

Palestine: the mornin

Edward Said, the leading Palestinian intellectual in exile from his homeland, says all the people of the diaspora have a fundamental right to return, but Israel has conceded nothing

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 15 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 only this one.'

In order to advance towards Palestinian self-determination – which has a meaning only if freedom, sovereignty and equality, rather than perpetual subservience to Israel, are its goal – we need an honest acknowledgement 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

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 200 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

I doubt that anyone who watched the White House ceremony did not also feel that a century of sacrifice had come to naught

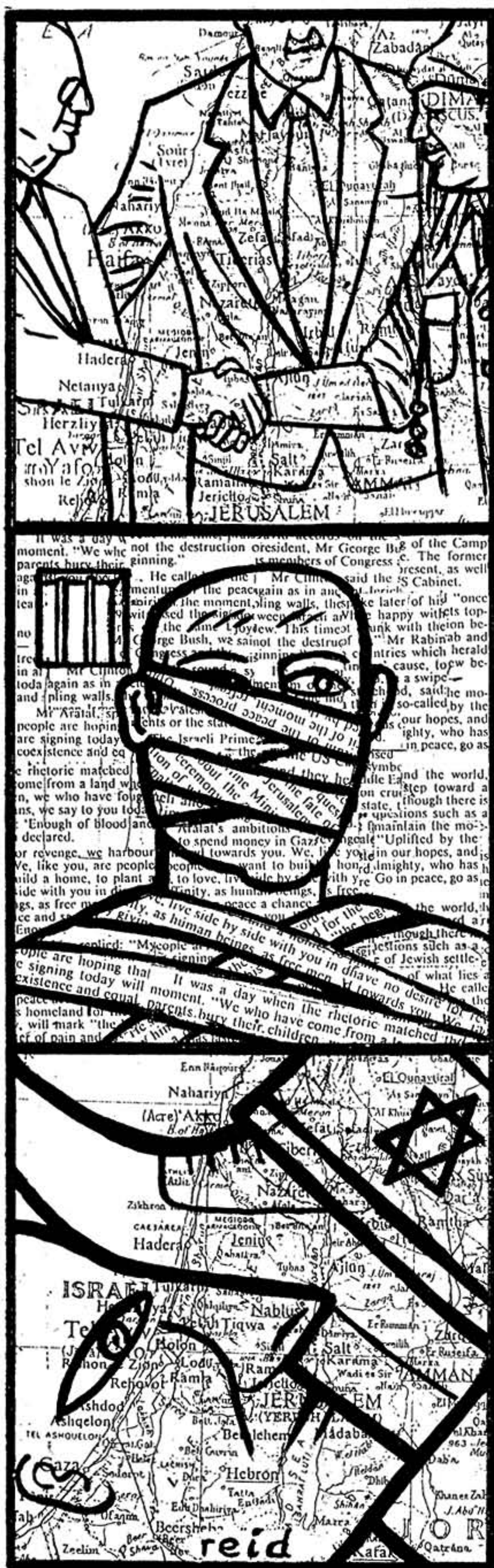
all the information on settlements, land and water is held by Israel, which hasn't shared most of these data with the Palestinians, any more

ism 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 until '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 15 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 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 is at the time of the worst Israeli repression of Palestinians under military occupation. The thinking behind the collaboration is that it will deter any Palesti-



A recent study by the Israeli journalist Asher Davidi quotes Dov Lautman, president of the Israeli Manufacturers Association: 'It's

children. Within a matter of days, the 'independent media' had totally rehabilitated Arafat. Given a modicum of honesty the

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