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Hazal Muslu El BERNİ *

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“After all, the book is written by an Israeli Jew who cares about his own society as much as he does about the Palestinian one. Refuting mythologies that sustain injustice should be of benefit to everyone living in the country or wishing to live there. It forms a basis on which all its inhabitants might enjoy the great achievements that only one privileged group currently has access to.” These words belong to Ilan Pappé, a historian of the Middle East who strives to reach an unbiased understanding of the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the chances of peace. In his book, Pappé challenges myths that appear as indisputable truths, and argues that they can be refuted through a detailed examination of the historical record. He portrays the Israel-Palestine conflict as an example of historical disinformation that promotes oppression and thereby perpetuates the conflict.

Pappé discusses the ten myths in question in chronological order, which enables the reader to follow the development of the conflict as well as of the official and Palestinian narratives throughout the course of the years. The first myth, “Palestine was an empty land,” is maintained by actors outside Israel, particularly in the US, who argue that the promised land was empty, desolate and barren before the arrival of Zionists. Pappé claims the opposite by referring to the works of David Grossman, Amnon Cohen, and Yehoushua Ben-Arieh. He points out that Palestine was a thriving Arab society, mainly Muslim, which was predominantly rural but also with some vibrant urban centers. It was a flourishing part of the *Bilad al-Sham* (Levant), where people engaged with each other and interacted with other cultures. Like Muhammad Muslih and Rashid Khalidi, Pappé indicates as well that Palestine had begun to develop as a nation long before the arrival of the Zionist movement.

Pappé emphasizes that the second myth, “the Jews were a people without land,” went hand in hand with the first that Palestine was a land without people. He refers to Shlomo Sand’s and Thomas Brightman’s studies showing that the Christian world, due to its interests, supported the idea of the Jews as a nation that had to return to Palestine and build a Zion. He underlines that the executive program of colonization and dispossession that began in Victorian Britain in the 1820s and supported by Lord Shaftesbury, James Finn, Arthur James Balfour and Lloyd George. All of these figures liked the idea of helping the Jews to return to Palestine because it helped Britain gain a foothold in the land. Thus, the Jews around the world began to settle in Palestine in 1882 (the first wave lasting until 1903, and the second wave taking place between 1904-14) after preparations in the communes in their home countries.

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In discussing the third myth, "Zionism is Judaism," Pappé observes that for many Zionist leaders, the references in the Bible to the land of Palestine constituted not the essence of Zionism, but rather a means to their ends. He illustrates this argument by referring to the texts written by Theodor Herzl, who was more secular than the group of leaders who succeeded him. Pappé relates how the Zionist movement seriously considered alternative destinations to Palestine, such as Uganda, north and south America, and Azerbaijan as the promised land of Zion. It was only following Herzl's death in 1904 that Zionism homed in on Palestine and the Bible, so much so that by the present time the Biblical references have come to be treated as absolute proof of a divine Jewish right to Palestine.

Challenging the fourth myth, "Zionism is not colonialism," Pappé refers to a report sent by a Zionist delegation to Palestine, which included the following statement: "The bride is beautiful but married to another man." Pappé prefers to identify the Zionism as a settler colonial movement, like the colonization of the South Africa, Australia, and the New Zealand by the Europeans. He distinguishes settler colonialism from classical colonialism by pointing out the settler colonialists' initial reliance on the empire for their survival, their diversified population, their desire to take over land in a foreign country, and their being refugees of a particular kind that seeks not just a home, but a homeland.

The fifth myth, "The Palestinians voluntarily left their homeland in 1948," is challenged by Pappé by reference to the official letters and statements of those years' influential leaders. According to the official Israeli argument, the reason why the Palestinians became refugees was that their leaders and the leaders of the larger Arab world had encouraged them to leave Palestine before the Arab countries would dismiss the Jews. In contrast, Pappé draws attention to the documents examined by Ronni Gabai in early 1961, and later declassified in the late 1980s, that reveal there was no such call by the Arab and Palestinian leaders. He underlines the fact that while in public meetings all the Zionist leaders and ideologues talked about transfer by agreement, the facts on the ground were much different. To illustrate this point, Pappé mentions Ben-Gurion's letter to his son Amos in October 1937, which reveals his intention of doing the transfer by force –which would result in a massive transfer in 1948.

The sixth myth, "The June 1967 War was a war of 'no choice'," is again the official Israeli line according to which the 1967 War has forced Israel to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Pappé remarks that this myth is closely related with another to the effect that "the Palestinian leaders are intransigent and thus peace is impossible." He points out that the 1948 War was considered a missed opportunity by the Israeli political and military elite, who regard it in hindsight as a historical moment in which Israel should have occupied the whole of historical Palestine from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. According to Pappé, ever since 1948, Jewish cultural, military, and political elites had been looking for an opportunity to set aright this mistake. Thus, from the mid-1960s onwards, Israeli elites planned how to create a greater Israel that would include the West Bank. Pappé claims that their logic was shaped by the wish to take over as much of Palestine as possible with as

few Palestinians as possible.

In discussing the seventh myth, "Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East," Pappé observes that Israel falls far short of being a true democracy. While the Israeli narrative portrays Israel as a benign democratic state that seeks peace with its neighbors and guarantees equality to all its citizens, Pappé argues that these claims have no historical foundation. According to him, there are several considerations that would prevent Israel from being depicted as a democracy before or after 1967. For instance, after the new territorial gains by Israel in that war, several laws were passed to provide a superior position for the majority. Such were the laws governing citizenship and land ownership as well as the law of return. While Israel grants directly citizenship to every Jew in the world, regardless of where he or she is born, Palestinians, considered as potential enemies who cannot be trusted, are denied the right of return to their homeland. This renders Israel an undemocratic country for Pappé.

In the eighth place Pappé mentions two interrelated myths associated with the Oslo Accord, which was signed on September 13, 1993 between Israel and the PLO. The first is that the Oslo Accord was a genuine peace process; and the second is that Yasser Arafat intentionally undermined the Accord by provoking the Second Intifada as a terrorist operation against Israel. Pappé regards the Oslo Accord as an ineffective attempt that reduced Palestine to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and excluded the refugee issue.

The ninth myth, "The Gaza Mythologies," is closely involved in the international public opinion about the Gaza Strip. Pappé views Hamas as a liberation movement and challenges the Israeli narrative that attempts to legitimize its actions since 2006 as a self-defensive war against terror. He claims that the Israel's strategy in Gaza is aimed at empowering Israel's hold over the West Bank turning the Gaza Strip into a mega-prison that could be monitored from the outside.

The tenth and final myth, "The two-states solution is the only way forward," a long-debated issue in the international community, is another myth that should be subjected to a historical examination according to Pappé. He believes that the two-state solution aims at keeping the West Bank under Israeli authority without incorporating the population living there into the Israeli society. This forces Palestinians to give up all their hopes concerning the chances of return, the acquisition of equal rights in Israel, the fate of Jerusalem, and the possibility of leading a normal life in their homeland. Interestingly, Pappé observes a certain connection between anti-Semitism and the two-states myth. He believes that the two-states solution is based on the idea that Israel and Judaism are the same and that Jews should live in Palestine rather than anywhere else, which is very close to the arguments of the anti-Semites. Pappé ends his analysis at this point, but it might have been good idea to dedicate some pages to the myths about the status of Jerusalem as well, another hotly debated issue of the conflict.

Pappé's book is worth reading for the scholars and students in the field of Middle East studies who are interested in the historical critique of the arguments relating to the Israel-Palestine conflict. It examines the conflict through a detailed study of the

historical events and records, and evaluates the views of both camps. The analysis of the myths in chronological order enables the reader to trace the historical development of the relevant arguments and counter-arguments as reflected in the official documents and the documents challenging the official narrative. Given the fact that the ten myths analyzed by Pappé are the ones that have been well-known arguments of Israel in the international platform, their analysis required a more historicized and contextualized approach, which is the one adopted by Pappé in this book.

In the book Pappé calls on the Palestinians to adopt a new dictionary to answer the Israeli strategy of taking as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible. In challenging the wide-spread Israeli myths about Palestine, Pappé's book goes some way toward contributing to this "dictionary." There is nevertheless a long way to go before the myths in question may be replaced in the region by the principle "live and let live," as Pappé hopes for.