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‘There is a clash of civilisations’: An interview with Benny Morris

by Gabriel Noah Brahm



Historian Benny Morris at his home. Anna Loshkin.

In this in-depth interview, Israeli historian Benny Morris speaks with Professor Gabriel Noah Brahm about his work, his critics and his regrets. He also charges Western academics with dishonesty about the Middle East, gives his prognosis for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and outlines his view of Israel's place in the 'Clash of Civilisations'.

Compiled by the Faculty Action Network

Benny Morris hasn't changed. One of the world's leading chroniclers of the Arab-Israeli conflict tells the truth as he sees it, based on the facts he discerns as a historian. While some have perceived a dramatic shift from the 'old' (more optimistic and liberal) Morris of the Oslo period to the 'new' (more realistic/pessimistic) Morris of today, this is something of a myth. He hasn't changed what he says about the reality of 1948, the Palestinian refugees, or anything else. Rather, he has added, to his knowledge of the history of Israel's rebirth as a modern nation-state, a painful analysis of more recent history. When Yasser Arafat walked away from Israeli peace offers in 2000 and 2001, a disillusioned Morris started to examine the possibility that the Palestinians weren't serious about wanting a two-state deal. He has since come to rate more highly the importance of Islamism and jihadism as forces driving Palestinian rejectionism.

Moreover, as a firebrand who tends to 'call a spade a spade,' he is irked by a censorious political correctness that limits what can be talked about honestly — policing thought in line with 'Western guilt' over colonialism. He is equally disdainful of the romantic cult of 'the Other' in academia that tries to assuage that guilt. He regrets not the substance of any of the things he has said, but only the 'intemperate' way he expressed himself on occasion. We talked about his books and his thoughts about the future of Israel and the region at his home.

ALBERT CAMUS'S MOTHER: JUSTICE OR MORALISM?

Gabriel Noah Brahm: *You've been both widely celebrated and also condemned by some for your work. Have you paid a price for your outspokenness and originality?*

Benny Morris: I'm not sure that's what the price is paid for. I certainly paid a price for writing things that the Israeli establishment wasn't happy with in the late 1980s and 1990s. But *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* and *Israel's Border Wars* also won me a place in an Israeli university — so it cuts both ways. I was unemployed for six years — you pay a heavy economic price for that. But on the other hand, it got me a type of position that I wanted. So I'm not bitter.

GNB: *Responding to critics, you once said that you respected Albert Camus's aperçu about his mother — whom he happened to prefer, for some strange reason, to the moralising Jean-Paul Sartre's endorsement of revolutionary violence directed at civilians in the name of a tristing concept of justice. When he referred to the*

civilians in the name of a pristine concept of justice. When he referred to the Algerian problem, he placed his mother ahead of morality', you said, adding that, in your own case, by analogy, 'Preserving my people is more important than universal moral concepts'. Haven't morals got to be consistently applied?

BM: I'm not sure I would say 'placed his mother before morals'. One type of moral value is wanting your mother to stay alive. And the same applies, I suppose, to the Jewish people. I think it's a value to want to preserve your people, and that's more important to me than some universal values which speak in terms of absolutes but don't look concretely at what is happening.

Looking concretely is what Camus did in Algeria. He understood that the Arab struggle for independence was going to cost one and a half million colonists dearly. He thought this was going to be a tragedy and wanted some kind of rapprochement between the nationalist Arabs and the immigrants who had arrived 100 years before. It didn't work out that way. But he thought that the Europeans in Algeria, because of the history of the place, also deserved a place in the sun.

GNB: *Undiluted commitment to an abstract, theoretical idea of 'justice' may in fact not always be just in practice. Can it also be moral to care about one's own?*

BM: To care for your own people as well as others is not contrary to universal morality. Many people try to pose it as such, as contrary to universal 'human values'. I think that's mistaken. One has to look at the reality of things, and not just talk of abstract concepts which are often very difficult to apply. You may cause far more injustice by trying to apply what you call 'justice' than by trying to find some sort of middle way.

SEEING THE PALESTINIANS PLAIN: THE LONGEST JIHAD?

GNB: *Your work has been hugely controversial. Looking back, would you do anything differently if you could?*

BM: To be completely honest, in the interview with Ari Shavit, in *Haaretz* in 2004, I should have said some things in a more temperate way. Not that I have a problem with what I said, but there were one or two phrases which provided ammunition to hostile critics. But I don't think I have changed anything I have ever written. I would take nothing back regarding my views about 1948 or the conflict, because what I wrote originally and what I continue to write is always based on persuasive evidence.

Politically, the thing which has changed for me (and you can see that in my journalism), is my view of the Palestinians and their readiness to make peace with the Israelis. This is the crux. I would say that in the 1990s, while I was not persuaded by Arafat — the man was always a vicious terrorist and a liar — I thought then maybe he is changing his approach, because he now accepts the realities of power and what is possible.

But when it came to the crunch, when he was offered a two-state solution in 2000 by [Ehud] Barak, and then got an even better offer from [Bill] Clinton at the end of 2000, Arafat said 'no'. And I think this was the defining moment for me. He was simply unable to reach a compromise with Israelis.

GNB: *And that affected you how, exactly?*

BM: From that point on, I lost a lot of sympathy for the Palestinians — and I came to understand that they are not willing to reach a two-state solution. And then there was Mahmoud Abbas's rejection in 2008 of the Ehud Olmert proposals, which were fairly similar to the Clinton proposals of December 2000. Abbas was offered a state with 95 to 96 per cent of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and he too said 'no'.

I understood that it wasn't really a question of a bit of territory here or there — it was a matter of the Palestinians non-acceptance of the legitimacy of the Jewish state. That was what lay behind Abbas's inability to accept any Jewish state next to a Palestinian state. This is really what it has always been about: for Arafat, for Abbas, and before them for [Haj Amin] al-Husseini in the 1930s and 1940s.

Let me add that during the 1990s I was working on my book, *Righteous Victims*, in which I looked at the conflict from its origins until 1999. Before that, I had written about segments of the conflict, about the emergence of the Palestinian refugee problem and about the 1950s, but in the 1990s I devoted my time to writing a comprehensive history of the clash between the two peoples — between the Zionists and the Arab world. I came to the conclusion, on the basis of what I read about the conflict during that decade, that the Palestinian Arabs were not willing to reach a compromise. What happened in 2000 capped the conclusions I had more or less reached on the basis of the material that went into *Righteous Victims*. I understood that even if there were some Palestinians who were genuinely moderate and conciliatory, and willing to live with a two-state solution, they would always be out-flanked, or crushed, by the much larger segment of the Palestinians who would be completely rejectionist.

Abbas can't reach a solution. Even if he were a real moderate, he would never sign on the dotted line. First, he would be shot by the Hamasnicks. Second, even if he wasn't shot by the Hamasnicks, the deal would come unstuck because Hamas would send out suicide bombers and enrage the Israeli right. There are simply too many extremists; the moderates end up bowing to their will. This is what always happens when it comes to the crunch.

GNB: Was it then, a matter of a shift in focus — from a close-up look at the origins of the refugee problem, where you're naturally feeling more sympathy for the Palestinian refugees, to the bigger picture, where it was not so easy to retain as much sympathy?

BM: Yes, maybe that's true. The focus of my original work on the refugees, and then my subsequent book on the infiltration problem and the border wars, did look more narrowly at the Palestinians and the bad things that happened to them. And this, with any normal, decent person, would generate sympathy — so this is true. But when you look at the wider picture, you end up attributing to them a great deal of responsibility for what happened as well.

GNB: To return to the question of Palestinian rejectionism, Norman Finkelstein and Avi Shlaim have questioned the narrative you present, arguing that both the Palestinians and the Israelis did not accept the Clinton parameters.

BM: This is not true. The response by the PLO to the Clinton parameters, which was published and is on the internet, is essentially a complete dismissal of any compromise on the 'right of return', which is crucial—the Palestinians offered no conciliation.

On the matter of territories, they were vague and they certainly didn't accept what Clinton outlined — 94 to 96 per cent of the West Bank, 100 per cent of the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem — all of this is insufficient for them. The Temple Mount, where Clinton offered a number of different alternatives — Israeli-Palestinian condominium, the Arabs owning the Temple Mount surface, the Jews owning the interior — these are variations on a compromise. On these there was no give at all by Arafat.

Clinton in his autobiography, and Denis Ross in *The Missing Peace*, both insist that the Palestinian response was a total rejection of the Clinton parameters. Whereas Clinton said the Israeli response (which incidentally Israel didn't publish, and the Americans never published, though most of it is in my book, *One State Two States*), was much, much closer to the details of the Clinton parameters. In other words, there were one or two things that Barak's government

wanted revised or re-discussed. They wanted more than 4-6 per cent of the West Bank — they wanted up to 8 per cent. But that was ‘up for discussion’. The same applied to the Temple Mount, and the sacred basin around the Old City. I don’t think Shlaim and Finkelstein are correct on this.

The Arafat response to the Clinton parameters, when a historian looks at it, is completely commensurate with the previous responses over many decades of Palestinian leaders to international and bilateral proposals for a compromise peace.

In 1937, the British Peel Commission put the first two-state solution on the table. Haj Amin al-Husseini and the Arab world (save for Prince Abdullah in Transjordan) all said ‘no’, and went back to rebelling against the British. They said ‘no’ to a peace proposal which actually gave them close to 80 per cent of Palestine’s land surface, and gave the Jews 17 per cent. But the Arabs said ‘no, we don’t want this compromise, they [the Jews] don’t deserve one inch of Palestine!’

In 1947, the international community put a second two-state solution on the table in the form of UN General Assembly Resolution 181, on 29 November 1947 — and the Arab world and the Palestinians again rejected it. That resolution offered the Palestinians something like 45 per cent of the country and the Jews 55 per cent.

Their problem wasn’t only in the percentages, which had now turned less favourable to the Palestinians. The problem was with the entire concept of partition and a two-state solution. They said all of Palestine belongs to us, and that is the only solution we will accept. And the Jews, some of them, can live here as a minority.

Essentially Arafat did the same thing in 1978, in response to Sadat and Begin’s proposal, at Camp David, of Palestinian autonomy. He did the same in 2000, with the Clinton parameters, and Abbas did the same thing with Olmert’s offer in 2008. The problem here, when you look at it as a historian, is the consistency one sees in the rejection of a two-state compromise. This is what should make reasonable people depressed.

OBSTACLES TO PEACE

GNB: In the US and Europe, of course, liberal folks think the obstacle to peace is the settlements.

BM: Look, the problem is that settlements are an expression of occupation and expansionism. The settlements are the symbol of the fact that Israel has been in occupation of the Arab territories in one way or another since 1967. We left the Gaza strip, but we can still control the airspace, the borders, the water. We control everything — even though we are physically not in the Gaza Strip. And in the West Bank, there are a large number of settlements which express the will of some of the Israeli public to expand and take over the West Bank in general.

Many in the West have been living with things as they have been since 1967. They don't go back to 1967 and look at why Israel conquered these places, or why it ended up retaining these places, even in the first years of occupation. They look at what exists now, and they see tanks vs. Kalashnikovs, and Israelis basically stealing land from Palestinians. This dominates their view of what the conflict is about, and it's a mistake. But the Palestinians of course understand this and exploit it.

The problem is that the Arabs rejected Zionist and Jewish presence in the area. They rejected the legitimacy of the Zionist and Jewish claims to even part of Palestine, and they continue to do that. But now they say, 'well, the conflict is because of the settlements and the occupation.' What I would say is this: the settlements and the occupation are obstacles to peace, without doubt; but the bigger obstacle is the essential rejectionism of the Palestinian national movement. The religious wing of the Palestinian movement is open about this, while the so-called secular variety (which is really not so secular) is more subtle. But for both, their rejectionism is the essential driving force of the conflict.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that we have a prime minister who is very right wing — a prime minister who appears dishonest, where you don't know what he's actually thinking or what he's after. One day he says 'two states', one day he says 'no two states', so he generates a great deal of mistrust amongst enlightened people across the world. He may generate trust in the Katamonim [a Jerusalem neighbourhood] in Israel, but most thinking people don't trust the man, and this includes most thinking Israelis as well. Abbas appears to be a much more genial character than [Bibi] Netanyahu. He dresses in suits, he speaks the language of two states — he sounds normal. And Netanyahu sounds fishy.

GNB: *Do you think it would have made a difference if Isaac ['Bougie'] Herzog had won the last election in Israel?*

BM: We'd be a bit better off, in terms of image and in terms of relations with the wider western world. We wouldn't be any closer to peace, though, because I don't think Herzog has it in him to do what is necessary. And even if he does what is

...and even if it were necessary, I'm not sure that would bring peace either.

Somebody like Sharon might have been able to deliver Israeli withdrawal from the territories. He did this with the Gaza Strip and slightly with the West Bank. He promised or seemed to promise that this is what he would do — a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, if you cannot reach an agreement with the Palestinians. This wouldn't have led to peace because, as I say, the Palestinians seem to want all of it — not just the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But, at least in terms of Western public opinion and governments, unilateral Israeli withdrawal from 90 per cent of the West Bank, back to what is called the Defence Barrier, this would certainly put us in better stead amongst Western governments and publics.

But the Palestinians — or a large segment of them — would continue the fight, shoot rockets into Israel, make life unlivable in Tel Aviv, or flights untenable at Ben-Gurion International Airport. And Israel would have to reconquer the West Bank.

But maybe the Palestinians would surprise me by not shooting rockets if we withdrew from the West Bank. If Israel gave that a chance, at least, as I say, we would be doing the right thing in terms of the West.

ISRAEL AND THE 'CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS'

GNB: *Is there a 'clash of civilisations' taking place in the world?*

BM: I think there is a clash of civilisations. There are Western values at odds with an Islamic world whose attitude to life, to political freedom, to creativity, is completely different.

Arab regimes are all dictatorships — there's absolutely no value to human life in such regimes. Families care for their loved ones, but the regimes themselves don't show a great respect for civil liberties, nor for life in general in the Arab world.

The Islamic world is resurgent, and the radical wing in Islam is furthering the idea of actually taking over the world and turning it into one Islamic polity — a Caliphate. In other words, Islam is the correct religion, everything else is wrong and Allah's will is that Islam dominate the earth. This is what the radical Islamists want, though Hamas at the moment is busy with us so it doesn't express its universal pretensions. Other movements like Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, ISIS — they talk more bluntly about a universal message, which they are trying to both

propound and achieve around the globe. So yes, there is a clash of civilisations.

Leaders like Obama would prefer to wish away this clash of civilisations. Many television stations completely ignore it and, like Obama, don't use the words 'Muslim' or 'Islamist' when it comes to terrorism — they just talk about 'international terrorism' or 'extremism'. Well, the real problem is Islamic terrorism and Islamic pretensions to world dominance. The fact that they sell millions of Osama [Bin-Laden] t-shirts in Cairo or Pakistan is a sign that they are popular. It's not just some minor, small extremist group.

GNB: *That all goes contrary to politically correct dogma.*

BM: Yes, they say that the vast majority of Muslims are moderate and peace loving and the same as us. I don't know if this is true. Maybe [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi, who heads IS [Islamic State], had it right when he gave a sermon and said Islam is not a religion of peace.

He didn't say that it is a religion of war, but that's what he meant when he said it's not a religion of peace. And then he said 'we have to go out on jihad'. I think a lot of Arabs believe that. I think they believe the West has been aggressing against them. They don't see it as a resurgent Islam attacking the West, but as a resurgent Islam defending itself against what they see as a Western incursion. And Israel is seen as the front line of the incursion. This is our problem.

The truth is that the Zionist movement did define itself as a Western movement, with Western ideals of democracy and development. The Arabs who saw us come here in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s, regarded us as an extension of the West. So it's not just us, it's them as well — we all see Israel as a part of the West and unfortunately we are at the forefront of this battle line of the clash of civilisations. There are other places where East meets West. Northern Nigeria, Northern Kenya bordering on Somalia, the Philippines, Thailand — these are the border lands between Islam and the West. And we're one of them, unfortunately.

GNB: *In your view, was the Palestinian rejection of Israel always rooted in Islamism? Was 1948 a jihad?*

BM: One of the things I understood from my work in the 1990s, and later, is that Islam plays a major role in the hatred of the Zionist movement by Arabs in the Middle East and in Palestine. It's not just a political matter of territory; it's also a matter of religion and culture which opposes the arrival of the infidel and his taking of Muslim holy land.

Sometimes Palestinian rejectionism is more political in nature, while at other times, such as now, Islam plays a major role in Palestinian thinking about the conflict with Israel and the Zionist movement. In 1929 the big riots were all about the Temple Mount and the Wailing Wall and how these holy places are being threatened by the 'infidel Jews'. We're in one of those times again, partly because the entire Islamic world has radicalized, including the Palestinians. When I was young, you could walk in the streets of East Jerusalem and never see veiled women. Never. So the Muslim Arabs of Palestine have changed over the last 40 years, and this is a reflection of what has happened in the Muslim Arab world in general.

You can't avoid the conclusion that Islam is playing a major role in what's happening. The business of the suicide bombers is another indication, Hamas are the people who in a sense introduced it into the conflict between us and the Palestinians at the end of the First Intifada and it got stronger at their Second Intifada.

Occasionally Israel captured would-be suicide bombers whose vest didn't work or who were weak-willed and didn't blow themselves up. Some were from the Fatah, which had begun to copy Hamas and send out suicide bombers. When they interrogated the Fatah 'secular' suicide bombers, they found that their motivation was exactly the same as the Hamas suicide bombers: religion, the 70 virgins and paradise, and all the rest of it. The secularism of the Fatah is not that deep. It's maybe a varnish. When you look into what drives the Fatah member towards resistance, especially towards suicide bombing — you will find he is exactly the same as the Hamasnik.

GNB: It's not an optimistic picture. Yet in Israel, you're considered on the left. You're a man of the Left, you refused to serve in the West Bank.

BM: No, I'm not sure I'm considered on the Left I used to be considered a left-winger because of the subject of my writing — the Palestinians. Nobody had looked at them before, at the refugee problem. Just your choice of subject puts you on the Left in Israel.

However, it's true I refused service in the West Bank and was jailed in 1988. I consider myself a man of the Left, if the left in Israel is defined, at least in foreign policy terms, as somebody who supports a two-state solution. A lot of leftist Israelis by now wouldn't regard me that way —because I'm pessimistic about a two-state solution and essentially say it's the Palestinians who will never agree to a two-state solution. Some left-wing Israelis regard me as a right-winger because I have said that the Palestinians are to blame for the continuation of the conflict.

ACADEMIA, BDS, AND THE POLITICS OF MENDACITY

GNB: In your famous interview with Ari Shavit in 2004 which you mentioned, you said something else in particular that interested me very much: 'I am trying to be realistic. I know it doesn't always sound politically correct, but I think that political correctness poisons history. In any case it impedes our ability to see the truth'. How much of a factor is 'political correctness' today? How important is the phenomenon itself—both in the academy and in the wider political arena?

BM: Political correctness in academia means that there are certain things which you can't say even if the evidence and the documents tell you that that's what happened — you can't say these things because they sound wrong. If a document from 1936 says 'the Arabs in this village are out to slit the throats of all their neighbours', a politically correct academic will tell you, 'well you can't say "The Arabs", you have to say 'three Arabs in the village'. But the document actually says 'the Arabs in the village', it doesn't say 'three particular Arabs'. It says they're jihadists, and you say 'well you can't identify them as jihadists', maybe it's wrong to even use the term. The problem is the moment you start paring down the truth of what the documents are telling you, you end up with history that isn't true. You end up with a distorted view of what actually happened. I think this happens in some Western academics' approach to the Middle East.

I'm talking about Middle East Studies departments. It's not just a matter of political correctness; it's also a matter of access to assets and to material and money which you need in order to function as an academic. You want grants; you want to be able to visit Damascus. If somebody wants to talk to you, you want to be able to get to him. If you say the wrong things, then you won't get a visa to Tehran or wherever. You see it occasionally vis-a-vis Turkey. I used to see people refusing to actually call a spade a spade when it came to the genocide of the Armenians, because they wanted access to Turkish materials.

Middle East Studies departments in America look to the Arab Middle East — they don't care about Israel. Israel isn't really in the Middle East for them. It's not part of their domain; their domain is the Arab/Muslim countries. Those are the ones you have to keep in with; otherwise you can't even function properly and get access to the material.

There is also an element of guilty conscience in all of this. The West did misbehave toward the Arab and other Third World countries; so some try to make amends by looking over backwards and denigrating the Arabs more positively.

make amends by leaning over backwards and depicting the Arabs more positively today, even if that's not actually the reality.

GNB: You've said that you don't think Israeli Jews would survive or would wish to remain as a minority in a future 'one-state solution'. In Israel it's completely common to talk about 'the demographic question', yet demography-talk can sound strange if not culpable to non-Israeli ears.

BM: Yes, people who talk about demography are vulnerable to the charge of racism. The point is that the most of the world is divided into nation states in which there is a majority of one people in a country, sometimes with minorities, sometimes without. It's true that America is an unusual country. It's an immigrant society; it's not a normal nation state. In the Middle East, nationality counts for a lot. We even see this happening in the break-up of countries like Syria and Iraq, in which particular ethnic groups that see themselves as nations want a separate domain. They don't want to be merged or overwhelmed by a majority in their country.

Arabs and Jews haven't been able to live well together over the past 100 years — they have been in constant conflict and to believe that they will live in peace in a 'one-state solution' is contrary to what history has been telling us has been happening. What we do know is that the Arab world in general used to have Jewish minorities that no longer exist. Jews did not in the end feel comfortable living there. In fact, they were intimidated into leaving the Arab world and that's why there are not Jewish communities in Yemen, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria — they all used to have large Jewish communities, and they have all vanished. The way that nation states and nationalism has developed in the Middle East basically alienated them, and threw them out.

The same would apply to a Palestine in which there was a majority of Arabs — especially given this increase in Islamic radicalism. Jews never actually fared that well in the Islamic world, and there's a sort of myth about how nice and good relations were among Jews and Arabs in the Islamic world over the centuries. It is nonsense. Jews were tolerated because they were a very small minority and didn't threaten anybody. If they had become much larger perhaps they would have been treated more violently; as it was they were mistreated and oppressed and there were pogroms all over the Arab world over the centuries. So expecting Jews who would turn into a minority in a united Palestinian state to want to stay here rather than go off to America and live a normal life in a tolerant democracy is nonsense. Those who say that Jews and Arabs in Palestine would live in peace and mutual tolerance in a single state are being dishonest — or are either too naïve or too ignorant to be allowed to publish books and articles.

When Arabs say ‘well, why can’t the Jews live with us together as equals in a joint society?’ this is nonsense. They’re presenting an imaginary future to Westerners that sounds like coffee shops in New York, but actually it’s not — we are talking about the Middle East. It’s not New York. A hundred years of what has happened between Israelis and Palestinians, the centuries of what happened to Jews in Arab lands, all of this means that the Arabs are not speaking honestly when they speak about living jointly in some sort of parity. Demography would tell. If it’s one person one vote, then they would control of what happened in the state and the Jews would of course prefer to leave. Arabs understand that. They are being dishonest.

GNB: The BDS [boycotts, divestments and sanctions] movement has been getting attention in Israel lately. Meanwhile, it’s been dismissed as fundamentally mendacious by everyone from Dennis Ross who calls it a ‘dishonest movement’, to Norman Finkelstein who calls it a disingenuous ‘cult’. Although the movement leaders pretend otherwise at times — for the sake of convenience, in order to seduce more reasonable people — BDS is in fact focused around achieving the ‘one state’ that you are so sceptical of, and have written about in your book, One States, Two States. Do you have any observations about BDS?

BM: There are different people working in the BDS movement and they say different things. I assume that the most vocal people, like Omar Barghouti, do support one statism and, as I say, I don’t think it’s honest because I think they are basically striving for an Arab-Muslim majority state. I think they understand there’s no reason to expect a Palestinian Arab state to be any more tolerant than any of the neighbouring Arab states. There is no reason for them to behave differently from Arabs in Syria, Arabs in Egypt, or Arabs anywhere else. I think they know that. They know that they won’t, and some of them also will acknowledge that there is a growing Islamist radicalisation among them, which would also not allow for coexistence because Islamic radicals think the Jew is an ‘ape’ or ‘pig’, as defined in the Quran.

EDWARD SAID AND 1948: NATIONS AND NARRATIONS

GNB: In 1998, in a meeting between Palestinians and some Israeli ‘New Historians’, Edward Said said that ‘one of the most remarkable things about the Israelis, except for [Ilan] Pappé, is the profound contradiction, bordering on schizophrenia, that informs their work. Benny Morris, for example, 10 years ago wrote the most important work by an Israeli on the birth of a Palestinian refugee problem. Morris’s meticulous work showed that in district after district commanders had been ordered

to drive out Palestinians, burn villages, systematically take over their homes and property, and yet strangely enough, by the end of the book, Morris seems reluctant to draw the inevitable conclusions from his own evidence. Instead of saying outright that the Palestinians were in fact driven out, he says that they were partially driven out by Zionist forces and partially left as a result of war. It is as if he was still enough of a Zionist to believe the ideological version that Palestinians left on their own, without Israeli eviction rather than completely to accept his own evidence which is that Zionist policy dictated Palestinian exodus'. How do you respond? Said clearly thought that you didn't understand your own work!

BM: You have to look at the facts of history: there were two national movements striving for territory in Palestine. The international community proposed a compromise between the two movements, giving to each part of the territory, so that they each would have a small state. The Palestinians said no and went to war — this is the basic fact of what happened in 1947.

There was a war which they started, the Palestinians attacked the Jewish community, maybe wanting to destroy it, maybe not, but they attacked the Jewish community and said 'no' to the compromise. They were joined subsequently by the armies of surrounding Arab states in an attack on the newborn State of Israel, and in the course of the war, the Israeli side, for reasons of war, ended up conquering territory and conquering hundreds of Arab villages and towns. This is what was necessitated by the circumstances of the war, and Palestinians fled in large numbers as a result of these military operations. Here and there, some of them were expelled by Jewish troops; here and there, some of them fled because Arab leaders told them to; by and large, people left their homes as a result of fear of the encroaching war.

In all places — and this is completely correct if you look at the facts — Israel did not allow the refugees to return. But then you say, well, what is the Israeli argument for not allowing these 700,000 people, who were innocent, to return to their homes? If you let them back in, you are basically inviting a destabilising minority, or even a majority, as it would have turned out, who want to stab you in the back. So the Israeli government at the time, and still to this day, rejects the idea of a mass return of refugees who would be disruptive of the existence of the Jewish state. You have to look at it politically. Israel would have been committing suicide by taking back, in 1949, the refugees, and would be committing suicide today.

What befell the individual Palestinians and their families — and not everybody went to war, not everybody was shooting at Israelis — has to also be looked at in a national political context, not just in terms of individual rights. That's the only

way of looking at history.

It's unfortunate, and I can understand what Said is saying; but you should be able to understand what I'm saying. I don't think it is reasonable of him to have expected Jews to commit suicide in 1949 and let the refugees back. And it's not reasonable for him to expect that Israel would accept a mass refugee return today. On the UN rolls there about five million Palestinian refugees; Palestinians say there are about six million or even more. There are six million Jews in Israel today and one and a half million Israeli citizens who are Arab. If you add six million Palestinian refugees returning to one and a half million Arabs that are citizens of Israel, you end up instantly with a majority of Arabs in the Jewish state — which means it is no longer a Jewish state, which means the Jews would be committing suicide to allow these people to return en masse. It's as simple as that.

GNB: Do you know, as a historian, what percentage of Arab Palestinians fled versus what percentage were really expelled?

BM: There is no way of working out the percentages, because even those who were expelled left in part because of all sort of things that happened to them over the months of warfare.

In most cases, as I say, there weren't expulsion orders. We know that in places like Ramla there were large expulsions, but we know in other places, like Haifa, the local Arab leadership instructed the Arabs to leave the town and in most places people just left because it was war. That's what people do in most places if they don't want to be in a war zone — because you can get killed, your daughter can get raped, all sorts of nasty things happen in war, especially in civil wars.

GNB: Why do you think there were, relatively speaking, so few atrocities in 1948? You've written that there were around 900 or so Arabs massacred.

BM: I would say that all together, during the 1948 war, which lasted from the end of 1947 to the beginning of 1949, around 800-900 Arab civilians or prisoners of war were deliberately killed in massacres, when you take all of the various 20 or so incidents. I would also say that between 200-300 Jews were massacred by Arabs in the course of the war. In general, I would say there were very few massacres in this war compared to civil wars, say, in Spain in the 1930s, or Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Rape almost was unheard of — perhaps a dozen incidents, in a year-long war in which civilian populations were overrun.

I would say that, by and large, the Jews — there is no other way of saying it — behaved well in the 1948 war, given the circumstances of Arab attack and fear of a holocaust at Arab hands. The quality and quantity of massacres were very small

...by comparison to other civil conflicts around the world in the modern age, and certainly in past centuries.

Why so few Jews were massacred by Arabs is because the Palestinian Arabs and Arab armies conquered only a very small number of Jewish villages during the war. I would add that, by and large, Arab armies behaved well in terms of their prisoners — they abided by the Geneva Conventions and didn't massacre prisoners; especially the Jordanians, who had the largest number of Israeli prisoners.

Even the Syrians and the Egyptians by and large respected the Geneva Conventions and did not massacre Jews. On the other hand, the Israelis overran 400 Arab villages and towns in the course of 1948 — many of them with civilians in them. And the number of those massacred is very small.

ON ARI SHAVIT'S *MY PROMISED LAND*

GNB: I wonder if you think Ari Shavit's gambit will work in his bestselling book, My Promised Land. It seems to me that he hopes to be seen as having shone a light once and for all into every dark corner of what he called 'Zionism's black box', so that he can, in effect, mixing metaphors, hit the 'reset' button on Israel's reputation. But there are those who contest his telling of certain events; for example, what happened in Lydda. Is the book accurate? And can it do the job of persuading people that Israel is a country without secrets; flawed to be sure but a miracle none the less, and a progressive cause that deserves support from liberals among others?

BM: The book is a problem because it — I think it's deliberate — pretends to be both pro-Zionist and anti-Zionist at the same time. It does project the good things about Israel — its creativity, its gathering of Jewish communities in distress, and so on. It also highlights the negative side of Zionism, vis-a-vis the Palestinians, and highlights what happened in Lydda, where there was a massacre and mass expulsion.

GNB: Would you call it a massacre?

BM: I definitely would call it a massacre.

GNB: Not fighting?

BM: Documents say that about 250 Arabs were killed in Lydda on 12 July 1948.

They also tell us that between two and four Israelis died in that battle. So the disparity points to massacre. There was a battle — it didn't happen out of the blue with people put against a wall and shot down. That's not what happened.

There was a fire fight, and there was sniping at Israeli troops, and the commanders of the Israeli troops, the Third Battalion and the Yiftach Brigade commanders, told the troops to shoot anything that moves. And this is what they did and they killed 250 people, some of them inside a mosque.

So those are the facts of what happened in Lydda, on a particular day in a particular battle. The problem with Shavit's book is that it gives too much prominence and importance to what happened on the 12th of July in Lydda, because this isn't what happened throughout the war.

The war was begun by the Arabs; they were the ones who launched aggression; they were the ones who killed many, many Jews in the course of the war — 6,000 people or 1 percent of the Israeli population was killed in this war. One percent of Americans dead today would be 3 million — that's what happened to the Jewish community in Palestine at the time, so the Israelis had good reason to feel anger in response to Arab violence.

Calling Lydda the 'black box of Zionism' is ridiculous. When Israeli troops conquered 400 villages they did not commit massacres in all of those villages and did not expel the inhabitants of all villages. This happened at Lydda — in one particular place and one particular time. I think he has distorted the history, focusing on one little bit of what happened and, in a sense, saying this was representative.

GNB: Anecdotally, my students in the U.S. seem to like Shavit's book — and the Israel they discover in its pages, both the 'tragedy', which they can empathise with, and the 'triumph' even more so. Leaving the distinct question of historical accuracy aside, does this approach help Israel or not, this 'warts and all' account?

BM: I don't know. We will see in about 20 years. I have a feeling that its impact will ultimately be negative, because of the prominence given to the chapter on Lydda. That's the chapter that was published in *The New Yorker*.

GNB: Is it true when he says that the early Zionists 'didn't see' the Palestinian Arabs?

BM: This is true. The early Zionists settlers, when they came here, were like Europeans in most third world countries — the settlers among them, like Nairobi

or wherever the British or the French settled. They didn't really see the natives. This is what Europeans were like at the end of the 19th century. A native wasn't part of the geography, he wasn't seen as human, certainly not on par with a European.

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