

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine

An Interview with Ilan Pappé

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Israeli historian Ilan Pappé's groundbreaking book, [The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine](#) (Engl. orig. 2006), on the events in 1947-49 that led to the formation of the state of Israel, had just been published in German translation, and he was in Austria to promote it. A few weeks prior to the outbreak of the Gaza war (2008-2009), Pappé answered our questions in such a way that all his points are still as relevant today as they were a year ago. Gaza is still suffocating under a heavy Israeli blockade, East Jerusalem and the West Bank still being invaded by illegal Jewish settlers. It is clearer than ever before that Israel is not defending itself; it is extending itself. The remaining Palestinian pockets of land look like 20th-century South African Bantustans, and worse, like the shrinking and disappearing American Indian reservations of the 19th century.

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine is still ongoing today, according to Pappé, and it is an intentional policy by the state of Israel. The international community, unfortunately, is doing next to nothing to stop Israel's illegal expansion. But Pappé lit up the evening for the roughly hundred-strong audience. He illustrated with concrete examples and vivid testimony how everybody and anybody can do something to contribute to justice and peace in the Middle East. His research and findings, as well as his ideals, have been viewed in a negative light by Israelis, and their reactions have led to his exile from his home in Haifa. The distinguished researcher and dedicated activist is currently Chair of the History Department at Exeter University in the UK, and he continues to research events and issues that many Israelis would rather leave buried and forgotten. He also spreads awareness of the injustices suffered by the Palestinian people through giving lectures around the world and publishing journalistic work.

What are the responses to your book from the scientific community?

The Israeli scientific community would say the facts are right but my interpretation is wrong. That I don't understand that Israel had the right to do what it did. But I think, around the world, most of the scientific community accepts the findings of my book, and accepts that this is now an integral part of history, to be taught in schools and universities and so forth.

How has your book been treated by the mass media?

I think unfortunately in the West, mainstream media tended to ignore the book, though not in England, where the book was well received. I think the book was more received by the

alternative media, the ones on the Internet and so on. It was difficult to get the book reviewed and discussed, especially on the main television channels. The newspapers were a bit better. So I don't think the mainstream media are ready, yet, to hear this version of events, especially in the US. Even Germany is better. Die Zeit reviewed the book and I did two interviews on major German TV channels. But in America it is very difficult.

What are you researching now?

I'm working on 1967. There is some new material. And I would like to show how the Israeli policies in the occupied territories were actually shaped in 1967. And they haven't really changed since then. The Israelis made up their minds about the territories back in 1967. And nothing that happened after that has changed those policies. I want to go back to the core of the Israeli vision: that most of Palestine belongs to them and they don't see any place for Palestinians in Palestine.

How can Palestinians be rehabilitated and restored to their rightful place within the human community?

I think there are three things that they have to go through before things will get better again. I think Israel and the West have to acknowledge the ethnic cleansing of 1948, and the ethnic cleansing since then. I think Israel should also be held accountable. This would open the way for Palestinian normal life. And I think only then can you ask the Palestinians to accept the Israelis. I think there are similar events in history where people have gone through this process: First acknowledge something happened, and then take responsibility. This is the Israeli part of the deal. And then the other side forgives and accepts the new life.

Ultimately, how do you see the future of the Palestinian people? Do you really think a solution can be reached or the Palestinian refugees may one day return to their country?

Yes, I'm optimistic. I think there is a chance that eventually these rights will be granted to the Palestinians. I'm afraid it's a long-term prospect. My great worry is the near future. There is a great danger that it will become worse before it becomes better.

What would you advise young people do to raise consciousness about the gross human rights violations taking place in Israel and Palestine, and what steps can they take to help stop them from occurring?

I think people like you should become VIPs. You should Visit, Inform, and Protest. It's not easy, I know, but you should try to see with your own eyes, and not just rely on others. And when you know what's happening: to tell other people. And then protest in a non-violent way, to change things. But it's also important not to forget Israeli society, to engage, to understand its fears and problems, to have a comprehensive picture. I think this will help push the peace process forwards.

Could you please add any comments on the more general context, more specifically on the international community including the EU and Austria?

There is an international context to this question. And without addressing this context you will never have a solution. So many people who are now oppressed, or who feel oppressed, are Muslims. And they feel there is a connection between the way Muslims are mistreated in Palestine and the way they are mistreated elsewhere. And there is this connection. There is a feeling that America and Britain and the West are treating Israel in a very extraordinary

way. This raises the question why this attitude was never granted to anyone who is not Israeli, in the Middle East, in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America. So that is one international context.

There is also a specific German and Austrian context. It has to do with the fact that so much that Israel does is justified by what was done to Jews in these countries. And I think it is up to the Germans and the Austrians to face courageously what they have done so they can tell Israelis to face courageously what they have done. All these things are part of the solution.

(The interview took place on December 6, 2008 at Amtshaus Währing in Vienna, Austria)

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