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Conference: "The origin of the violence in Gaza lies in the racist ideology of the elimination of the native"

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé looks back on the nearly 100-year history of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle



Children in a makeshift refugee school during the Nakba in 1948. / Hanini.org

The following text is a transcript of [the talk](#) given by Israeli historian Ilan Pappé at the University of California, Berkeley, on October 19, 2023. Pappé is director of the European Centre for Palestinian Studies at the University of Exeter and the author of several books on the issue of the Israeli occupation.



I thank you very much for giving us your time at this crucial and painful moment in the history of Israel and Palestine. Prior to October 7, 2023, most of Israeli Jewish society watched with some fear and apprehension the situation created during the last weeks of this month, and the main debate in Israel was about its future. The weekly demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of Israelis were part of a protest movement against the government's attempt to change Israel's constitutional law and create a new political system whereby political powers would have full control over the judicial system and the public sphere would be much more controlled by Messianic Jewish and religious groups.

In one of my articles, I describe that particular struggle for Israel's identity – which was the main theme until October 7, 2023 – as a struggle between the State of Judea and the State of Israel. The State of Judea was established by Jewish settlers in the West Bank and it was a combination of Messianic Judaism, Zionist fanaticism, and racism that became a kind of power structure that became much more noticeable and important in recent years – especially under the Netanyahu government – and that was about to impose its way of life on the rest of Israel beyond what we call Judea and, in a sense, beyond the West Bank or the Jewish space in the West Bank. Against him rose the State of Israel or, if you like, the city of Tel Aviv, its greatest exponent. The idea that Israel is pluralistic, democratic, secular – and most importantly, Western or European – and that it is fighting for its life against the State of Judea seemed to be the focus of what we might call, if not a real civil war, at least a cold civil war, certainly a culture war among Israeli Jews. among themselves.

"Palestinians living in Israel itself, I mean Israeli citizens, are afraid to go out at night."

When some of us asked both sides of this internal Israeli conflict whether, for example, the occupation of the West Bank should not be part of the debate about the future of Israel, we were told that no, that neither side should mention the occupation, that it is irrelevant to the future of Israel. In fact, anyone who tried to introduce the issue of the occupation into the weekly protests against judicial reform, or "judicial revolution" as they like to call it, was asked to leave and not be seen with the larger group of demonstrators waving the Israeli flag. Certainly, if someone were to bring the Palestinian flag to that demonstration, they would be beaten and kicked out, just as if someone were to mention the fact that perhaps the future of Israel is also the conditions and the situation of the nearly two million Palestinian citizens of Israel who in the last year have gone through a process of persecution by criminal gangs that terrorize their lives. There are heavily armed criminal gangs throughout Israel – many of them made up of former collaborators of Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who were taken out of these territories after the Oslo Accords and who are totally immune from any kind of police prosecution or effective criminal action – which means that, as many of you know, Palestinians living in Israel itself, I mean Israeli citizens, are afraid to go out at night because of the new reality in their streets and spaces. Nor was this issue allowed to be part of the public debate about Israel's future. "In the last four election campaigns in Israel, no one mentioned the Palestinian issue or occupation"

This and the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods, the protesters and their leaders declared, again, that it was not a major issue. Or as [Amira Hass](#), the courageous *Haaretz* journalist, put it, as far as the Israelis are concerned, until October 7, 2023, the occupation did not exist, which meant that it no longer existed as a problem. It's resolved; there is a huge presence of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, no one has to deal with it anymore. In fact, in the last four election campaigns in Israel, and there was one every year, no one mentioned the issue, the Palestinian issue or occupation, whatever you want to call it. Israelis were not asked to vote on this issue because it no longer existed as an issue. If someone mentioned the Gaza Strip and the siege was mentioned again, they would reply: what are you talking about? It was an issue that no longer concerned anyone, just as the daily slaughter of Palestinians over the past two years in the West Bank. But the constant and recurrent invasion of Al-Aqsa does not go unnoticed, and the fact that the weak Palestinian authorities are unable to protect the Palestinians from the violence exercised by the settlers, the Israeli army and the Israeli border police, does not mean that there are no groups willing to defend the Palestinians, not only in the Gaza Strip, but also

in the Gaza Strip. but also in other parts of historic Palestine. This has been communicated time and again to the Israeli public, to political leaders, to the heads of the Israeli army and secret services, but they all maintained that there was no problem. The only problem was legal reform, whether we liked it or not.

"What we had in Israel was a struggle between two forms of *apartheid*"

And it was very clear why all these other issues were not addressed. Because, in essence, what we had in Israel was a struggle between two forms of *apartheid*. On the one hand, there was secular Israeli *apartheid*, in which Israeli Jews undoubtedly enjoy life in a pluralistic, Western-style democracy. On the other hand, you had the opposite version of *apartheid*, the messianic, the religious, the theocratic. So the struggle was an internal Jewish question about the kind of Jewish life in the public sphere, without any reference to the lives of Palestinians, whether they were Palestinians subjected to occupation in the West Bank, siege in the Gaza Strip, or a discriminatory system within Israel, not to mention the many millions of Palestinian refugees: All of this wasn't there.

"The Hamas attack was so brutal, so devastating, that all the internal debates have been forgotten, but the internal conflict will return."

On the morning of October 7, all this blew up in the face of Israelis. And now there is the optical illusion that, because of the shock that Israel undoubtedly suffered that morning, all these cracks in the Zionist edifice have disappeared because the Hamas attack was so brutal, so devastating, that all the internal debates have been forgotten, and everyone is united around the army and its current plan to invade the Gaza Strip and begin what was already underway: genocidal policies on the ground. I think it's an optical illusion, that the internal Israeli conflict is not going away. Will. I don't know when, but he'll be back. However, the most important thing is that as activists, as academics, anyone who in one way or another is related to Palestine and the Palestinian struggle, regardless of how we understand and approach the events of October 7 from a human, strategic, moral point of view, however we do it, we do not fall into the trap of decontextualizing and eliminating the historical perspective of these events – and there seem to be quite a few good people in this one country that is falling into it. This is something that is not going to change in the coming weeks. The basic reality on the ground remains the same as it was before 7 October.

"The Palestinian people have been engaged in a struggle for liberation probably since 1929"

It is a struggle against its colonizers and, like any anti-colonial struggle, it has its ups and downs, its moments of glory and its difficult moments of violence. Decolonization is not a pharmaceutical and sterile process, it is a messy affair. And the longer colonialism and oppression last, the more likely it is that the outbreak will be violent and desperate in so many ways. It is extremely important to remind people of the history of the slave rebellions in this country and how it ended the revolts of the Native Americans, the rebellions of the Algerians against the settlers in Algeria, the massacre in Oran during the struggle of the ELN (National Liberation Army) for liberation. Sometimes you can question some of the strategic ideas, you can have moments of unease, and rightly so, about the way things are being done; However, if you don't take it out of context, if you don't eliminate the historical perspective of the event itself, you never lose your moral compass.

"A mile away from the Gaza ghetto, people were celebrating love and peace while the Gazan population was being subjected to a brutal siege."

We seem to be fighting against typical coverage – both by the media and by academia in this country, in the West and in the northern hemisphere in general – that has the ability to treat an event as if it had no history and no consequences. Even accounts of the festival that was attacked on October 7 fail to mention the fact that it was a festival about love and peace: a mile from the Gaza ghetto, people were celebrating love and peace while the Gazan population was being subjected to one of the most brutal sieges in human history. which has been going on for more than 15 years. The Israelis decide how many calories enter the Gaza Strip, who enters and leaves, and they hold two million people in the largest open-air prison on the planet.

All these contexts allow us to navigate morally without losing that compass; However, far more important than the immediate context and even the context of the siege – and this is what I would like to focus on today – is the fact that one of our greatest challenges as Palestinian activists, or committed Palestine scholars, is that we cannot challenge decades of propaganda and invention, confront that narrative, with short sentences. I think this is our main problem. We need space and time to explain reality in the face of the enormous number of channels, sources of information and cultural institutions that have projected a false, invented image and analysis of Palestine that has been built over the years with the help of academia, the media, Hollywood, television series, etc. and so on. All of this influences people's minds and emotions and creates a certain story that can't be questioned with a single sentence. It cannot even be challenged solely with a sense of justice, but with

a sense of justice based on a deep knowledge of history, with a deep and precise analysis of reality through the use of the right language, because the language used even by liberal, so-called progressive forces is a language that immunizes Israel and does not allow the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle to be justified. is accepted and legitimized. And, you know, in the pantheon of anti-colonialist struggle, where a lot of people would put a lot of heroes – from Nelson Mandela to Gandhi and other important leaders of the liberation movement – you won't find any Palestinians. They will always be treated as terrorists, when in essence it is an anti-colonialist movement. And to use the right language, to know the history of the place and to carry out a correct analysis, you need, as I said, space; You can't come in and tell someone: you're wrong and I'm right. And it is an enormous challenge for all of us at a time like the one we are experiencing these days in the United States, for example, where there seems to be unconditional support for Israel and a hypocritical stance towards the suffering of Israelis that was not shown to the suffering of the Palestinians at any time in the history of Palestine.

"No discussion of what is happening today in Israel or Palestine should be allowed without talking about Zionism."

History lessons, so to speak, are the antidote to the removal from historical perspective of the events of October 7 and those unfolding before our eyes today – and probably in the coming weeks, if not months. The historical context has two levels, two basic pillars on which the academic or media spheres should be based and which I consider very important for anyone who participates in public debates in an individual or institutional capacity. One is to never cease to insist on a precise definition of Zionism, this is very important: no discussion of what is happening today in Israel or Palestine should be allowed without talking about Zionism. Israel and its supporters have invested a lot of effort in equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism so that if you ever mention the word "Zionism," you are treading on the dangerous ground of being considered anti-Semitic, and therefore silenced. However, that doesn't mean that this isn't the only right way to start the story, which begins with an ideology that is racist and very harsh. Zionism belongs to the genealogy of racism, not to the history of liberation movements, which is how it is taught in most American universities, not to the history of national movements, as it is taught in most of the northern hemisphere or talked about or covered by the Western media. No, it belongs to the history of racism, which was not originally an ideology, but manifested as such in the land of Palestine.

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