"THE ORIENTALIST LENS: HOW AMERICAN DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTS PALESTINIAN IDENTITY"

RAHIMAKHANIM HASANOVA
Khazar University, master student

E-mail: rhasanova@khazar.org
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8082-7772

Introduction

In the last decade, American policy regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict has been more than a question of strategic interests or ideological sympathies—it has revealed a deeper pattern in the rhetoric of American officials regarding Palestinians, one that is shaped by persistent Orientalist discourses. As Edward Said outlined in Orientalism (1978), the term "Orient" was never merely an innocent term for the East. It was a Western construct, developed over centuries in cultural penetration, intellectual dominance, and political hegemony. At the heart of the conception is the figure of the "Other"—a figure imagined as irrational, uncivilized, and inherently different from the rational, modern West. For Palestine, this binary remains the way Palestinians are represented: neither as political actors with rights, nor as threatening security specters, but as vulnerable victims in need of help. This article examines how Orientalist ideology continues to shape the way U.S. officials discourse about Palestinian identity.

Through the analysis of major recent case— the 2025 U.S. defense of Israel's ban on UNRWA operations in Gaza—shows how official discourse continues to rely on colonial-era frameworks to legitimize policy decisions and sideline Palestinian agency.

Relying on the work of Edward Said and expanded on by scholars like Rashid Khalidi and Lisa Hajjar, the article asserts that Palestinians are rarely, if ever, situated as autonomous agents. Instead, they are situated as problems to be solved, victims to be sympathized with, or enemies to be controlled.

In its focus on speeches, legal statements, and press briefings, the article reveals how deeply embedded the Orientalist narrative is in American foreign policy terminology. These narratives not only distort political reality but also sanctify an unjust system where the voices of the Palestinians are being muffled and Israeli actions get normalized. Eventually, the article argues that words are not a mirror of policy—it's a part of the power system determining who gets heard, who gets humanized, and who is omitted from the narrative altogether.

Literature review

Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) is universally accepted as a foundation of postcolonial theory and the study of international relations. In it, Said argues that "the Orient" was never merely geography—it was a Western construction shaped by hundreds of years of literature, scholarly inquiry, and imperial domination. At the very heart of his theory is that of the "Other," and in this there is the notion of the East as irrational, exotic, and dangerous—literally the polar opposite of the rational, civilized West. This two-way split wasn't just utilized to describe colonialism in the past but informs Western nations' relations with non-Western cultures today (Said, 1978).

Said also noted that Orientalist knowledge was not just scholarship—it had a clear political agenda. It helped perpetuate the rationale for Western dominance of Eastern civilizations. He presents us with evidence drawn from literary works, for example, Disraeli and Flaubert, in which the East is represented without real voices and agency, much as objects and not human beings (Said, 1978). Islam is particularly stereotyped in Western literature as violent, primitive, and unable to conform to the contemporary world. But to Said, these images do not emerge from dispassionate facts—instead, they reflect the political agendas, desires, and fears of the West.

Relying on Said's writings, scholars like Rashid Khalidi and Lisa Hajjar have documented how Orientalism works in Palestine. Khalidi (2013), for example, explains how Palestinian national identity is bypassed by U.S. diplomatic discourse, repeatedly presenting Palestinians as security concerns and not as people with legitimate political rights. Hajjar (2005), concerning Israeli military courts, explains how Palestinians are often assumed guilty by default, affirming that they are inherently dangerous. Both critics enhance Said's argument by pointing out that Orientalist thinking is not only prevalent in language but also pervades institutions that underpin unequal power relations.

Some American Orientalist authors like Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes, on the other hand, resist

Said's criticism. In their view, their perceptions of the Islamic world are not ideologically driven but rooted in historical and cultural reality. Lewis (2003), for instance, contends that the key problems in the Muslim world—such as authoritarianism or anti-Westernism—are the result of internal cultural and religious factors. In The Crisis of Islam, he interprets jihad mostly as violent warfare and repeatedly describes Muslim societies as passive and recalcitrant. For Lewis, these problems are less colonial and more civilizational (Lewis, 2003).

Daniel Pipes pushes such arguments even further. In his critique of Orientalism, he contends that Said's book caused "lasting damage" by creating ideological distortion in Middle Eastern studies (Pipes, 2007). In books like In the Path of God (1983) and The Long Shadow (1989), Pipes portrays Islam as a pervasive phenomenon that equates religion with politics and continually suggests that Muslim cultures are necessarily at odds with secular democracy. He tends to view Islamic resurgence movements as emotionally attempting to move backward to an idealized past instead of rational responses to international pressures.

Although both Lewis and Pipes protest their objectivity, there still exists that same West/East dichotomy criticized by Said. The West is rational, and progressive, while the East is emotional and atavistic. These kinds of Orientalist narratives still influence how U.S. foreign policy discusses Palestinians—typically representing them as threats or victims, but rarely as complete political agents. Rashid Khalidi (2020) similarly argues that Palestinians are not only silenced by diplomacy but also by their erasure from histories that privilege Israeli statehood and Western perspectives.

Case Study: U.S. Defense of Israel's Ban on UNRWA in Gaza (April 2025)

On April 30, 2025, U.S. State Department legal adviser Joshua Simmons gave a formal statement at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), defending Israel's decision to block the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) from operating in Gaza. The speech came during an ICJ hearing focused on whether Israel's restrictions on aid—especially through UN agencies—violated international law and its responsibilities as an occupying power.

In his remarks, Simmons argued:

"There is no legal requirement that an occupying power permit a specific third state or international organization to conduct activities in occupied territory that would compromise its security interests" (Simmons, 2025).

This kind of language reflects the Orientalist logic that Edward Said (1978) wrote about—where Palestinian institutions are rarely seen as legitimate on their terms, but instead as potential threats that need to be contained. Simmons's focus on "security interests" shifts the conversation away from humanitarian needs and toward military logic. In doing so, it suggests that even basic aid to Palestinians must be filtered through Israeli security priorities. The human dimension—the fact that people in Gaza are suffering—is erased. Instead, Palestinians are reduced to a security problem, which fits into what Said called a Western tradition of representing the East "not as it is but as it has been pictured to be" (Said, 1978, p. 67).

Rashid Khalidi (2013) has often pointed out how Palestinians are denied full political subjectivity in global discourse. Simmons's remarks reinforce this pattern by implying that UNRWA isn't a reflection of Palestinian civil society but rather a suspicious outsider presence. Once again, Palestinian resistance—whether through diplomacy, law, or even humanitarian channels—is treated as inherently destabilizing.

Later in his statement, Simmons added:

"You have heard concerns about Israel's decision to cease engagement with UNRWA. You have heard little, however, about the serious, credible concerns about Hamas misusing UNRWA facilities and humanitarian assistance. […] These security needs persist today" (Simmons, 2025).

Here, the tone shifts from a legal argument to one of suspicion. By invoking "credible concerns" and linking UNRWA to Hamas, Simmons builds a narrative where any Palestinian connection—even to aid—is seen as potentially dangerous. This matches Lisa Hajjar's (2005) observations about how Palestinians are often viewed through a lens of preemptive suspicion, where the burden of proof is bypassed in favor of assuming guilt. What gets reinforced is the familiar binary: Israel is defending itself; Palestinians are somehow responsible for their crisis.

This framing also echoes Bernard Lewis's (2003) argument that problems in the Arab world stem

from internal dysfunction rather than external factors like occupation or war. Simmons doesn't frame the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as a result of years of blockade or conflict but as something brought on by Palestinian mismanagement and extremism. By casting Israel's actions as "reasonable security responses," the U.S. legal team ends up reproducing an Orientalist logic—one that paints Israel as rational and lawful while portraying Palestinians as reckless, emotional, and unfit to govern themselves.

What's important here, as Said (1978) reminds us, is how Orientalist thinking doesn't need to be openly hostile or racist to be effective. It often works quietly, through legal and diplomatic language that sounds neutral but is loaded with assumptions about who gets to be seen as credible, civil, or modern. Simmons's speech is a clear example of how Palestinian political identity can be erased not by shouting, but through the calm voice of legal justification.

The following day, during a May 1, 2025, State Department briefing, spokesperson Tammy Bruce responded to questions about the deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Her comments, though framed as concern for aid delivery, reflected many of the same discursive patterns.

When asked about the famine-like conditions and aid delays, Bruce said:

"We want humanitarian supplies and assistance to resume, as long as it can be safely moved in and there's no looting and people aren't getting mugged and it's not being stolen […] I mean, there are some standards about when you're going to send somebody into essentially a war zone, and I don't think that's a very high bar" (Bruce, 2025).

This kind of language defines Gaza as a place of confusion, chaos, and ungovernability and indirectly faults Palestinians for the crisis, as opposed to faulting policies that block aid. Instead of accepting Gaza as a besieged territory, Bruce defines it as a security nightmare, echoing Said's (1978) idea that the "Orient" is always represented in terms of Western fantasies of violence and chaos. This report starkly contrasts with UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports highlighting the gravity of the blockade's impact on civilians' ability to access food, water, and medicine (United Nations, 2024). The suggestion is that Palestinians can't be trusted even with receiving aid, let alone managing it.

She went on to quote President Trump, saying:

"We've got to be good to Gaza […] These people are suffering […] [There is] a very big need for medicine […] food […] and [we are] taking care of it" (Bruce, 2025).

This affective moment of language is sympathetic, but not without limits. As Khalidi (2013) has noted, the Palestinians are typically allowed to be seen as victims—not as political actors with demands or claims. We hear sympathy, but not solidarity. Palestinian suffering is heard but cut off from structural causes such as occupation, blockade, and displacement. As Lisa Hajjar (2005) would have it, the same applies to Israeli military tribunals, where Palestinians are given room only when they are silent or suffering—but not when they are being political.

Bruce was later asked whether the U.S. was pressuring Israel to allow more aid. Her reply was:

"We stand with Israel. They are one of our greatest allies […] and we support them in what their needs are. But in this case, I think we have the best answer regarding the attitude of the United States, and that comes from President Trump" (Bruce, 2025).

This statement reinforces the imbalance at the heart of U.S. foreign policy in the region. The needs of Palestinians are mentioned only in the background—secondary to America's unwavering support for Israel. It reflects Bernard Lewis's (2003) position that Western alliances must be protected above all in "unstable" regions. The result is that Palestinian voices are drowned out by strategic talking points and vague ideas about stability and security.

And when Bruce tried to downplay the impact of the aid blockade, she added:

"There are ways [to get aid in] […] but in this case, you're going to send somebody into essentially a war zone" (Bruce, 2025).

Referencing Gaza as a "war zone" deprives the scene of its context. It transmutes a long occupation and blockade into an SUMMARYion conflict, in which everything is unclear and nobody is guilty. This is how Orientalist discourse works, says Said (1978), in which such amorphous descriptions de-politicize resistance and erase boundaries between oppressor and oppressed. By thus defining Gaza, Bruce avoids having to deal with human rights or international law and indulges instead in tropes of randomness and irrationality.

Taken together, these assertions show the degree to which U.S. officials continue to speak of Gaza and the Palestinians in ferociously Orientalist terms. Palestinians are victimized by innocents or threatening others, and Israel is stable, moral, and legitimate. The potential that Palestinians have political rights or right to self-governance and representation is ruled out. This is the "symbolic erasure" that Said (1979) spoke of: the unspoken exclusion of a people's voice from the discourse concerning them.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of recent official discourse reveals a troubling pattern in this article show that Orientalist discourse is still deeply woven into the way the U.S. talks about Palestinians in its foreign policy. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, and building on the work of scholars like Khalidi and Hajjar, this analysis highlights three clear patterns.

First, Palestinian political identity is repeatedly undermined by how officials frame their language—Palestinians are either cast as irrational and untrustworthy or as helpless victims. Palestinian political action—be it diplomatic, institutional, or legal—in most diplomatic forums has been approached not as rightful acts, but rather as threats. Similarly, in the rationalization of Israel's 2025 prohibition of UNRWA, even Palestinian-affiliated humanitarian aid was framed in terms of suspicion, passed through Israeli "security" concerns. These are the horsemen for an old Orientalist stereotype: the East explosive and malignant, needing ceaseless policing by the West.

And when the suffering in Gaza or the West Bank does get attention, it's often talked about in isolation. There is little effort to connect it to the root causes—be it the ongoing occupation, displacement of humans, or the political mechanisms that continue to exclude Palestinians. Instead, Palestinians are most often portrayed as victims in a depoliticized way. As Khalidi (2013) recounts, such reporting enables the U.S. to sympathize but never be compelled to face the more essential, political origin of the crisis. It assures Palestinians they are only heard when they keep quiet—when they are dying, and not when they protest, speak out, or claim what belongs to them.

Together, these trends demonstrate that Orientalist ideology isn't a historical relic—it lives on in American policymakers' parlance today. This isn't about cobwebs of old stereotypes; it's about the persistent way Palestinians remain seen and treated. Instead of being recognized as political agents in their own right, they're still too often relegated to matters to be held in check or problems to be eliminated.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article has shown that Orientalist thinking still plays a major role in how U.S. political leaders and institutions talk about Palestinians. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Hajjar, Bernard Lewis, and Daniel Pipes, the analysis of two recent cases reveals a troubling pattern: Palestinians are often portrayed either as illegitimate political actors or as helpless recipients of aid—but rarely as people with rights, agency, and a voice under international law.

This erasure of Palestinian political agency is not an accident. It's the result of concerted rhetorical practice to naturalize Israeli power and label Palestinian agencies as suspicious or dangerous. These narratives help legitimate U.S. policies that extend the occupation, foreclose justice, and shut the door to true negotiations.

The policy interests at stake here are substantial. First, future U.S. administrations will need to more critically examine the language they use. If peace and justice are the goals, then official rhetoric should treat Palestinians as equal political actors with legitimate grievances—not as problems to be controlled or people to be sympathized with. Second, it is time to inspect the rhetorical and legal arguments invoked in an attempt to justify decreases in aid and diplomatic silence. Policy needs to be grounded in international law and real power configurations on the ground—not in insubstantial things like "balance" or "neutrality."

Finally, it's the duty of intellectuals, journalists, and civil society to keep critiquing how political language creates reality. When Orientalist discourse is not contested, it shuts up one voice of the conflict and makes it harder to imagine an equal, recognition-based future. If genuine coexistence is what we are after, then our words in describing Palestinians have to change—because words do not just reflect policy, they create it.

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SUMMARY

This article looks at how the way U.S. officials talk about Palestine is still shaped by old ways of thinking, especially ideas rooted in Orientalism. It focuses on the U.S. response in 2025 when Israel decided to stop the work of UNRWA, the UN agency helping Palestinians in Gaza. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, along with the views of scholars like Rashid Khalidi and Lisa Hajjar, the article shows that Palestinians are often described in U.S. political speech as either a security risk or simply as people who need help. This kind of language, while not always hostile, usually leaves out the idea that Palestinians are political actors with their rights and voices. By looking closely at official speeches and legal comments, the article argues that these patterns of language can unintentionally support existing policies and avoid dealing with deeper issues behind the conflict. The article suggests that using more fair and thoughtful language could open the door to better conversations and more balanced approaches in U.S. foreign policy.

Keywords: *Orientalism, U.S. foreign policy, Palestinian identity, discourse analysis, Edward Said*

XÜLASƏ

Bu məqalə göstərir ki, ABŞ rəsmilərinin Fələstin barədə istifadə etdiyi ritorika hələ də köhnə düşüncə tərzindən, xüsusilə də Orientalizm ideologiyasından təsirlənir. Tədqiqatın əsas diqqət mərkəzində 2025-ci ildə İsrailin UNRWA-nın Qəzzadakı fəaliyyətinə qoyduğu qadağaya ABŞ-nin verdiyi dəstək dayanır. Edward Said-in Orientalizm nəzəriyyəsinə və Rashid Khalidi ilə Lisa Hajjar kimi tədqiqatçıların fikirlərinə əsaslanan bu yazı göstərir ki, fələstinlilər çox zaman ya təhlükə mənbəyi, ya da sadəcə yardıma möhtac qurban kimi təqdim olunurlar. Bu cür yanaşma isə onların siyasi subyekt kimi qəbul edilməsinə az yer buraxır. Məqalə rəsmi çıxışlar və hüquqi açıqlamalar əsasında təhlil apararaq sübut edir ki, istifadə edilən dil çox zaman fərqində olmadan birtərəfli yanaşmanı gücləndirir və Fələstinlilərin yaşadığı dərin problemlərin əsas səbəblərinin müzakirəsindən yayınır. Yazının nəticəsi budur ki, ABŞ-nin xarici siyasətində daha balanslı və düşünülmüş bir dil istifadəsi, münaqişə ilə bağlı daha ədalətli və konstruktiv dialoqların aparılmasına şərait yarada bilər.

Açar sözlər: *Orientalizm, ABŞ xarici siyasəti, Fələstinli kimliyi, diskurs analiz, Edvard Said.*