

# A moral quest for equality and hum



By Edward Said

In early May I was in Seattle lecturing for a few days. While there I had dinner one night with Rachel Corrie's parents and sister, who were still reeling from the shock of their daughter's murder on 16 March in Gaza by an Israeli bulldozer. Mr Corrie told me that he had himself driven bulldozers, although the one that killed his daughter deliberately because she was trying valiantly to protect a Palestinian home in Rafah from demolition was a 60 ton behemoth especially designed by Caterpillar for house demolitions, a far bigger machine than anything he had ever seen or driven. Two things struck me about my brief visit with the Corries. One was the story they told about their return to the US with their daughter's body. They had immediately sought out their US senators, Patty Murray and Mary Cantwell, both Democrats, told them their story and received the expected expressions of shock, outrage, anger and promises of investigations. After both women returned to Washington, the Corries never heard from them again, and the promised investigation simply didn't materialise. As expected, the Israeli lobby had explained the realities to them, and both women simply begged off. An American citizen willfully murdered by the soldiers of a client state of

the US without so much as an official peep or even the de rigour investigation that had been promised her family.

But the second and far more important aspect of the Rachel Corrie story for me was the young woman's action itself, heroic and dignified at the same time. Born and brought up in Olympia, a small city 60 miles south of Seattle, she had joined the International Solidarity Movement and gone to Gaza to stand with suffering human beings with whom she had never had any contact before. Her letters back to her family are truly remarkable documents of her ordinary humanity that make for very difficult and moving reading, especially when she describes the kindness and concern showed her by all the Palestinians she encounters who clearly welcome her as one of their own, because she lives with them exactly as they do, sharing their lives and worries, as well as the horrors of the Israeli occupation and its terrible effects on even the smallest child. She understands the fate of refugees, and what she calls the Israeli government's insidious attempt at a kind of genocide by making it almost impossible for this particular group of people to survive. So moving is her solidarity that it inspires an Israeli reservist named Danny who has refused service to write her and tell her: "You are doing a good thing. I thank you for it."

What shines through all the letters she wrote home and which were subsequently published in London's Guardian, is the amazing resistance put up by the Palestinian people themselves, average human beings stuck in the most terrible position of suffering and despair but continuing to survive just the same. We have heard so much recently about the roadmap and the prospects for peace that we have overlooked the most basic

fact of all, which is that Palestinians have refused to capitulate or surrender even under the collective punishment meted out by the combined might of the US and Israel. It is that extraordinary fact which is the reason for the existence of a roadmap and all the numerous so-called peace plans before them, not at all because the US and Israel and the international community have been convinced for humanitarian reasons that the killing and the violence must stop. If we miss that truth about the power of Palestinian resistance (by which I do not at all mean suicide bombing, which does much more harm than good), despite all its failings and all its mistakes, we miss everything. Palestinians have always been a problem for the Zionist project, and so-called solutions have perennially been proposed that minimise, rather than solve, the problem. The official Israeli policy, no matter whether Ariel Sharon uses the word "occupation" or not or whether or not he dismantles a rusty, unused tower or two, has always been not to accept the reality of the Palestinian people as equals nor ever to admit that their rights have been scandalously violated all along by Israel. Whereas a few courageous Israelis over the years have tried to deal with this other concealed history, most Israelis and what seems like the majority of American Jews have made every effort to deny, avoid, or negate the Palestinian reality. This is why there is no peace.

Moreover, the roadmap says nothing about justice or about the historical punishment meted out to the Palestinian people for too many decades to count. What Rachel Corrie's work in Gaza recognised, however, was precisely the gravity and the density of the living history of the Palestinian people as a national com-

munity, and not merely as a collection of deprived refugees. That is what she was in solidarity with. And we need to remember that that kind of solidarity is no longer confined to a small number of intrepid souls here and there, but is recognised the world over. In the past six months I have lectured on four continents to many thousands of people. What brings them together is Palestine and the struggle of the Palestinian people which is now a byword for emancipation and enlightenment, regardless of all the vilification heaped on them by their enemies.

Whenever the facts are made known there is immediate recognition and an expression of the most profound solidarity with the justice of the Palestinian cause and the valiant struggle by the Palestinian people on its behalf. It is an extraordinary thing that Palestine was a central issue this year during both the Porto Alegre anti-globalisation meetings as well as during the Davos and Amman meetings, both poles of the worldwide political spectrum. Because our fellow citizens in this country are fed an atrociously biased diet of ignorance and misrepresentation by the media — the occupation is referred to in lurid descriptions of suicide attacks while the apartheid wall 25 feet high, five feet thick, and 350 kilometers long that Israel is building is never even shown on CNN and the networks (or so much as referred to in passing throughout the lifeless prose of the roadmap) and the war crimes, gratuitous destruction and humiliation, maiming, house demolitions, agricultural destruction and death imposed on Palestinian civilians are never shown for the daily, completely routine ordeal that they are — one shouldn't be surprised that Americans in the main have a very low opinion of Arabs and Palestinians.

After all, please remember that all the

main organs of the establishment media, from left liberal all the way over to fringe right, are unanimously anti-Arab, anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian. Look at the pillanimity of the media during the build up to an illegal and unjust war against Iraq, and look at how little coverage there was of the immense damage against Iraqi society done by the sanctions, and how relatively few accounts there were of the immense world-wide outpouring of opinion against the war. Hardly a single journalist except Helen Thomas has taken the administration to task for the outrageous lies and confected "facts" that were spun out about Iraq as an imminent military threat to the US before the war, just as now the same government propagandists, whose cynically invented and manipulated "facts" about WMD are now more or less forgotten or shrugged off as irrelevant, are let off the hook by media lies in discussing the awful, the literally inexcusable situation for the people of Iraq that the US has now single-handedly and irresponsibly created there. Whatever one thinks of Saddam Hussein, and he was a vicious tyrant, he provided the people of Iraq with the best infrastructure of services like water, electricity, health, and education of any Arab country. None of this is any longer in place.

It is no wonder, then, with the extraordinary fear of seeming anti-Semitic by criticising Israel for its daily crimes of war against innocent unarmed Palestinian civilians or criticising the US government and being called "anti-American" for its illegal war and its dreadfully run military occupation, that the vicious media and government campaign against Arab society, culture, history and mentality that has been led by Neanderthal publicists and Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes,

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has cowed far too many of us into believing that Arabs really are an underdeveloped, incompetent and doomed people, and that with all the failures in democracy and development, Arabs are alone in this world for being retarded, behind the times, unmodernised and deeply reactionary. Here is where dignity and critical historical thinking must be mobilised to see what is what and to disentangle truth from propaganda.

No one would deny that most Arab countries are ruled by unpopular regimes and that vast numbers of poor, disadvantaged young Arabs are exposed to ruthless forms of fundamentalist religion. Yet it is simply a lie to say, as the New York Times regularly does, that Arab societies are totally controlled, and that there is no freedom of opinion, no civil institutions, no functioning social movements for and by the people. Press laws notwithstanding, you can go to downtown Amman today and buy a communist party newspaper as well as an Islamist one; Egypt and Lebanon are full of papers and journals that suggest much more debate and discussion than these societies are given credit for; satellite channels are bursting with diverse opinions in a dizzying variety; civil institutions are, on many levels having to do with social services, human rights, syndicates, and research institutes, very lively all over the Arab world. A great deal more must be done before we have the appropriate level of democracy, but we are on the way.

In Palestine alone there are over a thousand NGOs and it is this vitality and this kind of activity that has kept society going, despite every American and Israeli effort made to vilify, stop or mutilate it on a daily basis. Under the worst possible circumstances, Palestinian society has neither been defeated nor has it crumbled completely. Kids still go to

school, doctors and nurses still take care of their patients, men and women go to work, organisations have their meetings, and people continue to live, which seems to be an offence to Sharon and the other extremists who simply want Palestinians either imprisoned or driven away altogether. The military solution hasn't worked and never will work. Why is that so hard for Israelis to see? We must help them to understand this, not by suicide bombs but by rational argument, mass civil disobedience, organised protest, here and everywhere.

The point I am trying to make is that we have to see the Arab world generally and Palestine in particular in more comparative and critical ways than superficial and dismissive books like Lewis's *What Went Wrong* and Paul Wolfowitz's ignorant statements about bringing democracy to the Arab and Islamic world even begin to suggest. Whatever else is true about the Arabs, there is an active dynamic at work because as real people they live in a real society with all sorts of currents and crosscurrents that cannot be easily caricatured as just one seething mass of violent fanaticism. The Palestinian struggle for justice is especially something with which one expresses solidarity, rather than endless criticism and exasperated, frustrating discouragement and crippling divisiveness. Remember the solidarity here and everywhere in Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia, and remember also that there is a cause to which many people have committed themselves, difficulties and terrible obstacles notwithstanding. Why? Because it is a just cause, a noble ideal, a moral quest for equality and human rights. *(to be continued)* —Courtesy Al Ahram

This is part one of a two-part series. The concluding part will be carried tomorrow