

Israel, Zionism - On the western awakening and what it means for Israel/Palestine

Saturday 16 May 2015, by [PAPPE Ilan](#), [WEISS Philip](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2015).

Ilan Pappé has lately published a new book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky, and edited by Frank Barat, called *On Palestine* [1]. Pappé is the director of the European Centre for Palestine Studies and the author of many books, notably *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Born in Israel 60 years ago, he left the University of Haifa in 2007 [2] to take up a position at the University of Exeter in England after he called for boycott of Israel and the school president pressed him to resign, while others threatened him personally. I interviewed Pappé by phone in April. The last four questions I sent to him by email, and he responded in kind.

Philip Weiss - One of the paradoxes you cite at the beginning of the book is the gap between world opinion of the situation in Israel/Palestine, which is with it, and elite opinion, which doesn't budge. Explain this.

Ilan Pappé - I think I became aware of this paradox once I was aware of how significant the shift in civil society or in public opinion was. In other words, the moment you understand that the new attitude toward Israel is not marginal or esoteric you suddenly encounter it everywhere- among people who are in the know, among people who have only partial information, and- it sounds simplistic- but almost any decent person you meet in the west has a clear view of Israel/Palestine with varying degrees of knowledge or commitment. There is a sense of a significant shift, and you would expect that this shift would manifest itself in mainstream media or politics, if not for genuine reasons, then for political reasons, because it is an important issue for your voters.

To my great surprise, and even after the three horrific attacks on Gaza, 2008-2009, 2012, and culminating with the attack in the summer, the cumulative effect has still left the mainstream politics in the same place they were in 20 years ago. I find that bewildering to say the least.

Q. How long has this process taken in public opinion?

I've observed public opinion shift more or less since the second Lebanon war, in 2006. I'm a historian, so I am aware that these processes take time to mature. And really it's not so important to find out when they germinate, it's more important to find out when they become significant.

It has been maturing a long time. Surely after the first intifada in '87, some of the demonization of the Palestinians was removed. Also the true nature of the Israeli criminality was revealed as we entered the age of internet, and therefore after 2006 the shift was obvious and visible though still not affecting the mainstream elites.

Q. How subjective are you?

Well I can be subjective, but I'm not just leaving it to my intuition. I have really tried to include it as part of my research, I'm really using my [European] Centre for Palestine Studies, established in 2007, to follow these things with the help of my students. So I don't think I'm falling into the trap of wishful thinking.... It's very very clear, especially if you decide to live within a western community.

Q. Public opinion in Europe is ahead of the U.S., though, right?

With a modicum of caution here—because both are continents, and generalizations overlook nuance—generally speaking we are talking about one public opinion which is better informed, the European one, and feels much more engaged with events not only in Palestine but in the Middle East as part of their immediate environment. And certainly senses something absent from the American public opinion, and this is guilt. The American public opinion is not as informed, even among those Americans who have shifted; the sense of urgency is not as great as in Europe; there is not the geographic proximity; and there is less of a guilt complex.

And in the end you have to break down both communities on vertical or horizontal lines. The pace of change in Europe is faster, the pace in the US is more important.

Q. How has the elite edifice been maintained?

One of the major means is all sorts of lobbying. I use the term lobby in the most general definition possible and not in the more familiar and narrow American reference to lobbying and therefore it can take a different form in Europe and for that matter in places such as Africa, China and India. A good example is Australia where the Jewish community is only 1 percent of the population and it lobbies relentlessly for Israel. It is a rich community and hence it used financial contribution, in equal measure, to each of the two big parties. The dividend is clear. When the previous Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was elected I was not surprised to hear that in her inaugural speech, she included Australian support for Israel as one of the four pillars of Australia's foreign and security policies. So for the government in Canberra -miles away from Israel, of all the places the Jewish state is prime security concern. This shows the solidity of the edifice. It is an edifice built on financial investment, bribes, threats and disinformation.

I think another factor is Islamophobia, of the kind that is now raging in certain quarters in the west. Islamophobia does not seem to affect greatly, or trouble, the Western civil society, but is preoccupying, genuinely or cynically, the political elites. One good example of this is the military arms industry, which of course needs the war of terror to reinvigorate its line of production, invention, sales, and its place in the world. Islamophobia counterbalances any inhibitions or restraints the more sensible, and who knows less cynical, captains of this industry may respond to - surely in the case of Gaza some of them would have had second thoughts but were convincing themselves that they provided arms to defeat the worst kind of fanatic Islamism, and not, as was the case, for a genocide.

Finally, in the context of atrocities that are enveloping us, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt- the nature of Israeli atrocity, the Palestinian suffering can be dwarfed, in the minds of people involved in policy making and informing public opinion. They say, No one can get a handle on everything, they have to have priorities. And I can appreciate why an editor of a leading Western newspaper or news bulletin would ignore the killing of two Palestinian kids and prefer to pay attention to far worse atrocities in Iraq or Syria. Nonetheless I would have like to convince this editor that the one does not exclude the other. Both should be reported and connected.

Q. Well what do you say to them?

I will try and convince them for two main reasons why they should give events in Palestine a central role. There is a direct link between the century of Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians and the eruption of violence in the Middle East. Even the worst of the violence is rooted in the Western colonial past of which the foundation of a Jewish state instead of Palestine was the worst crime in the eyes of generations to come. What is challenged violently today is the post-world-war-one

colonialist structure build by European powers. A central pillar of this building was the Judaziation of Palestine. You can not argue easily for human rights without being blamed for being too westernized and you can not recruit people to sport purist Islamist notions without stressing their anti-Western essence. Even the Shite-Sunni divisions, or the attacks of Christian and minorities are associated with the edifice built by the West, based on divide and rule, and incorporating the minorities in the colonialist, and post-colonialist, political structure. The epitome of this attitude was the unconditional support to Zionism at the expense of the Palestinians. So Palestinian suffering is the outcome of the original sin of the West after the first world war as are the other horrific scenes elsewhere in the Middle East.

There is a need to understand that if you want to engage, and at least on the face of it as an editor, cover things not just because they are interesting to people, but because of people's suffering, in order to end that suffering, or so as to add your voice against it—and more generally if the west through its media, politicians, and human rights NGOs, if it wants to be engaged in the conversation at the heart of these atrocities— it cannot be admitted as a genuine partner in that conversation unless it seizes on the exceptional status it granted Israel in this conversation.

Q. You're talking about root causes. Media don't often address them. You want them to speak of Zionism as a root cause of this conflict. Why?

Two issues are very important. The easier one is to treat Zionism as we treated the apartheid ideology in South Africa, and to ask oneself, would we engage with apartheid in South Africa without engaging the ideology of the regime. Could we have focused on only the policies of the government and ignored the source of the policies? If you go back and look at when South Africa became a pariah state, if you look at the media, they were isolating South Africa by attacking the ideology of supremacy, exclusion, and apartheid.

What is very clear in this case is that the western media does not allow itself, maybe because of self-censorship, maybe because of pressure—it does not allow itself to do the same for Israel. Even the worst atrocity is taken out of its ideological context. When the journalist spans a narrative of why that atrocity happened, they describe it as an Israeli retaliation against Palestinian violence. You would have liked journalists to understand by now that Israel does not retaliate against Palestinians and create unbearable situations for them in anticipation of some reaction to the oppression – be it a house demolition, arrest without trial, confiscation of land and more often than not, assassination. Violence for Israel is not a retaliatory means of responding to Palestinian resistance, no, it is the principal means by which the Zionist vision of having as much of Palestine as possible, with as few Palestinians in it as possible, has been implemented over the years.

Perceptive journalists should detect the difference between destroying houses because they endanger the security of the soldiers, and destroying the houses as a way of reducing the number of Palestinians as part of a mega plan for the region. If you are dealing with an ideology, you have an obligation to see through the pretext and not copy the causal narrative that Israel provides.

So that is one issue.

The second reason why Zionism has to be at the center of the media coverage, and that core historical issues have to be discussed is that we are still in that history – it is not a closed chapter that should only interest historians. We are in this paradoxical situation where Israel is both a colonialist and post colonialist state. Recently academics defined Israel as a settler colonial state – which explains why it was a colonialist project in the past, but one that still continues today as the project is incomplete. So as a journalist you are watching the same historical chapter that began in the late 19th century and continues today. There is no closure yet in this colonialist history. More

classical colonialist chapters, such as the British Raj in India, should be discussed in the cultural annexes of the papers or in special historical programs on TV and one would understand journalists covering India today focusing on the here and now. These are closed chapters of history. The Zionist Raj is still there and unlike the British Raj, it does not intend to dismantle the colony and go back home, it wants the colony to be cleansed of its native people.

Finally, dealing with the core issue, especially in the case of European Media, forces us to understand the more hidden layers of the Zionist project and its immunity in the West. When I say we are still in the same chapter of colonialism in Palestine that began in the late 19th century, I do not only mean that the colonization and dispossession of the native people continues with the same vigor and intent as in the past. I also mean by this that the presence of Jews in Palestine, was and still is, the European solution for its Jewish Question. The Jews were nearly destroyed in Europe during the second world war and instead of openly re-integrating them into Europe, the idea of sending them to Palestine, with the Zionist blessing, absolved Europe from dealing with what had been done not only to Jews but to other minorities as well in the second world war. When you have no closure on the place of Jews in Europe, you have no idea how to deal with the place of Muslims in Europe. Will they be looking now for a Muslim state somewhere away from Europe instead of accepting multiculturalism and diversity as a way of life?

The other side of this coin is that Israel and Palestine is a place where Jewish settlers rule over native Palestinians instead of living alongside them. So when Israel still propagates the notion that it is the homeland of all the Jews, it responds both to the anti-Semitic wish to purify Christian societies from Jewish presence and at the same time denies the rights of the Palestinians to Palestine or the rights of anyone who came or is in Palestine and is not Jewish. In the day of Independence, in the main ceremony, the diplomatic corps honors this idea in public and for the whole world to see - more out of ignorance than menace, one would think.

Finally, Zionism creates new problems for Jewish communities today, because the present Israeli regime declares clearly, something the Labor Zionist were careful not to do, that it represents the Jews wherever they are. So when this regime commits atrocities against the Palestinians, and Jews around the world do not challenge its claim to represent them, they are seen as supporting these atrocities. This line of thinking is totally absent from the Western media.

Q. I relate to that as an American interest type, and a Jew. The Iraq war and the neoconservatives were a big problem for me personally after my brother told me his Jewish newspaper said this war would be good for Israel.

Well this may be changing. Recently I met a group of liberal Zionists in the UK who were very concerned about this dilemma.

Q. When?

Two or 3 months ago. They'd never invited me before. I wondered why they were seeking a contact now. What I understand is that they were less worried about the Palestinians and far more about the possibility that their alliance, connection and commitment to their home country, which they genuinely feel, will be doubted and challenged. They used to regard themselves as an organic and integral part of the society and the new form of Zionism preached by Israel casts doubts on this role. I was impressed it bothers them more than Islamic radicalism which Israel claims is their main concern. They understand that if Netanyahu calls upon them to come to Israel because a synagogue in London was assaulted, even it was by angry Muslims, and they say nothing in response, they can be seen as accepting this logic, and if they oppose it, they will be regarded as anti Zionists.

Q. You think that some of these people will become active anti-Zionists?

Absolutely. As long as you had the more clever political elite in Israel, the labor Zionists, they were far more sophisticated and clever, and they would never have called on Jews to leave and come to Israel.

Q. Yes Ben-Gurion reached that understanding back in 1950 or so.

I think that the decision of the center and the right in Israel to focus on neo-Zionism, reinvigorating what they see as the Zionist ideology and value system, and putting into focus not just the fate of Jews in Israel, but of all the Jews in the world, created a monster. They manufactured a non-existent threat for Jewish life in Europe, which does not exist, and now they believe it themselves. Part of the story they concocted is that a desperate attack by a North African immigrant in France on a religious Jew and the Hamas war for survival are part of a new global anti Semitic campaign to destroy Jews (with support by the Left).

Last week on Shoah day, you saw some of the most important scholars in the country bringing to television and radio a kind of structural explanation for what they call the 'new anti-Semitism': fusing together classical European anti-Semitism, centered on the Church, Nazism, Islamic terrorism and the BDS movement. They are not only working together, they are all part of the same historical chapter that probably dates back to Christ himself. Waves after waves all directed against Jews, and this just another wave.

Q. Scholars really say that?

Yes. So these Jews will have to say something. They will have to get out of the box and say- Are you really saying there's going to be a second holocaust in London that will be brought about by Omar Barghouti, Roger Waters (Pink Floyd), David Irving, neo-Nazis in Germany and the Amir of the Islamic State? It will not be easy for these Jews to challenge this fabricated war mongering - it is produced by an ideological state, which is a nuclear power, a high tech empire and one that possess the strongest army in the Middle East. This is a dangerous situation when such a powerful state makes such accusations. If this hysteria is produced by a nutty professor in an Ivy league university this is one thing, but if it's spread by people with access to a red button that can launch another bombardment of Gaza or even against Teheran, then we should be terrified by this scenario, much more than any scenario we have predicted for the future plans of Iran or North Korea.

Q. You're saying they went along with a lot of liberal Zionism in the past, and stood up for Israel, but this has changed things.

Yes they're understanding what a terrifying a place Israel became. For many many years, they really were able to shut their eyes and close their ears, like the famous three monkeys, and say to themselves, this is something that we Jews deserve, we deserve not just our place here but also a Jewish homeland. Maybe they bought into the insurance model - if something bad happens, there's a place we can go to. However, when they are now being told by the insurance company your house is already burned, while they still peacefully live in it - they realize their future and fate is in the had of nutty and fanatic insurers

Q. And the stakes are too large.

Absolutely

Q. You say in your book that this moment is a liberal Zionist wake up call. Why are they important?

They are a very important part of the elite edifice. They are the ones who have provided the moral justification for the victimization of the Palestinians and their suffering. They are the ones who branded the Israeli atrocities as acts of self defense, forced upon the reluctant Israelis (as Golda Meir said, we will never forgive the Palestinians for what they forced us to do to them). They are the 'civilized' 'enlightened' shield for the barbarism on the ground. And now there are cracks in the shield, and we need cracks in the shield, that's very important. We are beginning to see the cracks, because this is the age of information and you can see through the cracks the true reality, and that reality is that Israel can not be both a Jewish and a democratic state, you cannot be both an enlightened occupier and an occupier at same time. Maybe they realize what they were helping to hide and are facing a moment of truth.

Q. Where do you see a crack?

Something interesting that happened in last attack on Gaza was that liberal Zionists were willing to say, whatever Hamas is doing, what Israel is doing is not justified. I am using Haaretz as the main venue for these relatively new doubts because it was adopted by the editorial board as well as the main conversation in the summer (not just by the usual suspects such as Gideon Levy or Amira Hass). This was an agenda also adopted by the few thousands who demonstrated during the assault in the last summer in the name of the suffering of both sides. It was a far cry from what I would have liked them to demonstrate against, but it was very different from their previous support to the atrocious policies against Gaza. As if they lost the verbal elasticity and juggling that enabled them to be both humanly concerned and Zionist patriots. Their verbal ability failed them. They could not produce, as in the past, a text that explain how Israel is still a democracy given what it's doing not only in Gaza, but given the way it treats the asylum seekers, given the racist legislation since 2000 and the brutality not only against the Palestinians, but against them themselves, the liberals.

Moreover, it seems that the political forces in power, the nationalists and religious forces, have no need for them any more. Their previous leaders such as Begin and Sharon both thought they needed them, and Netanyahu did once, he wanted Shimon Peres to represent the more sane face of Israel, while doing what he wished to do on the ground. Some of them may not even want to be used as a shield anymore as they were in the past. This is certainly true about liberal Zionist outside of Israel (see J-Street) and will be true about them inside Israel. I want to add in Israel there are not many of them so their importance in widening the cracks is less locally and far more significant outside of Israel.

Q. In terms of building a movement, do you favor outreach and diplomacy with these turning Zionists, to allow them to save face?

Let me explain. I have a litmus paper, I have a yardstick, with which I judge my willingness at all to engage. I don't mind if they tell me, for instance, that they object to an idea of boycott of Israel, and I say to them, That's OK, I do support the boycott of Israel. In the past this position has stopped the dialogue on the spot. This was the main reason for my expulsion from the University of Haifa, and the end of discussion with many liberal Zionists including my father in law, because boycott is a red line they won't cross. But this is no longer the red line. So it's very interesting. As if they brush the shoulders of those who will be proved right in the end of the day (like all the Whites today in South Africa who claims they were always closet ANC supporters). In the West, they are seeking now a dialogue with the pro-Palestinian activists (as can be seen from the creation of a new offshoot of the Hillel organization and the changing nature of some of the Jewish societies in the British campuses).

Q. They need the Palestinian-solidarity community? Why?

They do because they know very well however much they bought into the antisemitic line about

criticism of Israel, one thing about the Palestinian solidarity community is, it's not anti-Semitic, it's not anti-Jewish. One, because many of the activists are Jews and were always expunging anti-semitic elements from their ranks, and two, they are universally opposed to racism wherever it appears.

Q. But I don't think they are comfortable with us.

I think we're seeing a Kasherizing of the BDS movement. That in fact the world sees the mushrooming of crazy people and crazy ideologies. This is happening, no doubt: the people being burned alive, and beheaded. In this world, the BDS pro Palestinian solidarity movement is a group of civilized people, simple people who believe in humanity, decent people who believe in the rights of human beings.

You could not wish for better partners with whom to build a better world.

Q. Why was a dialogue with Noam Chomsky important? A lot of folks in the Palestinian solidarity community are likely to regard him as somewhat irrelevant to the question given his dismissal of the one state idea and his piece in the Nation that was critical of BDS.

I feel Noam is still a compass for many activists and committed academics in the West, and probably beyond. The tension between his universal radical views on world order, the USA and power and knowledge in general on the one hand, and his more guarded position on Palestine, always intrigued me, and not only me. I even know of people who are writing a whole book on his position on Palestine. Clarifying these positions was first important for me because he has been such an influence on my work and thinking. But I also thought the differences of opinions we have reflect a more general debate within the solidarity movement with the Palestinians, and from what I can tell, this debate is also now taking place in the Palestinian society itself.

Q. You say in the book that coming to your understanding has been a long journey, one that opposes you to your society and your family at times. Can you elaborate on this personally? Are there people in your family who don't speak to you anymore? How long did you censor yourself? And don't these social bonds act as mental fetters for many many Jews, and by what process can they be loosened?

Yes of course. I see it as a journey with no return ticket - a trip across the Rubicon, if you want. And I do not recall exactly when, but there was a point in the early 1990s where I felt suddenly liberated from Zionism as an ideology that governed every deed, or writing or articulation I had about Israel and Palestine. And when it became bitterly clear to me that I do not want any share in it, and later on, when I felt committed to struggle against it, I have become a pariah in distant and close circles of colleagues, friend and family.

To appreciate it you have to understand that back in the 1990s, the regime was not worried about anti-Zionist Jews (as it was for instance in the days of Mazpen in the early 1970s). It relied on the society to persecute and punish. In my case it took two forms: death threats on me and my family intensively and viciously and an expulsion from my university by my peers (encouraged by the minister of education at the time). So part of my colleagues and family do not speak to me today.

As for your more direct question: the distance between realising what was going on and articulating it - namely a process you call self-censorship, continued for almost a decade (in the case of most liberal Zionists they can do it for a lifetime which must cause them enormous medical problems). The only way of trying to convince them is first by not underestimating the difficulty of giving up a prestigious position and secondly repeatedly tell them about the sense of liberation and relief one has, when you are out of the frame of mind. You need to believe of course that despite years of

dehumanising the Palestinians, there is still left in them a modicum of decency - I do believe this.

Q. You say in the book that partition is “immoral.” And that we must tell our Palestinian friends who support two states why they are wrong to do so. What about the bloody rollercoaster/Algeria argument against one state as a goal? Aren't Palestinians allowed to fear the problems of Syria and Egypt? And, if Palestinians want a Palestinian state — and even Haneen Zoabi can imagine there being two democratic states — why not let em?

I think actually Algeria is a historical case study that shows that no native people would have agreed to partition their country with settlers and this was the right position for the FLN to take and the Palestinians. But I understand what you mean, there are plenty of examples also outside the Middle East that on the face of it would support partition, such as ex-Yugoslavia.

But I think people confuse nationalism with ethnicity. The Arab nation states collapse because the political structure built by the colonialist powers for them - and which their political elites after the second world war did not challenge - all they want is to be the rulers themselves of these political structures — were based on two flimsy foundations. First, lack of any respect to human and civil rights and indifference to the power of regional and ethnic affiliations. So either a dynasty or an oppressive secular regime was imposed, disregarding both sensitivities.

In Palestine, the structure that was suggested by the colonial power was very different. It allowed Zionism to colonise and dispossess Palestine. Now what is the solution, to allow colonisation and dispossession in only eighty percent of the land? It will never end the conflict. Once it is decolonised both sensitivities would have to be respected within the political structure (and possibly the Jewish settlers, as Azmi Bishara says, became an ethnic group themselves).

Q. What is the meaning of the statement I often hear: Jewish Israelis will not accept the dissolution of the Jewish state, they are committed to it; and one must address these Israelis if you are to find a solution to the conflict? I think Chomsky believes this to some degree. Certainly Norman Finkelstein does. Does this concern ever restrain you? So how do you change Israeli minds? Would a shift in opinion on the part of diaspora Jews play a role in unconvincing the Israelis?

What it means is that the Jewish society will not easily give up the privileged position it has - concealing the real motive for their stubbornness with national rhetoric of survival. So our problem, to add to what I said just now, is to find a way of creating a new political structure that only redistributes the land, resources and powers in a new state. They do not have to be convinced that they will disappear- this is a discourse of doomsday Zionist leaders use easily for anything that they want to keep in their hands- but that only that keeping the privileges will leave them in a perpetual state of conflict which they will not always win. Even with their military successes so far - young people, with resources, see no reason to stay in this modern day Prussia or Sparta.

So there are two approaches here. We need to save the Palestinian from further destruction and for that we do not have the luxury to wait until we transform the Israeli Jewish mindset. This can only be achieved through means of the BDS and resistance, hopefully popular and non-violent, on the ground. And we need a longer process of deprogramming a third generation of settlers who see themselves that they are not leading an ideal life, even if all the power is in their hands. The Jewish community abroad's role is to help divorce Zionism from Judaism so that a spade - colonialism- can be called a spade.

P.S.

* "Ilan Pappé on the western awakening and what it means for Israel/Palestine". [Mondoweiss](#), May 11, 2015.

* Philip Weiss is Founder and Co-Editor of [Mondoweiss.net](#).

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/On-Palestine>

[2] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/haifa-university-president-calls-on-dissident-academic-to-resign-1.156977>