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TEN MYTHS ABOUT ISRAEL

By Ilan Pappé,
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Israel was constructed upon myths, historical disinformation, and fabrications. On the one hand, there are those myths about the Self through which Israel depicts and presents itself to the world, such as claiming to be the only ‘democracy’ in the Middle East; on the other, there are the myths about Palestine and Palestinians, i.e. those whose very history and existence Israel denies. The well-known Zionist statement about Palestine being “a land without a people” is an example of how the Israeli myth is perpetuated. Pappé’s book *Ten myths about Israel* is a work that tackles a number of these myths and fallacies that the Zionist movement and its product, the State of Israel, have invented. The book contains ten chapters divided into three parts.

Pappé applies a historical perspective in tackling historical myths in part I, “The fallacies of the past”. He exposes the myth that Palestine was a land void of inhabitants in the first chapter by arguing that Palestine in the late 19th century was not an unpopulated country. He goes further, demonstrating that even when the Ottomans came to Palestine as early as 1517, they found an established society where Sunni Muslims were the majority, whereas the Jewish population was less than 5 percent. Likewise, he demonstrates how Palestine was a rich and fertile land, with its own distinct Arabic Palestinian dialect, customs, folklore and traditions. However, later on, the arrival of Zionist movement in Palestine turned the circumstances of the native Palestinians for the worse, culminating in disaster.

Fadi Zatari*

* Research Associate
at Center for Islam
and Global Affairs
(CIGA) and
Lecturer in
political science
and IR In Istanbul
Sabahattin Zaim
University

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To complement this myth, another myth has been contrived by the Zionists that the Jews were “a people without a land”, which is addressed in the second chapter. Pappé reveals how the idea that Jews were a nation without land has been developed ever since the 16th century by a number of Western scholars as well as politicians. For instance, the British clergyman Thomas Brightman, wished for the Jews to either leave Europe or to convert to Christianity. Also, numerous Western scholars and politicians believed that a reconstruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was a divine undertaking for redemption and absolution. In the 19th century, the Zionist movement was not only initiated but was also backed by European colonial powers as a tool serving their foreign policy in the region.

Pappé scrutinizes yet another celebrated myth that associates Zionism with Judaism. This myth, “Zionism is Judaism”, is discussed in Ch. 3, and addressed through historical assessment. Furthermore, Pappé demonstrates precisely how the different Jewish groups, such as the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities have always rejected Zionism. Similarly, eminent Jewish figures have disproved this connection between Judaism and Zionism. For instance, Isaac Mayer Wise often compared the leaders of Zionism to charlatan alchemists who claimed to have contributed to science. The fourth chapter exposes the myth that “Zionism is not colonialism”. Pappé shows how Zionism is merely a colonist project because it not only developed justifications and applied the means to remove Palestinians from their homeland, but also served to dehumanize the entire Palestinian society.

The Israeli narrative about the *Nakba* claims that Palestinians willingly left Palestine in 1948 and that the Palestinians have never been compelled to leave Palestine. In chapter 5, Pappé illustrates how the Zionist ideology since its very inception believed in the compulsory expulsion of Palestinians. To support his argument, he reveals numerous statements by Zionist leaders. He cites, for instance, David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Zionist movement at the time and first Israeli prime minister, who stated in 1937 that “With compulsory transfer we would have a vast area for settlement... I support compulsory transfer. I don’t see anything immoral in it.” (p. 52). Similarly, Pappé explains how, in keeping with these statements, the Palestinians lost their homeland through systematic expulsion, ethnic cleansing¹ and intimidation by the Zionists. Likewise, the June

¹ It is important to mention that Ilan Pappé’s major work is *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), in which he challenges the Zionist narrative of the *Nakba* in 1948. Pappé explains in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* that the *Nakba* was an orchestrated expulsion as well as systematic ethnic cleansing of Palestinians committed by the Zionist movement in order to achieve a purely Jewish state in Palestine.

1967 war and its consequences of colonizing the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula were presented by Israel as the result of “no other choice”. In opposing this narrative, Pappé demolishes this myth and exposes in chapter 6 how the annexation of the West Bank had always been historically a Zionist objective even before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

Israel presents itself to the world as a democratic country. Pappé refutes this myth in the seventh chapter which falls in Part II, “The fallacies of the present”. He reveals how Israel treats Palestinians inside Israel, in the West Bank as well as in the Gaza Strip in very different ways in comparison to the Jewish population. For instance, Israel denies the right of return to the Palestinians refugees, whereas the Israeli “law of return” grants the right to gain Israeli citizenship to any Jewish person in the world, regardless of where he or she is originally from. Besides, Israel uses collective punishment against Palestinians such as uprooting of trees and crops, house demolitions, confiscation of Palestinian lands for constructing Jewish settlements, and arrests without trial. Indeed, such acts contradict the essence of democracy and basic human rights.

There are also various myths associated with the Oslo process that were presented in the eighth chapter, titled “The Oslo Mythologies”. There is, for instance, the myth that the Oslo accord was an authentic peace process. However, Pappé argues that the “Oslo process was not a fair and equal pursuit of peace, but a compromise agreed to by a defeated, colonized people” (p. 101). This is a sound argument by Pappé since several fundamental issues, such as the fate of Jerusalem, the right of return for the Palestinians, and the Jewish settlements were postponed to a later stage and seem today to be further from resolution. Regarding the *status quo* in Gaza Strip, Israel also propagates several myths, such as that Hamas is responsible for the misery in Gaza. According to the Israeli narrative, the Israeli withdrawal in 2005 from the settlements located in Gaza was for the sake of achieving peace with the Palestinians who, however, as claimed by Israel, responded to this withdrawal by spreading violence and hostility in the Gazan society. Pappé refutes these claims in the ninth chapter, “The Gaza Mythologies”, and sheds light on how the withdrawal was intended to convince the Israeli society that abandoning settlements in such a manner must not be repeated in the future. Hence, this was a strategic move to justify further colonization of the Palestinian lands by painting the Israelis as “peace keepers”.

For Pappé the two-state solution is an invented Zionist myth that is impossible to achieve. In part III, “Looking ahead”, Pappé addresses this subject in a remarkable

manner, as he notes that “The two-states solution is like a corpse taken out in the morgue every now and then, dressed up nicely, and presented as a living thing. When it has been proven once more that there is no life left in it, it is returned to the morgue.” (p. 142).

This remarkable effort by Pappé could have been embellished by some attention to a few matters. For instance, in chapter 3 “Zionism is Judaism,” there is a lack of discussion on how Israel, Zionism and their supporters around the world instrumentalize this association to accuse anyone who criticizes Israeli policy of being anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic in order to steer the political discourse in favour of Israel. Another possible reason why Israel associates any critique of its policy with anti-Semitism is that this provides it with an easy self-righteous shield to hide behind and escape responding to the profound accusations of immoral conduct it constantly undertakes especially against Palestinians victims. repudiating the myth that “Zionism is not colonialism” is indeed a significant contribution by Pappé in this book and serves to bolster the perception of the Palestinian liberation movements as legitimate anti-colonialist efforts. Nonetheless, Pappé did not discuss how Zionism depicts and is keen to sell itself as a ‘modernist’ and ‘emancipist Jewish’ movement, which is a widespread myth about Zionism in the West and America. Likewise, even though the author elaborates why the two-states solution is an Israeli myth, he does not propose any well-defined alternative for it.

To summarize, despite some of the aforementioned shortcomings, Pappé’s book is very informative and well-argued in addressing the question of how Israel has constructed a fallacious narrative in representing itself as well as its depiction of the Palestinians. *Ten myths about Israel* offers an impartial perspective and does justice even from the standpoint of the victims of the Israeli apartheid system. This book is thus highly recommended, for both experts in the field as well as for beginners and functions as an exceedingly effective historical introduction for anyone who wishes to be involved in insightful discussions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.