

The Morning After

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Now that some of the euphoria has lifted, it is possible to re-examine the Israeli-PLO agreement with the required common sense. What emerges from such scrutiny is a deal that is more flawed and, for most of the Palestinian people, more unfavourably weighted than many had first supposed. The fashion-show vulgarities of the White House ceremony, the degrading spectacle of Yasser Arafat thanking everyone for the suspension of most of his people's rights, and the fatuous solemnity of Bill Clinton's performance, like a 20th-century Roman emperor shepherding two vassal kings through rituals of reconciliation and obeisance: all these only temporarily obscure the truly astonishing proportions of the Palestinian capitulation.

So first of all let us call the agreement by its real name: an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles. What makes it worse is that for at least the past fifteen years the PLO could have negotiated a better arrangement than this modified Allon Plan, one not requiring so many unilateral concessions to Israel. For reasons best known to the leadership it refused all previous overtures. To take one example of which I have personal knowledge: in the late Seventies, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance asked me to persuade Arafat to accept Resolution 242 with a reservation (accepted by the US) to be added by the PLO which would insist on the national rights of the Palestinian people as well as Palestinian self-determination. Vance said that the US would immediately recognise the PLO and inaugurate negotiations between it and Israel. Arafat categorically turned the offer down, as he did similar offers. Then the Gulf War occurred, and because of the disastrous positions it took then, the PLO lost even more ground. The gains of the intifada were squandered, and today advocates of the new document say: 'We had no alternative.' The correct way of phrasing that is: 'We had no alternative because we either lost or threw away a lot of others, leaving us only this one.'

In order to advance towards Palestinian self-determination - which has a meaning only if freedom, sovereignly and equality, rather than perpetual subservience to Israel, are its goal - we need an honest acknowledgment of where we are, now that the interim agreement is about to be negotiated. What is particularly mystifying is how so many Palestinian leaders and their intellectuals can persist in speaking of the agreement as a 'victory'. Nabil Shaath has called it one of 'complete parity' between Israelis and Palestinians. The fact is that Israel has conceded nothing, as former Secretary Of State James Baker said in a TV interview, except, blandly, the existence of 'the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people'. Or as the Israeli 'dove' Amos Oz reportedly put it in the course of a BBC interview, 'this is the second biggest victory in the history of Zionism.'

By contrast Arafat's recognition of Israel's right to exist carries with it a whole series of renunciations: of the PLO Charter; of violence and terrorism; of all relevant UN resolutions, except 242 and 338, which do not have one word in them about the Palestinians, their rights or aspirations. By implication, the PLO set aside numerous other UN resolutions (which, with Israel and the US, it is now apparently undertaking to modify or rescind) that, since 1948, have given Palestinians refugee rights, including either compensation or repatriation. The Palestinians had won numerous international resolutions - passed by, among others, the EC, the non-aligned movement, the Islamic Conference and the Arab League, as well as the UN - which disallowed or censured Israeli settlements, annexations and crimes against the people under occupation.

It would therefore seem that the PLO has ended the intifada, which embodied not terrorism or violence but the Palestinian right to resist, even though Israel remains in occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The primary consideration in the document is for Israel's security, with none for the Palestinians' security from Israel's incursions. In his 13 September press conference Rabin was straightforward about Israel's continuing control over sovereignty; in addition, he said, Israel would hold the River Jordan, the boundaries with Egypt and Jordan, the sea, the land between Gaza and Jericho, Jerusalem, the settlements and the roads. There is little in the document to suggest that Israel will give up its violence against Palestinians or, as Iraq was required to do after it withdrew from Kuwait, compensate those who have been the victims of its policies over the past 45 years.

Neither Arafat nor any of his Palestinian partners who met the Israelis in Oslo has ever seen an Israeli settlement. There are now over two hundred of them, principally on hills, promontories and strategic points throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Many will probably shrivel and die, but the largest are designed for permanence. An independent system of roads connects them to Israel, and creates a disabling discontinuity between the main centres of Palestinian population. The actual land taken by these settlements, plus the land designated for expropriation, amounts – it is guessed – to over 55 per cent of the total land area of the Occupied Territories. Greater Jerusalem alone, annexed by Israel, comprises a huge tranche of virtually stolen land, at least 25 per cent of the total amount. In Gaza settlements in the north (three), the middle (two) and the south, along the coast from the Egyptian border past Khan Yunis (12), constitute at least 30 per cent of the Strip. In addition, Israel has tapped into every aquifer on the West Bank, and now uses about 80 per cent of the water there for the settlements and for Israel proper. (There are probably similar water installations in Israel's Lebanese 'security zone'.) So the domination (if not the outright theft) of land and water resources is either overlooked, in the case of water, or, in the case of land, postponed by the Oslo accord.

What makes matters worse is that all the information on settlements, land and water is held by Israel, which hasn't shared most of these data with the Palestinians, any more than it has shared the revenues raised by the inordinately high taxes it has imposed on them for 26 years. All sorts of technical committees (in which non-resident Palestinians have participated) have been set up by the PLO in the territories to consider such questions, but there is little evidence that committee findings (if any) were made use of by the Palestinian side in Oslo. So the impression of a huge discrepancy between what Israel got and what the Palestinians conceded or overlooked remains unrectified.

I doubt that there was a single Palestinian who watched the White House ceremony who did not also feel that a century of sacrifice, dispossession and heroic struggle had finally come to nought. Indeed, what was most troubling is that Rabin in effect gave the Palestinian speech while Arafat pronounced words that had all the flair of a rental agreement. So far from being seen as the victims of Zionism, the Palestinians were characterised before the world as its now repentant assailants: as if the thousands killed by Israel's bombing of refugee camps, hospitals and schools in Lebanon; Israel's expulsion of 800,000 people in 1948 (whose descendants now number about three million, many of them stateless); the conquest of their land and property; the destruction of over four hundred Palestinian villages; the invasion of Lebanon; the ravages of 26 years of brutal military Occupation – it was as if these sufferings had been reduced to the status of terrorism and violence, to be renounced retrospectively or passed over in silence. Israel has always described Palestinian resistance as terrorism and violence, so even in the matter of wording it received a moral and historical gift.

In return for exactly what? Israel's recognition of the PLO – undoubtedly a significant step forward. Beyond that, by accepting that questions of land and sovereignty are being postponed till 'final Status negotiations', the Palestinians have in effect discounted their unilateral and internationally acknowledged claim to the West Bank and Gaza: these have now become 'disputed territories'. Thus with Palestinian assistance Israel has been awarded at least an equal claim to them. The Israeli

calculation seems to be that by agreeing to police Gaza – a job which Begin tried to give Sadat fifteen years ago – the PLO would soon fall foul of local competitors, of whom Hamas is only one. Moreover, rather than becoming stronger during the interim period, the Palestinians may grow weaker, come more under the Israeli thumb, and therefore be less able to dispute the Israeli claim when the last set of negotiations begins. But on the matter of how, by what specific mechanism, to get from an interim status to a later one, the document is purposefully silent. Does this mean, ominously, that the interim stage may be the final one?

Israeli commentators have been suggesting that within, say, six months the PLO and Rabin's government will negotiate a new agreement further postponing elections, and thereby allowing the PLO to continue to rule. It is worth mentioning that at least twice during the past summer Arafat said that his experience of government consisted of the ten years during which he 'controlled' Lebanon, hardly a comfort to the many Lebanese and Palestinians who recollect that sorry period. Nor is there at present any concrete way for elections to be held should they even be scheduled. The imposition of rule from above, plus the long legacy of the occupation, have not contributed much to the growth of democratic, grass-roots institutions. There are unconfirmed reports in the Arabic press indicating that the PLO has already appointed ministers from its own inner circle in Tunis, and deputy ministers from among trusted residents of the West Bank and Gaza. Will there ever be truly representative institutions? One cannot be very sanguine, given Arafat's absolute refusal to share or delegate power, to say nothing of the financial assets he alone knows about and controls.

In both internal security and development, Israel and the PLO are now aligned with each Other. PLO members or consultants have been meeting with Mossad officials since last October to discuss security problems, including Arafat's own security. And this at the time of the worst Israeli repression of Palestinians under military occupation. The thinking behind the collaboration is that it will deter any Palestinian from demonstrating against the occupation, which will not withdraw, but merely redeploy. Besides, Israeli settlers will remain living, as they always have, under a different jurisdiction. The PLO will thus become Israel's enforcer, an unhappy prospect for most Palestinians. Interestingly, the ANC has consistently refused to supply the South African government with police officials until after power is shared, precisely in order to avoid appearing as the white government's enforcer. It was reported from Amman a few days ago that 170 members of the Palestine Liberation Army, now being trained in Jordan for police work in Gaza, have refused to co-operate for precisely that reason. With about 14,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails – some of whom Israel says it may release – there is an inherent contradiction, not to say incoherence, to the new security arrangements. Will more room be made in them for Palestinian security?

The one subject on which most Palestinians agree is development, which is being described in the most naive terms imaginable. The world community will be expected to give the nearly autonomous areas large-scale financial support; the Palestinian diaspora is expected, indeed preparing, to do the same. Yet all development for Palestine must be funnelled through the joint Palestinian-Israeli Economic Co-operation Committee, even though, according to the document, 'both sides will co-operate jointly and unilaterally with regional and international parties to support these aims.' Israel is the dominant economic and political power in the region – and its power is of course enhanced by its alliance with the US. Over 80 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza economy is dependent on Israel, which is likely to control Palestinian exports, manufacturing and labour for the foreseeable future. Aside from the small entrepreneurial and middle class, the vast majority of Palestinians are impoverished and landless, subject to the vagaries of the Israeli manufacturing and commercial community which employs Palestinians as cheap labour. Most Palestinians, economically speaking, will almost certainly remain as they are, although now they are expected to work in private-sector, partly Palestinian-controlled service industries, including resorts, small assembly-plants, farms and the like.

A recent study by the Israeli journalist Asher Davidi quotes Dov Lautman, president of the Israeli Manufacturers Association: 'It's not important whether there will be a Palestinian state, autonomy or a Palestinian-Jordanian state. The economic borders between Israel and the territories must remain open.' With its well developed institutions, close relations with the US and aggressive economy, Israel will in effect incorporate the territories economically, keeping them in a state of permanent dependency. Then Israel will turn to the wider Arab world, using the political benefits of the Palestinian agreement as a Springboard to break into Arab markets, which it will also exploit and is likely to dominate.

Framing all this is the US, the only global power, whose idea of the New World Order is based on economic domination by a few giant corporations and pauperisation if necessary for many of the lesser peoples (even those in metropolitan countries). Economic aid for Palestine is being supervised and controlled by the US, bypassing the UN, some of whose agencies like UNRWA and UNDP are far better placed to administer it. Take Nicaragua and Vietnam. Both are former enemies of the US; Vietnam actually defeated the US but is now economically in need of it. A boycott against Vietnam continues and the history books are being written in such a way as to show how the Vietnamese sinned against and 'mistreated' the US for the latter's idealistic gesture of having invaded, bombed and devastated their country. Nicaragua's Sandinista government was attacked by the US-financed Contra movement; the country's harbours were mined, its people ravaged by famine, boycotts and every conceivable type of subversion. After the 1991 elections, which brought a US-supported candidate, Mrs Chamorro, to power, the US promised many millions of dollars in aid, of which only 30 million have actually materialised. In mid-September all aid was cut off. There is now famine and civil war in Nicaragua. No less unfortunate have been the fates of El Salvador and Haiti. To throw oneself, as Arafat has done, on the tender mercies of the US is almost certainly to suffer the fate the US has meted out to rebellious or 'terrorist' peoples it has had to deal with in the Third World after they have promised not to resist the US any more.

Hand in hand with the economic and strategic control of Third World countries that happen to be close to, or possess, resources like oil that are necessary to the US, is the media system, whose reach and control over thought is truly astounding. For at least twenty years, Yasser Arafat was taken to be the most unattractive and morally repellent man on earth. Whenever he appeared in the media, or was discussed by them, he was presented as if he had only one thought in his head: killing Jews, especially innocent women and children. Within a matter of days, the 'independent media' had totally rehabilitated Arafat. He was now an accepted, even lovable figure whose courage and realism had bestowed on Israel its rightful due. He had repented, he had become a 'friend', and he and his people were now on 'our' side. Anyone who opposed or criticised what he had done was either a fundamentalist like the Likud settlers or a terrorist like the members of Hamas. It became nearly impossible to say anything except that the Israeli-Palestinian agreement - mostly unread or unexamined, and in any case unclear, lacking dozens of crucial details - was the first step towards Palestinian independence.

So far as the truly independent critic or analyst is concerned, the problem is how he is to free himself from the ideological system which both the agreement and the media now serve. What is needed are memory and scepticism (if not outright suspicion). Even if it is patently obvious that Palestinian freedom in any real sense has not been achieved, and is clearly designed not to be, beyond the meagre limits imposed by Israel and the US, the famous handshake broadcast all over the world is supposed not only to symbolise a great moment of success but to blot out past as well as present realities.

Given a modicum of honesty the Palestinians should be capable of seeing that the large majority of people the PLO is supposed to represent will not really be served by the agreement, except cosmetically. True, residents of the West Bank and Gaza are rightly glad to see that some Israeli

troops will withdraw, and that large amounts of money might start to come in. But it is rank dishonesty not to be alert to what the agreement entails in terms of further occupation, economic control and profound insecurity. Then there is the mammoth problem of the Palestinians who live in Jordan, to say nothing of the thousands of stateless refugees in Lebanon and Syria, 'Friendly' Arab states have always had one law for Palestinians, one for natives. These double standards have already intensified, as witnessed by the appalling scenes of delay and harassment that have occurred on the Allenby Bridge since the agreement was announced.

So what is to be done, if crying over spilt milk is useless? The first thing is to spell out, not only the virtues of being recognised by Israel and accepted at the White House, but also what the truly major disabilities are. Pessimism of the intellect first, then optimism of the will. You can't improve on a bad situation that is largely due to the technical incompetence of the PLO - which negotiated in English, a language that neither Arafat nor his emissary in Oslo knows, with no legal adviser - until on the technical level at least you involve people who can think for themselves and are not mere instruments of what is by now a single Palestinian authority. I find it extraordinarily disheartening that so many Arab and Palestinian intellectuals, who a week earlier had been moaning and groaning about Arafat's dictatorial ways, his single-minded control over the money, the circle of sycophants and courtiers that have surrounded him in Tunis of late, the absence of accountability and reflection, at least since the Gulf War, should suddenly make a 180-degree switch and start applauding his tactical genius, and his latest victory. The march towards self-determination can only be embarked on by a people with democratic aspirations and goals. Otherwise it is not worth the effort.

After all the hoopla celebrating 'the first step towards a Palestinian state', we should remind ourselves that much more important than having a state is the kind of state it is. The history of the post-colonial world is disfigured by one-party tyrannies, rapacious oligarchies, social dislocation caused by Western 'investments', and large-scale pauperisation brought about by famine, civil war or outright robbery. Any more than religious fundamentalism, mere nationalism is not, and can never be, 'the answer' to the problems of new secular societies. Alas one can already see in Palestine's potential statehood the lineaments of a marriage between the chaos of Lebanon and the tyranny of Iraq.

If this isn't to happen, a number of quite specific issues need to be addressed. One is the diaspora Palestinians, who originally brought Arafat and the PLO to power, kept them there, and are now relegated to permanent exile or refugee status. Since they comprise at least half of the total Palestinian population their needs and aspirations are not negligible. A small segment of the exile community is represented by the various political organisations 'hosted' by Syria. A significant number of independents (some of whom, like Shafik al-Hout and Mahmoud Darwish, resigned in protest from the PLO) still have an important role to play, not simply by applauding or condemning from the sidelines, but by advocating specific alterations in the PLO's structure, trying to change the triumphalist ambience of the moment into something more appropriate, mobilising support and building an organisation from within the various Palestinian communities all over the world to continue the march towards self-determination. These communities have been singularly disaffected, leaderless and indifferent since the Madrid process began.

One of the first tasks is a Palestinian census, which has to be regarded not just as a bureaucratic exercise but as the enfranchisement of Palestinians wherever they are. Israel, the US and the Arab states - all of them - have always opposed a census: it would give the Palestinians too high a profile in countries where they are supposed to be invisible, and before the Gulf War, it would have made it clear to various Gulf governments how dependent they were on an inappropriately large, usually exploited 'guest' community. Above all, opposition to the census stemmed from the realisation that, were Palestinians to be counted all together, despite dispersion and dispossession, they would by that very exercise come close to constituting a nation rather than a mere collection of people. Now

more than ever the process of holding a census and perhaps, later, world-wide elections – should be a leading item on the agenda for Palestinians everywhere. It would constitute an act of historical and political self-realisation outside the limitations imposed by the absence of sovereignty. And it would give body to the universal need for democratic participation, now ostensibly curtailed by Israel and the PLO in a premature alliance.

Certainly a census would once again raise the question of return for those Palestinians who are not from the West Bank and Gaza. Although this issue has been compressed into the general ‘refugee’ formula deferred until the final status talks some time in the future, it needs to be brought up now. The Lebanese government, for instance, has been publicly heating up the rhetoric against citizenship and naturalisation for the 350-400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon, most of whom are stateless, poor, permanently stalled. A similar situation obtains in Jordan and Egypt. These people, who have paid the heaviest price of all Palestinians, can neither be left to rot nor dumped somewhere else against their will. Israel is able to offer the right of return to every Jew in the world: individual Jews can become Israeli citizens and live in Israel at any time. This extraordinary inequity, intolerable to all Palestinians for almost half a century, has to be rectified. It is unthinkable that all the 1948 refugees would either want or be able to return to so small a place as a Palestinian state: on the other hand, it is unacceptable for them all to be told to resettle elsewhere, or drop any ideas they might have about repatriation and compensation.

One of the things the PLO and independent Palestinians should therefore do is raise a question not addressed by the Oslo Accords, thereby pre-empting the final status talks – namely, ask for reparations for Palestinians who have been the victims of this dreadful conflict. Although it is the Israeli Government’s wish (expressed quite forcibly by Rabin at his Washington news conference) that the PLO should close ‘its so-called embassies’, these offices should be kept open selectively so that claims for repatriation or compensation can be pressed.

In sum, we need to move up from the state of supine abjectness in which the Oslo Accords were negotiated (‘we will accept anything so long as you recognise us’) into one that enables us to prosecute parallel agreements with Israel and the Arabs concerning Palestinian national, as opposed to municipal, aspirations. But this does not exclude resistance against the Israeli occupation, which continues indefinitely. So long as occupation and settlements exist, whether legitimised or not by the PLO, Palestinians and others must speak against them. One of the issues not raised, either by the Oslo Accords, the exchange of PLO-Israeli letters or the Washington speeches, is whether the violence and terrorism renounced by the PLO includes non-violent resistance, civil disobedience etc. These are the inalienable right of any people denied full sovereignty and independence, and must be supported.

Like so many unpopular and undemocratic Arab governments, the PLO has already begun to appropriate authority for itself by calling its opponents ‘terrorists’ and ‘fundamentalists’. This is demagoguery. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are opposed to the Oslo agreement but they have said several times that they will not use violence against other Palestinians. Besides, their combined sway amounts to fewer than a third of the citizens of the West Bank and Gaza. As for the Damascus-based groups, they seem to me to be either paralysed or discredited. But this by no means exhausts the Palestinian opposition, which also includes well-known secularists, people who are committed to a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, realists and democrats. I include myself in this group which is, I believe, far bigger than is now supposed.

Central to this opposition’s thinking is the desperate need for reform within the PLO, which is now put on notice that reductive claims to ‘national unity’ are no longer an excuse for incompetence, corruption and autocracy. For the first time in Palestinian history such opposition cannot, except by some preposterous and disingenuous logic, be equated with treason or betrayal. Indeed our claim is

that we are opposed to sectarian Palestinianism and blind loyalty to the leadership: we remain committed to the broad democratic and social principles of accountability and performance that triumphalist nationalism has always tried to annul. I believe that a broad-based opposition to the PLO's history of bungling will emerge in the diaspora, but will come to include people and parties in the Occupied Territories.

Lastly there is the confusing matter of relationships between Israelis and Palestinians who believe in self-determination for two peoples, mutually and equally. Celebrations are premature and, for far too many Israeli and non-Israeli Jews, an easy way out of the enormous disparities that remain. Our peoples are already too bound up with each other in conflict and a shared history of persecution for an American-style pow-wow to heal the wounds and open the way forward. There is still a victim and a victimiser. But there can be solidarity in struggling to end the inequities, and for Israelis in pressuring their government to end the occupation, the expropriation and the settlements. The Palestinians, after all, have very little left to give. The common battle against poverty, injustice and militarism must now be joined seriously, and without the ritual demands for psychological security for Israelis – who if they don't have it now, never will. More than anything else, this will show whether the symbolic handshake is going to be a first step towards reconciliation and real peace.

Edward Said

P.S.

* The London Review of Books, Vol. 15 No. 20 · 21 October 1993, pages 3-5:
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n20/edward-said/the-morning-after>