with which it divorced the Palestinians," exhibiting "more than a bit of condescension and a sense of relief."

In Benvenisti's view, the left used the crisis to return to the fold of the "national consensus," giving up its illusion that the intifada would end the occupation and that "they need not lift a finger." When Israel used the Gulf war as cover for extremely harsh, draconian measures in the territories, there was hardly a dissident voice to be heard. His warnings that a "peace" based on such fundamental inequality cannot survive seems especially apt given the events of the past two months.

"Extremists exist due to lack of justice here," reflected Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Ateek back in January in his office in St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem. "They are not extremists for extremism's sake." Ateek's practical linkage of Israel's security with a just political solution that is seen as such by the Palestinian people may seem a reasonable enough stance in a region awash with irrationality, although it has failed to reach the White House or the editorial board of the *New York Times*.

Although the refrain in the U.S. media runs "the ball is in Arafat's court," it may actually be that the "ball" is in the court of the Palestinians, if only because, as with so many tragedies in the past, the world and the Arab countries have left them bereft, and only able to rely on themselves.

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