

Interview

Palestine yesterday and today - The neck and the sword

Saturday 27 July 2024, by [ALI Tariq](#), [KHALIDI Rashid](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2024).

Tariq Ali: Let's start with the present, not just in the sense of the horrors being inflicted on Palestine right now, but the present as part of Palestine's still-active past. The brutal Anglo-Zionist repression of the great Arab Revolt of 1936-39 was followed by the Nakba of 1948, the Six-Day War in 1967, the 1982 siege of Beirut, led by Ariel Sharon, and the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, the two Intifadas, the continuous raining down of terror by Israel since then. Yet the post-October 7 genocide seems to have had a bigger global impact than any of these.

Rachid Khalidi: Yes, something has shifted globally. I'm not sure why those historic episodes did not have the effect of completely changing the narrative—the popular narrative, in particular. I don't want to speculate about things like social media. But this has been the first genocide that a generation has witnessed in real time, on their devices. Was it the first in recent times in which the US, Britain and Western powers were direct participants, unlike others, in Sudan or Myanmar? Did the work of pro-Palestinian advocates over a generation or more prepare people for this? I don't know. But you are right that as a result of the horrors that have been inflicted on Gaza over eight continuous months, and which are still being inflicted now, something new has happened. The displacement of three quarters of a million people in 1948 did not produce the same impact. The 1936-39 Arab Revolt is almost completely forgotten. None of those earlier events had anything like this effect.

The Arab Revolt has always fascinated me as one of the major episodes of anti-colonial struggle, which has had far less attention than it deserves. It began as a strike, became a series of strikes, then developed into a huge national uprising which had British forces tied down for over three years. Could you give us an explanation of its origins, development and consequences?

The Arab Revolt was essentially a popular uprising, on a massive scale. The traditional Palestinian leadership was taken by surprise, just as Arafat and the PLO leadership were surprised by the First Intifada in 1987. Both uprisings were sparked by minor incidents; in the case of the Arab Revolt, it was the death in battle of Shaikh 'Iz al-Din al-Qassam in November 1935, killed by British forces. Born in 1882 in Jableh, on the Syrian coast, al-Qassam was a religious scholar, trained at Al-Azhar, and a militant anti-imperialist, who fought against all the Western powers in the region, beginning with the Italians in Libya in 1911, then the French-Mandate forces in Syria in 1919-20. He ended up in British-Mandate Palestine, where he lived and worked mainly among the peasantry and the urban poor. Al-Qassam's killing had an enormous amplitude, such that within a few months it had helped to detonate the longest general strike in interwar colonial history. The best account is by Ghassan Kanafani, the great Palestinian writer assassinated by the Israelis in 1972; it was to be the first chapter of his history of the Palestinian struggle, unfinished at his death. [1]

Kanafani's analysis stands to this day. Among other things, he underlined the economic impact on the popular classes of increased Jewish migration to Palestine in the 1930s, after Hitler came to power; the sacking of Arab workers from factories and construction sites, in line with Ben-Gurion's

policy of 'Jewish Labour Only'; the eviction of 20,000 peasant families from their fields and orchards, sold to Zionist settlers by absentee landlords; rising poverty. These popular revolts erupt when people reach a point where they just cannot go on as before, and in this case social anger combined with powerful national and religious feelings. The Palestinians rose up against the full might of the British Empire—which, in a century and a half, had not been forced to grant independence to a single colonial dependency, with the sole exception of Ireland in 1921. The Arab Revolt was crushed by what was still the world's most powerful empire, but the Palestinians fought for over three years, with perhaps a sixth of the adult male population killed, injured, in prison or in exile. In the annals of the interwar period, this was an unprecedented attempt to overthrow colonial rule. It was only suppressed by the deployment of 100,00 troops and the raf. This is a forgotten page in Palestinian history.

Did not this defeat also lead to a demoralization within the Palestinian masses, so that when the Nakba proper began in 1947, they still had not recovered from the terror of 1936–39?

The defeat of the Arab Revolt created a heavy legacy that affected the Palestinian people for decades. As Kanafani wrote, the Nakba, 'the second chapter of the Palestinian defeat'—from the end of 1947 to the middle of 1948—was amazingly short, because it was only the conclusion of this long and bloody chapter which had lasted from April 1936 to September 1939. [2] What the British did was later copied in almost every detail by the Zionist leaders from Ben-Gurion onwards. For that reason alone, it's worth recalling the cost to Palestinian society. At least 2,000 homes were blown up, crops destroyed, over a hundred rebels executed for possessing firearms. All this was accompanied by curfews, detention without trial, internal exile, torture, practices like tying villagers to the front of steam engines, as a shield against attacks by freedom fighters. In an Arab population of about a million, 5,000 were killed, 10,000-plus wounded and over 5,000 political prisoners were left rotting in colonial jails.

In the process of crushing the Arab Revolt, the British gave the Zionist forces that were working with them valuable training in counterinsurgency.

Yes. The Zionists were taught every underhanded colonial technique by counterinsurgency experts like Orde Wingate, and other specialists in torture and murder. The British imported veterans from India, like Charles Tegart, the notorious Chief of Police in Calcutta, the subject of six assassination attempts by Indian nationalists. The same forts and prison camps built by Tegart are still in use by Israel today. They brought in people from Ireland and other places in the Empire, like Sudan, where Wingate started, and where his father's cousin, Reginald Wingate, had been Governor-General and an intelligence officer before that.

Orde Wingate, a long-forgotten name. I doubt many readers would even have heard of this demented figure, of whom Montgomery said the best thing he ever did was to be in the plane crash that killed him in Burma in 1944. Who was he and did he have any special links to the Zionist forces? I vaguely recall a bbc tv series on him in 1976 where he was portrayed as a hero.

He was a cold-blooded colonial killer, ending up a major general, who was loathed by many on his own side, as Montgomery's remark suggests; Montgomery also described Wingate as 'mentally unbalanced'. Churchill, no slouch when it came to inflicting suffering on subject populations, called Wingate 'too mad for command'. He was born in British India in a pious Plymouth Brethren family. A Christian fundamentalist and a Bible literalist, he promoted the Old Testament version of Jewish redemption. He arrived in Palestine as a Captain in military intelligence, just as the 1936 uprising was beginning. He knew Arabic, learnt Hebrew and became a key figure in training Haganah fighters as 'Special Night Squads'—in other words, death squads—to target and kill Palestinian villagers in the mountains, as the Israeli military and settlers do today. His notoriety was such that

on the outbreak of the European war in 1939, the Arab notables demanded that Wingate be expelled from the region. He was. His passport was stamped, prohibiting his return. His job was done. He had trained many of the men who became commanders of the Palmach and later the Israeli military, like Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon. Several sites in Israel bear his name, and he is rightly considered the founder of Israeli military doctrine.

He taught them well.

Yes. What was once a British colonial speciality became an Israeli colonial speciality. Everything the Israelis have done they learned from the British—including the laws, the 1945 Defence Emergency Regulations, for example, that the British used against the Irgun. The same laws are still in force, now used against Palestinians. It all comes from the British colonial playbook.

A victory—or even a draw—for the Arab Revolt would have laid the foundations of a Palestinian national identity and strengthened their forces for the battles that lay ahead. Like Kanafani, you've argued that the vacillations of the traditional Palestinian leadership played a key role in the defeat, kowtowing as they did—at the St James Conference, for example—to the collaborationist Arab kings, who had been put on their thrones by the British?

Then as now, the Palestinian leadership was divided. They were stymied by their own inability to agree on an appropriate strategy—to mobilize the population and create a representative national forum, a popular assembly where these matters could be discussed. The British, unlike in India, Iraq and parts of Africa, denied Palestinians any political access to the colonial state. So the argument for a people's assembly to break decisively with the structures of colonial control was very important.

The other background condition for the Revolt was the rise of fascism in Europe.

From the moment the Nazis came to power, the whole situation changed for Jews in their relationship to the world and to Zionism. That's entirely understandable. It produced changes in Palestine too: between 1932 and 1939, the Jewish proportion of the population rose from 16 or 17 per cent to 31 per cent. The Zionists suddenly had a viable demographic base for taking over Palestine, which they didn't have in 1932.

The Palestinians became indirect victims of the European Judeocide.

Absolutely. Palestinians are paying for the entire history of European Jew-hatred, going back to medieval times. Edward I expelling the Jews from England in 1290, the French expulsions in the following century, the Spanish and Portuguese edicts in the 1490s, the Russian pogroms from the 1880s and finally the Nazi genocide. Historically, a quintessentially European Christian phenomenon.

What if there had been no Judeocide in Europe and the German fascists had been ordinary fascists without the obsession to wipe out the Jews?

What a might-have-been. But look at the situation in 1939. There was already a Zionist project, with strong British imperial support, for reasons that had nothing to do with Jews or Zionism. It had to do with strategic interests. The Balfour Declaration was made by the man responsible for shepherding through the most antisemitic bill in British parliamentary history, the Aliens Act of 1905. The British ruling class didn't care for the Jews per se. They may have cared for their reading of the Bible, but what they cared about most was the strategic importance of Palestine and the Middle East as a gateway to India, long before 1917. That was what concerned them, from the beginning to the end. When they were forced to leave in 1948, they could do so because they'd already quit India in 1947 and didn't need Palestine in the same way. Had Hitler been assassinated, there would still have been

a Zionist project, with British imperial backing. Zionism would still have tried to take over the entirety of the country, which was always its objective, and would still have tried to create a Jewish majority through ethnic cleansing and immigration. I couldn't speculate beyond that.

But weren't there also anti-Zionist currents within the Jewish communities?

Certainly, there were Jewish communists, Jewish assimilationists. The vast majority of the persecuted Jewish population of Eastern Europe chose emigration to the white-settler colonies: South Africa, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, above all, the United States; some also went to Argentina and other Latin American countries. These were the majority and that's where the bulk of the Jewish population of the world went, besides those who stayed in Europe. Anti-Zionism was a Jewish project, up until Hitler. Before then, Zionists were a minority and their programme was deeply contested in Jewish communities. But the Holocaust produced a kind of understandable uniformity in support of Zionism.

Defeats usually have the effect of stopping everything for a time; then the resistance rises again, in different forms. But in the case of 1936-39, the defeat was immediately followed by the eruption of the Second World War—which started in China, though many call it the European war. What was the attitude of the Palestinian leadership in that period? In Indonesia, Malaysia, India and parts of the Middle East, some sections of the nationalist movement said: the enemy of our enemy is our friend, if temporarily. Since our enemy is the British Empire, that means the Germans or the Japanese. In his book on Egypt, Anouar Abdel-Malek recounts how, as it appeared that Rommel might take Egypt, huge crowds gathered in Alexandria chanting, 'Forward, Rommel, forward!' They wanted anyone but Britain. What was the attitude in Palestine?

The attitude in Palestine was deeply divided. A minority faction of the leadership aligned themselves with the Germans, following the Grand Mufti. He had an extraordinary wartime career: the French kicked him out of Beirut, the British chased him out of Iraq, when they reoccupied it in 1941, then they chased him out of Iran. He tried to go to Turkey, but the Turks wouldn't let him stay, so he ended up in Rome, and then Berlin. But most Palestinians did not adopt that line. Many joined the British Army and fought with the Allied forces. Of course, many leaders had been killed by the British, either on the battlefield or executed. Others were exiled. The British loved to exile their nationalist opponents to island possessions: Malta, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, the Andamans. My uncle was sent to the Seychelles for a couple of years, together with other Palestinian leaders, then exiled to Beirut for several more years. And so the leadership for the most part understood that Britain could never be their friend. You can read my uncle's memoirs—he became virulently, venomously anti-British. He was always a nationalist and anti-British, but the degree to which the Revolt changed Palestinian views is remarkable. Previously, the leadership had always tried to conciliate the British, along the lines of many co-opted colonial elites. This changed with the crushing of the Revolt.

Ultimately, the defeat of the Revolt and then World War Two left the Palestinians ill-prepared for what came after, when the two new superpowers—the us and the Soviet Union—supported Zionism, while on the ground the British collaborated with the Zionists and Jordanians to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Palestinians were not sufficiently organized to face the assault of the Zionist military, which began in November 1947, months before the Mandate ended on 15 May 1948, when the un Partition was supposed to go into effect and the Arab armies joined the fray. By then, Zionist forces had taken Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberias, Safad and dozens of villages, expelling around 350,000 Palestinians, and had already overrun much of what was to have been the Arab state under the un Partition Plan. So the Palestinians were already defeated before the State of Israel was proclaimed and the so-called Arab-Israeli War began.

We'll come to the United States' role in all this. But how do you explain the Soviet Union's support for the Zionists, supplying them with Czech weapons in order to carry on fighting?

Stalin turned on a dime, as you know. From being a staunch anti-nationalist and anti-Zionist power, the Soviet Union suddenly became an advocate of a Jewish state. This came as a huge shock to the Communist parties of the Arab world. There were several motivations, I think. It was certainly an effort to outbid the United States, and there was a sense that this might be a socialist country that would align with the Soviet Union. Stalin also wanted to undermine the British in the Middle East. Remember, he had spent his youth fighting in the south of what became the Soviet Union during the Russian Civil War, when the British were the primary supporters of the Whites—funding, arming and training them. They supported them with troops and fleets from the Baltic to the Caspian to the Black Sea. Early on, Stalin developed a great animosity towards Britain, and an obsession about the threat posed by British power to the south of the USSR. And he now saw this as a moment in which the Soviet Union could undermine Britain's Arab puppet regimes in the region.

It was a disastrous political intervention. But it didn't last too long.

A couple of years. But yes, absolutely. If you look at the vote in the UN General Assembly, without the Soviet Union and their Belarusian and Ukrainian attachments, as well as the countries they influenced, the Americans would have had difficulty pushing through the Partition resolution. They might have done it, but it could have led to a different outcome. And the Czech arms deal was crucial to Israel's victories against the Arab armies on the battlefield.

That brings us to the Arab elites—the monarchies and sheikhdoms installed by Britain after the collapse of the Ottomans—their collaboration with the British, and their failure to help defeat this entity that the British Empire had created.

The Egyptian, Jordanian and Iraqi monarchies played the most important role here. They were subject to competing pressures, from above and below. On the one hand, the British had absolutely no desire to see a Palestinian state. They still had enormous hostility to the Palestinians, even as they had also become hostile to the Zionists because of the bloody campaign waged against them by the Irgun, the Stern Gang and the Haganah at the end of World War Two. Britain abstained on the UN Partition resolution. A Jewish state would be established, there was nothing that could prevent that. But they hoped through their client regimes to balance its power and to maintain influence in a part of Palestine, thanks to Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, whose army was commanded by British officers.

On the other hand, there was the pressure of public opinion. The Arab world had long been concerned about Zionism. When I was researching this, I found hundreds of early newspaper articles about Palestine from Istanbul, Damascus, Cairo and Beirut. There were volunteers from Syria and Egypt fighting in Palestine during the Arab Revolt. So these neighbouring regimes came under popular pressure to do something about the catastrophe that was unfolding in Palestine in 1947-48, as the Zionists rapidly gained the upper hand and destitute refugees began arriving in Arab capitals. The British wanted the Jordanians to go in, of course—to annex the West Bank and East Jerusalem for themselves. Egypt and the other Arab countries were forced to intervene by their populations. But they did so in a half-hearted way, and only once the British had withdrawn.

This had a hugely radicalizing effect on the Arab junior officers involved, including Abdel Nasser. He wrote in his memoirs: we were not given the means to fight, and as we were fighting the Israelis, we were thinking of the corrupt British-controlled monarchy at home. Along with two close colleagues in the nationalist Free Officers group, Abdel Hakim Amer and Zakaria Mohyedin, Nasser was posted to Gaza and Rafah, and observed first-hand the anger of the rank-and-file soldiers against the High

Command in Cairo. He quotes a soldier who kept repeating with each new pointless order: 'Shame, shame on us', in the drawn-out sarcastic intonation of the Egyptian countryside. [3] The war boosted the popularity of the Free Officers, and ultimately led to the toppling of the monarchy in 1952. This was true with the Iraqis and the Syrians, too. Almost as soon as the war ended there was a series of coups in Syria, followed by the 1952 revolution in Egypt, and then Iraq in 1958. The military officers involved had all fought in Palestine.

So Palestine was partitioned, but not according to the plan agreed by the United Nations.

Ben-Gurion and the Zionist leadership wanted to take it all, they just didn't have the means at the time. So they settled for 78 per cent.

And there has been semi-continuous war since then. The first wave of refugees arrived in Gaza after the Nakba in 1948, including many of our friends. They had never lived in Gaza before.

Eighty per cent of the population of what is now the Gaza Strip are descended from refugees, most of whom arrived in 1948. There are populations from the Negev and other areas who were expelled even later. But 80 per cent of Gaza's population originally came from elsewhere.

Like much of my generation, I first learnt of the scale of the Palestinian Nakba—the catastrophe—in 1967, after the Six-Day War. I was sent to visit the refugees by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, which wanted us to produce an investigative report—as we had done in Vietnam for the International War Crimes Tribunal that Russell and Sartre had convoked. On that trip I met your cousin, Walid Khalidi in his house in Beirut, which I will never forget. He sat me down and said: 'Do you know what happened?' He told me about the massacre of Deir Yassin in April 1948. My eyes were coming out of my head. I couldn't believe that I hadn't known.

Do you recall when this was?

I think it must have been July, a month after the 1967 war. We met refugees in camps in Jordan, outside Damascus, in Egypt, as well as politicians and intellectuals. Ironically, our translator was a Muslim Englishman, Faris Glubb, whose father General Sir John Glubb had been commander-in-chief of the Transjordanian Army. Faris was a rock-solid supporter of the Palestinian cause. Walid was very tickled by this fact. He was the one who first gave me a real tutorial on Palestinian history.

He's very good at that. He's about to reach his 99th birthday, inshallah, in July.

I will never forget that afternoon in Beirut. And if people like me, growing up in a left-wing, pro-Arab, pro-Nasser family, didn't know about the Nakba at that time, then large numbers of people couldn't have had any idea.

Absolutely. I am constantly struck by how poor a job the Palestinians did in publicizing their cause, starting in 1917 and going well beyond 1967. It's only really with the current generation that there has been any kind of a breakthrough. And this has not come from the political leadership, but from civil society—organizations like pacbi, the group calling for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions, or the Institute for Palestine Studies that Walid founded, which has been working for decades. Finally, we're beginning to see the results. But this is in spite of the absence of any competent official effort. The PLO made a start on informational and diplomatic work in the 1970s and early 80s, though it was still insufficient. Aside from that, the record has been dismal.

How do you explain the persistent weakness of the modern Palestinian leadership? I know that the best people were killed.

That's the first important point. Assassinating Palestinian leaders became an Israeli speciality. An Israeli author, Ronen Bergman, has a chilling book about this, *Rise and Kill First*. The title says it all. They have been very careful in picking out the ones they want to eliminate. Together with a few Arab regimes, it must be said: the Israelis have been helped in their efforts by the assassins of Libya, Iraq and Syria. And the Israelis knew their targets. When they went to assassinate Abu Jihad in Tunis, they went straight past the home of Mahmoud Abbas. They didn't consider him a danger—on the contrary—so they kept him alive and have been using him ever since. This was also a British speciality.

But the problems of the Palestinian leadership go deeper. In the 1930s, it was in part a product of the Palestinian class structure—an out-of-touch landed elite, with blinkered or naïve views on how to deal with the British. Since the 1960s, the lack of a global outlook on the part of successive generations of Palestinian leaders has been a major problem. If you look at other anti-colonial movements—the Irish, the Algerians, the Vietnamese or the Indians—they were led by people with a sophisticated understanding of the global balance of power, of the way imperial powers operate, and how to reach public opinion in the metropole. Nehru, Michael Collins, de Valera understood this. The Algerian leadership understood France. What they called the seventh *wilaya* or province of the fln was in France. The Irish won in 1921 because they understood British and American politics, and had extensive political and intelligence operations there. The Palestinian leadership has never had the same knowledge or skills. I hate to say this, it sounds self-denigrating, but it's true.

*How would you characterize the Palestinian elite in that early period? In *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, you give a wonderful sense of these Palestinian clans, the Khalidis and the Husseinis. Yours was more intellectual, more scholarly, the Husseinis tended to occupy practical leadership roles. Was this kind of class structure particular to Palestine, or did it exist in some form in other parts of the Arab world?*

The term used by my teacher, Albert Hourani, was notables—the politics of the notables. [4] He talked about families, rather than clans; these were not tribal populations. The same social structure prevailed throughout the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire; they were urban elites, involved in religion, law and government; also, in many cases, landlords and involved in trade. This stratum was quite divorced from the popular classes, disdaining manual labour and, in many cases, commerce itself. It was imbricated in Ottoman politics for centuries, and before that, in the Mamluk empire. Members of my family were involved in the Mamluk judiciary in the 14th and 15th centuries. This elite was well suited to the kind of administration you had under the Moguls, the Safavids and the Ottomans. Some adapted to the modern era. Instead of religious training, they went to Malta or Istanbul, or to American missionary institutions. They acquired a modern education; instead of wearing a turban or a fez, they sported a top hat. But they were exquisitely ill-suited to dealing with the British.

This social structure was completely destroyed in 1948. The material base of the class that had dominated Palestinian society for centuries disappeared. Landlords lost their lands, merchants lost their businesses, and so on. And with the odd exception, none of these elites re-emerged after 1948. Palestinian society was essentially revolutionized, in the way that many other Arab societies were by social revolution—in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, where the age-old elites and the landlord class were overthrown in the 1950s. Dynasties like the Azms in Damascus disappeared from politics. The same thing happened in Palestine because of the Nakba. In a sense, it opened the door to those from the educated middle-class. The leadership of the plo was not made up of people from old notable families. The only exception I can think of was Faisal Hussein; he was the only prominent Palestinian leader after 1948 who came from the old elite class, and he was the son of an outstanding military leader who was killed in battle in 1948.

What happened to your own family at that point?

The family was scattered. Some were traumatized by the experience and others were galvanized. My grandparents lost the family home at Tal al-Rish, near Jaffa, and became refugees. My uncles and aunts and cousins ended up between Jerusalem, Nablus, Beirut, Amman, Damascus and Alexandria. As a result, I have cousins all over the Arab world and others in Europe and the us. Nevertheless, members of my family were among the lucky and privileged ones, as they had good educations thanks to my grandfather, and some of them had careers as professors, like my cousins Walid, Usama and Tarif, or as writers and translators like my aunt Anbara, or my cousin Randa. My parents, who had been planning to return to Palestine after my father finished his PhD at Columbia, ended up having to stay in the us, which is why I was born here in New York, in 1948. My father then worked for the United Nations.

Where did you go to school?

I went to the UN International School in New York, and I also went to school in Korea. I studied history at Yale and did my PhD at Oxford, with Hourani. So I was educated in three different places.

And Palestine was absent in all these places.

Yes. I've only lived in Palestine for short periods, a couple of years total. I lived in Libya for a few years when I was very young, and I lived in Lebanon for over fifteen years, in the 1970s and 80s, teaching at the American University of Beirut. I've lived in other places, but most of my youth and more than half my life has been spent in the United States.

To go back to the radical upheavals of the 1940s: as you were saying, the class structure changed all over the Arab world.

With one categorical exception: the remaining monarchies. The old social order in Morocco has not changed, nor in Jordan or Saudi Arabia. At least, it didn't change in the same way.

The British kept on the monarchies wherever they could. Churchill in particular loved them and even discussed the possibility of creating one for the Indian province of the Punjab.

British colonialists loved to replicate their own aristocracy and their own system. They would find a landed gentry in places that had never known such a thing. The French preferred colonial republics.

The other consequence of these radicalized middle-class upheavals was that the urban petit bourgeoisie gained access to the army, especially in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. This was the basis of the revolutionary nationalist movements—in India, the native officer corps was limited to the second sons of the landed gentry. How did these transformations play out among the Palestinian communities, in the diaspora and in Palestine? Nasser was a great hero for the post-Nakba generation. And he did try, to be fair—it's not that he didn't try. I remember saying this to a Palestinian in Egypt, who replied with a joke: 'Yes, Tariq, he tried, but, you know, he's like a bad clock. A clock says tick tock and moves forward. Nasser says tac-tic and moves backward.' In my view, the new generation of Palestinian leaders really came into its own after the Six-Day War, when they recognized that no Arab state was going to defend them and they had to fight for themselves. What would you say to that?

My view of Abdel Nasser would be somewhat similar; one of my former students berated me the other day for criticizing him. But the point to stress is that I don't think Palestine was ever Nasser's priority, even in 1948. If you read his memoir, which was ghost written of course, it's clear that his obsession was Egypt. He was an Egyptian nationalist, understandably. Palestine was important, but

it was never the priority. But to address the other question you ask: how did this new generation of Palestinian resistance leaders arise? It had started to coalesce before 1967, but the trauma of the Six-Day War had an enormous impact. As you say, it cemented the understanding that the Arab states weren't going to help. I think many believed that Nasser would—and this was the last straw. The successive defeats of 1948, 1956 and 1967 showed that the Arab states didn't have the means to defeat Israel, irrespective of whether they had the will to do so. Initiatives that had been brewing in Palestinian society led to the takeover of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which Nasser had established in 1964 in order to co-opt and control the rising tide of national fervour. In 1968 the plo was taken over by independent Palestinian groups, dissatisfied with Egyptian control. Fatah was the largest of these, and Arafat soon became plo chairman. Once again, this was a movement from below against the co-opted elites, Ahmad Shukeiri and others, who originally ran the plo. Shukeiri, by the way, was another member of the old ruling class. But from this point on, there was a new generation of Palestinian leaders—Arafat, Hawatmeh, Habash, Abu Jihad and others—who represent a different class, a different set of identities, to everything that went before.

One of Arafat's most important slogans was *al-qarar al-Filistini al-mustaqil*—independent Palestinian decision-making power. His insistence on Palestinian autonomy and self-determination was key to his popularity in this early period: 'The Arab regimes don't control us'. This was one of his relatively few successes, but a major one: keeping the plo largely independent from the Arab powers who wanted to control the Palestinian movement, just as they have tried to do since the 1930s. During the Great Revolt, at the 1939 St James Conference, in the debate over the UN Partition resolution or the establishment of the PLO—the Arab regimes consistently tried to dominate the Palestine question, for their own benefit; in rivalry with one another, of course. They are still trying to do so, even as they look on impassively and do absolutely nothing as Gaza is martyred.

You've already touched on another leading figure from this generation, Ghassan Kanafani. You write very movingly of him in The Hundred Years' War in Palestine. I met him once at a conference in Kuwait in 1966 and was bowled over.

He was enormously charismatic. You read him now, and the charisma almost comes off the page. But if you met him . . . I only met him a couple of times. The man was extraordinary.

I can't remember his exact words, which have since become famous, but I asked, is there any possibility of a negotiated settlement with these bastards? And he said—I'll never forget his voice or his smile—Tariq, explain to me how the neck negotiates with the sword. I laughed a lot. I said, that's a very brilliant analogy. He was a great intellectual, a writer as well as a political leader. He seemed to represent a whole culture. And so they killed him. Mossad blew him up, while he was travelling with his niece.

Exactly. His literary works resonate to this day. My son Ismail adapted his novella *Returning to Haifa* for the stage, with Naomi Wallace. It's impossible to get a major theatre in the US to show it, though it premiered in London at the Finborough Theatre. The adaptation was commissioned by the Public Theatre in New York, but the board refused to allow it to be produced; they said Kanafani was a 'terrorist'. Yet in spite of the establishment censorship, his work is everywhere. To this day, the novellas are in print, as well as his plays, his poetry, his other writings, both in Arabic and in translation. Along with Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said, I think he's the most important Palestinian intellectual of the 20th century.

This is what we were saying earlier: they know whom to kill.

And whom not to kill.

What led to Arafat and the team around him finally deciding to sell out at Oslo in 1993? Our friend Edward Said called it a 'Palestinian Versailles'—a punitive peace.

Edward was right, but he didn't know how right. In fact, it was far worse than Versailles. The turning point was 1988, when Arafat's team on the Palestinian National Council essentially capitulated to the Americans' conditions for entering bilateral dialogue—the Palestinians must renounce violence, something the Israelis were never asked to do, and accept partition, signing on to un Resolution 242, which confined the issues to the outcome of the 1967 war. That un resolution was drafted by Arthur Goldberg, Abba Eban and Lord Caradon: its authors were the great imperial powers and their Israeli client, though endorsed on the un Security Council by the USSR. In fact, the Israelis didn't want the plo to capitulate at that point. They were not interested in talking, no matter what the PLO accepted. They could agree to UNSC 242, accept the 'two-state solution', renounce violence—and the Israelis still wouldn't talk to them; until Rabin finally broke the taboo in 1992.

Behind the plo turn lay the outcome of the 1973 October War, when the Egyptian and Syrian regimes made clear that their interests were limited to their own territories occupied in 1967, Sinai and the Golan Heights. Beyond that, they didn't care. And this was made clear to the Palestinian leadership. I saw some of them coming back from Cairo. I was living in Beirut at the time and I was interpreting for a Palestinian-American delegation. They talked about their experience in Cairo with Sadat and how he made it clear that, this is it. This is what we're in for, and this is *all* we're in for. You guys take care of yourselves. He didn't say that in so many words . . .

But that's what he meant and that's what they did.

That's what the PLO leadership understood. And from that point on, they began to shift away from armed struggle and the liberation of Palestine towards negotiations for a so-called two-state solution. In 1974, at the Palestine National Council, they pushed through the first change to the wording. The PFLP [5] and the bulk of the Fatah membership understood perfectly well what they were trying to do and opposed it. It took the leadership years to get to the point where they were able to win the pnc's explicit approval for this programme—to move the plo from a position of liberation of all of Palestine, with a secular-democratic state for Muslims, Christians and Jews in which everybody is equal, to a one-state plus multiple-Bantustans solution, which is what the us-brokered two-state solution has always meant in practice. That's what the Israelis have given us, little bits and pieces separated by huge swathes of illegal Israeli settlements. The Arafat leadership arguably accepted this in principle in 1974 and then moved, slowly but surely, towards winning over Palestinian public opinion and the movement.

The other day Hillary Clinton entered the fray, adding her pebble to the mountain of lies that has been built around the 'peace process'. She basically said, 'We offered the Palestinians everything at the Camp David Accords in 1979, but they turned us down. They could have had their own state by now.' You know that phase intimately.

One of my students, a scholar called Seth Anziska, wrote the best book on the long-term impact of Camp David. [6] I focused on the Madrid and Washington negotiations in *Brokers of Deceit*. The basic point is that Palestinian statehood and sovereignty, and an end to occupation and settlement, have *never* been on the table, ever, anywhere, at any stage, from any party, the United States or Israel or anybody else. At Camp David in 1979, 'autonomy' was offered; at Madrid and Washington, in 1991, we were only allowed to negotiate for 'autonomy', or self-government under Israeli sovereignty; all we were told was that 'final-status issues' would include discussion of these other things. But we know what the bottom line was. Rabin told us. In his last speech in 1995, just before he was assassinated for going too far, he explained how far he would actually go. He said: what we are offering the Palestinians is *less than a state* and we would maintain security control over the

Jordan Valley. In other words, no self-determination, no sovereignty, no statehood. A one-state, multiple-Bantustans solution.

That was Israel's offer. And it never changed. Rabin was assassinated—*he* might have changed, you can speculate on that, if he had not been killed. But this is what he said in his last speech to the Knesset. And that was the bottom line for Ehud Barak in 2000, who negotiated with the PLO, unlike most other Israeli leaders. Rabin, Barak and later Olmert were actually willing to negotiate—they were willing to put the sword to the neck, in Kanafani's inimitable expression. But what were they offering? Not statehood, not sovereignty, not self-determination, not an end to occupation and not a removal of settlements. As for Clinton: one of the greatest liars in American politics and involved in multiple war crimes. She said the students don't understand history. Well, what she's propagating is certainly not history. It's a completely distorted narrative which is false in almost every respect.

Let's turn to Hamas. Is it accurate to say, as many of its opponents in the plo insist, that it was created by Israel?

No. Let me be very clear. Hamas emerged in 1987-88, in the situation we've just talked about. It grew out of the Islamist movement in Gaza, as a separate Palestinian extension of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This occurred just at the moment when Fatah and the plo moved away from the goal of liberating the entirety of Palestine, as a secular-democratic state, to accepting the American-Israeli conditions laid out in UNSC 242, laying down arms, agreeing to a divided Palestinian statelet side-by-side with Israel. The plo formally accepted this in 1987-88, which is precisely when Hamas emerged as a breakaway from the Islamist movement.

Now, were they encouraged by the Israelis? Yes, of course they were encouraged. Israel saw the plo as its chief nationalist opponent, the primary danger. Any dissident movement which undermined the wall-to-wall support of the Palestinians for the PLO was welcome to Israeli intelligence. Of course it was. Two Israeli specialists, Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, wrote a good book on Hamas which talks about this. [7] There was also an excellent Reuters article, which went into detail about how the Israeli intelligence services manipulated and supported the Islamist movement in Gaza. Everything else was shut down—every expression of Palestinian identity, even the Palestine Red Crescent—but not the Islamists. They operated freely. When the Israelis needed somebody to beat up PLO demonstrators on the Birzeit campus, in the West Bank, they would bus Islamists from Gaza across Israel, equipped with tyre irons and batons, to beat the living daylights out of pro-PLO demonstrators. Friends told me about kids having their arms broken by these guys. The Islamists were allowed to operate without being arrested, without being interfered with, as no other Palestinian civil-society organizations were.

When Hamas emerged, the Israeli occupation authorities were divided at first, because Hamas produced its notorious antisemitic charter and launched operations against Israeli soldiers and settlers in Gaza, after the start of the Intifada in December 1987. There was a debate within Israeli intelligence and the military: do we really want to continue supporting these people or not? But at different times, they were, if not supported, at least allowed to operate, for divide-and-rule reasons, by the Israeli intelligence services that controlled the Gaza Strip. I just saw a wonderful film called *Gaza Ghetto* made by Joan Mandell in 1984 which talks about what the Gaza Strip was like under Israeli occupation up to that point. She lived in Palestine at the time. The Israeli occupation controlled everything, as it controls everything in the West Bank today. There were attempts at resistance, obviously, some of which were successful, others not. But over time, Hamas turned into a resistance movement, and then the Israelis were not so happy with it. But they went back to supporting it in the last few years, under Netanyahu, because they thought they could use Hamas to pacify the Gaza Strip, with cash coming from the Gulf countries, Qatar in particular.

But that turned out not to be the case.

It didn't work out so well for them.

We now have the irony that the so-called secular-democratic plo is 100 per cent or 99.9 per cent collaborationist with the Israelis, that there is no Palestinian 'Authority', that effectively, the idf issues the orders and the Fatah-run Palestinian Authority carries them out. While the Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamist organization, Hamas, has become the leadership of what we have to call, and what is in fact, today's Palestinian resistance.

The terrible irony is that what Arafat and his colleagues did in accepting the Oslo Accords, and in moving almost the entire national movement into an Israeli-controlled prison in the occupied territories, was, first of all, to hollow out the plo itself. Today the plo doesn't really exist, except as a shell. That leadership now operates through this puppet quisling Palestinian Authority, which is a subcontractor for the occupation. It doesn't have an independent existence. It has no authority, no jurisdiction and no sovereignty. It's simply an arm of occupation, one of several. The Arafat-Abbas leadership thereby hollowed out what used to be the core of the national movement, which was the PLO. There is no PLO to speak of now. There is a Palestinian Authority, a bureaucracy which has governing power over the civil lives of Palestinians in part of the West Bank, though only a small part. The majority of the West Bank, so-called Area C, is controlled directly by the Israeli military. At most, the Palestinian Authority has a presence in 20-30 per cent of the West Bank, in terms of responsibility for public education, health and so on. But Israel is the sovereign power over the entirety of the occupied West Bank and occupied Arab East Jerusalem. It is the occupying power. It is the security power. It controls the population registry, entry and exit, everything to do with funding. It controls the pa security services. They do what the Israelis want. The Palestinian people want to be protected from the occupation and settlers, but the pa's people serve as agents of the occupation. They serve the enemy. So, yes: this is a tragedy for the secular-democratic, non-Muslim-Brotherhood elements of the Palestinian national movement.

After Oslo, NLR described Fatah's trajectory as a lurch from fantasy maximalism to ignominious minimalism, with no attempt to define and fight for an equitable solution in between. [8] There are still some in the plo who are resisting. Hanan Ashrawi has been stronger than the others, and I'm sure there must be others waiting for some alternative.

There are many people, including people involved in the plo/Fatah, and even some involved with the Palestinian Authority, though not many, who still have an independent position and who oppose the pa's collaborationist nature. You can see very clearly from a series of public opinion polls how broadly despised Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) is, how hated the pa is. This in spite of the fact that it provides the salaries for a huge proportion of the population of the occupied territories. There are tens of thousands of security personnel, tens of thousands of government employees, teachers, people in the healthcare sector, who are on the Palestinian Authority payroll and are entirely dependent on it for their livelihoods. In spite of that, the pa is loathed by overwhelming majorities of the population. That's perfectly clear.

The interesting thing is that Hamas's popularity has not always been as great as some people think, whether in Gaza, where they were growing increasingly unpopular before October 7, or even in the West Bank, where they are more popular simply because people have not been governed by them. But many of those under their rule in the Gaza Strip took a dim view of Hamas. It depends on the poll, who's asking and whom they ask. Public sentiment is not static; it goes up and down, over time. But the question of the degree of Hamas's popular support really should be asked much more carefully than it is. People assume that, because a lot of young people were swept away by enthusiasm after October 7, that is still the view of most people today, eight months later. I don't

think that's necessarily the case. Hamas is seen as deserving credit for inflicting a military defeat on Israel, the likes of which it has never suffered. Israel took a beating on some battlefields in 1948 and it suffered a severe military setback at the beginning of the 1973 war, before the Americans came to its rescue. But since 1948, Israel has never had to fight for days on its own territory. It took them four days to retake the military bases and the numerous communities that were overrun by Hamas and its allies on October 7. This has not happened before. The highest Israeli civilian death toll since 1948 was inflicted by the attack of October 7. (Israeli propaganda claims 'the highest since the Holocaust', but that's not true; 2,000 Israeli civilians and 4,000 troops died in 1948.) But Israel has never suffered an intelligence failure of this magnitude, even in 1973. So many people give Hamas credit for this, even though they may have reservations about them on other counts.

The Israelis knew what was going on in 1973. The Americans were telling them.

They knew, or they found out somewhat belatedly, but they didn't react fast enough, out of arrogance or hubris. They had spies in Egypt. They had spies everywhere. They had people telling them, 'Wait, wait, they're just doing exercises.' Even if 1973 was as big a shock, with Syria taking the Golan Heights, there were no Israeli civilian casualties. This needs to be said again and again about October 7: in addition to the atrocities, which definitely took place, the highest civilian death toll that Israel has ever suffered since 1948 occurred on those four days at the beginning of this attack. This is something Palestinians have to take on board, if they want to understand why Israel is so savage in its collective punishment of Gaza. It's not just the military defeat and intelligence failure. It's not just about restoring the tarnished honour and shattered 'deterrence' of the Army. It's a visceral desire for revenge, retribution for the traumatic suffering of a large number of Israeli civilians. Not just those killed or captured: entire communities were emptied and still haven't been repopulated, eight months later. This is fundamental if we want to understand what motivates the ferocity of Israeli behaviour. There is an underlying logic to it that goes back to the launching of the Zionist project. Every settler-colonial project *must* behave ferociously, to establish itself at the expense of the indigenous population. But what we have witnessed for the past eight months is on a scale never seen before, even in 1948.

We are fully aware that since October 7, at least 25 times as many Palestinians have been killed as Israelis, with a huge proportion of them civilians, women, children, the elderly, medical and aid workers, journalists, academics. The world is now fully conscious of the trauma this is producing. But some have not yet fully integrated the degree to which Israeli society has been affected by the impact of those first four days that it took the Israeli military to relieve the besieged headquarters of the Gaza Division, to retake the Erez crossing point, the multiple military bases that had been captured and a dozen communities along the Gaza frontier. It took them till October 10. The shock to Israel is going to last for a very long time, just as the trauma of what is being done to Gaza now will affect Palestinians everywhere for many years to come. Not just Gazans, or people like me and my friends and students who have family in Gaza, or know people there. Every Palestinian is affected by this trauma, and many others besides.

*As we've discussed, none of the previous tragedies of Palestinian history had this impact on public opinion globally, certainly not in the United States. And yet, watching the encampments being set up on over a hundred American campuses is quite astonishing to me. I heard your fine speech to the protesting students at Columbia the other day. It's as if October 7 has brought about a generational shift, as far as Israel and Palestine are concerned. A significant layer of young people, including thousands of young Jews, like the ones who occupied Grand Central Station in New York, want nothing to do with this monster entity which kills at will. People see what Israel is doing, and are saying, it's too much, it's unacceptable, it's genocide. And this is really rattling the mainstream media and the politicians. Do you think this will last? And, linked to that, how would you explain why Washington has become so utterly craven? In *Brokers of Deceit*, you provide a sober but very sharp*

analysis of the us role in the Middle East, particularly under Clinton and Obama, showing that while Washington claims to be an impartial mediator, seeking to advance an evenly balanced 'peace process', in fact it is highly partial, acting as 'Israel's lawyer' and its main backer. Nevertheless, when American interests were at stake, earlier administrations were prepared to crack the whip. Truman maintained an arms embargo against all belligerents in 1948; after Suez, Eisenhower told Ben-Gurion to get out of Gaza and the Sinai within two weeks or face sanctions; in August 1982, Reagan yelled at Begin to stop bombing Beirut; Bush Senior threatened to withhold \$50 billion to get Israel to the negotiating table. The current layer, Democrats and Republicans alike, show absolutely no willingness to put on any pressure at all. Biden—'Genocide Joe' as the students have dubbed him— is the worst of the lot. Trump will be no better. Secretary of State Blinken dances like a tame monkey to all Netanyahu's tunes. Has the monkey become the organ-grinder? Why and how has it gone so far?

It's actually a hard question to answer. We beat out our brains, trying to understand the degree to which they have become worse than complicit. They've become mouthpieces for every trashy piece of Zionist propaganda. The President and his appalling spokespeople, Admiral Kirby and the awful Matthew Miller, sound like Netanyahu's press attachés—like the worst Israeli propagandists, nakedly espousing an Israeli narrative on point after point. Today they admitted that the us is helping the Israelis try to hunt down and kill the Hamas leadership, that it provided intelligence for the hostage rescue that killed nearly 300 Palestinians. The raf has flown almost daily surveillance missions over the Gaza Strip. America and Britain, its bloodshot adjutant, are participating directly in the slaughter, not just supplying weapons, money and un vetoes, but doing the intelligence and propaganda work for this genocide. You used the word 'craven'. This is worse than that. There are words in Arabic for it that I can't translate. The degree to which this Administration has inhabited an Israeli perspective, from Biden through Blinken to Sullivan on down, marks it out.

It's true that in a couple of top leadership positions, there are people who will not and do not repeat that rhetoric. The Secretary of Defense, Austin, and Burns, the head of the cia, have not; nor have others, who know better. But they don't have any purchase within the Administration on this question. I would guess that most career professionals who serve in the State Department, in the military, and in the so-called intelligence community—I love that term, intelligence 'community'—know perfectly well that what Israel is doing is both futile and harmful to American interests; indeed, how harmful it is to any rational understanding of Israel's interests. But they have no voice in Biden's Administration.

Part of this has to do with the generational divide that you mentioned. The us is ruled today by an aged clique, a gerontocracy, that was indoctrinated in the 1960s and 70s with the myth of the connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel. Schumer, Pelosi, Biden, Trump; these are old people. Their consciousness was formed at the time of the 1967 war. And since then, they have never opened their minds, they have never had access to anything but a poisonous narrative that paints Israel in the most gleaming colours and the Palestinians in the darkest ones—the idea that Israel is always in existential danger, the Cossacks are always at the door; that the Holocaust could be repeated, that Israel represents a flower of Western civilization in a desert of Arab barbarism—a bunch of racist tropes that Israel, and the Zionist movement before it, successfully sowed throughout the West. Biden has not expressed the slightest sympathy for the 14,000 Palestinian children who have been killed by us bombs. He has no feeling of shame, no sense of the dimensions of the horrific genocide that he and his Administration are helping to perpetrate. And the people around him mirror that, obviously. They're insulated.

How long can this continue? I don't know. I see no sign of it stopping. They have now dimly begun to deduce that Israel is harming its and their interests, and they're trying to slow them down. But they have no purchase with the Israelis so far. And if I were Netanyahu and my political survival

depended on the continuation of the war, the Americans' feebly bleating and threatening to delay an arms shipment or two would be no reason to stop it. He'll go on for as long as he wants, correctly assessing that the Americans are more bark than bite, and that any bite would be a toothless nip. The us could say, we'll stop *all* arms shipments, unless Israel accepts the ceasefire plan that the cia chief, Burns, has drafted for them. It could sponsor a Security Council resolution demanding a ceasefire under specific provisions of the Charter, which would force Israel to stop tomorrow. They won't do that. To go back to what you said: this was something that Reagan himself was willing to do, in August 1982. The Israelis only stopped bombing Beirut because Reagan yelled at Begin, and half an hour later they called it off. We were sitting there in Beirut, under Israeli bombardment, and suddenly it stopped, essentially because of a phone call from the us president to the Israeli prime minister. Biden hasn't done that.

Mearsheimer and Walt were vilified for their book on the Israel lobby, called antisemites and so forth. [9] But the case they put for how American foreign policy is run on that level seems pretty strong today.

The amusing thing is that, in spite of all the vilification and the slanders, *The Israel Lobby and us Foreign Policy* fast became a bestseller, and it is still selling very well. I know the authors, they're both friends of mine; I believe that with the latest war there has been a bump in sales, a decade and a half after it was published. I think it was a sound analysis. I don't think it was comprehensive enough because it only talked about the lobby groups on Capitol Hill, as well as the Christian Zionists and the neocons, and the lobby's vigilantes in the media and academia, whereas there's a whole ecosystem that has extended to important elements of the American military, tech and biomedical sectors, which are closely integrated with their Israeli equivalents. Enormously important parts of the us economy are linked to these sectors in Israel and these are powerful forces in American society. They own Congress, in the sense that their contributions keep elected politicians in office—Silicon Valley, biotech, finance, the military sector in particular. The imbrication of the us security-military-industrial complex with that of Israel is seamless, as is the imbrication of Israel's defence and intelligence networks with those in India, the Emirates and a few other places. I don't think this is fully accounted for in *The Israel Lobby*, partly because some of this has emerged subsequent to publication of their book.

Let's come to the subject of the present Arab elites, who are carrying on even more blatantly than they did after the Nakba. Prior to October 7, the Saudis were on the verge of recognizing Israel.

They still are.

They still are. And the Gulf States remain imperial petrol stations, with enormous amounts of money. Jordan has been a us -Israeli protectorate for a very long time. The Egyptian masses were brutally defeated by the army. I did think there might be more protests in the Arab world—and the only thing that could change the mood there would be mass uprisings. But apart from Yemen, not too much. There have been pro-Gaza demonstrations, but so far not on the scale of the anger displayed in Britain and the us .

I think there are at least two things to say here. The first thing is that there is, and has always been, a deep sympathy with Palestine among the Arab peoples, throughout the Arab world, from the Gulf to the Atlantic. This hasn't changed. It's gone up and down a little bit, but it hasn't gone away. But these people are facing other critical issues. If you live in a state that's been destroyed—like Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon—by civil war or intervention by the imperial powers and their clients, you have other concerns. Iraq still doesn't have 24-hour electricity, 21 years after the American occupation—one of the greatest oil producers in the world. Palestine is important, but electricity and not being killed by the regime—or by this or that army faction—is also important. This

is the situation in half a dozen Arab countries: different stages of civil war-cum-proxy war, with all the great powers involved.

The second thing is that, almost without exception, from the Gulf to the Atlantic, you don't have regimes that allow public opinion to express itself. There are jackboot dictatorships, a *pouvoir* in Algeria, the most absolutist monarchies since Louis XIV, which allow virtually no dissent beyond a tiny space, and if you go beyond it, you will be tasered and tortured, you will be arrested and your family will suffer. So, you're right, no protests in the Arab world have risen to the level of what we've seen in London and New York, or in some parts of the Global South, Indonesia and Pakistan. That's partly because the Arab masses have been cowed by the cattle prods and tortures inflicted on them since the so-called Arab Spring. They were brought back to order by America's clients, in particular the Saudis and the Emiratis, with vast infusions of cash and support for the most hardline security measures. One can't entirely blame the people for not being willing to raise their heads above a certain point over this issue.

In some places, however, the situation is critical—in Jordan, for example, and in a few other countries, under the surface. But I don't see this leading to the democratic transitions which would be necessary for these countries to play an active, positive role. Their rulers are more concerned about what Washington and Tel Aviv may say than about their people. They don't represent their people's views in any shape or form. They're tied to Israel by so many visible and invisible ties. The anti-missile defences of the Emirates were provided by the Israeli subsidiary of Raytheon, which means that Israel's anti-missile surveillance against Iran is in Jabal Ali, in Abu Dhabi, not Jabal al-Sheikh (Mount Hermon), in the occupied Golan Heights. The UAE depends entirely on Israel for its security against missile attack. There are variations of that arrangement in Jordan, Egypt and other Arab countries. In Morocco, the royal bodyguards have been trained by Mossad for the past fifty or sixty years, since the time of King Hassan II. The Israeli defence connection is generations-old in the case of Jordan, Morocco and Egypt, and is well established in several of the Gulf countries and a couple of others, too.

There was some hope expressed early on that Hezbollah, with the backing, quietly or publicly, of the Iranian regime, might open up a second front and relieve the pressure on Hamas. But this didn't happen.

I think Hamas was wrong to expect it. They probably expected far more sustained responses from other Palestinians in the occupied territories and hoped that Hezbollah, as well as other Iran-allied militias and perhaps Iran itself, would be much more vigorous in reacting to Israel's counter-response to October 7. It's a perfect example of how little they understand of the world. For all their acumen in other respects, the leaders who organized this assault have what I would call tunnel vision. I think they really believed that there would be an uprising throughout the Arab world. I don't have a lot of evidence for that assertion, but they were certainly disappointed by the reaction. And Hezbollah's response has been what I would call 'performative'. It's had a significant effect on Israel: it's killed at least fifteen Israeli soldiers and eleven Israeli civilians, according to Israeli sources, and it's led to the evacuation of the entire border region—tens of thousands have been forced to leave their homes.

But while it may still explode into a full-scale war, so far it's been tit for tat, very measured and controlled. This is a function of what anybody with eyes to see could have told the boys in the tunnels, which is that Iran did not invest in building up Hezbollah's capabilities for the sake of Hamas. It did so in order to create a deterrent to protect Iran against Israel; that's the only reason. The idea that Hezbollah and the Iranians would shoot every arrow in their quivers to support Hamas, in a war it started without warning its allies—it beggars belief that anybody could think that that would be the case. Iran is a nation state that has national interests, which are restricted to regime

preservation, self-defence and *raison d'état*. You can talk about Islam, ideology and the 'axis of resistance' until you're blue in the face. I will tell you: *raison d'état*, regime protection—that's what they care about, and that's why they backed the build-up of Hezbollah's capacity. And they're not going to shoot that bolt. There was no possibility under any circumstances of their doing that to support Hamas. If, heaven forbid, a full-scale war erupts, it will be because of a miscalculation, or an accident, or an irrational move by Netanyahu, not a decision by Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is a Lebanese party. It has an Iranian patron, but it is acutely attuned to the fact that the Lebanese public will turn against it if its operations against Israel provoke a massive retaliation against Lebanon—which would not be directed just against Hezbollah but also, as in the 2006 war, against Lebanon's infrastructure. The Israelis have always punished the host country in order to force it to force the resistance to stop doing whatever it was doing. They bombed Jordan, they bombed Syria, in order to force those regimes to stop the Palestinians. They weren't trying to stop the Palestinians themselves, but to stop whichever Arab country it was from hosting and supporting the Palestinians. They would do that to Lebanon, to force it to stop Hezbollah. And Hezbollah knows that, and the Lebanese know it, too. I don't understand how the leaders of Hamas didn't understand that. It shows a detachment from reality and a flawed strategic sense which is really quite disturbing. Since October 7 they have dramatically upended the stagnant status quo in Palestine, and have shown themselves highly adept at waging guerrilla warfare—at an unspeakable price, let it be said. But ultimately, war is an extension of politics by other means, and they have not projected a clear, strategic, unified Palestinian political vision to the world. I don't think people are saying these kinds of things, hard as they are to say. But they should be. They should be.

I agree with you entirely. Turning to the future, what is the Israeli plan for Gaza? Are they trying to create another Nakba, i.e., destroy the strip, sell it off to their own people and turn more Palestinians into refugees? That is what seems to be the case. Or will someone intervene to stop this from happening? The Americans certainly won't, that's become very clear.

Unlike at other critical moments in its history, Israel doesn't have a unified elite and there is no clear-cut position on these issues today. In 1948, Ben-Gurion dominated Israeli politics; even in 1956, he prevailed over Sharett and he did what he wanted in launching the Suez war. Episode by episode, whether they did well or did badly, they at least knew what they wanted to do. There was a cohesive, unified sense of Israel's interests, even after the 1967 war, when they couldn't quite decide—should we keep it all?—they had a cohesive leadership. The military and political leaderships operated in sync throughout most of Israel's history. That's not the case today. I don't think there is a clear Israeli vision of what to do. Netanyahu has very little idea of what he wants strategically. What he wants personally is a continuation of the war with no clear end strategy. That serves his narrow political interest: staying in power, not having an election and not going on trial.

Other factions within his government have different views. The military and intelligence establishment is not cohesive. Just recently a former Chief of Staff came out and said the war has to end. You've never had former Chiefs of Staff saying this in wartime; Aviv Kohavi just said it. Other former generals and intelligence chiefs have said similar things. The Israeli elite is divided, with good reason, over how to end the war, over what to do in Gaza on the day after, if it ever comes. At the beginning, it was clear that they hoped they could complete the Nakba and expel large numbers of people—into Egypt, and possibly also from the West Bank into Jordan. And they sent their errand boy, Blinken, to do their dirty work for them—going to the Egyptians, to the Jordanians and to the Saudis and begging them, please, could you allow this to happen? The participation of the American government in an Israeli plan to further ethnically cleanse Palestine is one of the most despicable episodes in American history. It will be a mark of shame on Blinken and Biden for the rest of time. In 1948, Washington didn't *want* ethnic cleansing, though Truman allowed it to happen and did nothing to uphold the UN Partition resolution he had twisted so many arms to get. This is different and much

worse. This is Washington actively supporting Israel in genocide and actively trying to broker its ethnic cleansing of a part of Palestine.

But if the Israeli leadership had a clear view of what they wanted at the beginning—devastate Gaza and complete the Nakba—I don't think they have a clear view now. What seems likely to ensue is some form of Israeli occupation, which is an outcome that nobody, including the Israelis themselves, should desire. I wouldn't want to occupy Gaza if I were them. Their last occupation, up to 2005, wasn't so successful. Think what they had to cope with then, from the Hamas of the early 2000s and other groups with capabilities a fraction of what they are today. I don't think there are any good options, frankly, from an Israeli perspective. I don't think there's been a clear leadership decision on this. That may be wrong, but that's my impression from the outside, reading the Israeli press. In spite of their overwhelming power, they have put themselves in a hopeless strategic situation.

A terrible historical irony. After the Six-Day War in 1967, Isaac Deutscher gave an interview to nlr. [10] He had broken with Israel decisively and sent a message to Ben-Gurion, whom he knew, warning of disaster if the occupation was not ended. He described Israelis as the Prussians of the Middle East—a succession of victories breeding blind reliance on their own force of arms, chauvinistic arrogance and contempt for other peoples—and recalled the lesson Germans drew from their experience: 'Man kann sich totseigen!' You can triumph yourself to death.

Well, Ben-Gurion learned that. He was worried after the 1967 War that Israel would wallow in triumphalism and fail to take the opportunity the war offered to obtain a settlement favourable to Israel and Zionism. He was, of course, right. The sad thing about so many of these leaders is they learn too late. So you have Ehud Olmert talking about things that he never talked about when he was Prime Minister, or Ben-Gurion saying things in his dotage that he never said before, or former Israeli generals or heads of Mossad and Shin Bet, full of wisdom after they've retired. I had a wonderful encounter with Yehoshafat Harkabi, chief of Israeli military intelligence in the 1950s, who wrote two seminal books that were blueprints for the demonization of the plo. He served not just as chief of military intelligence, he was the lead propagandist in the West for a negative vision of the plo. When I met him in his old age, the man had shifted completely and had written a series of books criticizing Israel. It often happens too late with these people. The same with Jimmy Carter. Why didn't you say this when you were President?

Exactly.

The best ex-president the United States ever had. But I'd like to finish answering your first question, what has changed and what has not. I grew up in a world, as I said, in which the Zionist narrative was the only game in town and was believed blindly by almost everybody. That's not the case today, as we've been discussing. There's a vigorous contestation of the Zionist narrative, within the Jewish community in particular, with an interesting generational divide. That's entirely new—and very important.

What has not changed, and what our grandchildren still have to contend with, is the unwavering support of the rulers of the imperial powers for the Zionist project. Especially the United States and Britain, from World War One onwards, and France and Germany after World War Two. That is in many ways the biggest problem, to my way of thinking. If you accept the settler-colonial framework of analysis, then the metropole is as important as the settler colony. Israel is not a typical settler colony, by any means; it's also a national project, with a significant Biblical dimension, and a refuge from persecution. No other settler colony was a refuge from persecution to such a degree—the Puritans and other religious dissidents, like the Quakers, who came to North America, certainly experienced repression, but not on the same scale. Basically, this combination of characteristics is unique to the Israeli project. But the core of it, the settler-colonial core of it, relates to a metropole.

And the elites in that metropole, unfortunately, have barely changed from the time when I was a child. The new generations are going to have to deal with this.

A number of Israeli scholars and archaeologists, including Israel Finkelstein, have shown that the heroic stories of the Old Testament account—the exodus, the royal lineage of the Book of Kings—were largely an ‘invented tradition’, borrowings that were constructed as a court ideology in a later period. The Hebrew editions of Shlomo Sand’s books, The Invention of the Jewish People and The Invention of the Land of Israel, have been bestsellers in Israel. But this has had negligible impact on the hold of the national ideology over the majority of the population.

On nationalism, Gellner, Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson were right: it doesn’t matter what the historical realities were, it’s what people believe that counts. Finkelstein and other excellent Israeli archaeologists have blown to pieces much of the Biblical foundation of Zionism, to very little political effect. I think we have to look at the power of those Biblical myths, irrespective of their baselessness from a historical and archaeological perspective—their resonance over generations, over centuries, and not only among Jews. It’s equally important that they have resonated among Christians. British Protestants are ultimately responsible for the Balfour Declaration, rooted in their belief in these same myths. Lord Shaftesbury was a Zionist in the 1830s, before the first Jewish Zionists, for religious reasons.

But Israeli barbarism, as we’re seeing it, is beginning to dent some of these myths, is it not?

There may be a reckoning. This Christian Zionism is primarily a Protestant phenomenon; it’s much less prevalent among Catholic populations. That reading of the Bible—the ‘gathering of Israel’ as a precursor to the Second Coming and the Last Judgement, the Revelation of Saint John the Divine—is essentially a Protestant reading. And in many of the more liberal Protestant denominations in the us, there is a growing understanding of the danger of that reading and how false it is in terms of Christian values. You see a parallel shift among Jews, who say that this has nothing to do with the Jewish tradition we want to uphold. We don’t want to destroy people as the Israelites destroyed Amalek. We don’t believe in the version of Judaism that animates many of the settlers and the right wing of the Israeli political spectrum—which stretches from the far right to the centre left, by the way. They believe this stuff, about destroying the Amalekites as enemies of Israel. Netanyahu has cynically embraced that exterminationist logic, in a literalist reading of the Book of Saul—‘Remember what Amalek has done to you.’ A majority of the Knesset, 64 members, are backing a government headed by a man who has said this again and again. Yet that’s not what a large proportion of the Jewish community in the us believe.

Now, lastly, to your own university, Columbia.

It will cease to be my own university when I retire at the end of June.

But you will still be associated in some way.

I’ll just be a former faculty member, teaching some courses as a non-member of the faculty—or as ‘contingent’ faculty, as we have come to call them.

Might they do away with the ‘terrorist’ name altogether, the Edward Said professorship?

I have no idea what will happen with that. There are donors and descendants of donors who will, I assume, insist that there continue to be a chair and that someone qualified should hold it. I have no idea. The campaign in the United States against Middle East Studies in general, and studies on Palestine in particular, is virulent and spans the political spectrum. And we now have the New York City Police Department joining unprincipled politicians in the hue and cry shamefully echoed by

university administrators, about outside agitators and incitement by faculty members, including myself. So I don't know what will happen. When people ask me these kinds of questions, I say that the job description of a historian does not include predicting the future.

You dedicated your last book to your grandchildren, which we oldies tend to do.

[Laughter]

Let the record show both of us laughing heartily.

You expressed the hope that they would see a better world. What is the biggest difference between the world you grew up in and the world they're growing up in?

I grew up in a world where there was no Palestinian voice—in the Arab world, in the public sphere in the West; none at all, it didn't exist. Palestinians didn't exist. My four grandchildren are growing up in a time when there are quite vigorous voices for Palestine, all over the world. So that's an element of change for the better. I grew up in a world in which the Zionist narrative was completely hegemonic and Israel was fulsomely described as 'a light unto the nations'. That is no longer the case. Today it is widely, and rightly, seen as a pariah state because of its own genocidal actions. These are among the few good things that have happened in these very bad times.

P.S.

- "The neck and the sword". NLR. 147•May/June 2024:
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii147/articles/the-neck-and-the-sword?pc=1611>

Footnotes

[1] Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936-1939 in Palestine: Background Details and Analysis*, New York 2023 [1972].

[2] Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936-1939 in Palestine*, p. 60.

[3] Nasser's 'Memoirs of the First Palestine War', translated into English by Walid Khalidi for the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Winter 1973, is a riveting account of the chaos and deliberate lack of plan by the corrupted High Command in Cairo.

[4] Albert Hourani, 'Ottoman Reform and the Politics of the Notables' in William Polk and Richard Chambers, eds, *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, Chicago 1968, pp. 41-68.

[5] Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a revolutionary socialist organization formed by George Habash and others after the 1967 War.

[6] Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo*, Princeton 2018.

[7] Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, New York 2000.

[8] Perry Anderson, '[The House of Zion](#)', nlr 96, Nov-Dec 2015.

[9] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and us Foreign Policy*, New York 2007; the book expands on the arguments presented in 'The Israel Lobby', *London Review of Books*, 23 March 2006.

[10] Isaac Deutscher, '[On the Israeli-Arab War](#)', *NLR* i/44, Jul-Aug 1967, pp. 38-9.