

A Wall and a Watchtower: Why Is Israel Failing? Ilan Pappé

It all began with Homa and Migdal – literally, a wall and a watchtower.

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It is quite possible that the early thinkers and leaders of the Zionist movement, back in late 19th century Europe, imagined, or at least hoped, that Palestine was an empty land and if there were people there, they were rootless nomadic tribes that, in essence, did not inhabit the land.

If this had been the case, quite possibly the Jewish refugees making their way to that empty land would have built a prosperous society and, maybe, would have found a way to prevent polarizing themselves from the Arab World.

What we do know, as a matter of fact, is that quite a few of the early architects of Zionism were perfectly aware of the fact that Palestine was not an empty land.

These architects of Zionism were too racist and orientalist, like the rest of Europe, to realize how progressive Palestinian society was in relation to that period, with an educated and politicized urban elite and a rural community living at peace within a genuine system of co-existence and solidarity.

Palestinian society was on the threshold of modernity – like so many other societies in the region; a blend of traditional heritage and new ideas. This would have been the basis for a national identity and a vision of freedom and independence on that very land they had inhabited for centuries.

Zionists certainly knew in advance that Palestine was the land of the Palestinians, but they perceived the native population as a demographic obstacle, which had to be removed in order for the Zionist project of building a Jewish state in Palestine to succeed.

This is how the Zionist phrase “The Palestine Question” or “The Palestine Problem” entered the political lexicon of world politics.

In the eyes of the Zionist leadership, this “problem” could only be solved by displacing the Palestinians and replacing them with Jewish immigrants.

Moreover, Palestine had to be torn out of the Arab world and built as a front post, serving the aspirations of Western imperialism and colonialism to take over the Middle East as a whole.

It all began with Homa and Migdal – literally, a wall and a watchtower.

‘Wall and Watchtower’

These two elements were seen as the most important landmarks in the Jewish “return” to the supposedly empty land, and they are still present in every Zionist settlement until today.

At the time, Palestinian villages had no walls or watchtowers, and they still do not have them today.

People moved freely in and out, enjoying the view of villages along the road, as well as the food and water available for every passerby.

Zionist settlements, on the contrary, religiously guarded their orchards and fields and perceived anyone touching them as robbers and terrorists. This is why, from the very beginning, they did not build normal human habitats, but bastions with walls and watchtowers – blurring the difference between civilians and soldiers in the settler community.

For a short moment, the Zionist settlements won the accolade of the socialist and communist movements around the world, simply because they were places where communism was unsuccessfully and fanatically experimented with. The nature of these settlements, however, tells us, from the very beginning, what Zionism meant to the land and its people.

Whoever came as a Zionist, whether hoping to find an empty land, or determined to make it an empty land, was drafted into a settler military society that could only implement the dream of the empty land by sheer force.

The native population declined the offer to, in the words of Theodore Herzl, be “spirited away” to other countries.

Despite the huge disappointment by the British retraction from its early promises to respect the right of self-determination for all the Arab peoples, the Palestinians still hoped that the Empire would protect them from the Zionist project of replacement and displacement.

By the 1930s, the leaders of the Palestinian community understood that this would not be the case. Therefore, they rebelled, only to be brutally crushed by the Empire that was meant to protect them, according to the ‘Mandate’ it received from the League of Nations.

The Empire also stood by when the settler movement perpetrated a huge ethnic cleansing

operation in 1948, resulting in the expulsion of half of the native population during the Nakba.

After the Catastrophe, however, Palestine was still full of Palestinians, and those expelled refused to accept any other identity and fought for their return, as they do to this day.

Keeping the 'Dream' Alive

Those who remained in historical Palestine continued to prove that the land was not empty and that the settlers needed to use force to achieve their goal of turning an Arab, Muslim and Christian Palestine into a European Jewish one.

With every passing year, more force needed to be used to achieve this European dream at the expense of the Palestinian people.

By 2020, we have already marked one hundred years of an ongoing attempt to implement, by force, the vision of turning an 'empty land' into a Jewish entity. Moreover, for some democratic as well as some theocratic reasons, it seems that there is no Jewish consensus on this part of the 'vision'

Billions and billions of American taxpayers' money was, and is still needed to maintain the dream of the empty land of Palestine - and the relentless Zionist quest to realize it.

An unprecedented repertoire of violent and ruthless means had to be employed on a daily basis against Palestinians, their villages and cities, or the whole Gaza Strip, in order to maintain the dream.

The human cost paid by the Palestinians for this failed project has been enormous - and is around 100,000 to date.

The number of wounded, traumatized Palestinians is so high that probably every Palestinian family has at least one member, whether a child, a woman or a man, who can be included in this list.

The nation of Palestine - whose human capital was able to move economies and cultures around the Arab world - has been fragmented and prevented from exhausting this incredible potential for their own benefit.

This is the background for the genocidal policy that Israel is now enacting in Gaza and for the unprecedented killing campaign in the West Bank.

Only Democracy?

These tragic events raise, once more, the conundrum: **How can the West and the Global North claim that this violent project of maintaining millions of Palestinians under oppression, is carried out by the only democracy in the Middle East?**

Maybe even more importantly, why do so many supporters of Israel and the Israeli Jews themselves believe that this is a sustainable project in the 21st century?

The truth is, it is not sustainable.

The problem is that its disintegration could be a long process and a very bloody one, whose principal victims would be the Palestinians.

It is also not clear if the Palestinians are ready to take over, as a united liberation movement, following the final stages of the disintegration of the Zionist project.

Will they be able to shake off the sense of defeat and rebuild their homeland as a free country for all in the future?

Personally, I have great faith in the young Palestinian generation, who will be able to do so.

This last phase could be less violent; it could be more constructive and productive for both societies, that of the settlers and that of the colonized people, if only the region and the world intervened now.

If some nations stopped enraging millions of people by claiming that a century-old project – aimed to empty a land from its indigenous people by force – is a project that reflects an enlightened democracy and a civilized society.

If this happened, Americans could stop asking “Why do they hate us?”.

And Jews around the world would not be forced to defend Jewish racism by weaponizing antisemitism and holocaust denial.

Hopefully, even Christian Zionists would return to the basic human precepts Christianity stands for and would join at the forefront of the coalition determined to stop the destruction of Palestine and its people.

Multinational corporations, security companies and military industries, of course, would not join a new coalition that opposes the project of emptying the land. However, they could be challenged.

The only necessary prerequisite is that we, a naive people who still believe in morality and justice, who serve as lighthouses in this age of darkness, truly understand that stopping the attempt to empty Palestine is the beginning of a new era, of a much better world for everyone.

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