Benny Morris 's Shocking Interview

by
Baruch Kimmerling

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The Israeli historian Benny Morris did it again. Morris is not only a historian with impressive achievements but also an Israeli and international icon. One year after the publication of his book The Birth of Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949, published in 1987, he proclaimed himself a "new historian." He became the great guru of a small imaginary group appointed by him and including mainly Avi Shlaim, Uri Milstein and Ilan Pappe. Membership in this group varied from time to time according to Morris' sympathy or antipathy.

Morris basically claimed that all the Israeli historiography that preceded his book and several other writings was completely fabricated, a series of untrue myths designed to serve the Zionist need for legitimacy. Morris, with his great arrogance and unique talent for public relations provoked an immense furor among the old Israeli academic and intellectual establishment and became the hero of many Palestinians and a small group of younger Israeli academics who perceived him as a "debunker" of Zionist lies.

On the other hand he was accused by mainstream Israeli academics and intellectuals with "post-Zionism" and subverting the very legitimacy of Israel's existence. This triggered endless nonsense and semi-professional and mainly political debates in Israel and abroad about the meaning and extent of "post-Zionism" (frequently labeled as "anti-Zionism" or even "post-modernism") that included arbitrarily any serious or less serious critical (or supposedly critical) study on Israeli history, society and politics. Most of this debate caused great damage to Israeli historical, social and cultural research. Books and papers were judged not by their intrinsic values or shortcomings, but by their categorizations as Zionist, post-Zionist or anti-Zionist. Instead of being preoccupied with serious research, people devoted a lot of time and energy to polemics on this futile issue. Younger academics were scared and chose their research projects carefully in order to avoid being identified with one of the "camps."

To Morris' credit, it must be said, that he was very little involved in these debates, even if he enjoyed being at the center of the storm. Morris in general loved to leave his moral and ideological attitude toward the events he described ambiguous, and this was a correct position from his positivistic historian's point of view, in which role he claims objectivity, even if a careful reading of almost all of Morris' writings reveals a very simplistic and one-dimensional view on the Jewish-Arab conflict. Despite all his "discoveries" about moral wrongs perpetrated by the Israelis, on the bottom line, he always tended to adopt the official Israeli interpretation of the events (in *The Refugee Problem and Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*, but less in *Israel's Border Wars*). Another interesting issue is Benny Morris' compulsive dealings with the problems related to "transfer" of the Arab population, which most of his readers wrongly interpreted as anchored in a deep moral indignation.

As with most of Morris' other claims, the pretension to be the first and only Israeli who dealt with the ethnic cleansing of the Arabs reflected a partial reality. His book indeed touched a very central and painful nerve of the Israeli-Jewish current past, the uprooting of about 700,000 Arab Palestinians from the territories that would become the Jewish state, the refusal to allow them back to homes after the war, and the formation of the refugee problem during the period of the 1948 war and after. He also surveyed some atrocities committed by Jews during the inter-communal war that played some role in the "voluntary" flight of the Arabs from their villages and neighborhoods. Weirdly enough, Morris devoted a very salient and extensive discussion to the centrality of idea of "transfer" (i.e., ethnic cleansing) in Zionist thought, but concluded that the Palestinians had not been expelled by the Israelis in compliance with a master plan or following a consequential policy. This was not precise.

Plan D and the Israelification of the Land

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 1970S, I HAD BEGUN TO WORK on research at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which, I hoped, would produce a Ph.D. thesis in sociology. The subject was the Zionist ideology of land and its relationship to other political doctrines. In the earlier stages of my research, I was shocked to discover that a major "purification" of the land (the term

"ethnic cleansing" was unknown in that period) from its Arab Palestinian inhabitant was done during the 1948 War by the Jewish military and para-military forces. During this research I found, solely based on Israeli sources, that about 350 Arab villages were "abandoned" and their 3.25 million dunums of rural land, were confiscated and became. in several stages, the property of the Israeli state or the Jewish National Fund. I also found that Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Agriculture, disclosed that about 700,000 Arabs who "left" the territories had owned four million dunums of land.

Another finding was that from 1882 until 1948, all the Jewish companies (including the Jewish National Fund, an organ of World Zionist Organization) and private individuals in Palestine had succeeded in buying only about 7 percent of the total lands in British Palestine. All the rest was taken by sword and nationalized during the 1948 war and after. Today, only about 7 percent of Israel land is privately owned, about half of it by Arabs. Israel is the only "democracy" in the world that nationalized almost all if its land and prohibited even the leasing of most of agricultural lands to non-Jews, a situation made possible by a complex framework of legal arrangements with the Jewish National Fund, including the Basic Law: Israel Lands (1960), the Israel Lands Law and Israel Lands Administration Law (1960), as well as the Covenants between the Government of the State of Israel and the WZO of 1954 and the JNF of 1961.

Now the remaining puzzle was if this depopulation was a "natural" consequence of the war, which led the Arab populations to flee the country, as Israel officially states all the time while simultaneously accusing the Arab leadership of encouraging this flight, or if it was an intentional Jewish policy to acquire the maximum amount of territory with minimum amount of Arab population. Further research showed that the military blueprint for the 1948 war was the so-called "Plan D" (Tochnit Daleth). General Yigael Yadin, Head of the Operations Branch of the Israeli unified armed forces, launched it on March 10, 1948. The plan expected military clashes between the state-making Jewish community of colonial Palestine with the Arab community and the assumed intervention by military forces of the Arab states. In the plan 's preamble, Yadin stated:

> The aim of this plan is the control of the area of the Jewish
> State and the defense of its borders [as determined by the UN
> Partition Plan] and the clusters of [Jewish] settlements outside

> the boundaries, against regular and irregular enemy forces operating from bases outside and inside the Jewish State.

Furthermore, the plan suggested the following actions, amongst others, in order to reach these goals:

> Actions against enemy settlements located in our, or near our, defense systems [i.e., Jewish settlement and localities] with the aim of preventing their use as bases for active armed forces. These actions should be divided into the following types: The destruction of villages (by fire, blowing up and mining) – especially of those villages over which we cannot gain [permanent] control. Gaining of control will be accomplished in accordance with the following instructions: The encircling of the village and the search of it. In the event of resistance - the destruction of the resisting forces and the expulsion of the population beyond the boundaries of the State.

The conclusion was that, as in many other cases, what seemed at first glance a pure and limited military doctrine, proved itself in the case of "Plan D" to comprise far-reaching measures that lead to a complete demographic, ethnic, social and political transformation of Palestine. Implementing the spirit of this doctrine, the Jewish military forces conquered about 20,000 square kilometers of territory (compared with the 14,000 square kilometers granted them by the UN Partition Resolution) and purified them almost completely from their Arab inhabitants. About 800,000 Arab inhabitants lived on the territories before they fell under Jewish control following the 1948 war. Fewer than 100,000 Arabs remained there under Jewish control after the cease fire. An additional 50,000 were included within the Israeli state 's territory following the Israeli-Jordan's armistice agreements that transferred several villages to Israeli rule.

The military doctrine, the base of Plan D, clearly reflected the local Zionist ideological aspirations to acquire a maximal Jewish territorial continuum, cleansed from Arab presence, as a necessary condition for establishing an exclusive Jewish nation-state.

The British colonial regime—between 1921 to 1948—provided a political and military umbrella under which the Zionist enterprise was able to develop

its basic institutional, economic and social framework, but also secured the essential interests of the Arab collectivity. As the British umbrella was removed, the Arab and the Jewish communities found themselves face-to-face in a zero-sum-like situation. By rejecting the partition plan the Arab community and leadership were confident not only in their absolute right to control the whole country that then had an Arab majority comprising two-thirds of the population, but also in their ability to do so. The Jewish community and leadership appreciated, on the one hand, that they did not have enough power and population to control the entire territory of Palestine and to expel or to rule its Arab majority. Thus, on the other hand, they officially accepted the partition plan, but invested all their efforts towards improving its terms and maximally expanding their boundaries while reducing the number of Arabs in them.

It was impossible, at that stage, to find hard evidence that, despite its far-reaching political consequences and meaning, "Plan D" was ever adopted by the "political level," or even discussed by it. My intuition said that many political and national leaders knew very well that there were some kind of orders and plans that were better not to discuss or present officially. Later Morris' findings supported the correctness this intuition. In any case, though, the way that the military operations of 1948 were conducted does not leave any room for doubts that Plan D was indeed the doctrine used by the Jewish military forces during this war, or about the "spirit" and perceptions behind it.

In the Winter of 1974, I submitted my Ph. D. thesis and it was approved by the relevant committee of experts in the Spring of 1975. For many years, I tried to publish it, without success. My senior colleagues at the Hebrew University explained to me with a strain of pity, "well everybody who lived in this country in that period knows precisely what happened, but it is not publishable yet. Perhaps it will be after a hundred years or so…." Some others kindly advised me to find more interesting topics for research. However, I insisted and finally I found the Institute of International Studies of the University of California at Berkeley ready to publish it. The book was published in 1983 under the title *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics*. Being a "dry" professional text, it did now draw public attention and achieved limited circulation but became well known and widely quoted by a small circle of experts.

Baruch Kimmerling

The Israeli Demographic Discourse

Morris' latest controversy involves the public position he has taken on the possibility of a second act of ethnic cleansing. It is impossible to understand this controversy without understanding the demographic background to it. The issue is a complex one, but stated briefly, if current demographic trends continue, Jews will cease to be the majority population even within pre-1967 Israel within the next 40 to 50 years. A younger Arab population with a far higher birthrate makes this almost inevitable, even if there is continued immigration from the Diaspora. This fact creates a great deal of anxiety among all segments of the Israeli polity.

The radical solution to this dilemma is "transfer" of the Arab populations. "Moderate" versions of these proposals call for exchanges of territories with their populations. In these scenarios, areas in Israel with large Arab populations like the lower Galilee would be given to a Palestinian state in exchange for Jewish settlements in the territories being incorporated into Israel. More extreme solutions to this dilemma call for forcible expulsions of Palestinians, not only from the occupied territories, but even from Israel itself. This fringe opinion, in the last years has become somewhat respectable.

Formerly, solutions involving transfer were voiced openly only by followers of Meir Kahane. Yet by 1990, another party endorsing "voluntary transfer," General Rehavam Ze 'evi's Moledet Party, had become part of the Israeli government coalition. The "voluntarily" was added only to preserve the party from being accused of inciting a crime. Presently, Moledet (as part of a parliamentary bloc headed by Benny Elon, another supporter of "transfer") is again part of the government. In 2002, the National Religious Party chose a new leader, General Effie Eitam, who has called for transfer of hostile Arabs to other countries if a major war presented an opportunity. Indeed, most transfer scenarios, including that newly proposed by Benny Morris, are based on a "War of Armageddon." which would provide the cover for massive ethnic cleansing. The recent American assault on Iraq heightened this atmosphere of "anticipation." No wonder that under those circumstances, in which the Israeli government was the most enthusiastic foreign supporter of the war, that a group of Israeli academics published in

the *Guardian* (October 2, 2002) a "hysterical warning" about the possible intention to commit such an act under the cover of a regional war.

As the Palestinian armed resistance and terror continued, public opinion polls consistently indicate a perpetual increase in the number of Israelis wishing to expel Palestinians from the occupied territories and even Israeli Arab citizens. For example, according surveys conducted by Asher Arian for Jaffe Center of Strategic Studies of Tel Aviv University, in 1991, 38 percent of the Jewish population supported the "transferring" of the Palestinians out of the occupied territories through force while 24 percent favored expelling also the Israeli Arabs. In 2002, the percentages rose to 46 and 31 consecutively.

The alternative solution is to use the remaining time to withdrawal from the occupied territories and to achieve a major reconciliation between the Jews and the Arab citizens of Israel and their full integration as individual and ethnic group within the Israeli state on a complete equalitarian basis. Proponents of this solution argue that the vast majority of the Arab citizens of Israel is committed to the Israeli state, its values and culture, and appreciates its potential democracy. Furthermore, this alternative solution is necessary to save Israel from being another pariah-state (like South Africa under Apartheid regime). Benny Morris' recent contribution to this controversy is to adopt a solution on the more radical end of a continuum of possible strategies for dealing with the so-called "demographic problem."

The Outing of Benny Morris

AT THE BEGINNING OF 2004, BENNY MORRIS INDUSTRIOUSLY prepared a "revised" version of his *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* and a Hebrew version of the *Righteous Victims*, and toward their publication he published two articles in the *Guardian* (October 3, 2003 and January 13, 2004) and gave an extensive interview to [*Haaretz Magazine*](#) (January 8, 2004). Basically the three pieces reflected the same ideas; however the Hebrew

interview is less subtle and more directed to Morris' internal political audience, therefore it is more interesting and calls for a critical reading.

First and foremost, the historian underlined the new findings that justify the new version of *Refugee Problem*: "What the new material shows [says Morris] is that there were far more Israeli acts of massacre than I had previously thought. To my surprise, there were also many cases of rape." After some detailed description of the rape and murder of Palestinian girls, Morris concluded that "because neither the victims nor the rapists liked to report these events, we have to assume that the dozen cases of rape that were reported, which I found, are not the whole story. They are just the tip of the iceberg." Additionally he found that in twenty-four cases, about 800 Palestinians were massacred under different circumstances. And he added:

> That can 't be accidental. It's a pattern. Apparently, various officers who took part in the operation understood that the expulsion order they received permitted them to do these deeds in order to encourage the population to take to the roads. The fact is that no one was punished for these acts of murder. Ben-Gurion silenced the matter. He covered up for the officers who did the massacres.

However, one of the most interesting conclusions of Morris—what brings him closer to my findings—is that

> from April 1948, Ben-Gurion is projecting a message of transfer. There is no explicit order of his in writing, there is no orderly comprehensive policy, but there is an atmosphere of [population] transfer. The transfer idea is in the air. The entire leadership understands that this is the idea. The officer corps understands what is required of them. Under Ben-Gurion, a consensus of transfer is created.

It is not yet ethnic cleansing as a pre-planned part of a military doctrine as I found in the initial research, but just "projected message." However, in another way this is worse then my conclusions because it is openly referred to Ben Gurion himself.

So far it is the "old good" and expected Morris. The restless debunker of Israel's sins. However, suddenly the interview took a sharp turn from historiography to philosophy: "Under some circumstances expulsion is not a war crime. I don 't think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands." Moreover,

> if he was already engaged in expulsion, maybe he should have done a complete job. I know that this stuns the Arabs and the liberals and the politically correct types. But my feeling is that this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all. If Ben-Gurion had carried out a large expulsion and cleaned the whole country— the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River. It may yet turn out that this was his fatal mistake. If he had carried out a full expulsion - rather than a partial one—he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations.

Leave apart for a moment the moral implications of this statement and ask about its factual basis. All previous research by Morris shows that the refugee problem was and still is the core issue in the Jewish-Arab conflict. A "full expulsion"—presuming that was possible from a military and international point of view (a very dubious presumption)—would only triple the number of refugees. Morris has no answer about how such a cleansing should reduce the suffering and by whom. He knows very well that the absorption of even the "limited number" of 700,000 refugees caused famine and epidemics in the "host" countries.

Another crucial point that Morris should know very well was that the conquest of the West Bank would have pulled the only well-trained Arab army into the conflict, the Trans-Jordan Legion. Such a conquest would have violated the tacit agreement between Ms. Golda Meirson and King Abdullah about the partition of the land of Palestine between the Jewish state and the Kingdom. In such a case, the balance of power in the 1948 war would have been different and would have resulted in the same outcome of the war. Ben Gurion was very anxious on this point, and the only battles between the Arab Legion and the Jewish forces were local and took places in the Jerusalem area, the only disputed territory between the sides.

But Morris has abandoned his historian's mantle and donned the armor of a Jewish chauvinist who wants the Land of Israel completely cleansed from Arabs. Never has any secular public Jewish figure expressed these feelings so clearly and blatantly as Professor Morris did. And in order to be completely lucid on this point he drew an analogy between Israel and North America: "Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history." I do not know today any American historian or social scientist that agrees that the annihilation of the indigenous population of the continent was a necessary condition for the American nation or the constitution of American democracy. And these are facts and not "political correctness" as Morris loves to call any arguments he cannot deny.

However the issue is less about what happened in past and more about Morris' wishful thinking and prophecy about the future: To the interviewer's question if Morris advocates a new ethnic cleansing today he replies: "If you are asking me whether I support the transfer and expulsion of the Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and perhaps even from Galilee and the Triangle [Israel], I say not at this moment. I am not willing to be a partner to that act. In the present circumstances, it is neither moral nor realistic. The world would not allow it, the Arab world would not allow it, it would destroy the Jewish society from within. But I am ready to tell you that under other circumstances, apocalyptic ones, which are liable to be realized in five or ten years, I can see expulsions. If we find ourselves with atomic weapons around us, or if there is a general Arab attack on us and a situation of warfare on the front with Arabs in the rear shooting at convoys on their way to the front, acts of expulsion will be entirely reasonable. They may even be essential."

This doomsday scenario drawn by Morris is so fantastical not only because the Palestinian citizens of Israel proved, despite very harsh conditions and generational discrimination their "loyalty" to the state, but also because the existence of dense Arab population within the narrow strip of the Holy Land is the best insurance Israel has against being attacked by strategic nuclear or other WMDs. Otherwise, Morris is unable to understand that the moment that nuclear, biological and chemical weapons were used in the context of the Middle East by any side, it is already too late to save anything in the region.

But hatred toward the Arabs, their society and culture crush any logic in Morris' thought. The Palestinians are "the barbarians who want to take our lives. The people the Palestinian society sends to carry out the terrorist attacks… At the moment, that society is in the state of being a serial killer. It is a very sick society. It should be treated the way we treat individuals who are serial killers." After thirty five years of oppression, colonization of their land, expropriation of their water, ignoring almost all of their freedoms, administrative detention of tens of thousands of Palestinians, systematic destruction of their social and material infrastructure, it is more than ironic to talk about the Palestinians as barbarians and a sick society. If the Palestinian society is sick, who is responsible for this sickness and which society is sicker and an institutionalized serial killer?

Morris' mind is full of contradictions: Before he described the Palestinian "barbarism" he described the whole conflict as "in comparison to the massacres that were perpetrated in Bosnia, that's peanuts. In comparison to the massacres the Russians perpetrated against the Germans at Stalingrad, that's chicken feed." To these one may add the American bombardment of Dresden into rubble and other innumerable atrocious acts committed by the "Westerner" and other non-Arabs to conclude who are the "barbarians." Or after describing the rapes and the massacres committed by the Jews he comments that "it turns out that there was a series of orders issued by the Arab Higher Committee and by the Palestinian intermediate levels to remove children, women, and the elderly from the villages. Morris interprets that as proof that many of those who fled the villages did so with the encouragement of the Palestinian leadership itself, which proves that the Jews were not so much responsible for the cleansing. Morris cannot understand the obvious: what could be more human, in the face of rapes and massacres, than evacuation of women and children from a war zone? So, again the non-human Palestinian victims are responsible for the consequences. To say that he applies a double standard is a serious understatement.

By the same token, Morris fails to ask the right questions about the failed Camp David summit. If the Palestinian strategy is to destroy Israel in phases, why didn't they accept the "most generous offers" of Ehud Barak Camp David summit, as was described in the famous interview of Morris with Barak in the *New York Review of Books* (June 13, 2002)? But one cannot ask for much logic in an emotional outburst by an archivist, when he tries to

compose a generalized and coherent picture from his thousands of details. Then he turns to his own prejudices and stereotypes of the Islamic and Arabic culture that happen to be fashionable and well fit the present moods of the Israeli-Jewish and some parts of Western political culture since the September 11 calamity. But the historian is not just a part of the collective mood and expresses it, he also provide historical and intellectual legitimacy to the most primitive and self-destructive impulse of a very troubled society. Perhaps it is indicative that to the interviewer's question—"if Zionism is so dangerous for the Jews and if Zionism makes the Arabs so wretched, maybe it was [from the start] a mistake?"—Morris lacks any meaningful answers.

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