In the immediate aftermath of Edward Said’s death in September 2003, I remember wondering if, while we Palestinians mourned his passing, Israelis and their supporters were celebrating the demise of one of their most successful, articulate and effective opponents. The Israeli political establishment does not seriously fear Palestinian military resistance or Palestinian “terrorism,” or the threats of militants, however much it has proclaimed that Palestinian resistance is the major problem for Israel. The battle Israel cannot afford to lose is the one for hearts and minds, the public relations contest, which it has always won hands down against a poor and ineffectual Arab opposition. Over three decades, Edward Said reversed that perception in the most important arena for Israel and its supporters: the United States and the West. He was more effective than a dozen armies and a fleet of F16s in the struggle against the Zionists. His role brings to mind a former Israeli prime minister’s words in a totally opposite setting. After the Deir Yassin massacre by Zionists in April 1948 had terrified thousands of Palestinians into fleeing (including my own family), Menachem Begin, the commander of the operation, said that the massacre had been worth half a dozen battalions in the war against the Palestinian Arabs.

Most of Said’s many admirers—scholars and literati, musicians and historians, political analysts and activists were Western or non-Arab during his life. This is understandable, because the West was his milieu from adolescence onwards; he wrote in English, and his achievements in diverse fields of European thought made him a worthy exponent of several Western disciplines. Indeed, Edward Said, like all intellectuals, could be said to belong to the whole of humanity. But to identify him in this way is to misunderstand the Palestinian context that animated him and from which his inspiration sprang. In this sense, the Palestinian people must claim him first, as one of their subtlest, cleverest, and most loyal fighters, the foremost cultural bridge that connected and explained their cause to Western sensibilities. To underestimate the importance of Palestine as an inspiration and motivational force for his talent would also yield only a partial grasp of his work and lessen our understanding of its significance.

The Palestinian Context

My friendship with Edward Said spanned twenty-seven years, during which time I found inspiration but also identification with him. We were both born in Jerusalem, and we both grew up in exile, he in the affluent Western milieu in colonial Cairo and later in America, I in England. For both of us, political awakening came with the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and led to a new career of active involvement in the politics of Palestine. When he generously endorsed my memoir, In Search of Fatima, in 2001, I thought that he saw in my story the same sense of unbelonging and dispossession that he felt. We first met in Libya in 1976, when he was not yet well-known, as guests at a conference on Zionism and racism sponsored by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. We met again in New York when his major literary work, Orientalism, was published in 1978. Given that he came from a radically different discipline than mine, I little appreciated the importance of the book at first. The storm of controversy it aroused was remarkable, and to many of us, surprising. Without reading the book, we supported him on the most simplistic of levels: he was attacking a hegemonic West for its dominance of Arabs and the East, and that seemed only right. When I finally read the book, I began to understand its true significance, especially for Palestinians. Like all great ideas, the central theme of
Orientalism seemed at first simple and instantly familiar, as if we had all known it for ages. Its exposé of a paternalistic and colonialist Western scholarship toward the Orient aroused hostility and admiration in equal measure. But for Arabs, Said’s book had an instinctive appeal that did not need the intellectual underpinnings of his argument because it resonated with their collective consciousness of denigration and inadequacy at Western hands. For Palestinians, Edward Said’s real achievement is to have defined the will to dispossess that is at the heart of Orientalist scholarship. The Western writers who described the people of the Orient dispossessed them too, not by physical eviction, as happened in Palestine, but through an elegant and subtle erudition. A people who are recreated through the prism of an alien scholarship, influenced by alien notions of supremacy, are robbed of their real history and true identity. And that intellectual theft is a sort of dispossession.

These ideas were not just relevant to another age. They are with us today, as he asserted, and permeate much of the currently hostile attitudes and discourse of America and the West toward Arabs and Islam. In this sense, we can see that much of his writing is properly situated in this consciousness of dispossession that has its springboard in his Palestinian origins. To understand his significance properly is to understand the recent history of Palestine. The country he was born into in 1935 was ruled by a British colonial administration under U.N. mandate 1922. The environment of his childhood was subsumed with colonialist notions, and the Zionist enterprise, which had begun to flourish under British patronage at that time, was also colonialist. Although the Said family was affluent and his father a wealthy Christian businessman who afforded the young Edward a Western-style education in expensive schools, the general parameters of his Arab existence were inescapably colonialist.

These influences dominated his upbringing. When the Said family left Jerusalem in 1947, it went to Cairo, where he received a private English education. His home environment was imbued with admiration for Western culture, music, opera, literature, and above all, the English language. Said noted that this appreciation of things Western induced a split in his sense of identity during adolescence from which he never recovered. In an interview with Imre Salusinszky, he said, “My background is a series of displacements and expatriations which cannot be recuperated. The sense of being between cultures has been very, very strong for me. I would say that’s the single strongest strand running through my life: the fact that I’m always in and out of things, and never really of anything for long.”

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 led to the forcible expulsion and flight of three-quarters of a million Palestinians. This physical dispossession had its parallel in his spiritual dispossession and became a basic theme in his worldview. The Palestinian refugees’ right to return to the homeland from which they had been evicted was a central aspect of his work. He always returned to the fundamental elements of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians: the latter’s dispossession and Israel’s evasion of its responsibility for their plight. From the start of Israeli statehood, that evasion took a path of obsessive denial. To maintain its fiction of innocence, Israel set about eradicating all traces of the Palestinian presence in the land. Over five hundred villages were demolished, and new settlements sprang up in their place. The history of “Israel” that Israeli children learn at school is distorted so as to exclude the Arab presence. An intricate mythology of Israel’s origins maps a Jewish continuity from biblical times to the present, only interrupted by phases of transient settlement by Romans, Ottomans, and British. If you knew no different, you could believe that no Arabs had ever existed in the country but for a few wandering Bedouin tribes. By such methods, the Israelis have attempted to annihilate a whole people: their history, memory, language, and culture.

Said and Dispossession
All Palestinians feel this insult of a double dispossession of their bodies and their souls, with no acknowledgment of their history as a separate people or of their resulting sufferings. Edward Said felt this dismissal keenly, and many of his writings reflect this
feeling in one way or another. Finding a thematic connection in his wide and apparently disparate compositions is difficult, because he wrote on a variety of subjects, ranging from intellectual history to current affairs. Abdirhaman Hussein, in his intellectual biography of Edward Said, questions whether, given this range of writing, discern a common thread. Yet the themes of exile and dispossession seem to be central preoccupations, expressed mainly in his political writings and in his most important work, *Orientalism*. Said had a syncretic quality, an uncommon ability to cross intellectual boundaries and to step in and out of apparently unrelated topics—literary criticism, politics, culture, history, methodologies—in a fluid and effortless way.

This ability to inhabit the "in-between zone" echoed the experience of exile, when survival frequently depends on the capacity to merge or adapt one’s own identity and behavior to an environment that may be inimical to one’s original culture and experience. Said’s adolescent experience in the United States, of which he writes in his memoir, *Out of Place*, forced upon him just such a situation, in which he retain remarkable intellectual and emotional agility. Yet it left its mark and led to his persistent feeling of being "between cultures." A number of commentators have related his ability to cross intellectual boundaries to this experience of exile. One might wonder why a man who never personally experienced the Nakba, the 1948 mass exodus of Palestinians from their homeland, has been so affected by its consequences, not just in an intellectual or political sense but with great empathy and personal distress. He recognized that he was indeed privileged in escaping the depredations of expulsion and camp life. But the event and its aftermath nonetheless had the profoundest impact on him and drove him to produce, in my view, his most lucid, passionate, and compelling prose. "Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronised rhythms of disturbed time."

The Zionist denial of Palestinian life and history spurred him to reverse that denial and break the artificially imposed silence decreed by Zionism but colluded with by the Western world. "Since our history is forbidden, narratives are rare; the story of origins, of home, of nation is underground. When it appears it is broken, often wayward and meandering in the extreme, always coded—mock-epics, satires, sardonic parables, absurd rituals—that make little sense to an outsider."

This dual problem, the deprivation of his people of the basics of normal existence—home, roots, social continuity—and the feroceous and effective assault on these as *historical facts* by Zionists and their supporters, exercised Said for most of his life. His foremost role in Palestinian life was, inevitably, as spokesman and representative of the diaspora that was his natural constituency. "Behind every Palestinian there is a great general fact: that he once—and not so long ago—lived on a land of his own called Palestine, which is now no longer his homeland. No nuances are necessary for a Palestinian to make such a statement."

**Zionism and Dispossession**

Palestinian dispossession is in a sense like no other, in that the agent of dispossession claims a moral right that supersedes that of the dispossessed people to their land. And the remarkable thing is that this idea has taken firm hold of the Western imagination. Said believed that intellectuals involved in the discourse on Orientalism, imperialism, and Zionist political philosophy helped create the doctrine that such things as pure national, racial, or cultural and religious identities actually exist and that such identities may be nobler than and superior to others. In *Orientalism*, he focuses on the Orientalist construction of an identity that misrepresents Third World peoples and derives from a supremacist view of the world that defines categories of “them” and “us.” We can see in this act a ready parallel with the Zionist construction of a special Jewish people with a supreme mission that displaces the rights of a lesser people, the Palestinians, who are represented as absent or unworthy and defective. Interestingly in this context, Jonathan Raban evokes Said in a recent article about the horrors of the American occupation of Iraq. He remarks on the way in which the Iraqi people have been "Orientalized"—
dehumanized and robbed of their “intractable particularity.” He wonders if Iraq’s American tormentors have a copy of Edward Said’s book by their bedsides to ransack for ideas.

Said was interested that a manifestly colonialist, discriminatory and supremacist ideology, Zionism, was able to present itself as a socialist, democratic egalitarian enterprise. What ensured the credibility of this misrepresentation and its achievements? He asserted that one cannot understand this distortion outside the context of European imperialism and Orientalist discourse:

Effective political ideas like Zionism need to be examined historically in two ways: (1) genealogically in order that their provenance, their kinship and descent, their affiliation both with other ideas and with political institutions may be demonstrated; (2) as practical systems for accumulation of power, (land, ideological legitimacy), and displacement (of people, other ideas, prior legitimacy). Present political and cultural actualities make such an examination extraordinarily difficult, as much because Zionism in the post-industrial West has acquired for itself an almost unchallenged hegemony in liberal “establishment” discourse, as because in keeping with one of its central ideological characteristics Zionism has hidden, or caused to disappear, the literal historical ground of its growth, its political cost to the native inhabitants of Palestine, and its militantly oppressive discrimination between Jews and non-Jews.

Thus, Zionism inserted itself into the dominant Western discourse that saw the Arabs as “natives” of lesser worth, the “non-Jewish communities” of the Balfour Declaration whose destiny was to be decided by others and whose needs could be subordinated to those of a superior race. the Zionist colonization of Palestine would have been impossible without this discourse of power and specialness, which arose from a Eurocentric, Orientalist philosophy. Thus, Europe, with its grand culture and civilization, was assumed to be the moral, political, and aesthetic center of the world, and the rest of humanity, the “natives,” occupied a lower position. The idea of empire, establishing colonies of Europeans in far-flung countries and without regard for the colonized peoples’ wishes in the matter, was well established by the time Zionism appeared on the scene. Hence, Said considered the colonizing Zionist project to be part and parcel of this structure of attitudes and saw Orientalism as its indispensable component. In determining the fate of the “natives” of Palestine, colonial officials like Arthur Balfour and the Zionist leadership were in profound agreement. Thus, modern Zionism was allied from the start to the most extreme forms of European exclusivism and supremacism. This shared view enabled the building of a Jewish state in another country and at the expense of its natives in broad daylight, so to speak, with the full knowledge of its British patrons that Palestine was already home to an existing people. One cannot doubt that either the Zionists or the British colonial administration in Palestine did not always intend “the total reconstitution” of Palestine as a Jewish state with no room for non-Jews. Israel developed as a social polity out of the Zionist thesis that Palestine’s colonization and the displacement of the Palestinians were to be accomplished simultaneously for and by Jews. Zionism, as Said pointed out, attempted first to minimize, then to eliminate, and finally to subjugate the natives as a way of guaranteeing that Israel would not be simply the state of its citizens (which included Arabs, of course) but the state of “the whole Jewish people.” The Zionists established a kind of sovereignty over land and peoples that no other state possessed or possesses. Since then, the Arab Palestinians have been trying to resist and provide an alternative for this anomaly. For all these reasons, Said was preoccupied with the question of Israel: how it was able to displace and obliterate the Palestinian presence and the fact that the Palestinians never stopped resisting their imposed fate or devising counterstrategies, of which the one-state solution was the one he most strongly advocated in his later years. Of course, he never underestimated the enormity of the task facing the Palestinians. This simple, largely agricultural people, with poor education and
modest political aspirations, had been forced into close proximity with a formidable foe: European Jews allied to European imperialism, who were imbued with a “yearning for Jewish political and religious self-determination to be exercised on the promised land.” From the outset, the struggle was grossly unequal, and given the phenomenal success of the Zionist project on the international stage, it continues to be so. However, Said was fond of saying that this project, which the Palestinians experienced as a total calamity, nevertheless put them on the political map. Who would ever have heard about them if their invaders had been Chadians or Ukrainians? Precisely because the protagonists were Jews with a complex history, grounded in European persecution and guilt, the Palestinians acquired an unusual and unwelcome prominence.

Said and the Diaspora
As we have seen, Said’s foremost place in the Palestinian context was as an explicator and representative of Palestinian exile—so much so that he struck many Palestinians “inside” as remote or even irrelevant to their lives. He once told me early in the 1990s that he nowhere felt more undervalued than among his own people. He was hurt that some of those under Israeli occupation accused him of Western remoteness and intellectual hauteur, and therefore of an inability to empathize with their plight. By the time of his death, however, he had been showered with praise, admiration, and gratitude by critics and friends alike, and he was acknowledged as one of Palestine’s greatest sons. One can trace his “integration” into larger Palestinian society from his 1992 visit to Israel, when he returned to Jerusalem for the first time since childhood to find his family home. His connection with the people of the “inside” became solid with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Notwithstanding other objections to these accords, their most serious effect was to deepen the gulf between Palestinians inside Palestine and those outside. Worse still, the agreement drew the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had always been a diaspora organization, into the occupied territories—that is, inside—and thereby effectively destroyed it. The diaspora was left leaderless and, with the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, is even more so today. In this sense, the Oslo Accords must be viewed as the most successful Israeli venture to divide the Palestinians to date.

Whereas the PLO had led the struggle for liberation since 1965 and achieved the impossible—unifying more or less the exiled, 1948 Palestinians, who are numerically the majority, under one banner—the Oslo Accords, with their exclusive emphasis on the post-1967 population and territories, managed to delete both the history and the people, as if they were irrelevant. The West now focuses its attention exclusively on the events, strategies, and behavior of the Palestinians under occupation, as if there were no diaspora community and no issue other than the occupation. We know, of course, that the divisive process did not stop there, for Israel has since continued to fragment post-1967 Palestinians society ever since into cantons and areas permanently separated from each other. But the major rift between the two main Palestinian communities had already been effected in 1993, to the detriment of the Palestinian national cause and, no doubt, to Israel’s satisfaction in its long-running battle with Palestinian nationalism. It was here that Said had such a signal role. In the last decade of his life, his involvement with the Palestinians of the inside helped revive Palestinians’ consciousness of themselves as a people with one cause. He did so not only through his writings and media appearances but also through projects such as the musical-training initiative for young Palestinian musicians in Ramallah that he initiated with Daniel Barenboim. His best book on the subject, The Question of Palestine, had been out since 1979.

In the last few years of his life, he became a prolific writer of regular columns in the Arabic press, mainly the London-based Al Hayat and Cairo’s Al Ahram Weekly. We can easily forget that all this activity took place in the mid-1990s, no doubt linked to the diagnosis of his final illness in 1992. His articles provided more than commentary on the current situation; they gave many in the Arab world a keen insight into American thinking on the Middle East and as such, were eagerly anticipated and read by Palestinians and
many other Arabs. Through these means, he introduced fresh ways of looking at events and helped shape the political debate. His writing paralleled his increasing engagement with the Palestinians in the occupied territories, which he started to visit and where he frequently delivered lectures. This last was one of the most important functions he performed for Palestinians, for he provided a bridge between the “inside” and the “outside” and reconnected the various parts of this dispersed people, when the rift between them widened after 1993 and no national organization was properly functioning. His harsh criticisms of the Palestinian leadership antagonized many of his admirers and endeared him to intellectuals in Israel and the West. Right to the end, he was fearless in railing against incompetence and corruption among Palestinian leaders, most notably Arafat himself. In a private e-mail to me on September 5, 2003, three weeks before his death, he described the Arab-Israeli orchestra he had set up with Daniel Barenboim (of which more below). I had expressed reservations about Barenboim’s politics, and he responded as follows:

I don’t know a single Arab artist or intellectual who has done anything remotely like this. I think you should celebrate the man’s courage and his extraordinary genius and the fact that, when it comes to politics, there’s very little to choose between him and us. I hope this somewhat restores your enthusiasm which I fear too many years of fruitless verbal politics and political manoeuvring has depressed. We have established a foundation in Seville. Included is a complete program for Palestinian musical education, sponsored by Daniel and myself, to be run entirely by the Palestinian National Conservatory. In this world of Abu Mazens and Abu Shitheads, surely these are shining achievements.

His archenemy, Yasser Arafat, died just one year after his own death. How interesting to ruminate on what Said would have said about that event and about the subsequent election of Abu Mazen.

The Future of Palestine/Israel
Said was never under the illusion that the solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians was anything but elusive and seemingly impossible. For all his concern about the alliance between imperialism and Zionism, he never misread the Zionist project as simply a colonialist enterprise, which would therefore go the way of all others before it. His life and experiences in the United States, where he saw daily evidence of Zionist power and influence, precluded any such simplistic judgement. For this reason, he frequently wrote of the need to understand the other side and for all Arabs to acquaint themselves with the Holocaust in all its detail and to study Israeli society. He deprecated the lack of centers in the Arab world devoted to studying Israeli affairs and especially to studying America, Israel’s greatest supporter. In his own life, he encouraged connections, even friendships, with like-minded Israelis. In his last years, he became an associate of many prominent Israelis, gave interviews to Israel’s Ha’aretz newspaper, and became well-known to Israeli intellectuals. His association with the pianist Daniel Barenboim is one particularly fruitful example, for it culminated in a joint musical project, the East-West Divan Workshop and Orchestra, with a membership of young Arabs and Jews. I attended an ecstatically received first concert by this orchestra in London in August 2003. Even so, the project did not gain everyone’s approval, and some of us found a disturbing dissonance between the celebration in London of a “friendship” between Arabs and Israelis while Israelis conducted a pitiless onslaught on Palestinians back in Palestine.

Nevertheless, this initiative showed the direction in which Said would most likely have gone had he lived longer. The one-state solution that he espoused was premised on the understanding that because of Palestinians’ and Israelis’ respective histories, neither can make the other disappear. He believed that relationships between peoples should
transcend boundaries, racial exclusivity, and difference and that a new state built on
tolerance, harmony, and coexistence was an infinitely better goal to fight for than one
based on separateness, anger, hatred, and injustice.

“Perhaps our dream 20 years ago for a Palestinian state was realisable then,” he
wrote in 1999, “but today we have neither the military, nor the political nor the moral will
or capacity to create a real independent state. Israeli dreams are equally
unimplementable. Therefore the only acceptable political logic for Palestinians is to move
our struggle from the level of high-ranking negotiations to the level of the actual on-the-
ground reality.” He argued for coexistence and an alliance between like-minded
Palestinians and Israelis to realize this goal. “I write in order to be heard by other Arabs
and other Israelis, those whose vision can extend beyond the impoverishing perspectives
of what partition and separation can offer.”

In a later article, inspired by his visit to South
Africa, where the African National Congress had defeated the separation between peoples
imposed by apartheid, he reiterated his belief in Israelis’ and Palestinians’ “common
humanity”: “Separation can’t work in so tiny a land [as Israel/Palestine] any more than
Apartheid did.” So his answer was “two people in one land. Or, equality for all. Or, a
common humanity asserted in a binational state.” The call for a one-state solution came
late in Said’s professional life; for many years, he supported, either actively or passively,
the two-state idea. Yet his vision for this alternative solution toward the end of his life was
as compelling and inspiring as if he had always espoused it. When one surveys Palestine’s
last remnants today, the stunning power of Israel’s hold on the United States, the terminal
decline of the Arab world, and the immoral complicity of the international community in
this situation, can anyone still believe in the two-state solution? Can we not now see, as
some of us have seen since 1948, that an Israeli state built on overwhelming power and
oppression of others has no stable future? And is not the only possible and humane way
out of this nightmare the creation of a common state, where those who know it as their
homeland can share it equitably and amicably?