



REVIEWS

Looking at Evil Without Blinking

A review of Ilan Pappé,
*The Ethnic Cleansing of
Palestine*

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Raja Shehadeh

Baqa'a Refugee Camp in Jordan in 1947 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and properties by Zionist fighters. *Photo credit: UNRWA*

I had always known that the reason why my aunt, Mary Kawar, stayed in Acre in 1948 was because her youngest daughter, Amal, contracted typhoid and she could not travel. It was only after reading Ilan Pappé's book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, that I learned how she must have contracted the disease. Writing about the Hagana's campaign to conquer Acre, Pappé describes how it proved "once again that it was not only Napoleon who found it [Acre] hard to defeat." The Jewish forces then employed chemical warfare to subdue the city: "typhoid germs were apparently injected into the water." Reporting to their headquarters, the local emissaries of the International Red Cross "describe a sudden typhoid epidemic and, even with their guarded language, point to outside poisoning as the sole explanation for this outbreak." According to Pappé, their reports to their headquarters left "very little room for guessing whom they suspected: the Hagana" (p.100).

There are more revelations in Pappé's book than this early use of chemical warfare. I grew up hearing about the massacre in Deir Yassin but did not know that it was one of scores of massacres that had been planned and perpetrated by the Zionist forces throughout Mandate Palestine. The weight of historical evidence, as well as the graphic and detailed descriptions of specific atrocities that Pappé delineates to prove his case that the Zionists were guilty of the war crime of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, in themselves make the book worth reading.

As intriguing, perhaps, was the confrontation with that history that I, and perhaps other Palestinian readers, experienced in reading this valuable book. It made me realize how much of this history I had been suppressing. How skeptical I had become, how defensive against acknowledging many of these horrors. I had chosen to relieve myself from the full admission of the war crimes that my family and people had endured. It was not a book I could read in one go. That my parents did not tell me more is not surprising. The psychology of losers is not to speak out, but rather to blame themselves (not unlike what is now taking place in Palestinian society). In the case of my father, it was also to pick himself up and get on with his life rather than dwell on the losses. This is not unlike the children of Holocaust survivors who became silent when faced with the atrocity. It is only those who make an industry of catastrophe who dramatize and sensationalize.

The bulk of Pappé's book, the first eight chapters, is about the ethnic cleansing operations that occurred in 1948 in what became the state of Israel. Chapter nine describes the immediate aftermath following the declaration of the establishment of the state of Israel, the ghettoisation of those Palestinians who remained in various cities such as Haifa and Jaffa, the desecration of holy sites, and abuse of Palestinians, including instances of rape. The last three chapters take the book to the present. Chapter 10 discusses what Pappé calls "memoricide." This term, used in the heading of the chapter, is not defined. But Pappé gives many examples of its various manifestations and mechanisms. He writes that where remnants of Palestine villages are still visible, it has been the mission of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) to conceal them "not only by the trees it has planted over them, but also by the narratives it has created to deny their existence." (p 228) He then concludes:

deeply rooted in the people's psyche, this mechanism works through exactly this replacement of Palestinian sites of trauma and memory by spaces of leisure and entertainment for Israelis. In other words, what the JNF texts represent as an 'ecological concern' is yet one more official Israeli effort to deny the Nakbeh and conceal the enormity of the Palestinian tragedy.
(p 229)

A fundamental question that continues to intrigue many Palestinians today is how it was possible for the Jewish minority in Palestine in 1948 to defeat the majority of Palestinians and drive them away from their land. Pappé writes of several tactics that were used in this regard of which I (and I would suspect many Palestinians) were totally ignorant. These same tactics continue to be in use today, mainly against the Palestinians living in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. They include the following:

- Preparing intelligence files on a large number of Palestinian villages in Palestine. Pappé tells us that by the late 1930s “the ‘archive’ was almost complete. Precise details were recorded about the topographic location of each village, its access roads, quality of land, water springs, main sources of income, its sociopolitical composition, religious affiliations, names of its mukhtars, its relationship with other villages, the age of individual men (sixteen to fifty) and many more.” (p. 19) Similar files with the same information now exist about all the villages in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Pappé adds that:

the final update of the village files took place in 1947. It focused on creating lists of ‘wanted’ persons in each village. In 1948 Jewish troops used these lists for the search-and-arrest operations they carried out as soon as they had occupied a village. That is, the men in the village would be lined up and those appearing on the lists would then be identified, often by the same person who had informed on them in the first place but who would now be wearing a cloth sack over his head with two holes cut out for his eyes so as not to be recognized. The men who were picked out were often shot on the spot. (p 21)

A similar practice was used in the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of South Lebanon to determine who would be taken for imprisonment in the Ansar and Khayyam prisons that Israel had established. It continues to be used in the West Bank and Gaza to identify those who would become victims of Israel’s policy of ‘targeted killings’.

- The use of collaborators is linked to another tactic reminiscent of the creation of a network of informers, also commonly used by the Israeli occupation. One of those involved in this effort, Moshe Pasternak, recalled many years later that by 1943 “there was a growing sense that finally they had a proper network of informants in place.”
- A third practice that proved of extreme significance in “the building of an efficient military organization was training with the help of sympathetic British officers.”

The most prominent of these was Orde Charles Wingate who, according to Pappé:

made the Zionist leaders realize more fully that the idea of Jewish statehood had to be closely associated with militarism and an army, first of all to protect the growing number of Jewish enclaves and colonies inside Palestine but also... because acts of armed aggression were an effective deterrent against the possible resistance of the local Palestinians.

Pappé concludes, “from there the road to contemplating the enforced transfer of the entire indigenous population would prove to be very short indeed.” (p. 15) Wingate succeeded “in attaching Hagana troops to the British forces during the Arab revolt so that they could learn even better what a ‘punitive mission’ to an Arab village ought to entail. For example, “in June 1938 Jewish troops got their first taste of what it meant to occupy a Palestinian village: a Hagana unit and a British company jointly attacked a village on the border between Israel and Lebanon, and held it for a few hours.” In a press release almost 70 years later (26 June, 2007), the Palestinian human rights organization al-Haq reported that:

throughout March 2007, the Israeli occupying forces carried out four military training exercises in the village of Beit Lid in the Tulkarem area. The military manoeuvres usually lasted from approximately 2:00 am to 7:00 am and involved 400-500 Israeli soldiers entering the village on foot in groups of about 15-20. The exercises included training with human-shaped cardboard cut-outs, the simulations of evacuation and transfer of injured persons. To date, the soldiers have not entered any houses in Beit Lid, except an abandoned house in the middle of the village, or attacked any of the villagers.

Judging from the prevalence today of the same tactics Jewish forces used to perpetrate the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the territory where Israel was established, it would appear that the next phase of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the occupied territories is imminent, should propitious conditions arise.

But these similarities are not only military, but also diplomatic. One example involves the legal status of the territories Israel occupied. After the occupation of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip in 1967, Israel refused to accept that it was bound by the Fourth Geneva Convention. Instead it declared that it would abide only by the humanitarian provisions of that legal instrument. This brings to mind the distinction that has been made regarding Palestinian refugees, where their refugee status is denied and Israel insists on treating them as a “humane problem.” Pappé writes:

UN observers did draw some conclusions in October, writing to the Secretary General—who did not publish their report—that Israeli policy was that of ‘uprooting Arabs from their native villages in Palestine by force or threat.’ Arab member states attempted to bring the report on Palestine to the attention of the Security Council, but to no avail. For almost thirty years, the UN uncritically adopted the rhetorical obfuscations of Abba Eban, Israel’s ambassador to the UN, who referred to the refugees as constituting a ‘humane problem’ for which no one could be held accountable or responsible. (p. 190)

Pappe also brings to life for the reader Palestinian villages that were destroyed in 1948, evoking their architecture, landscape and social life. Travelling on the road from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv after reading Pappe’s book, I saw the whole country as though it were wearing new attire. A foreign presence has come and shorn the hills and coastal plains of century-old villages, terraced land and orchards, replacing them with new dwellings differently planned, built and coloured. This presence then cultivated the hills with pine trees that covered the ruins, turning them from what had been into how the colonizer thought it should be. I found myself looking at the Israeli towns nestled between pine forests with new eyes. Born after 1948, I have no memory of the ancient villages that graced these hills before they were destroyed by Zionist forces during and after 1948. For the first time, I was lamenting the loss of those beautiful spots and seeing the new Israeli towns as I do the settlements in the West Bank: artificial implants by a colonizing state.

One of the merits of the book is its powerful impact on readers, who see what is familiar in a new and revealing light. Another important aspect of the book is that it focuses not only on the destruction, but describes the ancient villages with a real sense of loss. It is proof of the extent to which the author, an Israeli Jew, is liberated from bias that he is capable of lamenting the loss of what is purely Palestinian.

Some would say that this book produces outrage and anger at the injustice perpetrated earlier by the Jewish forces and more recently by Israel’s army, and that the book could incite extremism, thus offering ammunition to those who call for the destruction of the Jewish state.

But this is not the message of the book or the purpose of the author. Pappe’s book is a desperate appeal for both sides, Israeli Jews and Palestinians, and for the international community to come to terms with the past. He writes:

Neither Palestinians nor Jews will be saved, from one another or from themselves, if the ideology that still drives the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is not correctly identified. The problem with Israel was never its

Jewishness—Judaism has many faces and many of them provide a solid basis for peace and cohabitation; it is its ethnic Zionist character. Zionism does not have the same margin of pluralism that Judaism offers, especially not for the Palestinians. They can never be part of the Zionist state and space, and will continue to fight—and hopefully their struggle will be peaceful and successful. If not, it will be desecrate and vengeful and, like a whirlwind, will suck us all up in a huge perpetual sandstorm that will rage not only through Arab Muslim worlds but also within Britain and the United States, the powers which, each in their turn, feed the tempest that threatens to ruin us all. (pp 260-1)

Under present conditions, it is not likely that Pappé's appeal will be heeded. But by informing us both of past atrocities and the systematic planning that underlay them, he has made a significant contribution to peace. This is because Pappé has not shied away from looking evil in the face or explaining it away as many Israeli intellectuals have been doing over the years.

Raja Shehadeh is a writer and a lawyer living in Ramallah. His latest book is Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape (Profile Books, forthcoming in the United States from Scribners).