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REVIEW ESSAY

Cleansing history of its content: Some critical comments on Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*

Mordechai Bar-On*

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, by Ilan Pappé, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006, 336 pp., ISBN 978-1-85168-467-0

On the cover of Ilan Pappé's recent book, John Pilger is quoted as saying: "Ilan Pappé is Israel's bravest, most principled, most incisive historian." In the following pages I shall try to explain and demonstrate why I believe that while Pappé may or may not deserve these lofty adjectives, he certainly does not deserve the title of "historian." I shall try to show how in this book, as in some other of his recent writings, Pappé does not look for the truth, as a historian should at least attempt to do, but, rather, volunteers his pen to the propaganda efforts of the more extreme Palestinian elements in an attempt to delegitimize Israel and Zionism.

Before launching my rebuttal I feel obliged to state my own convictions in order to clarify my political and ideological positions on the issues at hand:

- The Palestinian *Nakba* of 1948 was a real and horrendous disaster, which entailed enormous suffering for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and still exacts from them a heavy price of pain and oppression, collective and personal.
- The uprooting of a large part of the Palestinian population from their lands and homes, turning them into destitute refugees, was an outcome of a complex process, a combination of factors, some of which must be attributed to the weakness of the Palestinian society and political leadership of the time. Yet an important factor was the unyielding desire of the Jews in Palestine and the Zionist movement worldwide to establish a Jewish state, the resolve and ruthlessness with which they fought during the war, along with the fact that the Israeli leadership was eventually glad to see the Palestinians vacate a large part of the country which became the State of Israel, and during the latter part of the war assisted the removal of the inhabitants of the area conquered by the Israel Defense Forces, since then resisting any attempt to allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.
- Whatever the particular factors that molded the details of this process, it is clear in hindsight that the Zionist project from its outset was pregnant with a harsh and unavoidable confrontation with the local inhabitants of Palestine, who in the process came to see themselves as a unique nation.
- Therefore, as a historian, I believe that Israel must recognize not only the terrible price the Palestinians paid for the Jewish endeavor in Palestine, but also its own share in this process.
- Nevertheless, the Palestinian demand to return their refugees to their lands and homes amounts today to a battle cry, not a plan for peace. As such it has no chance of ever being realized, but may well prolong the conflict and the suffering of both peoples senselessly.

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That being said, I nonetheless believe that Pappé's book is replete with falsifications and fabrications which must be considered a call for more war, not an end to it. Within the confines of this review, I cannot point out all the errors and distorted and misleading insinuations that appear on almost every page of Pappé's book; this would also be a superfluous exercise, since, by his own admittance, Pappé does not believe in "facts," only in "narratives." Moreover, he has declared many times that he has adopted the "Palestinian narrative" because it is "the narrative of the victims."¹ Factual rebuttal may not impress him at all. Indeed his total "historical license" is thrown in the face of the reader by the book's very title. Nobody either in 1948 or during the sixty years of historiography and debate over what happened in 1948 has ever used the term "ethnic cleansing" to describe the uprooting of the Palestinians. The use of this totally anachronistic term can only distort and blur the complex process that brought about the Palestinian *Nakba*. The use of this term seems to have only one purpose: to smear Israel's name and give Israel's enemies a new weapon. He applies this term, which gained international condemnation during the war in Yugoslavia at the end of the last century, to the case of the Palestinians fifty years earlier in totally different circumstance. As such, the term has little explanatory power and amounts to nothing more than "name calling."

Such use of anachronistic terms does not belong to honest historiographical methods; it is rather borrowed from the arsenals of propaganda and journalistic rating. Pappé uses another well-known propaganda technique: If you repeat something often enough, in the end people will believe you. I could not bring myself to count the number of times Pappé uses the term "ethnic cleansing" in his book, but I am sure that one thousand will not be far from the mark.

Nevertheless, in order to give just a few examples of the endless errors, misinterpretation, and falsification presented in this book regarding events that have been amply documented and researched by other historians, regardless of their political sympathies, I randomly chose a couple of pages, and here are the instances I found. On pages 98–99 Pappé refers to "Operation Jebussi," which the Haganah launched in Jerusalem at the end of April 1948, when mistaken information arrived that the British forces were about to leave Jerusalem earlier than planned. Nothing of this background is mentioned by Pappé (let alone the Hebrew name of the operation).

- Pappé tells us that in April 1948 "Jewish troops shelled, attacked and occupied the western Arab neighborhoods [of Jerusalem]." Like in many other parts of the book, the picture he tries to draw is of peaceful, and peace-loving, Arab civilians who were cruelly and unprovokedly attacked by the Jewish forces. He calls the operation, as everywhere else, "a cleansing attack," as if "cleansing" were its main purpose. The reality, however, was quite different. Only two urban sections were attacked: Shaykh Jarrah and Katamon. Both had been practically deserted by their inhabitants much earlier. The purpose of this operation was to take hold of two topographically and strategically important positions held by Arab military units, in order to safeguard the connection with the Hebrew University and Hadassah hospital on Mount Scopus and defend the southwestern Jewish suburbs of Jerusalem. It was a purely military move which hardly involved civilians.²
- Hussein Khalidi was not in Shaykh Jarrah during the fighting and the quotes from his intercepted phone calls (not "telegraph," as Pappé writes) are from different periods.³
- The quote from the historian Itzhak Levy regarding the blowing up of houses in Shaykh Jarrah is distorted. The blowing up of houses is mentioned in an earlier document under the assumption that the area would have to be evacuated by the Haganah after the attack. Pappé makes no mention of the cruel attack of Arab fighters against the convoy bringing medical and academic personnel to Mount Scopus earlier that month, in which more than 70 Jewish civilians died from gunfire and bombs originating from those same houses which were to be blown up in case of an Israeli retreat.⁴

- Pappe tells us that a local British commander “saved the neighborhood,” as if this was a local and exceptional event. However, this was not a local event at all and involved the intervention of the highest echelon of the British forces in Palestine and some of the highest ranks on the Israeli side. The British wanted to leave open the highway that ran through Shaykh Jarrah since this was the main route through which they planned to eventually retreat from Jerusalem on 14 May. Therefore they did not allow any of the belligerent forces to take hold of positions endangering their retreat, either here or elsewhere.⁵
- The Shu’afat neighborhood of Jerusalem did not “refuse to surrender” but was occupied by the Palmah with no serious resistance and was later evacuated when Palestinian forces repelled an attack against Nabi Samuil, to the west of Shu’afat.⁶
- Jordanian forces were not involved in the April fighting in Jerusalem. Two Jordanian armored cars took part briefly in the fighting around the St. Simon monastery. They were sent officially by Jordan at the request of the Iraqi government (not as “volunteers”) to defend the Iraqi consulate that was housed in that area.⁷ (By the way, most of the beautiful villas of the rich Palestinians who lived in Shaykh Jarrah and Katamon are still there and have been designated protected buildings.)

Some of these errors may have resulted from sheer ignorance or flimsy research, but it is often hard to believe that his misinterpretation of quotations from documents is entirely innocent. One such example, out of many, occurs on page 73, where Pappe claims that the Scientific Section of the Haganah tried to “create a weapon that could blind people.” In support, he quotes an entry in David Ben-Gurion’s diary recording a report from Professor Aharon Katzir, which stated that his men had conducted a successful experiment on “animals which did not die (they were just dazzled).” The original text makes it clear that the scientists were experimenting with tear gas that could blind people temporarily, not permanently (the term used is *lesanver*). This was meant to be a tactical weapon to be used in the battle zones against the invading Arab forces but was never implemented.⁸

“Ethnic cleansing” is not the only misleading term Pappe “invents.” He also uses the strange and totally ahistorical term “Consultancy” (with a capital C) dozens of times in his book. In this case Pappe invents not only a name but also an institution that never existed. He claims that Ben-Gurion “was aided by a small group of people . . . an ad hoc cabal [*sic!*] assembled solely for the purpose of plotting and designing the dispossession of the Palestinians” (p. 5). Throughout the book he tries to create the impression that this was a clandestine, permanent body with a permanent set of participants who met regularly once a week and served as the main decision-making body in charge of the cleansing of Palestine. Thus, for example, on page 44 he writes: “The Consultancy wanted to be left in no doubt that the military force the Jewish community possessed would be strong enough to implement successfully their two pronged plan to take over most of Palestine and dislocate the Palestinians living there.” As if the Consultancy was a supreme body with its own will and power, reminiscent of similar evil bodies such as the Committee for National Security during the French Revolution. Lest we miss the evil purpose of this body, Pappe describes it as a “cabal.” But no such kind of body ever existed. When Ben-Gurion was chosen by the World Zionist Congress to head the security affairs of the Zionist movement, he did not enter a vacuum. Two bodies had controlled the security affairs of the Jewish Agency for a number of years: the National Command (*Mifkadah artzit*) and the General Staff (*Ha-Mateh ha-klali*). The first was a political body made up of representatives of parties, designed to make strategic decisions; the second was a professional body of military officers, designed to translate those decisions into military plans and orders.⁹

Throughout the winter and spring of 1948 Ben-Gurion worked with these bodies, until the first one was transformed into the Committee for Security Affairs of the Israeli government,

and the second became the supreme command of the newly formed Israel Defense Forces on 27 May 1948. In addition, Ben-Gurion convened from time to time groups of different people, some military people, some members of the Israeli intelligence services, and some other functionaries who were invited according to the subject raised on any given occasion. Many of these meetings dealt with financial and economic matters, others, with purely military operations, and yet others with issues of armament and military production. There was nothing clandestine about these meetings, and they were part of the normal decision-making process of every minister and prime minister. The fate of the Palestinians was rarely raised in these meetings and was always dealt with in the context of the current situation and its implications. These were indeed “consultations,” not a “Consultancy.”

The phantom of the Consultancy is created by Pappé without supporting documents. Thus, for example, on page 51 he tells us that during the first days the “Consultancy met every day” but supports this assertion by reference to a meeting on 2 December 1947. In Ben-Gurion’s diary no such meeting is referred to. On this date, as during most days of the war, Ben-Gurion, consulted with Israel Gallili, head of the National Command, and Ya’akov Dori, the Chief of the General Staff. Pappé describes another meeting of the “Consultancy” which, he assumes, took place on 10 December. Ben-Gurion notes in his diary for that date only that two of the Haganah’s intelligence officers came to report on the mood in the Palestinian camp – hardly a meeting for the sake of clandestine plotting. Similarly the meeting that Pappé claims to have taken place on 17 December (p. 57) did not occur. On that date another officer, who, according to Pappé, had “joined the Consultancy,” met Ben-Gurion privately to complain of his shaky position in Haganah headquarters. He was accompanied, as might have been expected given the subject of the meeting, by Chief of Staff Dori.¹⁰ These are just three of the many unsubstantiated fabrications Pappé makes with his fertile imagination.

One may have expected that Pappé would have given ample space to the consultation Ben-Gurion held on 1 and 2 January 1948, which, he admits, was “the only meeting of the Consultancy for which we have a protocol” (p. 63). Ben-Gurion refers to this meeting in his diary as involving “a group of experts on Arab affairs,” and later, more precisely, as “a joint meeting of the General Staff and the Arab Department of the Jewish Agency.”¹¹ Pappé refers to this consultation as “a pivotal meeting . . . its departure point, accepted by all, was that ethnic cleansing was necessary.” I have read through the record many times but have been unable to find even one mention of a plan to drive the Arabs out of the country, let alone of “ethnic cleansing.” The entire meeting dealt with how to respond to and deter the Palestinian acts of violence that had proliferated during the previous month. Nor was there any mention of Ben-Gurion’s desire “to disregard the partition map and to use force in order to ensure Jewish majority and exclusivity in the country,” which Pappé defines as the main purpose of the “Consultancy” (p. 37). To the contrary, the underlying assumption of all participants in this meeting was still that the UN Partition Plan would eventually be implemented.

Pappé refers to the intelligence people Ben-Gurion consulted with as “orientalists,” which, since Edward Said, is another loaded term. Gad Machnes, Ezra Dannin, and Josh Plamon were experts on Arab affairs serving their nation’s struggle for independence, not Europeans who were attempting to colonize the orient by cultural means. The real “orientalist” in this drama seems to be Ilan Pappé himself, who romantically describes every Palestinian village conquered by the Israelis as a haven of fresh water springs and shady palm trees. Indeed, his entire description of the peace-loving Palestinians is to my mind offensive. The Palestinians were not innocent children. They were mature and genuine nationalists for whom the Jews were indeed enemies to be fought against.

Pappé’s main thesis is that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine was a Zionist scheme from the outset which was eventually implemented during 1948, especially as a result of a meeting that

took place on 10 March, in which “final touches to a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine were put” in what was code-named Plan D (p. 80). This echoes the argument Palestinians have used in their propaganda since the 1950s after Walid Khalidi “discovered” the story.¹² The thesis is based on one section in the plan in which orders were given “to annihilate [Palestinian] villages... burning, demolishing and mining the ruins.”¹³

Plan D was issued in expectation of the invasion of the regular armies of the neighboring Arab states, upon the expiration of the British Mandate in Palestine on 15 May 1948. It was designed “to gain control of the territory [assigned by the UN for] the Jewish State and to defend its borders, and the blocs of Jewish settlements and the Jewish population outside these borders.” The action against Arab villages, quoted above, refers explicitly to “enemy locations inside or in the vicinity of our defense system... in order to prevent them from becoming bases for active armed forces.”¹⁴ Nothing in Plan D “called for the systematic and total expulsion [of the Palestinians] from their homeland” (as Pappé claims on p. 28). To the contrary, until the middle of May, the Jewish leadership was eager to prevent the invasion of the Arab regular forces, which were deemed by the Jewish generals as a great danger, and preferred the implementation of the Partition Plan. During the latter part of April it became clear that the expulsion, even the voluntary flight, of thousands of Palestinians from their towns and villages, would precipitate the invasion, as it in fact did.

The heavy intensification of the fighting during April, the total weakness of the Arab paramilitary forces, and the great and understandable fear of the Palestinian population in the wake of the Deir Yasin massacre, caused the massive flight of most of the civilian Arab population from their towns and villages during the Haganah’s offensive designed by Plan D. There was hardly any need to implement the article of the plan dealing with the treatment of villages conquered by the Jewish forces. Pappé’s attempt to base his thesis about the Zionist primordial dream on what actually happened during those momentous months amounts to the famous fallacy known as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. The truth is that the Zionist leadership was quite bewildered by what happened. The appeals they sent to the Arabs of Haifa to stay put and the decision to avoid a head-on attack on Jaffa testify to the falsity of Pappé’s assumptions. Even Simha Flapan, a harsh critic of Israel’s policies during the 1948 war, whom Pappé misquotes (on p. 49), declared clearly that “official Jewish decision making bodies . . . neither discussed nor approved a design for expulsion, and any proposal of the sort would have been opposed and probably rejected.”¹⁵

Pappé has indeed been unable to bring any documentary proof for his assumption that Plan D was a master plan for the cleansing of Palestine, explaining this deficiency by the total secrecy that covered it. As usual he misinterprets what he found in Ben-Gurion’s diaries. Thus, for example, he claims that the plan was discussed first by the “Consultancy” on 29 February 1948 (p. 80), but no such meeting took place. On that day a meeting was held to discuss the defense of the Negev, but no mention was made of overall strategy. Similarly he states that the plan was ordered by Ben-Gurion on 10 March (p. 81), but once again, the diary only records a consultation with four Haganah generals on the military organization for the defense of the Negev. There is no mention of Plan D or of any other overall strategic plan.¹⁶

What is sad about all this is that Pappé, who admittedly lends his pen to the service of the Palestinians’ cause, does them a major disservice. During their struggle for national liberation, nations in general tend to produce bad histories. It is only natural and understandable that Palestinian historians, at this stage of their national struggle, just like the Jews fifty years ago, prefer narratives that may serve them well in the diplomatic arena and help galvanize the fighting spirit of their people by pointing out the evils of their enemy and the great valor of their own fighters. In the long run, however, this kind of historiography is a sign of weakness and does not contribute to the inner strength of the nation, especially when options for ending the conflict and chances of achieving their national goals are appearing on their horizons.

The enthusiastic welcome Pappe received from many Palestinians shows that his poor historiography serves an outdated histrionic endeavor on the part of those intellectuals. One may hope that after sixty years of conflict, Palestinians may venture to produce more self-critical narratives than Pappe offers them. Self-criticism is a main requirement to ensure the strengthening of the inner fiber of the national intellect. Moreover, more than anyone else, Jews, who did not relinquish the memories of their own disasters for two thousand years, should understand that nobody can deprive the Palestinians of the memories of their *Nakba* and their dreams of return. Nevertheless, anybody who knows anything about Israel must realize that the right of return is a dream that cannot be fulfilled. With this book, Pappe makes a sad contribution to this unrealistic dream and weakens the ability of the Palestinians to support more pragmatic policies that may, at long last, bring about the fulfillment of their rights to self-determination and realization of their national independence and dignity.

The Palestinians have the undeniable right to tell their own narrative. Israeli historians must recognize it and feel compassionate towards it. But so must Palestinian historians recognize that the Israeli narrative represents another perspective that should be judged on its own merits. Attempts, such as Pappe's, to flatter your enemies with false historiography are not only patronizing, but also lead him, to his own detriment, to yield to his prejudices and misunderstanding regarding what really happened.

Notes

1. See for example Pappe, "Shi'ur be-historiyah hadashah" (A lesson in new history), *Ha'aretz*, 24 June 1993, and "Historiografyah post-tziyonit."
2. Levy, *Tish'ah kabin*, 205–24.
3. Gelber, *Nitzanei havatzelet*, 172.
4. Levy, *Tish'ah kabin*, 192–97.
5. Bandman, "Gibush ha-tokhniyot," 641.
6. Levy, *Tish'ah kabin*, 208.
7. See Pasha, *A Soldier with the Arabs*, 71–72.
8. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman ha-milhamah*, 150, 201.
9. For a brief discussion of these institutions, see Shapira, *Me-piturei ha-rama*, 9–31. For the later development of the General Staff, see Ostfeld, *Tzava nolad*, 38–40.
10. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman ha-milhamah*, 52.
11. *Ibid.*, 97.
12. Khalidi's article, "Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine," was first published in Arabic in the late 1950s and reissued in English in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 1988. It is interesting to note that Khalidi saw in Plan Dalet a "Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine," not for the expulsion of its Palestinian inhabitants, certainly not for their "Ethnic Cleansing." Khalidi was almost right: Plan D was indeed a "master plan for the conquest," not of Palestine, but of the part of it assigned to the Jews in the UN partition plan.
13. From the verbatim citation of Plan D in Meser, *Tokhniyot operativiyot*, 135–36.
14. *Ibid.*, 130–62.
15. Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*, 87. See Pappe's misrepresentation of Flapan's opinion on 269, n. 21.
16. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman ha-milhamah*, 267–70, 286–91. The entire handling of Plan D demonstrates flimsy research and is replete with false statements. Thus, for example, Pappe writes that the blueprint for the plan was drafted by "the intelligence unit of the Hagana" a few days after the murder of Yehoshua Globerman, after whom the plan was called (81). Globerman was killed on 8 December 1947, a long time before anybody thought of the plan which was designed by the GHQ Operations Department under General Yigael Yadin, not by intelligence officers. There were not two different versions of Plan D, one for the politicians and one for the military commanders, as Pappe claims on p. 83. Everybody received the same plan, except that brigade commanders received in addition the details pertaining to the region under their command.

Notes on contributor

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