FORUM

EDWARD SAID

"Are we a national independence movement or are we a national liberation movement?" Columbia University Professor and Palestine National Council member Edward W. Said asked in this candid discussion with Forum Editor *Mark Bruzonsky*. "We're at the juncture where we have to make a decision". Said was born in Jerusalem, raised in Egypt, and educated in the United States. He is one of four American academics of Palestinian origin whose names cropped up last year as possible representatives of the Palestinians who would be acceptable to the United States. His new book *Orientalism* is being widely discussed in intellectual circles. (*The Middle East* Books Section features a review of *Orientalism* next month).

Bruzonsky: **Were there any significant decisions at the recent Damascus PNC meeting? Why didn't you go?**

Said: I was ill, but I followed the reports as best I could. What came out of note was the programme of national unity that was adopted. I'm not sure that PNCs are where great developments are decided.

□ **There were many expectations and talk of a government-in-exile before the meeting.**

○ It was more an internal meeting and didn't strike me as one of the more interesting ones. I think the 1974 and 1977 meetings were more crucial. One has the impression that there hasn't been much advance in Palestinian politics since Camp David.

□ **Ideologically you mean?**

○ In all ways. A lot of people say that the Baghdad summit was crucial. It was important as a forum for inter-Arab discussions. But I've felt since September that what is needed is a very clear enunciation of a Palestinian political process around which people can organise and work and significant advances can be made.

Obviously, we need a clearer programme for progress toward peace – forthright statements of a two-state solution and some indication of how this might come about, beyond slogans like "armed struggle", "continuing the struggle" and so forth which we all know. The question is how do you advance the political process to your advantage given the world in which we live, a post-Camp David world.

□ **Are you suggesting the Palestinian movement ought to discuss how two states can co-exist in Palestine with the ideological struggle and the struggle over historical interpretation continuing, but the violent, the military, struggle ending?**

○ Partly that. I'm not talking about a declaration of peace, but about political realisation of the fact that the armed struggle that was enunciated back in 1969 is not the principal programme of the Palestinians. Now, what is the political programme? I don't have an answer.

I'm simply talking about the need to open a space for debate in the Palestinian community. There's a lot of surreptitious discussion that we need to talk to the US, to reform our ties with Jordan, to do something to get the Syrians off our back.

We must address US politically

I want this debate to take place in forums that will make it possible for these things to happen – not just an occasional journalistic leak like Arafat's talking to Anthony Lewis and then the whole thing being dropped next time somebody comes around. I want it to be embodied in Palestinian political activity.

□ **Are you indirectly criticising Arafat's leadership of the PLO?**

○ No, no. I think that in the present circumstances he's the only person who could lead the PLO. He is the figure who represents the Palestinians' fate today. And I think that he now needs the support of more Palestinians like myself who believe that something more than just survival is necessary. We want to try to translate the Palestinian dispersion and fragmentation into process which will not always leave us on the fringe, attached to some other power.

□ **So what are the priorities?**

○ First, we ought to regularise and institutionalise our relations with Jordan.

□ **That's being done, isn't it?**

○ Yes, it's being done, so, in other words, hasten it. Second we should begin to address the US in a serious way.

□ **Meaning what?**

○ Meaning that, if we believe the US has interests in the area and that we stand as an adversary with regard to these, then we should address the US politically.

□ **You mean show the US how a Palestinian state could be in the interests of the US?**

○ Precisely. Not only in the interests of the US but in the interests of peace. We should demonstrate that peace is in the interest of everybody who has interests in the area.

□ **Then all you have to do is to let the**

Carter Administration know you'll accept 242 with reservations.

○ But that's not necessarily the way we perceive it. That's precisely what I'm trying to say. If we reject 242 with a reservation what alternative do we present? So far there's no alternative, and I can't outline the specific steps because then I'll have problems.

□ **So, back to the priorities. The first is Jordan and the second America. Are there more?**

○ Certainly our relations with the leading Arab countries. It seems to me that some redefinition of our relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria should be in the offing. I'm not saying that there necessarily has to be a dramatic change – that all of a sudden we embrace Sadat. I'm talking about making our position clear.

□ **But aren't you continuing to beg the question of what that new clear policy should be?**

○ Well, I myself am confused. I'm not clear just what our positions on these questions are. I don't think many Palestinians are. Are we a national independence movement or a national liberation movement? In a certain way we're claiming to be both. We're at the juncture where we have to make a decision. The period of indecision between one alternative and the other is pretty much at an end. And I would rather it was taken by us than in some sense imposed upon us.

□ **Many people think not much will happen until 1981, after the American presidential election.**

○ Well, I'm not so sure about that. I think Carter's staked an awful lot on this. Some kind of dramatic move toward peace – as defined by the US – may be in the offing.

□ **Do you think this dramatic move may be something the Palestinian movement could co-operate with?**

○ Well, no, I'm worried that, on the contrary, it will leave the Palestinian movement even further out.

□ **And you're worried that Arabs other than Sadat will co-operate with the Americans?**

○ Yes, of course, it's perfectly possible that eventually the Jordanians might move in and that some Palestinians might be found on the West Bank and Gaza to co-operate.

□ **What would be the reaction within the Palestinian community if the PLO leadership chose to be a "national movement" instead of a "liberation movement" as you've suggested and agreed to recognise Israel in exchange for an independent Palestinian state?**

○ I think if it came about within the context of moving the Palestinians out of the present morass, and if it were politically prepared for then I think it would gain much acceptance.

□ **Even at the grass-roots level from people living in the area, in the camps?**

○ Yes, by political preparation. What I would accept as a Palestinian is not "take it or leave it, this is a package deal". But if it appeared as part of a re-examination of the whole Palestinian case and if the whole question of Palestinian rights is discussed in the context of peace, then I think it would be acceptable.

If it was possible to see this two-state solution in the context of a wider discussion of the fate of those Palestinians let's say in Lebanon who are not from the West Bank . . . How are their national rights to be addressed, their lost property, their national identity, their repatriation? Then there's the fate of the Palestinians inside Israel.

So if the overture towards peace was made in the context of addressing all of the issues in detail, then I think it would be willingly accepted. But if it's always seen in the context of solving the Palestinian problem once and for all by confining all Palestinians on the West Bank in a state dominated by Israel, then nobody will buy it.

□ **You personally believe all those problems can be solved and still allow for a viable Israel state somewhere within the 1967 boundaries professing to Zionist ideology in a moderate and non-expansionist form?**

○ You're putting words in my mouth. There is a Zionist state. There is an Israel. I think we have to credit most Palestinians with seeing that there is a state and a society.

We're not talking about a collection of people who can just be sent away tomorrow. I also give us credit for seeing that state and our state in the area reaching some kind of *modus vivendi*.

When you say Zionist ideology, for me Zionist ideology denies the existence of a Palestinian people. If there's some recognition that there is a genuine Palestinian national identity which has a right to exist in the land of Palestine – which would also mean that for the first time Zionism would have made an accommodation to this – then it would be a quite different thing from the Zionism of today.

□ **Would you agree with what Abu-Iyad said in Eric Rouleau's new book that when the Palestinians get their state the military struggle will end?**

○ Yes, I would basically agree.

□ **Isn't this really a three-state solution?**

○ You mean with Jordan. Yes. Demographically the Hashemite Kingdom is part of this Palestinian entity.

□ **So an historic accommodation to let the King live as long as . . .**

○ Now that I really can't say. I mean, frankly, I don't see any simple solution to the question of Palestinian nationalism versus Hashemite nationalism at this point. They do seem to me to be in conflict. Let's say historically in conflict.

□ **You talk of resolving your relations with the Israelis, why can't you resolve them with Amman?**

○ There is overlap between the two, with both making claims to the same constituency. This is quite different from Israel and a Palestinian state.

"Arafat is the only person who could lead the PLO. He is the figure who represents the Palestinians' fate today. I think that he needs the support of more Palestinians like myself who believe that something more than just survival is necessary"

□ **At Bir Zeit University a few months ago the students seemed very vehement that reconciliation with Jordan could only be possible without the monarchy.**

○ I think most Palestinians feel that if there is ever a live Palestinian political entity it will in the end be a challenge to the monarchy. Most Palestinians understand that a choice has to be made between the monarchy and Arafat. What I'm talking about is an engagement between opposing positions in which, in the end, the just position will prevail.

□ **What does that mean? I thought we were talking about a two-state and maybe a three-state compromise where the Palestinians will in reality if not ideologically give up their claim to 70 per cent of what used to be Palestine . . .**

○ I didn't say they would give up their claim. I said the claim would be addressed.

□ **But you may never get that chance if you don't convince enough people . . .**

○ It's not about convincing. I'm saying that we have a political position which is basically very powerful, very potent. It is a position we have not yet used, which would force the Israelis and the Americans, who have for years gotten along by ignoring us, to engage with us. We have to make ourselves irresistible. And I don't mean attractive. I mean that we have to be dealt with as Dayan recently intimated. It was a trial balloon. We have to be able to make more statements of that kind happen.

And the way you do that is not just to make remarks, but to fight politically for a programme. And the programme is clearly a state whose lines are x, y, and z and whose provisions are a, b and c . . .

□ **So you are saying that for the time-being you need to play the political game to get a state. You are assuming a tactical rather than an overall strategic, long-term posture.**

○ No. It's a definite political goal. We have to stake our political activities on goals and aims for which we are responsible. These can't be left floating and vague indefinitely. And if that means that we want a state – one with clear contours and a known constituency which also engages the whole problem of Palestinian national rights in Israel, etc – then we should adapt ourselves to that goal.

□ **Why don't you play the autonomy game – elect an autonomy council to act as a Palestine state and ask for UN observer status, and let world opinion come to its defence every time the Israelis clamp down on it?**

○ Well, because the autonomy game has rules weighted in favour of the Israelis and the Egyptians, those parties who have devised it. It certainly is not weighted in favour of the Palestinians! There is a kind of vetoing authority invested in a joint Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian authority.

So the Egyptians and the Israelis have a direct interest in the functioning of autonomy – as do the Jordanians and the Israelis. Palestinian autonomy becomes a function of all sorts of other autonomies. That kind of game is precisely designed never to let me achieve anything resembling my real political goal – independence.

□ **You are an American citizen, and I assume you watch Carter as closely as any of us. How do you evaluate him?**

○ I thought that his early statements were very encouraging and unusual. But what

"I would like to say that history's on our side, but history's littered with just causes that have died by the wayside"

impresses me as time goes by is the total blank where the Palestinians are concerned. One can understand that in an abstract way he wants peace and justice. But any understanding by the Administration that the Palestinians are a functioning, political society with their history, culture, and tradition, and their particular predicament is lacking.

□ **Don't you think this is more Sadat's fault than Carter's?**

○ I don't know. Sadat represents a certain kind of thinking, which is to accommodate what seems to be the American perception of things. And he's willing to play along, in his own interests, with this view.

Saying it's Sadat's fault is too simple. It's obviously co-operation between the two in what seems a mutually satisfactory vision of things. But it is totally out of touch with reality as is obvious to even a detached observer.

□ **But you earlier implied that you're still hopeful about Carter.**

○ Well, I'm optimistic in the sense that I believe in the end common sense prevails. Certainly it seems to me that, given what's happened in Iran and what's happening throughout the Arab world and Asia, arrangements where we rely upon rulers who seem to give satisfaction will change.

□ **Sometimes you speak as an American and sometimes as a Palestinian.**

○ I'm both.

□ **There's a school of thought which sees Palestinian interests linked up to Soviet interests.**

○ Look. I can't speak for other Palestinians, just for people like myself. I grew up essentially in the West. And there's no question that historically and culturally our ties are more intimate, more strongly linked with the West.

□ **And politically and economically?**

○ Well, for me – and I stress just for me – those are abstractions. I can understand and I feel a kind of sympathy with the left. I consider myself a man of the left. But that does not necessarily means Bolshevism for me.

I have yet to see a satisfactory translation of European Marxism into Arab or Third World terms. That hasn't come about yet. There is no successful Marxist organisation. There have been attempts – noble, valiant, heroic attempts, the Egyptian Communist party and so forth – but . . .

As for political and economic interests it's certainly not lost on any Palestinian that the Soviet Union originally supported partition, that the Soviet Union supports 242, does not support all our programs, and does not come to our aid, for example in the invasion of the south of Lebanon last March.

□ **You recently forecast another "wave of Middle East instability" and said that the US could have prevented it. What do you have in mind?**

○ It would seem to me that US reliance on Sadat and regimes like this – which in the final analysis are going to take harsher measures against the opposition, will polarise the society more sharply. The results will probably be more oppression and a greater outburst at the end. A lot of that, it seems to me is due to the strengthening of Sadat's hand with arms and political support.

□ **What choice does a status quo power have? There's Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. You can't hedge your bets and support these regimes at the same time.**

○ No you can't, if you continue to consider everything as essentially bilateral: the US and Egypt, the US and Saudi Arabia, and so on – and so consciously promote conflict between states in order to safe-guard your position as mediator. But there's no reason why that automatically need be the way to proceed.

□ **You're suggesting a regional view?**

○ Yes, a regional, a realistic focus. When you don't deal with the PLO, when you don't deal with the Baathists, you're not making these things go away.

□ **Do you believe the Palestinian movement could act badly and fail to get anything?**

○ Yes, absolutely. You know I would like to say history's on our side, but history's littered with "just" causes that have died by the wayside. It isn't enough to have a just cause. And it is perfectly possible that an over-extended Israeli state, including the West Bank and maybe the East Bank too, will fall. But that by no means guarantees that we as Palestinians will benefit from this fall. I don't believe in historical determinism. I don't believe that justice will prevail . . .

□ **Or peace?**

○ Absolutely. I believe you have to mobilise for a political goal that you feel committed to and which in the end will prevail if it is a common view. It's a political process which involves constant conflict and organisation.

□ **Why do you think Sadat decided to do the opposite of what he has been instructing his Foreign Ministry people to do?**

○ He does seem to be a rather strange combination of Messianism and erratic qualities. At one point in his autobiography he says, "I'm Egypt", or something like that. He sees himself on a very large canvas, but his political past is essentially a small one.

To anyone who followed the revolution Sadat was not one of the great figures. He doesn't have a dramatic sense. He's a figure who remained in the background and was content to swim along in the currents created by Arab nationalism and Abdel-Nasser.

It seems to me that he has suffered a too rapid transition from the small figure to the large figure, and that the erratic quality is a sense of disorientation. He's dealing in a world, and I'm talking about the West now, in which he's not accustomed to be patient and follow things through.

He's a fundamentally lonely man from everything I've been able to gather – as are most leaders like that. It doesn't seem to me that he listens very much.

□ **But he does have a large part of the Egyptian people, if not looking to him as the only leader the country has, at least acquiescing in his policy.**

○ What's the achievement in that?

□ **Well, it is not as if he's running a totally repressive state like the Shah was. He really does have a base of support.**

But I think it's possible to see Egypt going the way of Iran. It seems that the apparatus and the functionaries of government are losing touch with the political, economic, social and even cultural reality of the base. I think Sadat's carried along more by this apparatus than by the people. And I think the danger of isolation is increasing.

□ **What will be the effect on Egypt if Carter does succeed in pushing Sadat into a treaty with Israel?**

○ From the very beginning when he went to Jerusalem I've felt that Sadat frequently doesn't know what he's getting into. And he only finds out later. When his Jerusalem trip was announced I felt surprise and a sort of combination of admiration and disgust at the theatrical quality of the gesture.

I also felt that he didn't really know what he was doing. Had he studied and found out a bit more about Begin and about the political arena which he was entering he wouldn't have done it.

"No intellectual, academic, commercial institution in the Arab world considers itself responsible for study of the US"

□ **Ceausescu told him Begin was a reasonable man.**

○ Is that the way a head of state behaves? He should have tried to understand in more detail what he was dealing with.

□ **Do you think that in two or three months we could find Sadat changing course again?**

○ Totally. Anything.

□ **You haven't said anything about Sadat's relationship with Carter.**

○ I don't understand that. I don't understand Carter's personal relationship with anybody. That to me is a cypher. Carter, whatever else he is, is not a fool. He is dealing with constituencies and not in a political vacuum. The idea that the US is politically and economically in a position to restart a Marshall Plan on the scale that Sadat wants, as it did in Europe after World War II, is insanity! But Sadat obviously wanted to hear that.

□ **What do you make of the Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement?**

○ It's terribly important. It's a dramatic event. But we need to see where it's going.

□ **Wouldn't the Saudis be anxious about a lasting Syrian-Iraqi unity which might also bring Jordan, Lebanon and maybe a new Palestinian state into some kind of federation?**

○ From one point of view yes and from another no. The more these countries invest in stability and the apparatus of government the better it is for the Saudis.

□ **Is the Saudi schism with the US serious?**

○ Well, the Saudis are insisting that it is. Certainly that's the message they've been trying to get across. On the other hand the Saudis need the US economically and probably militarily. The Saudis get more political capital in the rest of the Arab world by not lying down and taking this, by showing that they're still interested in Jerusalem and in Palestinian rights.

□ **Why aren't the Palestinian community and the Arab community preparing for 1981?**

○ They don't know anything about it! There is no intellectual institution, academic institution, even commercial institution in the Arab world today which considers itself responsible for the study of the US.

This is what I meant also by the need for serious Palestinian efforts. When they want to reject 242, it takes the Palestinians at the Central Council three minutes to say "no". But when they want to discuss differences between the rejection front and Fateh, it takes nine hours. There's something wrong here.

You're dealing with a country which is political reality in the region – the US. It's part of the political leaders' responsibility to know something about this country.

The Arab world has become a consumer market and they think it's all a matter of consumerism. If you wear blue jeans and drink Coke and watch the Rockford Files you understand America.

□ **But the Arab American community has various organisations and intellectuals. Why aren't you providing what the Jews are providing for Israel?**

○ We're trying to. But we're a community very divided politically. And it's a community with very short roots in the society. Most Arabs in this country don't participate in the life of the American republic.

And above all, in my opinion, it's a functionally illiterate community. The people are mostly technicians, culturally very distant from the real workings of the US and they have no more understanding of how the society works than do the Arab societies from which they come. □