

Palestine and the Exile of Edward Said

By Bruce Shen

Israel's Law of Return gives all non-Israeli Jews, including converts, the right to reside in Israel and receive full citizenship; however, Palestinians expelled after 1947 are denied property rights and the right to return.¹ Generations of Palestinians are thus condemned to perpetual exile.

Perhaps the person who best symbolizes and articulates the Palestinian struggle is Edward Said (1935-2003), a distinguished literary critic. Said was an exile in the sense that the country in which he was born no longer exists. Originally from Mandatory Palestine, Said and his family were forced to give up their home in Jerusalem when the State of Israel was established in 1947. They settled down in Egypt and eventually the United States.

Like many other Palestinians, Said was stripped of his national identity. The "place of birth" column on his passport simply reads "Jerusalem"—without specifying the country. When Said's father and mother registered for their wedding, the officer, who was a British woman, simply tore up his mother's passport and told her that her identity would be given to a Jewish immigrant to Palestine, Said told the *BBC* in 1988. "And then she became in the late 50s a Lebanese citizen. And of course, she's not Lebanese; she's Palestinian," Said scoffed bitterly.²

After studying at Princeton and Harvard, Edward Said became a literature professor at Columbia University in 1963, a position he held for 40 years. Outside his academic career, Said was a prominent advocate for Palestinian self-determination. He co-founded the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) and helped compose the Palestinian National Council's proclamation of an independent state of Palestine in 1988.³

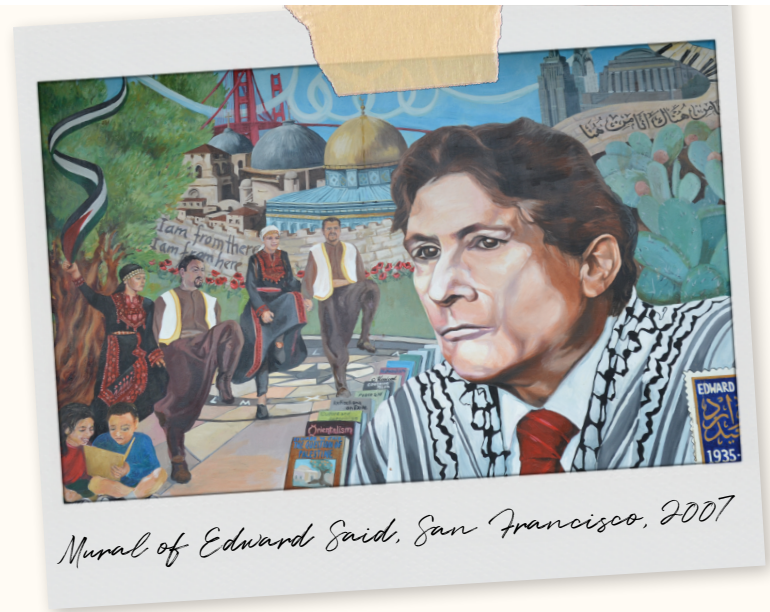
For all of his outspokenness and activism, Said was no extremist. "Why not have a mutual recognition in which the [Israeli and Palestinian] people recognize each other?" Said asked presciently on the Phil Donahue Show

in 1986, seven years before the PLO and Israel acknowledged each other's right to exist. The predicament of Palestinians, he acknowledged, was a result of failure from leaderships on both sides. After Oslo I, Said did not hold back from criticizing Israel for refusing to end violence and compensate Palestinian victims any more than he shied away from berating Yasser Arafat, then-leader of the Palestinian Authority (PA), for making too many "unilateral concessions" (he called the negotiation a "degrading spectacle").⁴ In response, the PA briefly banned his books in 1995.

Zionism's widespread appeal among Europeans and Americans remains at the heart of the question of Palestine. Said offered his literary interpretations. The first is that the Zionist movement resembles an archetypal phoenix: remnants of formerly oppressed communities rising from the ashes and coming together. The second is the appeal of building in historic Palestine a new country—with a clean slate—as Europe once did with the American Experiment.⁵ Said's analysis is echoed by the two pillars of Zionism: "conquest of land," namely to tame the wilderness of Palestine through Zionist settlements, and "conquest of labor," which entails filling all jobs in the economy with Jews.⁶

But Palestine was not devoid of inhabitants when new Jewish immigrants arrived in 1882. The presence of Arab natives, however, disrupted the Zionist imagination of "a land without a people" and therefore must be deliberately dismissed as an illegitimate political factor, if not a demographic one. Hence the State of Israel became paradoxically both a decolonizing nation and a colonizer, reeling from the shock of the Holocaust on the one hand, aggressively dominating the natives on the other.

This is hardly surprising; post-colonial states tend to imagine a pre-colonial past in which they can start afresh (in Israel's case, an uninhabited Palestine), as Said observed



in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).⁷ Yet he argued that Israel's past sufferings cannot justify its present human rights abuses. In the *BBC* Reith Lecture, Said lamented that lessons learned about oppression in one place were often conveniently forgotten in another place or time. This was the case for the Boers, who imposed apartheid in South Africa after suffering from British imperialism themselves, as well as the

Israelis, who felt entitled to expel the native Palestinians by virtue of their own hardship.⁸ But universal human rights cannot be conditional, warned Said. "[N]o power, no matter how special or how developed or how strong or how urgent its claims of past victimization, is exempt from accusation and judgment if that government practices such things."⁹

While Said's exile is physical, having been forbidden from returning to Palestine until 1998, his exile is also, in a sense, metaphorical. With an Arabic last name, a British first name, an American passport, and no certain identity, Said spent most of his life feeling out of place.¹⁰ His fierce criticism of US authorities kept him outside the American estab-

lishment, which was dominated by Zionist lobbyists who blocked the broadcast of his documentary in America,¹¹ and by neoconservatives like Samuel Huntington, whose "clash of civilizations" thesis provided the ideological bedrock for the US invasion of Iraq.¹²

Nonetheless, Said was content as an outsider; he chose to be one. Said saw himself as a public intellectual who must speak truth to power, not bound by party affiliations or concerned about material rewards.¹³ Consequently, he has repeatedly declined to work for think tanks and paid consultancies. In his mode of being, exile is meant for the intellectuals, and personal cost is to be damned.

Said envisioned a binational Israeli-Palestinian state in which an equal citizenship transcends ethno-religious differences.¹⁴ That vision has become elusive, with Israel passing over 30 discriminatory laws in 2020 alone.¹⁵ But that doesn't have to be the case. Both peoples are victims of oppression; instead of engaging in rhetoric of blame and difference, we must stand in solidarity to end injustice. Said's voice of reason is needed now more than ever.