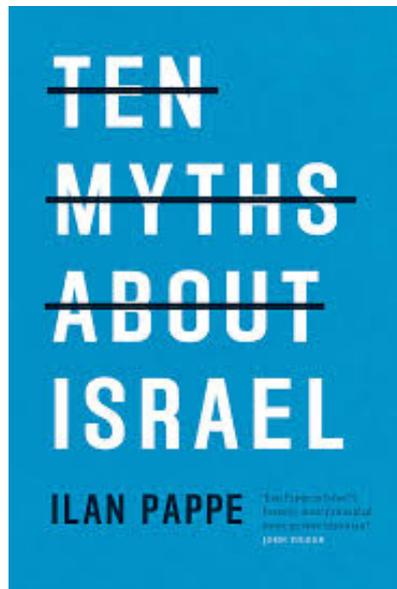


# Review: Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths About Israel*

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Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths About Israel*, Verso 2017, £9.99

‘This is not a balanced book’, Ilan Pappé informs his readers in its opening pages: rather, it is ‘yet another attempt to redress the balance of power on behalf of the colonized, occupied and oppressed Palestinians in the land of Israel and Palestine.’ The many strengths and occasional weaknesses of *Ten Myths About Israel* are arguably indicated by such introductory remarks. On the one hand, this survey and (mostly) incisive analysis by Pappé of the national myths which continue to provide the ideological foundations for the crimes of the Israeli State - and for its seemingly limitless immunity from international sanction - is motivated by a deep-rooted sense of solidarity with Palestinian communities. Israel’s settler colonial policies and other crimes, Pappé writes, have been perpetuated not just with ‘the elimination’ of the Palestinian population from their land as a first principle, but with a ‘logic of dehumanization’ at their base - a ‘logic’ Pappé

sets out to expose in the brashness of its appearance and the appalling scale of its effects on Palestinian history. Hence, Pappé writes, the most revealing means of assessing Israel’s actions and intentions since 1967

[...] is to look at [its] policies from the point of view of the Palestinian victims. After the occupation, the new ruler confined the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in an impossible limbo: they were neither refugees nor citizens - they were, and still are, citizenless inhabitants. They were inmates, and in many respects still are, of a huge prison in which they have no civil and human rights and no impact on their future.

Pappé doesn’t confine his commentary to the post-1967 status quo, however. Indeed, *Ten Myths About Israel* is notable for the historical scope of its discussion, ranging from the early origins of (and debates within) the European Zionist movement in the 19th century to the violent foundation of Israel on Zionist principles in 1948 - a series of actions which Pappé is clear in classifying as war crimes, in the context of a broader policy of ethnic cleansing.

Pappé’s analysis is underwritten by an acute understanding of the insidious forms of bias and distortion that pervade mainstream accounts of Israeli settler colonialism in the West (and in his own academic field, the study of history). Often these masquerade under the banner

of balanced discussion, yet for all practical purposes, serve to ensure that Israel's material and ideological supremacy remains unchallenged. So, for example, Pappé helpfully points out that in its insistence on (a highly unequal) partition and its refusal to address the rights of Palestinian refugees and their families to return to their homes, the Oslo Process was 'at best a military redeployment and a rearrangement of Israeli control in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip', and in any case 'inaugurated a new system of control that made life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories far worse than it was before'. Similarly, *Ten Myths* excels in unpicking the historical tapestry that, from 1948 to the present, insists on depicting Israel as a self-defensive 'David fighting an Arab Goliath'. Rather, Pappé asserts, once we recognise the Israeli state as the product of a flexible (and frequently vicious) settler colonial project, events such as 'the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Oslo Process, and the disengagement from Gaza' can be seen as part of a single, continuous strategy, namely that of

[...] taking as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible. The means of achieving this goal have remained over time, and it remains uncompleted. However, it is the main fuel that feeds the fire of the conflict.

*Ten Myths* has plenty of such pithy interventions in the mainstream discourse surrounding Israel and its crimes - and taken together they mount not just a corrective to these, but what seems also in many places like a call to concerted, collective action (if not quite to arms) for the Palestinian cause. The book, Pappé

clarifies, is a 'modest invitation' to scholars and budding activists 'to reconnect with [their] societies' - and by implication, to change them. And as for socialist readers who still may be enthralled by the distant image of the Israeli Kibbutz, or by Israel's early history of seemingly progressive forms of collective organisation, Pappé offers what is surely the final word, when he writes: 'socialism within Zionism, as a praxis and way of life, was always a conditional and limited version of the universal ideology.' The 'universal values and aspirations' that characterize socialist struggle, indeed, 'were very early on nationalized or Zionized in Palestine', and so deflected from their true purpose.

All of which is to the good. The main limitation of the book, however, which its prefatory comments also partly imply, is that it is indeed 'yet another attempt' to set the record straight - and as such, from time to time can feel humdrum as a survey, and tired as a critique. This is partly a result of Pappé's setting out to cover large patches of familiar territory - readers of Pappé's criticism and even moderately seasoned BDS campaigners will surely find little that is genuinely new in this volume. The analysis itself, however, is also lacking on occasion. Among Pappé's assertions, for example, is the bizarre (and, for activists, largely unhelpful) claim that 'the moral implication' of 1948 is that 'the Jewish state was born out of sin', and specifically a sin which has never been 'admitted'. Similarly, Pappé's speculations on the unminuted content of Israeli military council meetings in 1967, for example, are rhetorically compelling, but ultimately irrelevant in the unsubstantiated form in which he presents them. 'Probably', Pappé tell us, Israeli military commanders outlined to foreign minister Abba Eban '[the] need to understand that this was a historical

opportunity to correct the 'fatal historical mistake' of not occupying the West Bank in 1948'. Passages like this may have a persuasive edge on first encounter, but the fact is that as soon as they're used in open-style arguments they will very easily fall apart, and likely expose BDS advocates to unnecessary criticism in the process.

If Pappé sometimes allows a vaporous 'moral' perspective more space than it merits, his essay nonetheless has a clarity of critique, and indeed a righteous force, that can only be applauded. Accusing the Zionist leadership of 1948 (and by implication, of the present day) of 'ethnic cleansing', Pappé thus succinctly observes:

The definition of the crime was clarified in the aftermath of the 1990s civil war in the Balkans: ethnic cleansing is any action by one ethnic group meant to drive out another ethnic group with the purpose of transforming a mixed ethnic region into a pure one. Such an action amounts to ethnic cleansing regardless of the means employed to obtain it....

Israel may be a key partner in trade and (an exceptionally ruthless) military ally of blocs like the European Union or the United States, but Pappé's observations above remind us that this doesn't change the nature or severity of the crimes Israel has perpetrated, and continues to commit against Palestinian communities. Indeed if anything, the West's extensive military, economic and cultural support for Israel should only heighten the urgency with which we adopt and defend our pro-Palestine positions. Once

again, at its best, Pappé's acknowledgement of this urgency can be as moving as it is concise:

For the Palestinians who lived in pre-war Israel and those who lived in the post-1967 West Bank and the Gaza Strip, [the Israeli apartheid] regime allowed even the lowest-ranking soldier in the IDF to rule, and ruin, their lives. They were helpless if such a soldier, or his unit or commander, decided to demolish their homes, or hold them for hours at a check-point, or incarcerate them without trial. There was nothing they could do. At every moment from 1948 until today, there had been some group of Palestinians undergoing such an experience.

Such passages are particularly memorable. Having said this, it should also be acknowledged that *Ten Myths* is for the most part lacking in first-hand accounts of the experiences of Palestinians living under Israeli apartheid, which Pappé rightly gestures to here. The book thus contains ample evidence of Israeli war crimes, for example - one chapter, referencing *Amnesty International* reports, details some of the devastations inflicted on Gaza over the past number of years - yet little in the way of personal testimony, or what might be broadly termed *self-advocacy*, in the sources it uses. In a longer work - one meant to provide a more through-going analysis of (rather than an introduction to) the ideology and effects of Israeli colonialism - this particular feature would be problematic.

As it stands, Pappé's *Ten Myths About Israel* presents a series of accessi-

ble and cogent counternarratives to the myths currently being peddled to justify every manner of atrocity and discrimination enforced against the Palestinians. These include the falsity that Israel in its beginnings provided a land without a people to a people without a land and the vicious deceptions which allow Israel's various aggressions against Gaza, for example, to be portrayed as actions of self-defence. In this way, Pappé aims to persuade readers of the necessity and the justice of pro-Palestine solidarity, and of the Palestinian cause in general. He largely succeeds - and if sections of *Ten*

*Myths* seem over-wrought in their tone or too efficient in their presentation, it nevertheless represents a useful primer for BDS activists (and perhaps, for the as-yet-unconverted). It counters the propaganda of the Zionist state and its apologists with persuasive, ready-to-hand arguments. In this sense, Pappé's text is an important contribution to the growing literature on pro-Palestine solidarity in the West. As such, it may be taken as a small (but important) stepping-stone in the collective struggle for Palestinian self-emancipation.