

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine

Ilan Pappé

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Ilan Pappé has added another work to the many that have already been written in English on the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. These include works by Walid Khalidi, Simha Flapan, Nafez Nazza, Benny Morris, Nur Masalha, and Norman Finkelstein, among others. All but one of these authors (Morris) would probably agree with Pappé's position that what happened to the Palestinians in 1948 fits the definition of ethnic cleansing, and it certainly is not news to Palestinians themselves, who have always known what happened to them. But Pappé's concern here is public opinion as well as historiographical debate:

The "new history" narrative and recent Palestinian historiographical inputs somehow failed to enter the public realm of moral conscience and action. . . . I want to make a case for the paradigm of ethnic cleansing and use it to replace the paradigm of war as the basis for the scholarly research of and public debate about 1948. I have no doubt that the absence so far of the paradigm of ethnic cleansing is part of the reason why the denial of the catastrophe has been able to go on for so long. (xvi)

His commitment to shifting the paradigm from war to ethnic cleansing is a direct challenge to Morris, who even now clings to his thesis that the Palestinian refugee crisis was "born of war not by design."¹ This is somewhat bizarre, given that Morris himself continues to mine the Israeli archives for examples of atrocities and direct expulsions. In his article "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," in his book *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (an updated version of the original *Birth* published in 1987), and most recently in his book *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*.² Pappé's call for a shift from "born of war" to ethnic cleansing has ramifications beyond the scholarly debate with Morris, however. It is a plea to the majority of Israelis (and to those in the West who support the Israeli state unconditionally) to give up the excuse that in war "stuff happens" and to accept that a crime was committed against the Palestinians in 1948, so that

everyone, Israelis and Palestinians alike, can move forward to a better future.

Most of the book is devoted to telling a familiar story, at least to this reviewer: conquest of most of Palestine by a well-organized and determined colonial settler state and the expulsion—carried out through a variety of tactics including atrocities—of as many of the non-Jewish inhabitants as possible. It is based on secondary sources (Morris shows up in the footnotes quite a bit) and some primary sources drawn mainly from the Israeli archives. One of the new elements in Pappé's narrative is his use of the label "The Consultancy" to name the group of men (Ezra Danin, Yehoshua Palmon, and Eliahu Sasson, among others) who regularly consulted with David Ben-Gurion before and throughout the war. Although the minutes of many of these consultations were not recorded, the group's discussions and decisions do show up in Ben-Gurion's diaries and the private archive of Israel Galili, who was, according to Pappé, present at all the meetings. In Pappé's account the Consultancy planned and helped to implement the ethnic cleansing. He also presents Plan Dalet as a master plan of expulsion—a theme of revisionist scholarship for a long time. The cohesion and stability of the Consultancy as a group is a crucial part of Pappé's argument in favor of the ethnic cleansing label. In chapter 1 he offers the following definition of ethnic cleansing: "It is a *well-defined policy of a particular group of persons* to systematically eliminate another group from a given territory on the basis of religious, ethnic or national origin. Such a policy involves violence and is very often connected with military operations" (1, my emphasis). This is a quotation from Drazen Petrovic writing in the *European Journal of International Law* in 1994, a quotation that is part of a broader comparison that the book makes between the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in 1948 and the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs in the 1990s.³ A serious historian with many books to his name, Pappé is deeply knowledgeable about the history of this period and is intimately familiar with the sources. I am convinced by his case for the Consultancy and Plan Dalet as a concomitant "smoking gun" document. But it is a case. He does not explore counterarguments, which others will certainly produce by working with the same evidence that Pappé presents.

But can the book do the job that Pappé wants it to do? Can the book succeed in forcing the para-

1. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 286.

2. Benny Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948," in *The War for Palestine*, ed. A. Shlaim and E. Rogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37–60; Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian*

Refugee Problem Revisited, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

3. Drazen Petrovic, "Ethnic Cleansing: An Attempt at Methodology," *European Journal of International Law* 5 (1994): 342–60.

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digm of ethnic cleansing into the debate so that it becomes the lens through which both mainstream academics and policy makers view the Palestinian tragedy? It has to be said that regardless of the strength of Pappé's arguments, his publisher, One-world, is marketing the book in a way that works against this aim. Apart from endorsements by Khalidi and Richard Falk, who have both worked extensively on this topic, most of the other puffs come from nonexperts: John Pilger (journalist), George Galloway (British member of Parliament), and Ahdaf Soueif (novelist). The publisher's association of the book with these British-based activists for the Palestinian cause, however principled they may be, decreases the possibility that Pappé's hypothesis could be recast, for example, in *Foreign Affairs* under the title "Were the Palestinians Ethnically Cleansed in 1948?" where it would have a chance of influencing an actual policy maker.

Pappé dedicates the book to the Palestinian victims of the 1948 ethnic cleansing. For them and for the subsequent generations of Palestinians whose lives have been determined by the tragedy of 1948, the book shows that there are some brave Israeli historians who combine serious research with moral clarity to tell a story of 1948 that accords with the Palestinians' lived experience of it. Pappé's underlying message is powerful: the Jewish people have suffered in unimaginable ways, but we did something terrible to you in this time and place (Palestine 1948); some of us know that we need to take responsibility for this so that we can all begin to imagine a shared future.

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Rethinking Global Sisterhood:

Western Feminism and Iran

Nima Naghibi

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In this highly theoretical work, Nima Naghibi brings together postcolonial studies, gender studies, Middle Eastern studies, and Iranian studies. Critiquing global sisterhood, she cites literature that tackles assumptions about women in Iran from a postcolonial feminist perspective. This critique challenges the perceived binary opposition between the West and "the other" Middle East/Muslim world, in this particular case, Iran. In line with this binary relationship it is often assumed that the West is modern, progressive, and, with regard to the role of women, liberated in contrast to the Orient/Iran, seen as backward, uncivilized, and oppressive of women who are further categorically understood as "the victim." Naghibi brings to light nuances and complexities of the history of the feminist movement in Iran. This is particularly important because assumptions underlying the perceived binary relationship of the Oriental woman/Iranian woman and Western women require that the former be saved by the West. In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the West's civilizing mission is to "save brown women from brown men."¹ Naghibi traces the civilizing mission to the early days of Christian missionary activity when, as part of the colonial enterprise, some European women, Gertrud Bell, for example, saw Iranian women as prisoners of Islam. In other words, it was the job of self-sacrificing Western sisters to save Eastern women. Yet in examining the history of Iran more closely we find many instances of women's resistance, first as part of the Tobacco protest against the British in 1890 and then as women fought in men's clothing during the constitutional revolution in the early twentieth century.

By adopting a historical analysis, Naghibi brings to light the relationship between the sisterhood efforts of Christian missionaries and Western-style feminist liberative endeavors that followed in their wake. From the start, there appears to have been an alliance between the colonial civilizing enterprise, the self-sacrificing mission of Western women, and the activities of local elites, best illustrated in the writings of Taj al-Saltaneh. Al-Saltaneh was a princess from the Qajar dynasty who had no confidence in "backward Iranian women" (43). The

1. Quoted in Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 297.

views of women like al-Saltaneh, who saw Iranian women as backward, gave rise to a discourse promoting a nationalist and modernist agenda articulated by the local elite in terms of a global sisterhood mission to save Iranian women from the veil and to lead them directly from backwardness to modernity. Naghibi identifies the paternalistic manner in which al-Saltaneh and other women of elite background treated women of the lower classes. Similar attempts occur later during the rule of the shah of Iran, when the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) was established and received funding from Ashraf Pahlavi, the shah's sister. Both she and Farah Pahlavi, the shah's wife, regarded themselves as saviors of Iranian women and founders of the women's movement in Iran (89). Ashraf Pahlavi provides support for the WOI, headed by Mahnaz Afkhami, and the organization hosts a gathering of elite women with Betty Friedan, thereby linking the WOI to the liberation agenda of the global sisterhood. Naghibi correctly points out that there is no doubt that the WOI did bring about legal reform and improved conditions for women; however, she notes that such changes were from the top down and remained isolated from the masses of women who were not of the elite. Thus global sisterhood was composed of unequal sisters—the elite among them seeing it as their calling to “rescue” Iranian women, which they approached in a paternalistic way. In perhaps one of the most interesting points of the book, Naghibi illustrates how, during the first International Women's Meeting in Mexico in 1975, the list of invitees was drawn by heads of state, but in the case of Iran it was Ashraf Pahlavi who was drawn.

It is therefore not surprising that when Robin Morgan publishes an anthology on global sisterhood, Afkhami, who left Iran after the revolution, contributes a chapter on Iran from a perspective lacking in an analysis of class or anti-imperialist struggles.² Like other contributions to Morgan's volume, the chapter represents Western liberal feminism, which assumes a universal definition of women's rights, including the primacy of gender unity irrespective of cultural and class differences, and which views all women ultimately as victims. I have challenged Iranian women's victimhood in my academic writings. Naghibi mentions also in this regard Mino Moallem, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Afsaneh Najmabadi, among others. To illustrate her point she brings in examples of films made by Iranian women, notably Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady*, Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's

Divorce Iranian Style and *Runaway*, Farzaneh Milani's *Two Women*, and Mahnaz Afzali's *The Ladies Room*. In all of these films, some feature films and others documentaries, one sees a more nuanced view of Iranian women in which they reveal a resistance and immense resilience. This is an image that shatters the persona of victimhood assumed by the global sisterhood phenomenon.

If Iranian women are not always categorical victims, then it follows that the liberating mission of the global sisterhood needs to be taken to task. Naghibi argues that while it is important not to overlook some of the important achievements of the global sisterhood—for example, their success in bringing the activities of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) to light—the danger of global sisterhood is that it can be aligned and/or complicit with the way the war on terror has unfolded. In a world where George Bush becomes the savior of Afghan women and global sisterhood does not object, then it must be taken to task.

This book is highly recommended for students of sociology, anthropology, gender studies, Iranian studies, Middle Eastern studies, women and development, and women in the Muslim world, as well as those interested in the general history of women and the contemporary issues of women in Iran.

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2. Mahnaz Afkhami, “Iran: A Future in the Past: The ‘Prerevolutionary’ Women's Movement,” in *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: The Feminist Press at City University of New York, 1996), 330–38.