

## Review of “The ethnic cleansing of Palestine” by Ilan Pappé

Ilan Pappé is an Israeli Professor of History who left the University of Haifa for the University of Exeter. His book “The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine” describes his view of what the Israelis did to the Palestinians in 1948. He claims that recently released documents show Israel had a deliberate, ruthless and successful plan of ethnic cleansing in 1948. He also claims he was forced out of Israel – and the University of Haifa in particular – because of the strong reaction by Israelis against his views.

His book has naturally been welcomed by pro-Palestinian Christians and, also understandably, strongly attacked by Zionists, including Christian Zionists. The danger is that both sides will take an emotive and rather uncritical approach which I try to avoid in this article. I shall outline both Pappé’s book and the criticisms of it.

Pappé believes that David Ben-Gurion was behind the ethnic cleansing plan. He quotes him as saying in June 1938 “I am for compulsory transfer [of the Palestinians]; I do not see anything immoral in it.” He wrote to his son in 1937 saying: “The Arabs will have to go, but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as a war.”<sup>1</sup> Ben Gurion ran with a rather shadowy organisation called the Consultancy.

According to Pappé, the Israeli military plan, codenamed Plan D (Dalet in Hebrew) gave orders to intimidate and forcibly evict Palestinians, besiege and bombard villages, demolish or set fire to houses and plant mines in the rubble to prevent people returning. A list of villages was given to each unit. In the six month mission 531 villages had been destroyed and some 800,000 Palestinians evicted.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s Pappé was one of the “new historians” in Israel who revised the accepted Zionist history of the 1948 and claimed to disprove the idea that the Palestinians left of their own accord. But he writes: “But we, the new historians, never contributed significantly to the struggle against the Nakba<sup>3</sup> denial as we sidestepped the question of ethnic cleansing and, typically of diplomatic historians, focused on details.”<sup>4</sup>

Pappé accuses one of the best known “new historians”, Benny Morris, of naively accepting military reports at face value and ignoring “such atrocities as the poisoning of the water supply into Acre with typhoid, numerous cases of rape and the dozens of massacres the Jews perpetrated.”<sup>5</sup>

He acknowledges that the Israeli forces did save the Jewish community from attacks and afforded a safe haven from religious persecution, but he says this was achieved by committing serious crimes against the Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> He admits it is “bewildering .... that the ethnic cleansing of 1948 has been eradicated almost totally from the collective global memory and erased from the world's conscience.”<sup>7</sup> The only adequate response, says Pappé, is for Israel to allow the unconditional return of the Palestinian refugees to their home.<sup>8</sup>

Pappé goes on to link Zionism with 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian millenarianism and European colonialism and the desire to create a Christian Palestine free from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>9</sup> He also refers to the desire of the Europeans to compensate the Jewish people for the Holocaust which happened on their soil but, in so doing, with no regard for the Palestinians. He writes: “It is clear that by accepting the Partition Resolution, the UN totally ignored the ethnic composition of the country's population. Had the UN decided to make the territory the Jews had settled on in Palestine correspond with the size of their future state, they would have entitled them to no more than ten per cent of the land.”<sup>10</sup> He added: “Several leading Palestinians at the time demanded that its legality be tested in the International Court of Justice (founded in 1946), but this was never to happen. One does not have to be a great jurist or legal mind to predict how the international court would have ruled on forcing a solution on a country to which the majority of its people were vehemently opposed.”<sup>11</sup>

He describes how the Israelis drew up detailed plans about Palestinian villages – how many guards (if any) and arms they had and a list of “wanted” persons in each village, namely those involved in the Palestinian national movement and having been involved in action against the British and the Zionists. He claims such people “were often shot on the spot.”<sup>12</sup>

There were, according to Pappé, “several massacres” by Israeli troops, not just the generally accepted Deir Yassin massacre.<sup>13</sup> For example, they attacked Khisas on 18 December 1947 and blew up houses at night when the occupants were asleep, killing 15 villagers including five children. This shocked the New York Times reporter who was present.<sup>14</sup> On 31 December Balad al-Shaykh was encircled and the Israeli commander was ordered to kill as many men as possible, but not women and children. Sixty Palestinians were killed, not all men.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Pappé records that 70 men were executed in Safsaf.<sup>16</sup> Pappé adds: “The oral testimonies, unlike the Israeli military archives, tell of even worse atrocities. There is very little reason to doubt these eyewitness accounts, as so many of them have been corroborated by other sources for other cases. Survivors recall how four women and a girl were raped in front of the other villagers and how one pregnant woman was bayoneted.”

Pappé describes the Israeli attack on Haifa and adds: “When Golda Meir, one of the senior Zionist leaders, visited Haifa a few days later, she at first found it hard to suppress a feeling of horror when she entered homes where cooked food still stood on the tables, children had left toys and books on the floor, and life appeared to have frozen in an instant. Meir had come to Palestine from the US, where her family had fled in the wake of pogroms in Russia, and the sights she witnessed that day reminded her of the worst stories her family had told her about the Russian brutality against Jews decades earlier. But this apparently left no lasting mark on her or her associates' determination to continue with the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the most controversial claims made by Pappé is that there was a massacre in Tantura when many of the hundreds of men were taken out in small groups and executed. He quotes Eli Shimoni, senior officer in the Alexandroni Brigade, as saying: “I have no doubt a massacre took place in Tantura.”<sup>18</sup>

He continued: “Israeli, and in particular American, public opinion, however, succeeded in perpetuating the myth of potential destruction or a 'second Holocaust' awaiting the future Jewish state. Exploiting this mythology, Israel was later able to secure massive support for the state in Jewish communities around the world, while demonising the Arabs as a whole, and the Palestinians in particular, in the eyes of the general public in the US. The reality on the ground was, of course, almost the complete opposite: Palestinians were facing massive expulsion.”<sup>19</sup>

Pappé records that one American journalist wrote: “Practically everything in their [the Israeli forces'] way died. Riddled corpses lay by the roadside.”<sup>20</sup> Another reported seeing “the corpses of Arab men, women and even children strewn about in the wake of the ruthlessly brilliant charge.”<sup>21</sup> He adds: “One might wonder why newspaper reports of a massacre on this scale did not provoke an outcry in the United States. .... At the time, American reporters .... were astonished by .... the Israeli 'Blitzkrieg, and by the resoluteness of the Jewish troops.” However, Pappé accuses the two journalists of neglecting “to provide a similarly probing report on the number of Palestinians killed, wounded, or expelled from their villages” and added that “the correspondents' reports were totally one-sided.”

Pappé quotes Arnon Soffer, professor of geography at Haifa University, “who is closely connected with the government” as saying: “We were murderous, but it was not malice for the sake of malice. We acted out of a sense of being exposed to an existential threat. And there were objective reasons for this feeling. We were convinced that without Jewish territorial continuity, especially along the national water carrier [the aqueduct that runs from the Lake of Galilee to the south of the country], the Arabs would poison the water.” Pappé comments (rather unconvincingly): “That there are no fences or guard posts along the entire route of the aqueduct raises doubts about the sincerity of the concern expressed here.”<sup>22</sup>

He regards the *London Economist* as less biased when it recorded that: “The Arab refugees were systematically stripped of all their belongings before they were sent on their trek to the frontier. Household belongings, stores, clothing, all had to be left behind.”<sup>23</sup>

Pappé writes: “It should be clear by now that the Israeli foundational myth about a voluntary Palestinian flight the moment the war started - in response to a call by Arab leaders to make way for invading armies - holds no water. It is a sheer fabrication that there were Jewish attempts, as Israeli textbooks still insist today, to persuade Palestinians to stay. As we have seen, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had already been expelled by force before the war began, and tens of thousands more would be expelled in the first week of

the war.”<sup>24</sup> However Ben Gurion did not want Nazareth to be depopulated because the eyes of the Christian West were upon it.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Pappé states that “Without the Jordanian Army [Jordan and Israel had reached a non-aggression agreement], the Arab Legion, the Arab world lacked all serious capacity to defend the Palestinians or foil the Zionist plan to establish a Jewish state in Palestine at the expense of the indigenous population.”<sup>26</sup> Initially, Israel had 50,000 troops fighting against 7000 Palestinian paramilitaries and between 1000 and 3000 volunteers from Arab countries. By the time the Arab forces reached its maximum of 50,000, the Israelis had 80,000. He adds: “the overall military, political and economic balance between the two communities was such that not only were the majority of Jews in no danger at all, but in addition, between the beginning of December 1947 and the end of March 1948, their army had been able to complete the first stage of the cleansing of Palestine, even before the master plan had been put into effect.”<sup>27</sup>

Pappé goes on to record that Israel has carefully concealed the visible remnants of Palestine by planting forests over them and “by the narratives it has created to deny their existence” and “spout the familiar myths of the narrative - Palestine as an 'empty' and 'arid' land before the arrival of Zionism”<sup>28</sup>

## Critique of “The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine”

Some Pro-Palestinian Christians have leapt to welcome Pappé’s book, regarding it as the truth coming out at last. Some Christian Zionists have condemned the book as inaccurate and anti-Israel. (Some readers may not be aware that there are Jewish people in Israel who reject the establishment of the State of Israel). These reactions are to be expected, but we need to be rather more critical than that.

I do not believe that it helps Israel to be uncritically supportive of her or to whitewash her behaviour. True friends of Israel (as true friends of the Palestinians) will be constructively critical. The fact is that there is a good deal of oppression and humiliation dealt out to the Palestinians today, particularly by some Jewish settlers and some checkpoint soldiers. At the same time anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish terrorism is alive and well. However we need to take a critical approach to the propaganda from both sides. Therefore we need to take a critical approach to Pappé’s controversial book.

I do not start with the assumption that Pappé’s book cannot be correct because it is so negative towards the Israelis. Israel is a secular democracy subject to all the faults of other western democracies. The Israelis are just as much sinners as we British or the Americans and we both have shameful periods in our history. If Pappé’s book is reliable then the British and Americans hardly have a leg to stand on criticising Israel. We have oppressed and dispossessed peoples in our imperial past even when there was no threat to our survival. We had not endured centuries of dreadful racial persecution leading to a Holocaust in our circumstances as was the case with Israel.

Nevertheless, there are valid reasons for posing questions about the reliability of Pappé’s book. Briefly, they include the following:

1. **Pappé is from an extreme left wing political position.** In 1996 he stood for the Knesset as a member of the Hadash Party. The main founder of and largest part of the Hadash coalition is the Israeli Communist Party. So Pappé is a senior member of a largely Communist political party in Israel. As such he rejects Zionism in favour of internationalism and a single Jewish-Arab State. He takes a Marxist view of history which sees Zionism as colonial – linked with British imperialism. He starts therefore with a prejudice against those who set up the Jewish state. Stephen Howe, Professor in the History and Cultures of Colonialism at Bristol University says that Pappé’s commitment to the Ethnic cleansing view “makes his book a slightly uneasy, if also often compelling, mixture of historical argument and politico-moral tract. His fervour also makes him rather less than generous in acknowledging others’ work in the field.” Benny Morris, another Israeli “new historian” whose work is severely criticised by traditional historians as fabricating Zionists’ crimes, writes of Pappé’s book “A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples” wrote: “Pappé regarded history through the prism of contemporary politics and consciously wrote history with an eye to serving political ends .... from the first Pappé allowed his politics to hold sway over his history.... We are both men of the left; but whereas since the late 1960s I

have consistently voted Labor or Meretz (a Zionist party to the left of Labor), Pappé, so far as I know, has always voted the Israel Communist Party ticket (under its different names) and has figured repeatedly in the party's list of Knesset candidates. During the past few years Pappé has veered even further leftward."<sup>29</sup>

2. **Pappé takes a very subjective postmodernist approach to history and believes there is no such thing as historical truth but only narratives shaped to promote particular political purposes.** Benny Morris comments: "Pappé is a proud postmodernist. He believes that there is no such thing as historical truth, only a collection of narratives as numerous as the participants in any given event or process; and each narrative, each perspective, is as valid and legitimate, as true, as the next. Moreover, every narrative is inherently political and, consciously or not, serves political ends. Each historian is justified in shaping his narrative to promote particular political purposes."<sup>30</sup> Pappé wrote in the introduction to his book "A History of Modern Palestine": "My bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the "truth" when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous. This book is written by one who admits compassion for the colonized not the colonizer; who sympathizes with the occupied not the occupiers." Pappé does not seem to take seriously the Jewish fears following the Holocaust. He does not refer to the effect of the killing of 6000 Jewish people killed by Arabs. He does not mention Arab threats to massacre Jewish people and he does not seem to take seriously successful Arab attacks on Jewish settlements. Nor does he mention the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Jewish people from Arab lands. Pappé also makes much of the Israeli Plan Dalet as being a plan for ethnic cleansing. His critics say that it was not a plan for expelling Arabs but for defending the Jewish population, including the temporary removal of civilians in specific cases, for strategic reasons, rather than wholesale expulsion. Having read the plan I have to respond that it certainly reads as Pappé's critics claim."<sup>31</sup>

3. **Pappé is alleged to have fabricated evidence.** Benny Morris writes: "Unfortunately much of what Pappé tries to sell his readers is complete fabrication. .. This book is awash with errors of a quantity and a quality that are not found in serious historiography... The multiplicity of mistakes on each page is a product of both Pappé's historical methodology and his political proclivities.... For those enamored with subjectivity and in thrall to historical relativism, a fact is not a fact and accuracy is unattainable .... "<sup>32</sup> Efraim Karsh, Director of the Mediterranean Studies Programme at King's College, University of London, accuses Pappé of writing about events that never happened, such as the nonexistent May 1948 Tantura "massacre" or the expulsion of Arabs within twelve days of the partition resolution. They learn of political decisions that were never made, such as the Anglo-French 1912 plan for the occupation of Palestine or the contriving of 'a master plan to rid the future Jewish state of as many Palestinians as possible.' And they are misinformed about military and political developments, such as the rationale for the Balfour declaration..."<sup>33</sup>

Pappé publicly supported a left-wing student, Teddy Katz, who wrote an MA thesis claiming, as Pappé does, that the Israelis perpetrated a massacre in the village of Tantura in 1948. In December 2000 Katz was sued for libel by members of the Alexandroni Brigade, whom he alleged were responsible for the massacre. Under pressure, Katz withdrew his allegations but Pappé continues to support them. In fairness it has to be said that some historians do not dismiss the allegations. New historian, Tom Segev whilst criticising Katz's history, thinks the massacre probably happened. Benny Morris thinks that some Tantura villagers were killed after they had surrendered.

4. **Pappé puts too much faith in oral testimony, including that received decades after the events.** Morris comments: "My own view is that the historian must base his work on primary written sources, that is, on contemporaneous documents, and must be exceedingly wary of oral history, especially when the events that are being remembered are morally sensitive and politically charged, and occurred many years ago. In the absence of contemporary documents, the historian may occasionally draw upon oral testimony for "color" or a sense of atmosphere, but never to reconstruct what actually happened."

5. **Pappé's work shows a lack of careful attention to facts and includes many factual errors.** Morris points out that Pappé gave mistaken dates for the establishment of the Stern Gang, the Palmach, the Arab Higher Committee, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the founding of Tel Aviv, for Ben Gurion

becoming chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, for the first truce between the Israelis and the Arabs, for the flight of the Grand Mufti from Jerusalem. He mistakenly claims that:

- the Arab Legion did not withdraw from Palestine, along with the British, in May, 1948 but most of its units did.
- that the UN partition proposal of November 29, 1947 had an equal number of supporters and detractors (the vote was 33 for, 13 against, and 10 abstentions);
- that the Jewish forces better equipped than the invading Arab armies in May, 1948 (Morris claims they were not by any means);
- that in August, 1948 'the successful Israeli campaigns continued, leading to their complete control of Palestine, apart from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip' (the Second Truce prevailed during August and September, and warfare was resumed only in mid-October);
- that the late nineteenth-century Zionist pioneers known as the Biluim established 'the first Zionist settlements in Palestine' (they did not), and that they 'were led' by Moshe Lilienblum and Leon Pinsker (they were not) and so on.

Pappe has admitted he made mistakes.

In an interview with *The Peninsula*, an English daily in Qatar in March 2007 Pappe said “he has found it increasingly difficult to live in Israel with his ‘unwelcome’ views and convictions.” He continued: “I was boycotted in my university and there had been attempts to expel me from my job. I am getting threatening calls from people every day. I am not being viewed as a threat to the Israeli society but my people think that I am either insane or my views are irrelevant. Many Israelis also believe that I am working as a mercenary for the Arabs”

The article about the interview also states: “A bit surprisingly, he said: "I support Hamas in its resistance against the Israeli occupation though I disagree with their political ideology. I am for separating state from religion," said Pappe.”<sup>34</sup>

Pappe left the University of Haifa in 2007. One issue was that Pappe had called for a worldwide boycott of Israeli Universities which, not unnaturally led to a call for his resignation from the authorities of his own university. However the university stated: “In actual fact, during the past few years, Dr. Pappe has transgressed all common ethical standards of academic life. Yet, despite his conduct, the University of Haifa has demonstrated extraordinary tolerance. One of his colleagues did indeed lodge a complaint with the internal faculty disciplinary committee. The complaint focused on Dr. Pappe's unethical behavior towards his peers and his efforts to disbar them from international forums for daring to contradict his views. However, Dr. Pappe was never summoned by the disciplinary committee as the committee's chairperson decided not to pursue the complaint. Moreover, and contrary to Dr. Pappe's claim, the university made no attempt to expel him .....Despite these violations of academic collegiality and ethics Dr. Pappe never faced disciplinary proceedings nor was his tenured status in any way endangered.”<sup>35</sup>

Whilst, as I said before, not intending to assume that Pappe’s book cannot be correct because it is so negative towards the Israelis, there does seem to be ample reason to approach his work with great caution. He admits his subjectivity which denies the reality of historical truth and his (extreme) political bias. He relies heavily on oral evidence from people who have experienced decades of political bias since the events they describe. He also tends to show a lack of careful attention to matters of fact. All of this hardly makes a good case for the credibility of “The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine” as reliable history.

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<sup>1</sup> p. 23

<sup>2</sup> p. xii

<sup>3</sup> The Palestinian term for the 1948 disaster

<sup>4</sup> p. xiv-xv

<sup>5</sup> p. xv

<sup>6</sup> p. 6

<sup>7</sup> p. 9

<sup>8</sup> p.7

<sup>9</sup> pp. 12-13

<sup>10</sup> p. 31

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<sup>11</sup> p. 34

<sup>12</sup> pp. 20-21

<sup>13</sup> p. 40

<sup>14</sup> p. 57

<sup>15</sup> p. 59

<sup>16</sup> p. 148

<sup>17</sup> p. 95

<sup>18</sup> p. 127 quoted from *Maariv*, 4 February 2001

<sup>19</sup> p. 122

<sup>20</sup> Keith Wheeler of *The Chicago Sun Times*, p. 168

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Bilby of *The New York Herald Tribune*, p. 168

<sup>22</sup> p. 223

<sup>23</sup> p. 168

<sup>24</sup> p. 131

<sup>25</sup> pp. 170-171

<sup>26</sup> p. 44

<sup>27</sup> p. 85

<sup>28</sup> pp. 228-229

<sup>29</sup> Benny Morris "Politics by Other Means," a review of Pappé's "A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples" in *The New Republic*, 22.3.04.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, op. Cit.

<sup>31</sup> The most relevant quotation from Plan Dalet seems to be as follows:

*(b) Consolidation of Defense Systems and Fortifications*

Mounting operations against enemy population centers located inside or near our defensive system in order to prevent them from being used as bases by an active armed force. These operations can be divided into the following categories:

Destruction of villages (setting fire to, blowing up, and planting mines in the debris), especially those population centers which are difficult to control continuously.

Mounting search and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the village and conducting a search<sup>7</sup> inside it. In the event of resistance, the armed force must be destroyed and the population must be expelled outside the borders of the state.

The villages which are emptied in the manner described above must be included in the fixed defensive system and must be fortified as necessary.

In the absence of resistance, garrison troops will enter the village and take up positions in it or in locations which enable complete tactical control. The officer in command of the unit will confiscate all weapons, wireless devices, and motor vehicles in the village. In addition, he will detain all politically suspect individuals. After consultation with the [Jewish] political authorities, bodies will be appointed consisting of people from the village to administer the internal affairs of the village. In every region, a [Jewish] person will be appointed to be responsible for arranging the political and administrative affairs of all [Arab] villages and population centers which are occupied within that region.

*(c) Deployment in Major Cities*

Occupation and control of all isolated Arab neighborhoods located between our municipal center and the Arab municipal center, especially those neighborhoods which control the city's exit and entry roads. These neighborhoods will be controlled according to the guidelines set for searching villages. In case of resistance, the population will be expelled to the area of the Arab municipal center.

Encirclement of the central Arab municipal area and its isolation from external transportation routes, as well as the termination of its vital services (water, electricity, fuel, etc.), as far as possible.

<sup>32</sup> Morris, op. Cit.

<sup>33</sup> Efraim Karsh review of "A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples" in the *Middle East Quarterly* Winter

2006, pp. 82-83. Karsh's criticisms apply to "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine" too.

<sup>34</sup> "Academic slams Israel for land grab", article by Mohammed Iqbal in the *Peninsular Web* posted at: 29/3/2007

<sup>35</sup> The University of Haifa Response to the AUT [Association of University Teachers] Decision (1.5.05)