

# Flunking History: Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*

by Seth J. Frantzman

Among many Israeli academics and Western revisionists, it has become fashionable to examine Israel's war of independence from an Arab perspective, in which Jews were the aggressors and Arabs the victims.<sup>1</sup> This trend began in 1989 with works by Ben Gurion University professor Benny Morris<sup>2</sup> and Oxford University professor Avi Shlaim,<sup>3</sup> and developed further with the writings of the late Hebrew University anthropologist Baruch Kimmerling,<sup>4</sup> Neve Gordon<sup>5</sup> at Ben Gurion University, and Meron Benvenisti,<sup>6</sup> a political scientist who served as deputy mayor of Jerusalem between

Many of these so-called New Historians and their fellow travelers may have embraced the notion of reverse victimization in order to rationalize the unexpected survival of Israel in the 1948 and 1967 wars. They present every massacre of Jews as an understandable response to a Jewish offense, for example portraying both the April 13, 1948 Mount Scopus convoy massacre and the May 15, 1948 murders of fifty Jews who had surrendered to the Arab Legion at Gush Etzion as an Arab reprisal for the April 9-11, 1948 Irgun attack on the Arab village of Deir Yassin.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the New Historians, see Efraim Karsh, "Rewriting Israel's History," *Middle East Quarterly*, [June 1996](#), pp. 19-29.

<sup>2</sup> Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestine Refugee Problem* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide* (New York: Verso Books, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Neve Gordon, *Torture: Human Rights, Medical Ethics and the Case of Israel* (London: Zed Books, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Shlaim, *Collusion*, 164; Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006), [AU: pp. pls]; Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *O Jerusalem* (Chelmsford, U.K.: Grafton Books, 1982) p. 266, Hillel Cohen, author interview, Rothberg International School of the Hebrew University, Nov. 13, 2005; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims*, pp. 209, 214.

## Pappé's Polemics

Ilan Pappé has now seized on what the New Historians started and brought it to new heights by promoting revisionist arguments that place exclusive blame on early Zionists for victimizing Arabs and destroying opportunities for peace and reconciliation. Indeed, it has become the strategy by which Pappé has salvaged his turbulent career: He left Haifa University in 2007 after the exposure of his research errors undercut his master's thesis and his endorsement of the British boycott of Israeli universities prompted the president of the university to call for his resignation.<sup>8</sup> From his new position at the University of Exeter, he has promoted his 2006 book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*,<sup>9</sup> which argues that even prior to Israel's independence, Zionist officials plotted to expel Arabs from Palestine.

Pappé's thesis is that Israel's founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, working with the Zionist leadership in Palestine, made special preparations for ethnic cleansing known as Plan D. This plan envisioned the conquest by the Haganah—the Mandate-era precursor to the Israeli army—of areas occupied by Arabs but allotted by the United Nations to the Jewish state.

Pappé's evidence for a Zionist plan to cleanse Palestine of its Arab population derives from his interpretations of the Haganah archives and the Israel State Archives files. Among the evidence Pappé finds damning are Haganah intelligence surveys of Arab villages, including information on the number of armed men, the *mukhtars* (village or neighborhood headmen), and any anti-Zionist activities.<sup>10</sup> Pappé uses the presence of such lists to suggest parallels between Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and Palestinian Arab suffering as a result of Israel's creation.<sup>11</sup>

Pappé also argues that Jewish forces, whether Haganah, Irgun, or the Lehi group, which sought to evict the British from Palestine, attacked Arab villages prior to the May 15, 1948 Israeli declaration of independence. He writes:

On a cold Wednesday afternoon, 10 March 1948, a group of eleven men, veteran Zionist leaders together with young military Jewish officers, put the final touches to a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. That same evening, military orders were dispatched to the units on the ground to prepare for the systematic expulsion of the Palestinians from vast areas of the country ... When it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), Apr. 26, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> New York: Oneworld Publications, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*, pp. 17-22.

<sup>11</sup> Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*, pp. xiii, xvii, 235.

<sup>12</sup> Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*, pp. xii-xiii.

This passage, characteristic of so much of Pappé's book, is a cynical exercise in manipulating evidence to fit an implausible thesis. Yigal Yadin, the chief of operations of the Haganah, adopted Plan D on March 10, 1948, as part of preparations for the onset of open warfare between Arabs and Jews in Palestine that the Arabs themselves were promising would follow a declaration of statehood. Morris described it as "a blueprint for securing the emergent Jewish state and the blocs of settlements outside the state's territory against the expected [Arab] invasion on or after 15 May,"<sup>13</sup> but recognized that "Plan D was not a political blueprint for the expulsion of Palestine's Arabs."<sup>14</sup>

Pappé does not agree, and says that new material from Israeli military archives, a reassessment of older material, and Palestinian oral history suggest that the plan was far more nefarious.<sup>15</sup> But Pappé, in this example as in many others, is blinded by his need to fit events into a preferred narrative, and what little new evidence he includes does not persuade when considered in the context of historical events—a context that Pappé rigorously obscures.

### The Importance of Context

Pappé would have his readers believe that in the years before the Israeli declaration of statehood, the Arabs living in Mandate Palestine were lacking in the hostility to Jews that made Jewish war-planning necessary. To take just one time period, between the U.N. General Assembly vote to partition Palestine on November 29, 1947, and Israeli independence almost six months later, Arab irregulars killed 1,256 Jews in Palestine<sup>16</sup>—almost all of whom were civilians. Pappé might be onto something if Plan D was drafted in the absence of Arab violence against Jews, or if the Arab states surrounding Palestine were not so serious about answering the declaration of a Jewish state with a war of annihilation. But inconveniently for Pappé, those were the realities of the time—realities that undermine the thesis of his book.

*The Palestine Post* provides a detailed window into the period. Between 1932 and 1948, the paper, which would later change its name to *The Jerusalem Post*, was Mandatory Palestine's newspaper of record. An English-language daily, it catered both to Palestine's British administrators and the relatively small number of Jewish residents in Palestine who spoke English. It was not always sympathetic to Zionists, especially not to those who resorted to force of arms, and often sided editorially with the British against the Irgun and Stern Gang. For instance, on February 20, 1948, it headlined a story about an Irgun attack on British servicemen, "Terrorists Murder Soldier in Jerusalem."<sup>17</sup> And rather than ignore the Arab population, *The Palestine Post* perhaps overemphasized their claims. Analysis of the newspaper's casualty

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<sup>13</sup> Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 163-4.

<sup>14</sup> [AU: Ibid.?] Morris, *Birth*, p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine," interview with Ilan Pappé, ZNET, [Oct. 3, 2006](#), accessed Aug 3, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> *The Palestine Post* [AU: correct? Dates pls]

<sup>17</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Feb. 20, 1948.

reports shows that between November 1947 and May 1948, it over-reported Arab casualties threefold when its figure of over 3,500 is compared to British Mandatory statistics.<sup>18</sup> The editors of *The Palestine Post* did not know how history would be written, and there is every reason to believe the reports between November 29, 1947, and May 15, 1948 sought to depict events accurately.

Nor should historians ignore context, as Pappé willfully does. Those who read *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* will not learn that, in the first week after the passage of the U.N. partition plan, Arabs murdered 62 Jews. In the following month, Arabs killed an additional 200. By March 1, 1948, 546 Jews had been murdered and, by Ben Gurion's Declaration of Independence, the total was over 1,000.<sup>19</sup> Arab paramilitaries, militias, and terrorists both besieged Jerusalem and cut the Jewish neighborhoods' water supplies, and surrounded Jewish villages in the Negev. Arab snipers attacked Jews in Haifa and other mixed villages.<sup>20</sup> A sniper from Beit Dajan shot a 14-year-old girl,<sup>21</sup> and Arab fighters attacked more than a dozen kibbutzim between December 1947 and March 1948.<sup>22</sup> Massacres were common: Arab rioters killed 39 Jews at Haifa's oil refinery on December 30, 1947, and two weeks later Arab irregulars killed 35 Jews trying to reach Gush Etzion. On February 1, 1948, an Arab terrorist blew up *The Palestine Post* building and, three weeks later, a terrorist's bomb killed 44 Jews on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street. Massacres continued for weeks both inside Palestine and in the neighboring states.<sup>23</sup> On March 21, the bodies of 11 missing Jews were found, and three had been burned.<sup>24</sup> Local Arab villagers or Bedouins may have precipitated the autumn 1947 violence,<sup>25</sup> but by spring 1948, Arab volunteers from Iraq and Syria were increasingly participating.<sup>26</sup> On April 11, 1948, for example, Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood attacked Kfar Darom, near Gaza City.<sup>27</sup>

In this context—a state of low-level terrorism and violence that Pappé, given the narrative he wishes to promote, is loath to disclose—it is not the least bit curious that Zionist leaders in

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<sup>18</sup> *The Palestine Post*, May 6, 1948; British mandatory figures published in *The Palestine Post*, Nov. 29, 1947 to May 1, 1948.

<sup>19</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Jan. 2, 7, 27, 1948; Feb. 2, 1948; Mar. 2, 1948; Apr. 1, 1948; May 1, 1948.

<sup>20</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Dec. 9, 11, 1947.

<sup>21</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 21, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> *The Palestine Post*, [AU: dates pls]; David Tal, *War in Palestine 1948: Strategy and Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 57-123.

<sup>23</sup> Michael M. Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt 1920-1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), [AU: pp. pls]

<sup>24</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 21, 1948.

<sup>25</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Dec. 14, 1947.

<sup>26</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Apr. 19, 1948; Tal, *War in Palestine 1948*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Apr. 12, 14, 1948.

Palestine were developing plans to defend themselves in the case of the outbreak of full-scale war. It would indeed be strange if Jewish strategists were *not* doing so.

### **The Real *Plan D***

While no scholar disputes that Zionist leaders adopted Plan D, Pappé's argument—that Plan D is evidence of a desire to conduct ethnic cleansing and constituted a war crime—is a leap of logic. The reality of that time period is one in which Jewish leaders were faced with problems far more urgent and existential than altering the ethnic makeup of certain territories. On the same day that the Zionist leadership adopted Plan D, British Mandatory authorities admitted that Fauzi el-Kaukji, leader of the Arab Liberation Army, was in Palestine, operating in Samaria.<sup>28</sup> Snipers attacked Jews in Haifa, and Arabs launched mortar attacks on Tel Aviv. There were reports that British forces were evacuating.<sup>29</sup> The Zionist decision to seize land to deny Arab attackers strategic territorial advantages was inevitable and motivated by legitimate military considerations. Villages such as Ishwa and Jaffa hosted foreign fighters from Iraq, Syria, and even Yugoslavia,<sup>30</sup> and thereby sacrificed their status as noncombatant areas.

The decision to implement Plan D had little effect on the Arab forces, which continued their assault on all parts of the Jewish *yishuv* (the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine).<sup>31</sup> As Arab forces tried to isolate and eradicate pockets of Jews, Jews traveled in convoys that often became the focus of Arab ambushes,<sup>32</sup> some of which involved more than 500 Arabs.<sup>33</sup> Major Plan D operations, such as Operation Nachson, to open the road to besieged Jerusalem, began on April 6, just five weeks before Israel's independence.

Nor do the lists that Pappé finds so damning provide conclusive evidence of malfeasance. Cobbled together over the course of the decade before Israel's independence, the Haganah lists were not a blueprint but rather an intelligence assessment. In 1943, the Palmach (the Haganah's regular fighting force) and the Haganah Intelligence Service began to survey villages in order to evaluate their capabilities should hostilities erupt. Jewish pilots also conducted aerial surveys.

These intelligence assessments were so parochial that, today, they could serve as a resource for research into Arab village life of the Mandatory period. One representative Haganah intelligence report surveys the hamlet of Beit Umm el-Mais near Jerusalem, and reveals that the sons of Hasan al-Jura moved to the ruins of the village around 1905, that the village consisted of one clan, and that its residents were illiterate and had no connections to nearby kibbutzim. The only terror suspect was Ismail Hamdan, who was involved in the 1936-39 Arab revolt. The

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<sup>28</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 11, 1948.

<sup>29</sup> *Palestine Post*, Mar. 5, 8, 9, 1948.

<sup>30</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 23, 1948; Emilio Traubner, "Sarajevo to Tel Aviv," *The Palestine Post*, Dec. 3, 1947.

<sup>31</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 19, 1948.

<sup>32</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 23, 1948.

<sup>33</sup> *The Palestine Post*, Mar. 19, 1948.

village possessed 11 modern rifles divided among 25 men.<sup>34</sup> Another Haganah report noted that the nearby village of Beit Thul was 300 years old, possessed 400 sheep, and that Arab nationalists persecuted members of the village during the revolt.<sup>35</sup>

Nor were the Zionists the only ones to make such assessments. The British kept similar intelligence about kibbutzim and Arab villages alike, especially during the Arab Revolt, noting items such as the presence of weaponry and the extent of illegal immigration.<sup>36</sup> Such lists are evidence of military preparedness and routine intelligence collection, not evidence of plans to ethnically cleanse the Jewish population. The Haganah files may have saved Israeli lives by portraying an accurate picture of Arab defenses and probably saved Arab lives by enabling the Israel Defense Forces to avoid collateral damage.

As a work of scholarship, Pappé's book falls short, and it does so in a particularly damning way. He ignores context and draws far broader conclusions than evidence allows by cherry-picking some reports and ignoring other sources entirely. He does not examine Arab intentions in the five months between the U.N. endorsement of Palestinian partition and Israel's independence, nor does he consider the widespread public statements by Arab officials in Palestine and in neighboring states declaring their goal of eradicating the Jewish presence in Palestine.<sup>37</sup> It is obvious why a polemicist such as Pappé would cleanse—so to speak—his narrative of any such references: To avoid doing so would strike at the core of the reality that he wishes to foist upon his readers, one which precisely inverts the historical record and turns a coordinated Arab attempt at ethnically cleansing Palestine of its Jews into a Jewish attempt at ethnically cleansing Arabs.

Pappé's writings may win plaudits among his new British peers, whose disdain for the state of Israel is legendary. But his disregard for the obligations of the historian and his indifference to academic integrity condemn his work to the realm of the polemic, not scholarship.

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<sup>34</sup> "Beit Um Al Mies," Village Survey Project of the Shai, Haganah Archives, Tel Aviv, 105/378.

<sup>35</sup> "Beit Thul, May 22, 1943, Village Survey," Haganah Archives, 105/95 A 150.

<sup>36</sup> "General Sir Al Cunningham to Secretary of State for the Colonies: Weekly Intelligence Appreciation, 13 March 1948," Public Record Office, London, CO 537/3869.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2006), [au: pp. pls or title of entry]; Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Hajj Amin al-Hussaini* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 66-9.