

## History and Power in the Middle East: A Conversation with Ilan Pappé

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**Q:** *What is your background and how do you see your own development as a historian?*

**Pappé:** I was born in 1954 to a German Jewish family in Haifa where I lived in blissful ignorance about the world beyond the comfortable and safe mount Carmel until I reached the age of 18. At that age I began my military service which introduced me to other groups and to the host of social problems facing Israeli society. But it was only in the 1970s, at Hebrew University, that I was exposed to the plight of the Palestinians in Israel as an undergraduate in the department of Middle Eastern History. It was then and there that I found my love for history and developed my belief that the present cannot be understood and the future changed without first trying to decipher its historical dimensions.

It was clear that this could not be done freely inside Israel-especially if its own history was to be my subject matter. This is how I found myself at Oxford in 1984 as a D. Phil student under the supervision of two great supervisors, the late Albert Hourani and Roger Owen. The thesis was on the 1948 war in Palestine, a subject that has engaged me ever since my career as a professional historian began. This is still a subject that haunts me and I regard the events of that year as the key to understanding the present conflict in Palestine as well as the gate through which peace has to pass on the way to a comprehensive and lasting settlement in Palestine and Israel. Intimate and strong friendships with Palestinians and the newly declassified material in the archives produced my new look at the 1948 war. I challenged many of the foundational Israeli myths associated with the war and I described what happened in Palestine in that year essentially as a Jewish ethnic cleansing operation against the indigenous population. This conviction informed not only my work as a historian but also affected significantly my political views and activity.

I also ventured, in between my forays in the 1948 story, into the exciting-but always productive for me-world of historiosophy and hermeneutics. I do think, in retrospect, that much of what I had read and discussed influenced my attitude to historiography in general. I treat history from a much more

relativist point of view than many of my colleagues and I was also highly impressed by the need—which informs my work in the last few years—to write more a history of the people and less a history of the politicians, and more a history of the society and less of its ideology and elite politics.

**Q:** *You have often been associated with “revisionist history” and the emergence of a “post-Zionist” discourse: what do these terms mean and how have they affected the political climate in Israel?*

**Pappé:** Revisionist history means those books written by Israeli historians about the 1948 war that question the essential foundational Israeli myths about that war. First among them is that it was a war between a Jewish David and an Arab Goliath. The new historians described an advantage for the Jewish military side in most stages of the war. They also pointed to the prior agreement between the Jewish state and the strongest Arab army—the Arab Legion of Transjordan—that neutralized the Palestinian force and limited its activity to the Greater Jerusalem area. This prior understanding divided post-Mandatory Palestine between the Jews and the Hashemites of Jordan at the expense of the Palestinians.

As for post-Zionism, this adjective is usually associated with critical research in Israel on various chapters in the history of Zionism and Israel. It includes sociologists who view Zionism as colonialism, historians who doubt the sincerity of the Zionist effort during the Holocaust, and it also criticizes the manipulation of Holocaust memory within Israel. Among them you can find scholars identifying with the fate of the Mizrahi Jews in Israel and who deconstruct the attitude of the state, especially in the 1950s, toward these groups employing paradigms of research offered by Edward Said and others in postcolonial studies. Palestinian Israelis have done the same in looking at the attitude of the Jewish state toward the Palestinian minority and feminists have critically analyzed the status of women and gender relations as they developed through time in the Jewish State.

In the 1990s, when most the works of the revisionist and post-Zionist historians and scholars appeared, there seemed to be some impact on the general public. You could see it in documentary films on television, in op-eds in the printed press and in some textbooks and curricula in the educational system.

But after the outbreak of the second intifada in October 2000, not much was left of the previous readiness of Israeli society to hear critical voices on the past. The electronic media loyally towed the official line; the printed press silenced critique in general; and revisionist textbooks were taken out of the school system.

One could probably say that it never affected the political system, but it seems to have taken root in Israeli civil society and its impact will, I think, be felt in years to come.

*Q: Your last book dealt with 1948 and you suggest that Israel is still living with the consequences of choices made then. Could you elaborate on this?*

**Pappé:** This was not my last book. My last book was *A History of Modern Palestine*, published by Cambridge University Press. My last book on 1948 is *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* published by I. B. Tauris.

Indeed, I think that the ethnic cleansing in 1948 will never allow Israel to reconcile with the Palestinians and the rest of the Middle East, nor to live in peace with its own Palestinian minority unless Israel boldly faces the past. The ethnic cleansing included the destruction of more than 400 villages, 11 towns and the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians.

The Israeli state, as a political entity, has to acknowledge the ethnic cleansing. Until today it had failed to do so and it should be made accountable for its deeds and offer compensation for the people it wronged. This should be done on the basis of UN Resolution 194 that allowed the refugees to choose between compensation and return.

*Q: The plight of the Israeli Arabs and those Arabs living in the occupied territories is often underestimated: they are seen as poor and exploited but, if I can put the matter this way, not particularly more than any number of other peoples. Is there something systematic here that is reminiscent of apartheid or even ethnic cleansing?*

**Pappé:** There are of course differences in the way Israel treats the Palestinians living under occupation and those whom it regards as citizens. But there are also common features of that policy. Let us begin by charting

the common ground. It is beyond the scope of this interview to present the emergence of Zionist attitudes and perceptions about the indigenous population of Palestine. What suffices in this context is to point to the final formulations of this process: a dehumanization of the Palestinians, their exclusive depiction as a security problem and the wish to have a pure Jewish state, empty of any Arabs or Arabism.

The wish to retain the façade of a democracy complicated the translation of these attitudes into actual policy toward Palestinians inside Israel, those who are officially regarded as citizens. Until 1966, in the name of security, the rights of these Palestinians were removed and they were subjected to cruel military rule. But when, after 1967, the U.S.-Israeli alliance became the central source for the Jewish State's existence, one of the more democratic features developed among them was the abolition of that military rule. Racism and apartheid—which were official policy under military rule—now became illicit and in a way more dangerous because it was more difficult for human and civil rights organizations to expose them. In the years since 1967, as a Palestinian citizen you could never know where the racism and discrimination would hit you. It meant that at any given minute, without prior knowledge, you were likely to encounter *de facto* segregation, discrimination, abuse of basic rights and even death. This is still the state of affairs today, and in many ways it has worsened since the outbreak of the second intifada.

On top of all of this, Palestinian citizens in Israel suffer from a *de jure* discrimination as well. There are three laws in the country that define most of the cultivated land as belonging exclusively to the Jewish people and hence cannot be sold to, or transacted with, non-Jews, namely Arabs. Other *qua* apartheid laws are the law of citizenship that demands naturalization processes for the indigenous population while the law of return grants it unconditionally to unborn yet Jewish children everywhere in the world.

There are clear policies of discrimination in the welfare system, in the budgeting of public services and in the job opportunities, especially in industry, of which 70 percent is termed “Arab Free” as it is strongly connected to the military and security sector. But I think it is the daily experience—as I described it above—of the license for everyone who represents the state to abuse you at will that is the worst aspect of living as a Palestinian in the Jewish state. To this has lately been added the fear of ethnic cleansing and expulsion.

The situation in the occupied territories is far worse. House demolitions, expulsions, killings, torturing, land confiscation and daily harassment at will of the population has been going on from the first day of occupation in 1967: it did not start because of the suicide bombs which appeared for the first time in 1995 as a very belated Palestinian response for more than 25 years of occupation. The situation has only become worse in the last four years. There are several spheres of brutality that should be mentioned: the collective punishment, the abuse of thousands of detainees and political prisoners, the transfer of people, the economic devastation, the slaying of innocent citizens and the daily harassment at checkpoints. Lately to this was added the fence that is ghettoizing thousands of people, separating them from their land and their kin and/or destroying their source of living and their houses.

*Q: This wall is being termed a “wall of separation.” Perhaps you can offer some reflections on this symbol of oppression and its implications.*

**Pappé:** I think the wall fits well into older Zionist notions of how to solve the problem of Palestine while taking into account realpolitik such as the need to maintain Israel’s external image and keep a cordial relationship with the West and the United States in particular. The aim has always been, and it still remains, to have as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible. Only very unique historical circumstances, such as those that existed in 1948, allowed for mass expulsions of the Palestinians on the way to realize the vision of a totally de-Arabized Palestine. In the absence of, or while waiting for such circumstances, more gradual means have been employed. The first is an internal Israeli decision on how much of historical Palestine is needed for sustaining the Jewish State. The consensus between Labor and Likkud today is that the Gaza strip is not needed and that half of the West Bank as well can be given up. The half of the West Bank that is left to the Palestinians, however, is not a contiguous territory: it is bisected by areas in the West Bank deemed necessary for Israel’s survival, because they include water resources, historical sites, strategic positions and large post-1967 Jewish settlements. The drawing of this new map can either be done with the consent of a Palestinian leadership or without it.

The second device is a set of operations meant to cleanse the indigenous population of those areas that were annexed to Israel from the West Bank.

Today there are about a quarter of a million people inhabiting these regions. As in 1948, the issue is not just expulsion, but also anti-repatriation. So the wall that is being built demarcates the eastern border of Israel (so that the Jewish State will consist of 85 percent of original Palestine) and is meant to draw a clear demographic line between the Jewish and Palestinian populations. People who have already been chased out of their houses while the wall and security zone around it was constructed, and those who are in danger of being evicted in the future, will be blocked from coming back by the wall.

The third step is an Israeli willingness to define the Gaza strip and what would be left of the West Bank as a Palestinian state. Such a state cannot be a viable political entity and would be akin to two huge prison camps—one in the Gaza Strip the other in the West Bank—in which many people would find it difficult to find employment and proper housing. This may lead to immigration and de-population that may raise the appetite of Israel for more land.

Two final points: the wall would leave the Palestinians citizens of Israel, as a “demographic” problem inside the wall. Zionist policies in the past and present Sharonite plans raise severe concerns for the fate of these people, presently still citizens of Israel who number more the one and a quarter million today. The second point is that the wall will also turn Israel into a prison hall—wardens and inmates are quite often both prisoners—which means that the siege mentality that lies behind some of the most cruel and aggressive Israeli policies inside and outside the country will continue.

*Q: The Geneva Accords have raised the hopes of many: critics have attacked their advocates, however, and emphasized the need for a bi-national state rather than a “two-state” solution to the current crisis. Where do you stand?*

**Pappé:** First, I do support a bi-national state and find it a far better solution than the two-states solution offered by the Accords. In fact, I will even go further than that and claim that only a secular democratic single state will, at the end of the day, bring peace and reconciliation to Palestine. It is the only political structure that allies with the demographic composition on the ground—the absence of any clear homogenous territorial communities, the need to repatriate the refugees, and the danger of the politics of identity on both sides if they are to become state identities and the need to cater to

crucial and urgent agendas such as poverty and ecological problems that cannot be dealt with by a national structure in either Israel or Palestine alone.

The Geneva initiative is, like so many other peace plans in the past, an Israeli dictate that seeks, and quite often finds, Palestinian partners. This present peace plan, like the previous one, has three assumptions that have to be deconstructed. The first is that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 is irrelevant to the making of peace. The second is that peace excludes any solution for the refugee question based on the right of return and Israeli accountability for the catastrophe of 1948. The third, is that the Palestinians are not entitled to a state, but a dependency over roughly 15 percent of historical Palestine and for that they should declare the end of the conflict.

My point is that indeed everything possible should be done to end the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip and liberate it from Israeli control and pass it to Palestinian hands. But this can only be a first step, because such a withdrawal does not solve the predicament of most of the Palestinian people, who live in refugee camps or are citizens of Israel. The end of the occupation is not equivalent to the end of the conflict, as is stated in the Geneva document, it is a precondition for peace.

Israel has first to acknowledge the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and make itself accountable by implementing UN resolution 194. In the meantime, given the realities surrounding the return of refugees and the presence of so many Jews in Palestinian areas, there will be a need to look for the appropriate political structure that can carry this reconciliation. For me, the best is the one state structure.

*Q: What would you say to those who claim that the current policies of the Sharon regime are in reality necessary in order to assure the security of Israel from terrorist fanatics?*

**Pappé:** There are two answers. The first is that these policies were in tact from 1967, long before the first suicide bomber was even born. The second is that we should say to them what we say to those who claim that the neocons in Washington planned the occupation of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Iran because of 9/11. I think we all know that 9/11 was a pretext for a strategy born in a certain American school of thought of what America is all about and how it should control the world politically, militarily and economically. The suicide bombers are a pretext for implementing a harsher

version of policies of collective punishment meant to enable the territorial enlargement of Israel and the de-population of further parts of Palestine.

*Q: Israel is often depicted as the lone outpost of democracy in the Middle East. How legitimate is this claim? Or, further, is a redefinition of democracy taking place in your country?*

**Pappé:** I think that one of the major tests for a democracy is the treatment of minorities. If this is accepted as a principal test case than it is ludicrous to define Israel as a democracy, let alone as an outpost of democracy. There are official and formal characteristics which justify the definition of Israel as a democracy, but it is so flawed in the field of maintaining basic civil and human rights, that notwithstanding these attributes, one can still cast severe doubts about the definition of the state as a democracy.

As I have tried to show in the analysis of the Israeli attitude to Palestinians as citizens or under occupation, the basic Israeli policy is a mixture of apartheid practices and colonialist attitudes. But also the role of religion in the state and the consequent violation of basic rights as a result are additional reasons to look for a different definition for Israel, rather than search a new definition for democracy.

*Q: What do you make of what has been termed the “new anti-Semitism”?*

**Pappé:** I do not think there is a new anti-Semitism. There is anti-Semitism, rooted in the extreme right in Europe and the United States. It has been silenced to a great extent since 1945 and it is still a marginal phenomenon. There are strong sentiments against Israel and Zionism both on the Left and among the communities of Muslim immigrants. Some of the actions taken are reminiscent in form and tone of the old anti-Semitism, but for the most part, these actions have been taken against Jews who chose to represent Israel in their own countries and thus became targets for legitimate and illegitimate actions against them. Particularly appalling is the use by the Israeli government and its supporters of the anti-Semitism card in order to silence any criticism on its policies in Palestine.

**Q:** *Do you see any sources of change and hope?*

**Pappé:** Alas, not in the near future, but I am quite hopeful about the long term. I think there are signs that elements of civil society both in Israel and in Palestine are willing to take the issue of resolving the conflict away from the politicians who hijacked it for their own personal and narrow interests. Such actions on the part of civil society, however, will unfortunately not prove effective or assume a mass character unless there is strong external pressure on, and condemnation of, the Israeli state and its policies. A more hopeful scenario cannot materialize unless that occurs and more blood will be shed in another round or two of violence.

**Q:** *Arab critics have described Zionism as a form of racism: how would you deal with that assessment?*

**Pappé:** Zionism is both a national movement and a colonialist project. Most national movements have an inherent racist element in them. They differ in how significant this element in the national discourse and practice actually is. In Zionism, it is a particularly meaningful signifier of self-identity.

Colonialism is also very closely associated with racism and there are many features of Zionism in the past and the present that are purely colonialist in character. The only thing I would object to in identifying Zionism and racism is the tendency to neglect other vital aspects of Zionism such as its importance for creating a Hebrew culture, a new nation state, and a safe haven for some Jews.