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The Question of Palestine

EDWARD W. SAID

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Edward W. Said was University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He was the author of more than twenty books, including *Orientalism*, which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Culture and Imperialism*; *Representations of the Intellectual*; *The End of the Peace Process*; *Power, Politics, and Culture*; and *Out of Place: A Memoir*. His books have been published in thirty-six languages. He died in 2003.

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EDWARD W. SAID

THE QUESTION OF
PALESTINE



VINTAGE BOOKS · A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC. · NEW YORK

Vintage Books Edition, April 1992

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Said, Edward W.
The question of Palestine/Edward W. Said.—Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York: Times Books, © 1979. With new introduction and epilogue.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-679-73988-2

1. Jewish-Arab relations. 2. Palestinian Arabs. I. Title.

DS119.7.S333 1992

327.5694017'4927—dc20 91-50707

eBook ISBN 9781101971604

CIP

v4.1

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In memoriam

Farid Haddad

Rashid Hussein

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Preface to the 1992 Edition

This book was written in 1977–78 and published in 1979. An enormous amount has ensued since then, including the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the onset of the continuing *intifada* in December 1987, the Gulf crisis and war of 1990 and 1991, and the convening of a Middle East peace conference in late October and early November 1991. With the addition to this extraordinary mix of events of such things as the massive changes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the freeing of Nelson Mandela, independence for Namibia, the end of the Afghanistan war, and regionally, of course, the Iranian revolution and its aftermath, we are in a new, but no less perilous and complex, world. And yet, strangely and unhappily, the question of Palestine remains—unresolved, seemingly intractable, undomesticated.

Two decades after Black September (1970), the main aspects of Palestinian life remain dispossession, exile, dispersion, disenfranchisement (under Israeli military occupation), and, by no means least, an extraordinarily widespread and stubborn resistance to these travails. Thousands of lives lost and many more irreparably damaged seem not to have diminished the spirit of resilience characterizing a national movement that, despite its many gains in achieving legitimacy, visibility, and enormous sustenance for its people against staggering odds, has not discovered a method for stopping or containing the relentless Israeli attempt to take over more and more Palestinian (as well as other Arab) territory. But the discrepancy between important political, moral, and cultural gains on the one hand, and, on the other, a droning ground bass of land alienation, is at the heart of the Palestinian dilemma today. To speak of this discrepancy,

in aesthetic terms, as an ironic one is by no means to reduce or trivialize its force. On the contrary: what to many Palestinians is either an incomprehensible cruelty of fate or a measure of how appalling are the prospects for settling their claims can be clarified by seeing irony as a constitutive factor in their lives.

Paradox and Irony: The PLO and Its Environment

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, United States Secretary of State James Baker completed a series of eight trips to the region and successfully set out the main lines of a peace conference, its aim the settling of the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and that conflict's Palestinian-Israeli component in particular. In the Arab states he visited, he was reportedly told by every senior official with whom he spoke that no improvement in the Arab states' essentially nonexistent relationships with Israel could be expected until the question of Palestine was seriously addressed. Yet, at the same time, the PLO was snubbed throughout the Arab states of the coalition, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories continued to experience even greater hardship because of the disruption of funds from the Gulf, and the situation of Palestinians resident in the Gulf states was precarious. Most dramatically, the entire Palestinian community in Kuwait underwent severe tribulations, with torture, deportation, arbitrary arrests, and summary killings the order of the day. Leaving aside the immeasurable material losses to this community and its dependents in the Occupied Territories, there is the additional fact that the restored Kuwaiti authorities announced that those Palestinian residents who left Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation would not be allowed back, leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees in a Jordan already severely overburdened. Those who remained face astringent measures—among them further deportation and imprisonment—against them.

Thus the averred moral and political centrality of the Palestinian issue to official Arab discourse is scandalized by the actual relationship between the Palestinians as a real people, political community, and nation on the one hand, and the Arab states on the other. This particular contradiction takes us back to 1967, for the emergence of the Palestinian movement after the June