

## Israeli Historian Ilan Pappé on Changing Perceptions: Israel/Palestine

summarized by Liza Burr

Ilan Pappé is a major Israeli New Historian who published the results of his groundbreaking research on the 1948 Israeli war of independence in his book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oneworld Publications, 2006). While teaching at Haifa University, Dr. Pappé received numerous death threats in response to his dissenting views, including his interpretation of the 1948 war. He moved to the UK in 2007 in order to join the faculty of the University of Exeter. A prolific author, Pappé is also an activist committed to a non-Zionist “one-state solution” for Israel/Palestine.

Liza Burr synopsised a talk, sponsored by the Middle East Committee of Women Against Military Madness, which Pappé gave via Skype in February of this year; the synopsis is followed by key points that she identified in his responses to questions posed by the audience after his talk.

Calling the topic of his talk “a new orientation,” or “new directions in our thinking about Israel/Palestine,” Pappé divided it into three parts.

First, he explained why the rhetoric of the “peace process” is so irrelevant to the realities on the ground for the Palestinians, including Palestinian refugees. He emphasized his view that the conflict needs to be correctly framed as one not between two national movements with equal claims to the land, but rather as one between a settler colonial movement that came to Palestine in the late 19th century—with the settlers reinventing themselves as a new people in a new homeland—and the indigenous people of the land. The goal of the Zionist colonial movement has been to acquire as much of the land of historic Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians living on it as possible. With respect to the Palestinians, Zionism has been an ideology of exclusion and racism. The war of 1948 (for Palestinians the Nakba--or the Catastrophe) was a war of ethnic cleansing designed to create a safe demographic haven for Jews (see Pappé’s *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2006). However, when it conquered the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel decided not to expel more Palestinians but instead to maintain control over them by offers of fake autonomy and other devices. The key to a solution to the ongoing conflict, he concluded, is decolonization; it is still possible for colonizers and colonized, or guests and hosts, to live together as equals.

Second, Pappé noted that what is needed is to teach people a new perspective with a new dictionary containing new terminology to describe the actual reality in Palestine. He and renowned linguist/political commentator Noam Chomsky have since published a book together entitled *On Palestine* (Haymarket Books, 2015) to meet this need. Pappé provided as an example the misnomer “occupation” for the status quo in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The term “occupation” normally refers to temporary, post-war military rule pending a political resolution.

The Israeli occupation, of nearly 48 years duration, is instead a type of colonization or incarceration; he described Gaza as a maximum security military prison.

Third, the “wrong logic” of the Oslo “peace process,” which went nowhere, is that Israel was allowed to pursue policies in defiance of the agreement. In the negotiations, it had been deemed mandatory to convince the weaker party (Palestinians) to do what the stronger party (Israel) wanted, with the result that Israel could act unilaterally in ways that made life in the Occupied Territories impossible; for instance, the settler population doubled in the 1990s. Moreover, the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the millions of Palestinian refugees have not been part of the official “peace process” conversation. Israel’s treatment of Israeli Palestinians, who are citizens of Israel (that is, Palestinians who remained within the borders of the 1948 state of Israel), increasingly resembles its treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Indeed Israel sees the peace process as “war by other means”; thus talks may continue inconclusively, but all the while “facts on the ground” are proceeding apace. The complacency and silence of the Western world allowed the establishment of Israel as a Zionist state. The message of non-accountability for this fait accompli, at the expense of the Palestinians, was integrated into world culture. Israel will not change until the world exerts strong pressure to make it change through such grassroots mechanisms as BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions). Israel/Palestine is already, in fact, one state—not two; it is vital that this state be secular and democratic, and that a way be found for the two peoples of this land to coexist on the basis of equal human and civil rights. Meanwhile, the victims of the ongoing conflict are mostly Palestinians, and the majority of Palestinian victims are women and children.

Key Points Made by Pappé in Response to Audience Questions Following His Talk:

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1. U.S. support for Israel is based not only on AIPAC but also on the considerable clout of Christian Zionists, in addition to the military-industrial complex. The main obstacle to changing U.S. policy is on Capitol Hill: the fear felt by senators and congressional representatives of the political consequences if they deviate from the line dictated by the Israel lobby. But what is most important for activists is to focus on a “clear way forward,” especially by means of a more effective pro-Palestinian lobby providing an alternative agenda.

2. The British Members of Parliament are timid too, but British public opinion is far more enlightened than U.S. public opinion. If British politicians were more democratic and paid closer attention to their constituents, they would reflect the influence of their electorate far more than they do. British academics are more willing to speak out than are their French, German, and Italian counterparts, who are “terrified.” In general, a larger worldwide cadre of courageous academics is

needed. The price to pay for taking a stand in favor of justice for Palestinians is small compared to the price being paid by Palestinians.

3. Israel's policy toward Gaza is "incremental genocide," although there is no master plan to kill the entire population. For Palestinians in Gaza there is no escape and no way to know where the bombs will fall. But two obstacles are faced by those "raising the alarm" over Gaza: critical world attention only focuses on Gaza when there is a major massacre (as for example last summer); and the situations in Iraq and Syria are so terrible that attention is deflected to those countries from Gaza. Yet Israeli inhumanity and barbarism in Gaza and the West Bank are linked to inhumanity and barbarism elsewhere in the Middle East.

4. Yes, Palestinian membership in the ICC (International Criminal Court) is meaningful and beneficial for the Palestinians; it sends a message to Israel that "you are not ok," contrary to the opposite message sent by the so-called peace process. The ICC offers a means of educating public opinion inside and outside of Israel signifying that Israel's behavior is not only unacceptable; it is criminal. Some of Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are in fact war crimes.

5. When a questioner suggested that Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), concerning the 1948 war, contains "fiction," the author replied that the basic thesis on which the book is based is irrefutable: the Zionist leadership planned the systematic, intentional ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians from Palestine long before 1948, the year in which they oversaw the destruction of half the total number of Palestinian villages along with massacres of thousands of Palestinians. Palestinian Nakba survivors know what was done to Palestinians by the Zionists, just as Jewish Holocaust survivors know what was done to Jews by the Nazis. Israel must come to terms with what it did in the past if it wants to live in peace in the future.

6. On the connection between Islamophobia and the Palestinian issue, Pappé explained that before 9/11 there was public international consensus that the Israeli occupation could not be justified, and Israel realized that it could not defend such actions against the Palestinians as systematically incarcerating and torturing them without justification. Therefore the Israeli government decided to take advantage of the rise of extreme Islamic militancy by associating that with the Palestinians' just struggle for liberation from Israeli oppression. The result is a clouding of the real core issues. Islam is not the issue. The issue is Israel's human and civil rights record, on which Israel should be measured with the same yardstick by which other countries are measured.



*Street artist Banksy found a way to let people know about Israel's destruction of Gaza in Operation Cast Lead, 2008/2009. Why this image? "On the internet people only look at pictures of kittens." 5,000 Palestinians had been wounded. 1,400 were killed, more than 500 of those were children.*

7. The U.S. population is ignorant about Israel/Palestine but willing to learn. The Israeli population has been indoctrinated, which means that you have to reach Israelis on a deeper level through a long, slow educational process. The international grassroots movement called BDS (boycott-divestment-sanctions) is a quick means of applying pressure to Israel in order to save the Palestinians, but the more lasting solution is to de-program Zionist Jews, who dehumanize Palestinians. It is easier for Palestinians to humanize Israelis than for Israelis to humanize Palestinians. Pappé seeks a "new reality," as exemplified by a new center in the Galilee where joint Palestinian-Jewish kindergartens are being established.

8. The Bedouins, indigenous people living in the Negev desert region of southern Israel, are among those omitted by the "peace process." The Jewish National Fund (JNF) is enabling Israel to Judaize and de-Arabize southern Israel by planting imported European pine trees in the desert in order to limit living space for the indigenous people there. These Disneyland forests displace the native Bedouins and destroy their communities, committing irreversible crimes that are both political (against people) and ecological (against nature).



*Wishing bon voyage to the Marianna as she embarks under a Swedish flag to carry international solidarity activists attempting to break the draconian eight-year siege of Gaza.*

*Photo: Freedom Flotilla Coalition*

9. Israel may be singled out at the United Nations in words (through UN resolutions, which the U.S. invariably vetoes), but Israel is never singled out in action. Neither UN resolutions nor terrorist attacks have caused Israel to change its strategy or behavior. You can complain about Israel, but you cannot do anything; the exception is BDS, which is doing something on a grassroots level. Criticizing Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians and condemning its criminal acts is not anti-Semitic. Israel is unwilling to accept the humanity of the Palestinians; its racism parallels white American racism against African Americans and white South African racism against black South Africans. The charge of anti-Semitism leveled at critics of Israel who are backed by a well-documented record of human rights abuses is a disingenuous silencing tactic.

10. Regarding Israel's sizable nuclear arsenal and the Iran negotiations, Pappé commented that in the Middle East you can commit genocide without nuclear weapons. He also remarked that in such a small area the use of nuclear weapons would be instantly suicidal. Yes, there is a double standard: Israel with its arsenal of at least 250 nuclear warheads, in contrast to Iran with its arsenal of zero nuclear warheads, is granted exceptional status by the West. This is an extension of the exceptionality granted to Israel regarding its human rights abuses and violations of international law.

11. The Israeli elections in March will have no impact on the Palestinian situation, and neither the Palestinian Authority (PA) nor Hamas can truly address Palestinian suffering. Alternatives to both the PA and Hamas are being constructed, but old structures should not be thrown out until new ones are ready to replace them. The U.S. role in the Middle East, which has been quite negative, is in decline; since the

U.S. economy is based on debt, the U.S. will have to downsize, which is good news for those who seek justice in the Middle East. Nevertheless, new powers that are moving in, such as China, are motivated by narrow economic interests. Israel is already building a pro-Israel lobby in China. Ultimately, the struggle for social justice in the West and the struggle for justice in Palestine are connected. Those engaged in either or both can draw strength from each other.

Liza Burr is a member of the WAMM Middle East Committee. She earned a Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard University, and has taught at several universities in the Twin Cities, in addition to other activities. Her most recent course is "Justice, War, and Peace in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," offered at Metropolitan State University. She has visited Israel/Palestine periodically since 1970.