

## Israeli Jewish myths and the prospect of American war: *Ilan Pappé interviewed by Greg Dropkin*

*Dr. Ilan Pappé is an Israeli historian at Haifa University who writes on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the history of the 1948 war. He was interviewed on 11 Sept 2002, before addressing a public meeting and open debate at the University of Manchester. Both events were recorded by Joseph Cooper and Kristin Karlsson. Photos: Kristin Karlsson, Pertier Media*

Transcript of interview:

I think there are 3 main myths that inform mainstream Israeli Jewish society. A lot of them still believe, because that's the way they have been educated, that Palestine had been empty when the Jewish settlers came there in the late 19th century. There is still a feeling there that basically the Palestinian inhabitants of Palestine are either a nuisance or newcomers, or irrelevant. They are an obstacle, but not people with rights or indigenous rights.

The second myth is more directly connected to 1948. Most Israeli Jews believe that the Palestinians left voluntarily in 1948. They are not aware, or do not want to be aware of the fact that an ethnic cleansing took place in 1948.

And the third myth concerns the Occupation. Very few Israelis would call it an Occupation at all. Very few relate to any of the Palestinian demands to end the Occupation, and most Israeli Jews would regard the war against them not as a war of liberation or a war against Occupation, but as part of the more general scheme by Arabs or Muslims in general to destroy the Jewish State.

*Going back to 1948 for a bit, could you give a little more detail of your own historical research.*

A group of us are called the "New Historians", those who revise and

challenge the main Israeli version of 1948. We debunk several myths.

The first myth is that Israel was fighting the whole of the Arab world in a kind of David and Goliath war. Although there was a lot of war rhetoric from the Arab side, very few Arab soldiers were sent into the battlefield, and actually for most of the war there was superiority on the side of the Israeli army. In fact one of the most important Arab armies, the Jordanian army, had colluded with the Israelis before the war to divide Palestine. So the first myth we undermine is the “few against many” - which is very important in the Israeli psyche, the Israeli mentality.

The second and most important myth is that the Palestinians left voluntarily. We found out that there was a systematic expulsion of Palestinians and an ethnic cleansing operation taking place.

We also found there had been willingness on the Arab side in general and on the Palestinian side in particular, to conclude some sort of an agreement with the Jewish State after the war, and it was the Israeli intransigence and inflexible position that failed the peace efforts after the 1948 war.

*The strategy was set out even well before 1948 with the Transfer Committee.*

Yes. The Transfer Committee was part of the outfit in pre-1948 Palestine, that belonged to the Jewish Agency, to the Jewish leadership. And its main position was actually to evaluate the “quality” of the 500 - 600 Arab villages, i.e. to find out which village had fertile land, what was the wealth of each and each village. It was preparing for the day that Israel would take over these villages. And then, after the ethnic cleansing took place, it was renamed and became more like a distribution committee. It had to divide the spoils between the various Kibbutzim movements, and the various Jewish agencies that dealt with Settlement. And so it was an important official facet of the

leadership. But it was all conceived by the leader of the Jewish Agency and later the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion. The committee were just the officials, they were not the decision-makers in this case.

*After the war ended, presumably some Palestinians wanted to return. What happened to them?*

Yes, there was a clear anti-Repatriation policy. Even before the war ended, most of the deserted and evicted Palestinian villages were erased from the earth, and either turned into Jewish settlements or into fertile land. So by destroying the houses, in many ways Repatriation or Return became impossible, although the United Nations sanctioned such a Return as something that Israel should do. Some Palestinians, a small number, 25,000, no more, succeeded in smuggling their way back into Israel. So there was an actual policy that prevented Return, a few did return and were reunited with their families, but most of them could not.

*How was all of this covered up? If one of the myths was that this never happened, how could this be sustained?*

It's an interesting question! I still try to find my answers to that. One way was by creating an indoctrinating system of education, in which the people who perpetrated the ethnic cleansing cooperated. From the moment the war ended the people who fought in the war were also the people who wrote the history books of the war. And they already had a story they made up about what had happened, and that story was integrated into the Israeli education system, the media, the political discourse. And with the help of the launderette of words all kind of new words were invented to hide what had really happened on the ground. Because of the Holocaust it was easier for Israel to do it than for any other nation, I think. And it succeeded.

The second reason is that the Palestinians were under such a shock

and trauma, that when they started to tell the story it was a bit too late. It was so many years after, that it was less relevant in the eyes of many good people in the world.

*Did the left play any role in perhaps not telling the story as forcefully as it could? For example what was the attitude of the Soviet Union in 1948?*

Yeah, that's a good point. Well "left" is something obscure. In the local context there is the Zionist Left, there is the non-Zionist Left, there is the Soviet Union. Well first of all let's state very clearly, the people who perpetrated the ethnic cleansing were the Left, not the Right-wing. The Left Zionist movement, the Socialist Zionist movement, are the people who expelled the Palestinians. So definitely the fact that they had done it, and they were seen as the moderate part of the Israeli polity, made it easier to cover it.

Yes, the fact that the Soviet Union had supported the Partition resolution helped. But I think the Soviet position is more complicated. Because on the one hand it supplied arms to the Israelis, and this is something which of course helped the ethnic cleansing. On the other hand they supported the Partition resolution which did not call for an ethnic cleansing. In fact it called for the creation of a bi-national Arab-Jewish state. According to the Partition resolution, almost 50% of the citizens of the future Jewish State were supposed to be Palestinians. The fact that the Palestinians rejected the plan and so on, enabled the Israelis later on to say that they had accepted the Resolution and had it not been for the Palestinian refusal, the war would not have taken place. Which is I think quite a false argument. But coming back to the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union at least supported a solution that at the time meant that there would be two, I would say "stateless states". One has to read the Partition resolution very carefully. Unfortunately also the Palestinians did not read the Partition resolution carefully enough at the time to understand that it had more in it for their sake than met the eye. But then that was too late anyway, it was done.

*In writing about the myth that expulsion never happened you have called it "Nakbah Denial"*

Absolutely.

*and that obviously echoes the phrase "Holocaust Denial"*

Absolutely.

*and there are other echoes of the Nazi era in the current situation, I think we were all amazed with putting the numbers on the arms at Tulkarem. How do you interpret these echoes of Nazism?*

I would say first of all and it's important to many people to make it very clear that one doesn't, shouldn't and cannot equate a genocide with ethnic cleansing. They are both terrible things but definitely a genocide is a far worse human crime than ethnic cleansing. And one should not equate the Holocaust with the Nakbah. I think that should be very clear and I think that most of my Palestinian friends at least don't. But there is a dialectical connection between the Holocaust and the Nakbah. On two levels.

One is the fact that there is a chain of victimisation here. The Palestinians are the victims of the victims of the Holocaust. And you would have expected the victims of the Holocaust not to perpetrate any crimes against humanity. And definitely when you start looking at exactly what had been done to the Palestinians, what is being done to the Palestinians nowadays you can see, not from the genocide phase of the Holocaust, I think there is no resemblance there, but definitely from the pre-extermination phase there are many, many things which resemble. Because ethnic cleansing also took place in Nazi Germany, and discrimination also took place before the horrible phase of extermination.

So that's on one level. The second level is no less important, that there is what I call the "Nakbah Denial", "Catastrophe Denial". I think there is a similar "Holocaust Denial" on the Palestinian side, and I am a great believer that in order to further the chances of reconciliation, you have to have a kind of link, an association between the ability of the Israelis to stop denying the Nakbah, and the Palestinians accepting that the Holocaust plays a role in the life of Jews in Israel, and the life of Jews everywhere. I'm not inventing the wheel, this was first mentioned by Edward Said in his book "The Dispossession of the Palestinians", but I think it's a good idea. That we are all there victims also of the Holocaust, not only of what we are doing to each other.

*Does it cause ripples in Israeli society now when people see these things?*

Oh no, unfortunately not. No the Israeli society is still numb, and very indifferent. We have a national singer who was appalled when she saw that, Yaffa Yarkoni, probably The National Singer, and she's boycotted ever since she dared to say that it reminded her of Nazi Germany. No no, in a way it's a non-starter in Israeli political debates, you're not allowed to do this. I think you should, but you're not allowed to. No unfortunately there is no sensitivity in the Israeli Jewish society. On the contrary I think the major thing that Israelis are doing now is blaming anyone who criticises them of being pro-Nazi, at worst, or someone who doesn't understand the Holocaust, at best.

*You yourself have also suffered some victimisation.*

Well I suffer it in 3 levels. One is that I've written several books in English, but they are not translated into Hebrew, so this is a kind of boycott of books which goes on. The second one is the more sort of personal intimidation through the phone and letters, and so on. And the third one is sort of the climax of this whole campaign, there was an attempt to expel me from my University in May 2002. And it was difficult because I have tenure, I have a permanent position at the

University. It was a legal procedure that has been suspended, because of international pressure.

The concrete reasons for the last phase was that I protected a student, not my student but someone I know very well, who in his MA dissertation revealed that there was a massacre in the village of Tantura in the 1948 war, one of the worst massacres in that war. And although he received the highest grade possible for his excellent thesis, because the veterans of the Unit that he accused of perpetrating the massacre sued him in court, the University changed its attitude. He is being disqualified and robbed of his title. And I accused the University of certain things because of that, and because of these public accusations I was myself brought to trial, which can still be resumed next academic year.

*Oh, so it's just in limbo.*

It's in limbo, it hasn't been dropped, and I think unless there is a dramatic change in the general atmosphere which unfortunately I cannot foresee, I'm afraid that it will be resumed, probably. I'm ready for this!

*I'm sure your supporters are as well.*

Yes.

*Well, I understand that you are calling for, at least a debate on the question of an academic boycott.*

Absolutely. I think it's very important to distinguish it as an Israeli call because in the end of the day it's up to people outside of Israel to decide whether they should boycott or not, I don't think that I can boycott myself, it's a kind of a paradox. I mean I have signed a

petition which supports boycott in Israel but practically doesn't mean much from my point of view.

What I wrote and I'm going to write more in the future, that there are three agendas in the conflict. One is a long term agenda, which is a reconciliation effort, where no sanctions should be involved, no boycott should be involved, in fact no armed struggle should be involved. This should be a genuine effort by both sides to find a solution without outside pressure.

Then there is the agenda of ending the Occupation, there you need pressure on Israel to end the Occupation but again I'm not sure exactly what are the right means of doing it.

And then there is a third agenda, to which I think the boycott and my support of the boycott refers. And this is my conviction that the Israeli government is about to plan another Palestinian Catastrophe. It's going to use the war on Iraq to, what most Israelis would say, "solve the Palestine question once and for all". Meaning expelling as many Palestinians as possible and destroying what is left of Palestine.

And I think this has to be stopped and there is no way that you can stop it by negotiations or lobbying and so on, the only way to stop it is to have sanctions and to have boycott. I think these have to be limited boycott in time and in space, but I think that definitely a cultural and academic boycott can drive the message to good Israelis that there is a price to be paid for being indifferent. Not only for doing the things themselves, but even for being silent in Israel itself. And although we started as being 6 Israeli academics who supported it, out of 9,000, there are more Israelis now who understand it. I'm not trying to paint a picture of a massive movement, but I think there is more understanding than before. People are aware that the Sharon government will not be stopped by negotiations. And I'd rather see a cultural boycott than a severe economic boycott where common workers and farmers would be hurt, who are not to be blamed for what goes on, or bombing from the air by Nato or anything. It's a

small price to be paid, if I'm right that by that we may prevent another Catastrophe.

*What exactly do you want people to do?*

I want people to boycott Israeli institutes. Wherever there is an official and formal Israeli participation, I think Israelis should politely be told that as long as the present situation continues, unfortunately these institutions cannot be part of any international or regional conference. I don't think there's a need to hunt Israeli academics, but the official Israeli academic scene, or cultural scene. For example, I was asked by two Irish film-makers who were invited to the Haifa International Film Festival, whether they should come or not? And I wrote back, the Haifa International Film Festival, I was once an organiser of that Festival, is a very nice event, it's not a political event and so on. And yet, the only way the people in Haifa will understand that there is strong dissatisfaction with the way the government is behaving and what it is doing, is by the fact that they would lose international participation in that Film Festival. So I think it was nothing personal against the Film organisers, it was I think a very reasonable and sensible political act.

*So things like your visit here, to Manchester, that doesn't come under the things that you think should be boycotted?*

I don't think that someone who calls for a boycott can be boycotted, it's a bit of a paradox, I mean we are living in a world of paradox, but no I don't think. If I may be bold enough to liken myself to those whites in South Africa who supported the ANC, maybe even were members of the ANC, and during the period of boycotts on South Africa I don't think people boycotted the whites who joined the ANC or were sympathetic to the ANC. So I don't think my personal visit is part of the same problem.

*So it's a boycott of institutions.*

Absolutely, absolutely.

*You've mentioned the possible parallel with South Africa and obviously a lot of people are thinking about this in terms of apartheid, because of the legal framework in Israel and so on. Now during that period there was in fact a widespread economic boycott by trade unionists internationally, and indeed banks started pulling out of South Africa. You said that you didn't want the boycott to go that far, but do you think there is a role that the trade union movement internationally can be playing here?*

I think there is, I mean one has to wait and see, it has to be played very carefully and very reasonably. Like in every campaign of sanctions you cannot be absolute at the beginning, you have to be gradual, to see if it works, it works, if it doesn't work you have to exert more pressure. And probably exerting more pressure is going to the economic sphere, to the commercial sphere. Yes, I think that, unfortunately as I say there would be victims in Israel, I mean economic victims, cultural victims, but if something like this would not be done there's going to be a lot of life lost and more importantly maybe, Palestine would just be erased from collective memory, from our conscience. And this would be another tragedy. If we can prevent it, we should do all we can to prevent it.

*You wrote recently about the moves to fence off Israel from the West Bank, to construct a rigid barrier between the two. And you point out that some people on the Israeli Left, perhaps in quotes, support this tactic.*

Absolutely

*And you point out that this completely begs the question of the economic viability of what's on the other side of the fence. But it also has consequences for the 1 million Palestinians inside Israel.*

Yes, I wrote this article because I became very worried by the fact that those people who use the slogan "a 2-state solution" are using

another slogan, and these are people of the Israeli Left, these are the people of the Israeli Peace Camp. The other slogan is “we are here, and they are there”. They are behind the fence. It’s not a fence by the way, the Israelis are building an electric wall, it’s much more like a wall of a prison than a fence between two nations. And it meant that anyone who is not an Israeli Jew probably has to be on the other side of the fence.

And not surprisingly, Israelis from the Left, not Israelis from the Right, Israelis from the Left, started writing cautiously but nonetheless quite clearly about the possibility of transferring. they call it “voluntary transfer” which I think is an oxymoron, I don’t believe in it, a “voluntary transfer” of Palestinian citizens of Israel to the other side of the fence. And I think that it means that anybody outside of Israel who supports a 2-state solution, has to be very careful because those people who are now supporting a 2-state solution in Israel include Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He also supports a 2-state solution.

Because what they mean in a 2-state solution is that 90 percent of historical Palestine would be Israel. In the other 10 percent you’d have two huge prison camps. One in the Gaza Strip and one in the West Bank. And into these two camps, Sharon wants to expel as large a number as possible, depending on the circumstances, of Palestinians both from the rest of the West Bank which would be annexed to Israel, and from Israel itself.

So it raises all kinds of questions about the viability of the 2-state solution of which I myself was once a great supporter, and still many of my Palestinian friends, especially those in the Occupied Territories - I don’t think the Palestinian Diaspora supports it - but Palestinians in the Occupied Territories support. I think those who genuinely want to see a 2-state solution have to be very careful now with their fellow travellers and we have to rethink, I think, the political solution.

*Would you go as far as saying that without abandoning the Zionist character of the Israeli State there isn’t going to be a solution?*

Yes, I've written it very clearly. I think the de-Zionisation of Israel is a pre-condition for peace, I have no doubt about that.

*I read that you are a member of Hadash*

that's true

*and I'd like to know whether the views that you are expressing in this part of the interview are also theirs, or maybe not.*

No, they are not. But they are in a period of transition so I'm trying to have an impact on Hadash to go in that direction. The majority of people who like myself are part of the leadership - though I don't like that word - do not share my views. Most of the leadership would still go very clearly to the 2-state solution, especially as long as the Palestinian Authority is still there, and still Yasser Arafat believes in the 2-state solution. I think the rank and file are much more on my side. But it's a very open debate because my idea of a 1-state solution is still a vision. I wish we would be already at the point where we have to debate whether we support a 2-state solution or a 1-state solution. I think we have so much on our plate before that, there's still time for us to cooperate and therefore I think there is no reason or fear for a schism in the Party or whatever. So we are now fighting against the expulsion of Palestinian citizens from Israel, a more brutal kind of an Occupation. And when this is over I hope all of us will sort of rethink what will be the best solution. But as I say there is a more urgent agenda for us to fight for.

*Ok let's come to Iraq. I'm sure you are opposed to the prospect of war*

Absolutely, quite vehement.

*but as well as telling us about your own position I'd like to hear more about different sections of Israeli society and indeed the government.*

Well let me start with the government and then I'll move to the

society. It's interesting, just today I heard on Israeli radio, Ariel Sharon saying that there is no difference between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. He explained very well that in case of an attack on Iraq, Israel has the right to go into Lebanon and clean it from the Shi'ites, from the Hezbollah. So I think you get a glimpse into the Israeli plans for the contingency of a war.

I'm more worried, and I think it's even more feasible what the Sharon government is going to do in the Occupied Territories in case of an American attack on Iraq. What they do every day on a very slow and measured pace, they will do in one go. Whether it's expulsion or diluting the population or destroying houses on a massive scale and so on. So I think the Israeli government, and it reminds me very much of 1948, are not really worried about an Iraqi attack. I think they know for sure that the chances for a serious Iraqi attack on Israel are slim. I'm not saying they are non-existent, of course. But I think they are not that worried, they think either that the Iraqis don't have the capabilities, or if they have, that Israel has all the tools in its hands to prevent it. They are much more focused on what to do, "rightly" as Ariel Sharon would put it, to exploit the historical moment to the best of our abilities.

Now the public is a different story. I think the public is terrified. The Israeli press is full of horrible stories of the plague that would fall upon us from the skies, and they're really terrified. And I think this is on purpose. I think the Israeli government is terrifying its own public on purpose in order to create an atmosphere which would justify its actions in the future. So there is a full support for the American attack on Iraq, although at the same breath, the same people on the street will tell you "we support the American attack on Iraq, but we are very very frightened about the doomsday weapons the Iraqis have." Which is not a very logical sentence, but it's fully exploited by the government.

*And in terms of the different perspectives within the Israeli left that you were talking about before, where do they come out on this?*

I don't think there is really an Israeli left.

*Well ok, put everything in quotes.*

No I mean, that's the unfortunate thing, there are certain issues like the war on Iraq, like the Refugee problem, not the Occupation but the Refugee problem, where there is no left. There is a movement against the Occupation. There is, and one shouldn't underestimate it. And these are people who are within the Zionist camp, but they see the Occupation as something which corrupts Israeli society. And therefore there is a certain opposition to the Occupation. But this is not a movement for peace, they don't really want to reconcile with the Palestinians, and therefore I think they would gladly go for the wall or fence solution that we talked about.

Similarly on Iraq, they support the American position. You have to remember that in Israel, now this is something that I think is very difficult to explain to people from outside Israel, America is considered to be the precursor of bold peace initiatives. America recognised the PLO five years before Israel. America talked about illegal settlements ten years before Israelis did. So if America goes to war, this is America the peacemaker. And if they decide to go, this is how it's viewed in Israel, if they decide to go to war, it means that really they have exhausted any other possible means.

During the first war against Iraq, I think the number of Israeli Jews who would oppose the war would not need a larger place than this very very small room.

*But now there are a larger number of people who have broken through some of the myths and have for example defied the blockade and gone in to the Occupied Territories. How do those people feel about the impending war?*

These are important groups of people who are supporting and aiding the people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but we are talking about a cadre of 100 to 150 people within a population of 6 million. So I guess that half of these people would be against the war. I'm not underestimating their importance but I want to make clear, I think one has to be accurate about it because this is what made me, after a lot of hesitation, support the idea of boycott and sanctions, when I came to the conclusion that there are not enough forces from within that can change the government's policy. This is why I keep returning to the fact that the numbers of Israelis who are dissenting, or are dissenting voices, is very small.

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