

## Thoughts about America

Edward Said warns against the return to a shameful episode in the US's intellectual history

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I don't know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel that he or she belongs to the enemy camp, and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility. For despite the occasional official statements saying that Islam and Muslims and Arabs are not enemies of the United States, everything else about the current situation argues the exact opposite. Hundreds of young Arab and Muslim men have been picked up for questioning and, in far too many cases, detained by the police or the FBI. Anyone with an Arab or Muslim name is usually made to stand aside for special attention during airport security checks. There have been many reported instances of discriminatory behaviour against Arabs, so that speaking Arabic or even reading an Arabic document in public is likely to draw unwelcome attention. And of course, the media have run far too many "experts" and "commentators" on terrorism, Islam, and the Arabs whose endlessly repetitious and reductive line is so hostile and so misrepresents our history, society and culture that the media itself has become little more than an arm of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as now seems to be the case with the projected attack to "end" Iraq. There are US forces already in several countries with important Muslim populations like the Philippines and Somalia, the buildup against Iraq continues, and Israel prolongs its sadistic collective punishment of the Palestinian people, all with what seems like great public approval in the United States.

While true in some respects, this is quite misleading. America is more than what Bush and Rumsfeld and the others say it is. I have come to deeply resent the notion that I must accept the picture of America as being involved in a "just war" against something unilaterally labeled as terrorism by Bush and his advisers, a war that has assigned us the role of either silent witnesses or defensive immigrants who should be grateful to be allowed residence in the US. The historical realities are different: America is an immigrant republic and has always been one. It is a nation of laws passed not by God but by its citizens. Except for the mostly exterminated native Americans, the original Indians, everyone who now lives here as an American citizen originally came to these shores as an immigrant from somewhere else, even Bush and Rumsfeld. The Constitution does not

provide for different levels of Americanness, nor for approved or disapproved forms of "American behaviour," including things that have come to be called "un-" or "anti-American" statements or attitudes. That is the invention of American Taliban who want to regulate speech and behaviour in ways that remind one eerily of the unregretted former rulers of Afghanistan. And even if Mr Bush insists on the importance of religion in America, he is not authorised to enforce such views on the citizenry or to speak for everyone when he makes proclamations in China and elsewhere about God and America and himself. The Constitution expressly separates church and state.

There is worse. By passing the Patriot Act last November, Bush and his compliant Congress have suppressed or abrogated or abridged whole sections of the First, Fourth, Fifth and Eighth Amendments, instituted legal procedures that give individuals no recourse either to a proper defence or a fair trial, that allow secret searches, eavesdropping, detention without limit, and, given the treatment of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, that allow the US executive branch to abduct prisoners, detain them indefinitely, decide unilaterally whether or not they are prisoners of war and whether or not the Geneva Conventions apply to them -- which is not a decision to be taken by individual countries. Moreover, as Congressman Dennis Kucinich (Democrat, Ohio) said in a magnificent speech given on 17 February, the president and his men were not authorised to declare war (Operation Enduring Freedom) against the world without limit or reason, were not authorised to increase military spending to over \$400 billion per year, were not authorised to repeal the Bill of Rights. Furthermore, he added -- the first such statement by a prominent, publicly elected official -- "we did not ask that the blood of innocent people, who perished on September 11, be avenged with the blood of innocent villagers in Afghanistan." I strongly recommend that Rep. Kucinich's speech, which was made with the best of American principles and values in mind, be published in full in Arabic so that people in our part of the world can understand that America is not a monolith for the use of George Bush and Dick Cheney, but in fact contains many voices and currents of opinion which this government is trying to silence or make irrelevant.

The problem for the world today is how to deal with the unparalleled and unprecedented power of the United States, which in effect has made no secret of the fact that it does not need coordination with or approval of others in the pursuit of what a small circle of men and women around Bush believe are its interests. So far as the Middle East is concerned, it does seem that since 11 September there has been almost an Israelisation of US policy: and in effect Ariel Sharon and his associates have cynically exploited the single-minded attention to "terrorism" by George Bush and have used that

as a cover for their continued failed policy against the Palestinians. The point here is that Israel is not the US and, mercifully, the US is not Israel: thus, even though Israel commands Bush's support for the moment, Israel is a small country whose continued survival as an ethnocentric state in the midst of an Arab-Islamic sea depends not just on an expedient if not infinite dependence on the US, but rather on accommodation with its environment, not the other way round. That is why I think Sharon's policy has finally been revealed to a significant number of Israelis as suicidal, and why more and more Israelis are taking the reserve officers' position against serving the military occupation as a model for their approach and resistance. This is the best thing to have emerged from the Intifada. It proves that Palestinian courage and defiance in resisting occupation have finally brought fruit.

What has not changed, however, is the US position, which has been escalating towards a more and more metaphysical sphere, in which Bush and his people identify themselves (as in the very name of the military campaign, Operation Enduring Freedom) with righteousness, purity, the good, and manifest destiny, its external enemies with an equally absolute evil. Anyone reading the world press in the past few weeks can ascertain that people outside the US are both mystified by and aghast at the vagueness of US policy, which claims for itself the right to imagine and create enemies on a world scale, then prosecute wars on them without much regard for accuracy of definition, specificity of aim, concreteness of goal, or, worst of all, the legality of such actions. What does it mean to defeat "evil terrorism" in a world like ours? It cannot mean eradicating everyone who opposes the US, an infinite and strangely pointless task; nor can it mean changing the world map to suit the US, substituting people we think are "good guys" for evil creatures like Saddam Hussein. The radical simplicity of all this is attractive to Washington bureaucrats whose domain is either purely theoretical or who, because they sit behind desks in the Pentagon, tend to see the world as a distant target for the US's very real and virtually unopposed power. For if you live 10,000 miles away from any known evil state and you have at your disposal acres of warplanes, 19 aircraft carriers, and dozens of submarines, plus a million and a half people under arms, all of them willing to serve their country idealistically in the pursuit of what Bush and Condoleezza Rice keep referring to as evil, the chances are that you will be willing to use all that power sometime, somewhere, especially if the administration keeps asking for (and getting) billions of dollars to be added to the already swollen defence budget.

From my point of view, the most shocking thing of all is that with few exceptions most prominent intellectuals and commentators in this country have tolerated the Bush

programme, tolerated and in some flagrant cases, tried to go beyond it, toward more self-righteous sophistry, more uncritical self-flattery, more specious argument. What they will not accept is that the world we live in, the historical world of nations and peoples, is moved and can be understood by politics, not by huge general absolutes like good and evil, with America always on the side of good, its enemies on the side of evil. When Thomas Friedman tiresomely sermonises to Arabs that they have to be more self-critical, missing in anything he says is the slightest tone of *self-* criticism. Somehow, he thinks, the atrocities of 11 September entitle him to preach at others, as if only the US had suffered such terrible losses, and as if lives lost elsewhere in the world were not worth lamenting quite as much or drawing as large moral conclusions from.

One notices the same discrepancies and blindness when Israeli intellectuals concentrate on their own tragedies and leave out of the equation the much greater suffering of a dispossessed people without a state, or an army, or an air force, or a proper leadership, that is, Palestinians whose suffering at the hands of Israel continues minute by minute, hour by hour. This sort of moral blindness, this inability to evaluate and weigh the comparative evidence of sinner and sinned against (to use a moralistic language that I normally avoid and detest) is very much the order of the day, and it must be the critical intellectual's job not to fall into -- indeed, actively to campaign against falling into -- the trap. It is not enough to say blandly that all human suffering is equal, then to go on basically bewailing one's own miseries: it is far more important to see what the strongest party does, and to question rather than justify that. The intellectual's is a voice in opposition to and critical of great power, which is consistently in need of a restraining and clarifying conscience and a comparative perspective, so that the victim will not, as is often the case, be blamed and real power encouraged to do its will.

A week ago I was stunned when a European friend asked me what I thought of a declaration by 60 American intellectuals that was published in all the major French, German, Italian and other continental papers but which did not appear in the US at all, except on the Internet where few people took notice of it. This declaration took the form of a pompous sermon about the American war against evil and terrorism being "just" and in keeping with American values, as defined by these self-appointed interpreters of our country. Paid for and sponsored by something called the Institute for American Values, whose main (and financially well- endowed) aim is to propagate ideas in favour of families, "fathering" and "mothering," and God, the declaration was signed by Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Daniel Patrick Moynihan among many others, but basically written by a conservative feminist academic, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Its main

arguments about a "just" war were inspired by Professor Michael Walzer, a supposed socialist who is allied with the pro-Israel lobby in this country, and whose role is to justify everything Israel does by recourse to vaguely leftist principles. In signing this declaration, Walzer has given up all pretension to leftism and, like Sharon, allies himself with an interpretation (and a questionable one at that) of America as a righteous warrior against terror and evil, the more to make it appear that Israel and the US are similar countries with similar aims.

Nothing could be further from the truth, since Israel is not the state of its citizens but of all the Jewish people, while the US is most assuredly *only* the state of its citizens. Moreover, Walzer never has the courage to state boldly that in supporting Israel he is supporting a state structured by ethno-religious principles, which (with typical hypocrisy) he would oppose in the United States if this country were declared to be white and Christian.

Walzer's inconsistencies and hypocrisies aside, the document is really addressed to "our Muslim brethren" who are supposed to understand that America's war is not against Islam but against those who oppose all sorts of principles, which it would be hard to disagree with. Who could oppose the principle that all human beings are equal, that killing in the name of God is a bad thing, that freedom of conscience is excellent, and that "the basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing"? In what follows, however, America turns out to be the aggrieved party and, even though some of its mistakes in policy are acknowledged very briefly (and without mentioning anything specific in detail), it is depicted as hewing to principles unique to the United States, such as that all people possess inherent moral dignity and status, that universal moral truths exist and are available to everyone, or that civility is important where there is disagreement, and that freedom of conscience and religion are a reflection of basic human dignity and are universally recognised. Fine. For although the authors of this sermon say it is often the case that such great principles are contravened, no sustained attempt is made to say where and when those contraventions actually occur (as they do all the time), or whether they have been more contravened than followed, or anything as concrete as that. Yet in a long footnote, Walzer and his colleagues set forth a list of how many American "murders" have occurred at Muslim and Arab hands, including those of the Marines in Beirut in 1983, as well as other military combatants. Somehow making a list of that kind is worth making for these militant defenders of America, whereas the murder of Arabs and Muslims -- including the hundreds of thousands killed with

American weapons by Israel with US support, or the hundreds of thousands killed by US- maintained sanctions against the innocent civilian population of Iraq -- need be neither mentioned nor tabulated. What sort of dignity is there in humiliating Palestinians by Israel, with American complicity and even cooperation, and where is the nobility and moral conscience of saying nothing as Palestinian children are killed, millions besieged, and millions more kept as stateless refugees? Or for that matter, the millions killed in Vietnam, Columbia, Turkey, and Indonesia with American support and acquiescence?

All in all, this declaration of principles and complaint addressed by American intellectuals to their Muslim brethren seems like neither a statement of real conscience nor of true intellectual criticism against the arrogant use of power, but rather is the opening salvo in a new cold war declared by the US in full ironic cooperation, it would seem, with those Islamists who have argued that "our" war is with the West and with America. Speaking as someone with a claim on America and the Arabs, I find this sort of hijacking rhetoric profoundly objectionable. While it pretends to the elucidation of principles and the declaration of values, it is in fact exactly the opposite, an exercise in *not knowing*, in blinding readers with a patriotic rhetoric that encourages ignorance as it overrides real politics, real history, and real moral issues. Despite its vulgar trafficking in great "principles and values," it does none of that, except to wave them around in a bullying way designed to cow foreign readers into submission. I have a feeling that this document wasn't published here for two reasons: one is that it would be so severely criticised by American readers that it would be laughed out of court and two, that it was designed as part of a recently announced, extremely well-funded Pentagon scheme to put out propaganda as part of the war effort, and therefore intended for foreign consumption.

Whatever the case, the publication of "What are American Values?" augurs a new and degraded era in the production of intellectual discourse. For when the intellectuals of the most powerful country in the history of the world align themselves so flagrantly with that power, pressing that power's case instead of urging restraint, reflection, genuine communication and understanding, we are back to the bad old days of the intellectual war against communism, which we now know brought far too many compromises, collaborations and fabrications on the part of intellectuals and artists who should have played an altogether different role. Subsidised and underwritten by the government (the CIA especially, which went as far as providing for the subvention of magazines like *Encounter*, underwrote scholarly research, travel and concerts as well as artistic exhibitions), those militantly unreflective and uncritical intellectuals and artists in the

1950s and 1960s brought to the whole notion of intellectual honesty and complicity a new and disastrous dimension. For along with that effort went also the domestic campaign to stifle debate, intimidate critics, and restrict thought. For many Americans, like myself, this is a shameful episode in our history, and we must be on our guard against and resist its return.

## The screw turns, again

It falls to the victim to show new paths of resistance, writes **Edward Said**

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History has no mercy. There are no laws in it against suffering and cruelty, no internal balance that restores a people much sinned against to their rightful place in the world. Cyclical views of history have always seemed to me flawed for that reason, as if the turning of the screw means that present evil can later be transformed into good. Nonsense. Turning the screw of suffering means more suffering, and not a path to salvation. The most frustrating thing about history, however, is that so much in it escapes language, escapes attention and memory altogether. Historians have therefore resorted to metaphors and poetic figures to fill in the spaces, and this is why the first great historian, Herodotus, was also known as the Father of Lies: so much in what he wrote embellished and, to a great extent also, concealed the truth that it is the powers of his imagination that make him so great a writer, not the vast number of facts he deployed.

Living in the United States at this moment is a terrible experience. While the main media and the government echo each other about the Middle East, there are alternative views available through the Internet, the telephone, satellite channels, and the local Arabic and Jewish press. Nevertheless, so far as what is readily available to the average American is drowned in a storm of media pictures and stories almost completely cleansed of anything in foreign affairs but the patriotic line issued by the government, the picture is a startling one. America is fighting the evils of terrorism. America is good, and anyone who objects is evil and anti-American. Resistance against America, its policies, its arms and ideas is little short of terrorist. What I find just as startling is that influential and, in their own way, sophisticated American foreign policy analysts keep saying that they cannot understand why the whole world (and the Arabs and Muslims in particular) will not accept the American message, and why the rest of the world, including Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, persists in its criticism of American policies in Afghanistan, for renouncing six international treaties unilaterally, for its total, unconditional support of Israel, for its astonishingly obdurate policy on prisoners of war. The difference between realities as perceived by Americans on the one hand and by the rest of the world on the other, is so vast and irreconcilable as to defy description.

Words alone are inadequate to explain how an American secretary of state, who presumably has all the facts at his command, can without a trace of irony accuse

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for not doing enough against terror and for buying 50 tons of arms to defend his people, while Israel is supplied with everything that is most lethally sophisticated in the American arsenal at no expense to Israel. (At the same time, it needs to be said that PLO handling of the Karine A incident has been incompetent and bungling beyond even its own poor standards.) Meanwhile, Israel has Arafat locked up in his Ramallah headquarters, his people totally imprisoned, leaders assassinated, innocents starved, the sick dying, life completely paralysed -- and yet the Palestinians are accused of terrorism. The idea, much less the reality, of a 35-year military occupation has simply slid away from the media and the US government alike. Do not be surprised tomorrow if Arafat and his people are accused of besieging Israel while blockading its citizens and towns. No, those are not Israeli planes bombing Tulkarm and Jenin, those are Palestinian terrorists wearing wings, and those are Israeli towns being bombed.

As for Israel in the US media, its spokesmen have become so practiced at lying, creating falsehoods the way a sausage-maker makes sausages, that nothing is beyond them. Yesterday, I heard an Israel Defence (even the name sticks in one's throat) Ministry official answering an American reporter's questions about house destruction in Rafah: those were empty houses, he said, without hesitation; they were terrorist nests used for killing Israeli citizens; we have to defend Israeli citizens against Palestinian terror. The journalist didn't even refer to the occupation, or to the fact that the "citizens" were settlers. As for the several hundred poor homeless Palestinians whose pictures appeared fleetingly in the US media after the (American-made) bulldozers had done their demolition, they were gone from memory and awareness completely.

As for the Arab non-response, that has exceeded in disgrace and shamefulness the already abysmally low standards set by our governments for the past 50 years. Such a callous silence, such a stance of servility and incompetence in facing the US and Israel is as astonishing and unacceptable in their own way as what Sharon and Bush are about. Are the Arab leaders so fearful of offending the US that they are willing to accept not only Palestinian humiliation but their own as well? And for what? Simply to be allowed to go on with corruption, mediocrity, and oppression. What a cheap bargain they have made between the furtherance of their narrow interests and American forbearance! No wonder there is scarcely an Arab alive today for whom the word "regime" connotes more than amused contempt, unadulterated bitterness, and (except for the circle of advisers and sycophants) angry alienation. At least with the recent press conferences by high Saudi officials criticising US policy towards Israel there is a welcome break in the silence,

although the disarray and dysfunction concerning the upcoming Arab summit continues to add to our already well-stocked cupboard of poorly-managed incidents that demonstrate needless disunity and posturing.

I do think that the adjective "wicked" is the correct one here for what is being done to the truth of the Palestinian experience of suffering imposed by Sharon on the West Bank and Gaza collectively. That it cannot adequately be described or narrated, that the Arabs say and do nothing in support of the struggle, that the US is so terrifyingly hostile, that the Europeans are (except for their recent declaration, which has no measures of implementation in it) so useless: all this has driven many of us to despair, I know, and to a kind of hopeless frustration that is one of the results aimed for by Israeli officials and their US counterparts. To reduce people to the heedlessness of not caring anymore, and to make life so miserable as to make it seem necessary to give up life itself, comprise a state of desperation that Sharon clearly wants. This is what he was elected to do and what, if his policies fail, will cause him to lose his office, whereupon Netanyahu will be brought in to try to finish the same dreadful and inhuman (but ultimately suicidal) task.

In the face of such a situation, passivity and helpless anger -- even a kind of bitter fatalism -- are, I truly believe, inappropriate intellectual and political responses. Examples to the contrary still abound. Palestinians have neither been intimidated nor persuaded to give up, and that is a sign of great will and purpose. From that point of view, all Israel's collective measures and constant humiliation have proved ineffective; as one of their generals put it, stopping the resistance by besieging Palestinians is like trying to drink the sea with a spoon. It just doesn't work. But having taken note of that, I also firmly believe that we have to go beyond stubborn resistance toward a creative one, beyond the tired old methods for defying the Israelis but not sufficiently advancing Palestinian interests in the process. Take decision-making as a simple case in point. It's all very well for Arafat to sit out his own imprisonment in Ramallah and to repeat endlessly that he wants to negotiate, but it just is not a political programme, nor is its personal style sufficient to mobilise his people as well as his allies. Certainly it is good to take note of the European declaration in support of the PA, but surely it is more important to say something about the Israeli reservists who refused service on the West Bank and Gaza. Without identifying and trying to work in concert with Israeli resistance to Israeli oppression, we are still standing at square one.

The point of course is that every turning of the screw of cruel collective punishment dialectically creates a new space for new kinds of resistance, of which suicide bombing is

simply not a part, any more than Arafat's personal style of defiance (all too reminiscent of what he said 20 and 30 years ago in Amman and Beirut and Tunis) is new. It isn't new and it isn't up to what is now being done by opponents of Israel's military occupation in both Palestine and Israel. Why not make a specific point of singling out Israeli groups who have opposed house demolitions, or apartheid, or assassinations, or any of the lawless displays of Israeli macho bullying? There is no way that the occupation is going to be defeated unless Palestinian and Israeli efforts work together to end the occupation, in specific and concrete ways. And that, therefore, means that Palestinian groups (with or without the PA's guidance) have to take initiatives that they have been shy of taking (because of understandable fears of normalisation), initiatives that actively solicit and involve Israeli resistance as well as European, Arab and American resistance. In other words, with the disappearance of Oslo, Palestinian civil society has been released from that fraudulent peace process's strictures, and this new empowerment means going beyond such traditional interlocutors as the now completely discredited Labour Party and its hangers-on, in the direction of more courageous, innovative anti-occupation drives. If the PA wants to keep calling on Israel to return to the negotiating table, that's fine, of course, if any Israelis can be found to sit there with the PA. But that doesn't mean that Palestinian NGOs have to repeat the same chorus, or that they have to keep worrying about normalisation, which was all about normalisation with the Israeli state, not progressive currents and groups in its civil society that actively support real Palestinian self-determination and the end of occupation, of settlements, of collective punishment.

Yes, the screw turns, but it not only brings more Israeli repression, it also dialectically reveals new opportunities for Palestinian ingenuity and creativity. There are already considerable signs of progress (noted in my last column) in Palestinian civil society: an intensified focus on them is required, especially as fissures in Israeli society disclose a frightened, closed-off and horrifyingly insecure populace badly in need of awakening. It always falls to the victim, not the oppressor, to show new paths for resistance, and the signs are that Palestinian civil society is beginning to take the initiative. This is an excellent omen in a time of despondency and instinctual retrogression.

## Emerging alternatives in Palestine

End the occupation: that comes first. **Edward Said** comments on a brave initiative

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Since it began 15 months ago the Palestinian Intifada has had little to show for itself politically, despite the remarkable fortitude of a militarily occupied, unarmed, poorly led, and still dispossessed people that has defied the pitiless ravages of Israel's war machine. In the United States, the government and, with a handful of exceptions, the "independent" media have echoed each other in harping on Palestinian violence and terror, with no attention at all paid to the 35-year Israeli military occupation, the longest in modern history: as a result, American official condemnations of Yasser Arafat's Authority after 11 September as harbouring and even sponsoring terrorism have coldly reinforced the Sharon government's preposterous claim that Israel is the victim, the Palestinians the aggressors in the four-decade war that the Israeli army has waged against civilians, property and institutions without mercy or discrimination. The result today is that the Palestinians are locked up in 220 ghettos controlled by the army; American-supplied Apache helicopters, Merkava tanks, and F-16s mow down people, houses, olive groves and fields on a daily basis; schools and universities as well as businesses and civil institutions are totally disrupted; hundreds of innocent civilians have been killed and tens of thousands injured; Israel's assassinations of Palestinian leaders continue; unemployment and poverty stand at about 50 per cent -- and all this while General Anthony Zinni drones on about Palestinian "violence" to the wretched Arafat, who can't even leave his office in Ramallah because he is imprisoned there by Israeli tanks, while his several tattered security forces scamper about trying to survive the destruction of their offices and barracks.

To make matters worse, the Palestinian Islamists have played into Israel's relentless propaganda mills and its ever-ready military by occasional bursts of wantonly barbaric suicide bombings that finally forced Arafat in mid-December to turn his crippled security forces against Hamas and Islamic Jihad, arresting militants, closing offices, occasionally firing at and killing demonstrators. Every demand that Sharon makes, Arafat hastens to fulfil, even as Sharon makes still another one, provokes an incident, or simply says -- with US backing -- that he is unsatisfied, and that Arafat remains an "irrelevant" terrorist (whom he sadistically forbade from attending Christmas services in Bethlehem) whose main purpose in life is to kill Jews. To this logic-defying congeries of brutal assaults on

the Palestinians, on the man who for better or worse is their leader, and on their already humiliated national existence, Arafat's baffling response has been to keep asking for a return to negotiations, as if Sharon's transparent campaign against even the possibility of negotiations wasn't actually happening, and as if the whole idea of the Oslo peace process hadn't already evaporated. What surprises me is that, except for a small number of Israelis (most recently David Grossman), no one comes out and says openly that Palestinians are being persecuted by Israel as *its* natives.

A closer look at the Palestinian reality tells a somewhat more encouraging story. Recent polls have shown that between them, Arafat and his Islamist opponents (who refer to themselves unjustly as "the resistance") get somewhere between 40 and 45 per cent popular approval. This means that a silent majority of Palestinians is neither for the Authority's misplaced trust in Oslo (or for its lawless regime of corruption and repression) nor for Hamas's violence. Ever the resourceful tactician, Arafat has countered by delegating Dr Sari Nusseibeh, a Jerusalem notable, president of Al-Quds University, and Fatah stalwart, to make trial balloon speeches suggesting that if Israel were to be just a little nicer, the Palestinians might give up their right of return. In addition, a slew of Palestinian personalities close to the Authority (or, more accurately, whose activities have never been independent of the Authority) have signed statements and gone on tour with Israeli peace activists who are either out of power or otherwise seem ineffective as well as discredited. These dispiriting exercises are supposed to show the world that Palestinians are willing to make peace at any price, even to accommodate the military occupation. Arafat is still undefeated so far as his relentless eagerness to stay in power is concerned.

Yet at some distance from all this, a new secular nationalist current is slowly emerging. It's too soon to call this a party or a bloc, but it is now a visible group with true independence and popular status. It counts Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi and Dr Mustafa Barghouthi (not to be confused with his distant relative, Tanzim activist Marwan Barghouthi) among its ranks, along with Ibrahim Dakkak, Ziad Abu Amr, Ahmad Harb, Ali Jarbawi, Fouad Moghrabi, Legislative Council members Rawiya Al-Shawa and Kamal Shirafi, writers Hassan Khadr and Mahmoud Darwish, Raja Shehadeh, Rima Tarazi, Ghassan Al-Khatib, Nassir Aruri, Eliya Zureik and myself. In mid-December, a collective statement was issued that was well-covered in the Arab and European media (it went unmentioned in the US) calling for Palestinian unity and resistance and the unconditional end of Israeli military occupation, while keeping deliberately silent about

returning to Oslo. We believe that negotiating an improvement in the occupation is tantamount to prolonging it. Peace can only come after the occupation ends. The declaration's boldest sections focus on the need to improve the internal Palestinian situation, above all to strengthen democracy; "rectify" the decision-making process (which is totally controlled by Arafat and his men); assert the need to restore the law's sovereignty and an independent judiciary; prevent the further misuse of public funds; and consolidate the functions of public institutions so as to give every citizen confidence in those that are expressly designed for public service. The final and most decisive demand calls for new parliamentary elections.

However else this declaration may have been read, the fact that so many prominent independents with, for the most part, functioning health, educational, professional and labour organisations as their base have said these things was lost neither on other Palestinians (who saw it as the most trenchant critique yet of the Arafat regime) nor on the Israeli military. In addition, just as the Authority jumped to obey Sharon and Bush by rounding up the usual Islamist suspects, a non-violent International Solidarity Movement was launched by Dr Barghouthi that comprised about 550 European observers (several of them European parliament members) who flew in at their own expense. With them was a well-disciplined band of young Palestinians who, while disrupting Israeli troop and settler movement along with the Europeans, prevented rock-throwing or firing from the Palestinian side. This effectively froze out the Authority and the Islamists, and set the agenda for making Israel's occupation itself the focus of attention. All this occurred while the US was vetoing a Security Council resolution mandating an international group of unarmed observers to interpose themselves between the Israeli army and defenceless Palestinian civilians.

The first result of this was that on 3 January, after Barghouthi held a press conference with about 20 Europeans in East Jerusalem, the Israelis arrested, detained and interrogated him twice, breaking his knee with rifle butts and injuring his head, on the pretext that he was disturbing the peace and had illegally entered Jerusalem (even though he was born in it and has a medical permit to enter it). None of this of course has deterred him or his supporters from continuing the non-violent struggle, which, I think, is certain to take control of the already too militarised Intifada, centre it nationally on ending occupation and settlements, and steer Palestinians toward statehood and peace. Israel has more to fear from someone like Barghouthi, who is a self-possessed, rational and respected Palestinian, than from the bearded Islamic radicals that Sharon loves to

misrepresent as Israel's quintessential terrorist threat. All they do is to arrest him, which is typical of Sharon's bankrupt policy.

So where is the Israeli and American left that is quick to condemn "violence" while saying not a word about the disgraceful and criminal occupation itself? I would seriously suggest that they should join brave activists like Jeff Halper and Louisa Morgantini at the barricades (literal and figurative), stand side by side with this major new secular Palestinian initiative, and start protesting the Israeli military methods that are directly subsidised by tax-payers and their dearly bought silence. Having for a year wrung their collective hands and complained about the absence of a Palestinian peace movement (since when does a militarily occupied people have responsibility for a peace movement?), the alleged peaceniks who can actually influence Israel's military have a clear political duty to organise against the occupation right now, unconditionally and without unseemly demands on the already laden Palestinians.

Some of them have. Several hundred Israeli reservists have refused military duty in the occupied territories, and a whole spectrum of journalists, activists, academics and writers (including Amira Hass, Gideon Levy, David Grossman, Ilan Pappé, Dani Rabinowitz, and Uri Avnery) have kept up a steady attack on the criminal futility of Sharon's campaign against the Palestinian people. Ideally, there should be a similar chorus in the United States where, except for a tiny number of Jewish voices making public their outrage at Israel's military occupation, there is far too much complicity and drum-beating. The Israeli lobby has been temporarily successful in identifying the war against Bin Laden with Sharon's single-minded, collective assault on Arafat and his people. Unfortunately, the Arab American community is both too small and beleaguered as it tries to fend off the ever-expanding Ashcroft dragnet, racial profiling and curtailment of civil liberties here.

Most urgently needed, therefore, is coordination between the various secular groups who support Palestinians, a people against whose mere presence, geographical dispersion (even more than Israeli depredations) is the major obstacle. To end the occupation and all that has gone with it is a clear enough imperative. Now let us do it. And Arab intellectuals needn't feel shy about actually joining in.