

The problem is inhumanity

By Edward Said

Africa

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TWO corners of the Arab world have been very much on my mind these past weeks, Algeria and Lebanon. The former was once synonymous with anti-colonial resistance and uncompromising toughness; the latter with openness, diversity and the joy of life. Yet both places have gone through horrendous transformations.

The Lebanese civil war lasted for almost twenty years, virtually destroyed the society, produced uncounted thousands of dead innocents mostly killed or massacred because of their religion, and then finally gave birth to a so-called new Lebanon in which many of the old problems have been swept under a carpet of corruption, frenzied environmentally destructive building, and deepening economic crisis. The poor are poorer, the rich richer, and all the old politicians and their supporters remain in place on almost entirely confessional grounds.

Algeria has fared just as badly, but in a different, perhaps more agonizing way. An aging political oligarchy held over from the days of anti-French struggle ruled the country for three decades after 1962, in the process bleeding it dry, extinguishing democracy, giving the army the main role in authority and political life. Then in 1992, after the Islamic Salvation Front in effect won the elections, the results of those elections were nullified by the army, and the Islamists — whose politics I have no love for — were declared outlaws, their leaders jailed, their organizations disbanded.

Since that time Algeria has endured wave after wave of massacres, first the killing of intellectuals and artists, then of journalists, most recently literally hundreds of innocent women and children, killed in the most brutal and senseless way. The government's position is that all the killings are being done by renegade members of FIS or the GIA, whereas independent observers such as Amnesty have accused the government troops of taking part in the killing, or of not doing anything to stop it even though in several instances villagers have been slaughtered right next to army posts. To make matters worse the government has made it almost impossible for foreign journalists to visit Algeria and has turned down several offers of mediation from the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations.

blamed in some measure. No one denies that Zionism bears an enormous responsibility for the unhappy fate of the Palestinian people since 1948, but Arabs — collectively and individually — also bear responsibility.

This was dramatically apparent in a surprisingly frank and humane programme broadcast on January 20 by ABC television. Apparently the reporter, Steve Lawrence, was sent to Lebanon to report on the country's reconstruction but ended up reporting on the 350,000 (or perhaps more) Palestinians now marooned there without residence permits, unable to work (there are 95 different kinds of jobs which Palestinians are forbidden by law to undertake), unable to travel, poor, destitute, uncared for and generally in a pitiable, not to say dreadful state.

Lawrence focusses on one refugee family in Shatila camp. They are completely without hope, without health, without money. The father tells how when his one week old baby son was gravely ill he took the child to a hospital for treatment.

There is a coarse inhumanity to our public life that is deeply shocking. The inhumanity of colonialism is replicated, indeed reproduced in our societies two generations after the end of colonialism. Our various national movements have glorified raw power, a blind subservience to authority, and a truly frightening hatred of others into practices that are taking us back inexorably into the middle ages.

grate them in the society. We cannot give them the Lebanese nationality. We cannot consider them as Lebanese because they are not and if we did so, we feel that we are implementing the plan of Israel.

Lawrence: So the refugees are stuck. Even Yasir Arafat appears to have forgotten them. Financial aid from the PLO has been cut. Contributions from wealthy Arab nations, once generous, are next to nothing now.

It is particularly painful to witness such a scene on American television, which is not known for its compassion for Palestinian refugees. Certainly the brief episodes I have described do not begin to approach the exhaustive account of Palestinian life in Lebanon written by Rosemary Sayigh, a truly superb scholar and compassionate human being: her book is entitled *Too Many Enemies*, and is available from Zed Books. But the story she tells is pretty much the same as Lawrence's, a story for which the usual excuses and explanations will not do.

By the terms of Arab political logic what the Lebanese Prime Minister says is unremarkable, perhaps even acceptable. But by the terms of normal human logic it is profoundly cruel, which is the same attitude to be found in every Arab country with a population of Palestinian refugees who, with the exception of Jordan, are largely treated as non-persons, barely tolerated, officially stigmatized as Palestinian aliens, yes, aliens.

It remains for Arab political discourse to explain satisfactorily how it is that the humane treatment of refugees is equivalent to the implementation of Israel's plan: I cannot understand it, and certainly most ordinary human beings not privy to the deep logic of statesmen and politicians cannot either. Is there something particularly sinful or punishable about being a Palestinian refugee? The pity and tragedy of it is that even Palestinian leaders seem not to care about the destitute people they claim to be representing in talks with the World Bank or President Clinton.

Or consider Iraq. Understandably, Saddam Hussein does not want to submit to United States bullying. But he did invade and attempt to obliterate Kuwait, he deliberately provoked a costly and ultimately useless war and by going on as he has, he has caused enormous suffering for his people, the most innocent of whom (children, the sick and aged) have paid and continue to pay the price of his folly. Is the safeguarding of Iraq's totally ineffective military assets worth such inhumanity such as callous disregard of

sible for foreign journalists to visit. It has turned down several offers of mediation from the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations.

Are these two cases unique in the Arab world? Only in degree, not in kind. Those of us who have fought for Palestinian self-determination over the years have been bitterly disappointed in the behaviour of Yasir Arafat's Palestine Authority towards its own citizens. All the human rights groups have commented on the lawlessness, corruption and sheer brutality of PA security men, many of whom paradoxically were victims of Israel's occupation policies.

I recall a young man from Gaza, who now worked for one of the security forces in Ramallah, responding to my shocked query about his activities as a spy on, and interrogator of, his fellow students at Bir Zeit university. He said that "they (meaning the Israelis) tortured me; now it's my turn." Every Arab country practises what we all denounce in Israel, namely, physical coercion in prisons, and all around Israel the signs of Arab inhumanity to Arabs are plainly evident.

Take as a very simple, even trivial case: people arriving at the airport. Almost without exception they are treated harshly and in a hostile manner by their border police, as if it was assumed that they were criminals and not citizens returning to their homes. Wherever one looks, the signs of an absence of humanity in the powerful towards the weaker and the disadvantaged stands out starkly. Torture, massacres, repression, undemocratic practices: this is what we Arabs have become known for.

It is no use simply blaming Israel or imperialism for this situation, even though they can be

ages.

That hospital referred him to a charity institution, Hotel Dieu, which had a contract with UNRWA to treat Palestinians. There the poor man was told that he needed to pay \$3,000 before the sick baby could be treated. When Lawrence visited the hospital to find out exactly what happened he was first told that the baby was indeed treated free of charge; later, though, a hospital administrator admitted on camera that "it was possible" that the baby had been turned away because he was Palestinian.

Desperate, the man took the dying child to Sidon, 50 miles away, but there too he was asked to pay \$1,000. Because he started to cry the hospital person took pity and told him to leave the baby for treatment but to come back with money the next day. Since he had no choice, the father did what he was told; when he returned the next day his child had died but a hospital official refused to give the body back unless he was paid \$220. As the disconsolate man and his wife say to Lawrence, death is better than the sort of life we have to lead here.

The story gets worse. The reporter pays a visit to the prime minister who before the cameras says that Lebanon is not responsible for the Palestinians, only Israel is. I quote verbatim from the transcript:

Lawrence: Is it fair for the head of the Lebanese government to say it's not our problem?

Prime Minister: You know, it depends how you put it. It depends how you put it. We cannot inte-

to pay the price of his folly. Is the safeguarding of Iraq's totally ineffective military assets worth such inhumanity, such as callous disregard of human life, even as more presidential palaces are built and "protected?"

There is a coarse inhumanity to our public life that is deeply shocking. We have not paid sufficient attention to the liberal and humanistic education of our young people nor, alas, to the real priorities for our national institutions. The inhumanity of colonialism is replicated, indeed reproduced in our societies two generations after the end of colonialism. The distortions of Zionism have not been rectified by our various national movements who have glorified raw power, a blind subservience to authority, and a truly frightening hatred of others into practices that are taking us back inexorably into the middle ages.

In the name of what? Certainly not freedom, since we have far less of it now than we did fifty years ago. In the name of sovereignty and national unity? Certainly not: Arabs are more divided and penetrated than ever. Development and democracy? Of course not. What then? I am afraid to say it but the conclusion is inescapable: in the name of inhumanity. That is our problem, our inability collectively and individually to treat ourselves as human beings deserve to be treated, as citizens whose lives are intrinsically important and valuable. How is the so-called peace process going to help us achieve this basic level of decency and humanity? Obviously it cannot, since the problem begins at home. The sooner we acknowledge that, the better for us.—
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