

Exposing and opposing Zionism: A conversation with Ilan Pappé

Chris Marsden
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Ilan Pappé is an internationally renowned Israeli historian.

Formerly a senior lecturer in political science at the University of Haifa, he is now professor of Middle Eastern studies at the University of Exeter.

Pappé has written more than 20 books on the history of Palestine and the State of Israel, including the seminal work, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), which makes clear that the driving out of 700,000 Palestinians and the seizure of their land during the founding of Israel in 1947-48 was a deliberate Zionist policy.

His latest work, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic* (2024), examines how pro-Israel lobbies convinced British and American policymakers “to condone Israel’s flagrant breaches of international law, grant Israel unprecedented military aid and deny Palestinians rights,” while subjecting anyone who questioned unconditional support for Israel to “relentless smear campaigns.”

Pappé is a longtime political activist and defender of the Palestinians, including standing for the Knesset twice, in 1996 and 1999, for Hadash, the Communist Party-led electoral front. He has been repeatedly attacked by Zionist and state forces for his political views and historical work, being questioned at Detroit airport for two hours by the Department of Homeland Security in May.

Pappé spoke to Chris Marsden, the National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK).

Chris Marsden: If I may, I’d like to begin with your detention at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Could you explain what happened?

Ilan Pappé: I was taken aside by agents that I only later learned were from Homeland Security. At first I thought they were FBI. And they detained me for about two-and-a-half hours, asking mainly political questions.

They also took my phone and copied everything that was on it. They refused to tell me why I had to go through this procedure. They just produced all kinds of documents that showed that they had the right to do what they were doing. Some of the questions I refused to answer.

But these were very weird questions for even Homeland Security people. I mean, there were some questions which I was very vague about, but I can understand at least where they’re coming from. Like, “Who do you know in the United States?”, “Who invited you?”, “What is your connection to the Arab and Muslim communities, in the United States in general and in Michigan?” Which I didn’t like and I thought it was outrageous, but at least I understood where it came from.

And then there were these questions such as “How do you define the Israeli actions in Gaza?”, “Do you believe in the slogan, ‘Palestine should be free from the river to the sea?’” and that kind of question, most of which I refused to answer. I politely invited them to my talks, because I said I’m beginning a series of talks in the United States, and I’m sure that many of the questions you ask will be answered!

So this was harassment for two-and-a-half hours. They were not particularly impolite, but I’m going to the States again at the end of this month and I have no idea whether this is going to be repeated—become

standard practice—but I’ll be better prepared this time—I’ve already lined up some lawyers—just to make sure that this time I’m not totally defenceless as I was then.

I’m a professor of history. OK, I’m an activist and so on. But everything I do is so open. I’m an open book, you know. It’s not as if I’m involved in any clandestine activity. All they had to do was open my YouTube or read one of my 20 books. That’s why I think it was just an intimidation, just, “Think twice whether you want to go through this again.”

Chris Marsden: They’re also pushing an envelope here, aren’t they? It was not long between you being questioned at the airport and the FBI raiding Scott Ritter’s home.

Ilan Pappé: Exactly. I agree with this, also, on one level, it’s encouraging. I’ll tell you why. Because I think that the pro-Israeli lobby, which I think is the main body behind these kinds of behaviours or attitudes, does not have a total grip anymore on civil society and the universities and so on—on alternative media. And so they are escalating their repressive actions. It’s a battle not just between people of power against people who are powerless. It’s a moral battle that they have very little to bring onto the battle.

This is also an indication of a certain success of changing public opinion on Israel and Palestine, even making it an electoral issue, which, if you told me 20 years ago that support for Palestine could be an electoral issue in any American political party, I wouldn’t think it would be possible.

Chris Marsden: I can’t think of an issue in which the opinion in ruling circles has been so out of step and hostile to the views of the broad mass of the world’s population as the genocide in Gaza since 2003 and the Iraq war. And it means they have to rely increasingly on slander campaigns and repression.

Are you aware of what happened to the journalist Richard Medhurst at Heathrow? His treatment was horrendous. Detained and questioned for almost 24 hours. They did it earlier to Craig Murray as well.

But you’re a historian and your treatment is of immense significance. You are very respected in your field. You’ve undertaken decades of examination of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the history of the State of Israel, the Palestine question. History is now a battlefield and the question is when they will begin book burning.

Ilan Pappé: There was a funny moment when one of the Homeland Security Officers wanted to tell me what he thought were the historical roots of the conflict and I said, “Stop! I’m not telling you how to run the security of the United States. Don’t teach me about history. That would be the final indignity.”

But you’re right. I agree with this assessment. The gap between civil society, including the global North and even the United States, the gap between what position people think everybody should take towards the genocide, on the one hand, and the policies the governments are pursuing, on the other hand, the gap is so wide and so illogical. That the only way to narrow it is by force and intimidation.

I was in France between the two rounds of the elections. Opposition to the Gaza genocide is a cement that kept this amazing alliance of the left together and to overcome, you know, some other issues that may have in the past fragmented the left. It was not the only reason, of course, I'm not deluding myself, but it was very, very important.

Because for the left in France, all its kinds of factions and parties, the attitude of the French government and of Europe as a whole towards the genocide in Palestine was indicative of the attitude towards poverty, immigration, social justice, and so on. That was the power of the left that I hope we will regain, to see these connections, to link them together, to understand that these are not atomized problems, that they emanate from a certain worldview, from a certain definition of what politics is, what political elites shouldn't do.

Chris Marsden: But in France you've got the New Popular Front [NFP] in which Jean-Luc Mélenchon of France Unbowed, who has made supportive comments and statements with regards to the Palestinians, formed an electoral coalition with the Socialist Party, which is a vehicle for Raphaël Glucksmann, Olivier Faure, and which is pro-Zionist. And this is the actual position taken by the NFP. And the manoeuvre now by President Macron is to say to the Socialist Party and the Communist Party: ditch Melenchon and then you may have a governmental role to play.

Ilan Pappé: Yeah, it's a fight for the definition of politics, I think. And Palestine is such a fundamental part of this discussion.

Chris Marsden: You were bracketed with the New Historians, and that was a catch-all. I don't think you're any longer to be bracketed with Benny Morris! I know something about your background, and I know that you're the son of German Jews who fled Hitlerite fascism. But how did your interest, an abiding interest and a really serious interest, in the Palestinian question develop?

Ilan Pappé: It was a journey. It didn't happen in a day. It started with a very early love for history, as a teenager. Whenever people ask me what gifts I wanted for my birthday, it was always history books and so it came naturally to me when I thought of an academic career that history would be the main interest. And it was quite logical to be interested in your own history.

By itself, that takes you out of tribal boundaries. But I think that the fact that I was born and lived in a city such as Haifa, which is relatively, without romanticising it, a bit more open about Arab-Jewish relationships, also had its impact.

Because of the requirements for a successful academic career, even in Israel, it's good to complete your studies outside of the country in a good university. I made the conscious decision that I would like to work with an Arab supervisor, to see things from the other side. And my years in studying for the doctoral dissertation meant I was exposed to suppressed information, because of the topic I chose and without knowing beforehand this was going to happen. But I chose the topic 1948.

[Pappé studied history at Oxford, completing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1984 under the supervision of historians Albert Hourani, of Lebanese descent, and Roger Owen. Both specialised in the history of the Middle East. Pappé's doctoral thesis became his first book, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*.]

This was at a time when very important documents were declassified in many parts of the world, including many in Israel thirty years after its founding. And what I saw there challenged everything I knew, or I thought I knew, about 1948 and beyond. And the fact that I shared this journey into the past with an Arab supervisor and then with a lot of Palestinian friends who otherwise I would not have met in Israel itself, began the most serious part of the journey.

It's not a moment of Epiphany, where you wake up and suddenly you are on the other side of the Rubicon. It takes time. But there is a moment where you feel that you know enough and you understand enough and you have heard enough to challenge fundamentally the narrative of your own

society, of your own state. You understand the cowardice or conformist nature of your academic colleagues, of a community to which you once belonged. And it's at one point that you understand you have a choice.

You can either leave the topic, or the country, or try to challenge it and understand that this is not going to be received very well. And there's a moment where you are at peace with yourself. You know, you're OK with yourself. You're OK with what you have done. And you don't look back anymore.

Chris Marsden: When you first accessed the archives demonstrating that ethnic cleansing was a deliberate policy of the Zionist elite, how did you proceed from there?

Ilan Pappé: You have to understand the evidence I saw. The documents are not evasive. It's not ambivalent, really. You don't need to be very learned person. You need some Hebrew. A friend of mine says that Israelis treat Hebrew as if it's a secret language and therefore they can write and do things and say things in Hebrew that nobody in the world will ever understand and then they can say the opposite in English!

Also, I began my study because I was already doing a doctorate dissertation outside of Israel. I began to gather some information from Palestinians. And I was very surprised that they said, "Yes, of course, we know because we are the victims of this." They said, "We didn't know what you're telling us, that this was all planned, but we saw the manifestation of the policy."

It began to add up. I was very naive at the beginning when I came back from my doctorate, when I received my doctorate in 1984 and came back to Israel, and I really believed that all I would have to do is just tell the Israelis, especially the younger ones, what happened. And when you understand what really happened that should change our whole attitude towards the current situation.

But I was shocked to learn that the narrative that I brought back with me was not challenged as a lie, or a fabrication. It was dismissed because it does not serve the State of Israel. And I said, why should I, as an academic, serve the State of Israel? I should say the truth of what I know. Isn't that what academics are supposed to do?

And I learned my lesson. This is not how the world works. There was a loss of naiveté, of waking up to realities, understanding the price that might be attached to such a journey. But of course I have to say all along I didn't remain in the ivory towers of the academia and, from very early on, after I arrived from England in 1984, I understood this is not just a debate between me and Israeli academics. This is a debate between me and the Israeli Jewish society, and therefore, alongside my academic career, I have to be an activist.

And I tried all kinds of activism. I joined the Communist Party. I was a candidate for the Knesset. Then I thought that politics from above in Israel was not for me and not very effective. So I joined the civil society where I was much more consensual, did not belong to one particular political party. And I'm still all the time trying to combine activism and academic research. I don't think one can separate them. And for the benefit of the struggle for justice, where you can combine them both it's very powerful.

That also alienates you from the academic world because it's bad enough that you're questioning the hegemonic narrative. It's even worse when you say that academics are also political. People don't like to hear that. They think about themselves as objective scientists.

You get accused. There was this amazing attack in the *Literary Review* in Britain, with Auberon Waugh saying I'm a Nazi, a postmodernist and a communist!

I would say that academic courage is an oxymoron. Academics find it very difficult to risk their own career.

Chris Marsden: At the time you were researching 1948, you were still a Zionist?

Ilan Pappé: Yeah, definitely. In my first book, which was my PhD in 1984, I did not connect the Israeli policies to the ideology of Zionism.

And it's only when I began to write my book on ethnic cleansing, which I started writing in 2000 against the background of the Second Intifada, that's when I began such an examination.

I was in very good intellectual connection with the emerging scholars of settler colonialism in Australia, the late Patrick Wolf, and Lorenzo Veracini, and I began to see the connection. I also had a very close relationship with the late Edward Said.

I began to understand the connection between the Zionist ideology, the massacres and ethnic cleansing that occurred after 1948, the Israeli behaviour towards the occupied Palestinians after 1967, and so on. That also influenced my activism. But first I had to be personally persuaded as a scholar that Zionism was the problem, not policy.

Chris Marsden: Did you examine the actual genesis of the Zionist movement in Europe?

Ilan Pappé: Yeah, and it was really interesting. Because after I wrote *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, in which I do connect Zionist ideology to the ethnic cleansing, I was commissioned by the Cambridge University Press to write a book about what they suggested was the history of Israel and Palestine.

I said, I'm not going to write the history of Israel and Palestine because the series to which you want me to add this book is a series on the history of countries, not of states. I said the state is called Israel, and I don't deny it, but the country is not Israel. The country is Palestine. I said I'm willing to write the history of modern Palestine. It was 65 years of Israel's existence as well.

They did allow me to write the book, but then they commissioned a book called *A History of Modern Israel*. So they decided that both what they would call the Zionist narrative and the Palestinian narrative should be represented.

I now understand much better the whole story of Zionism after I finished the book I just published, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic*. I was surprised how little I knew of many things that connected Zionism to political economy, to world politics; not the simple story of people having an idea and having the power to implement it. It's far more complicated. What Zionism was supposed to solve for different groups of people, different states, different actors. These are fundamental ideologies that change the life of people. It's not that easy to unpack them.

Chris Marsden: All political ideologies and tendencies have a social base.

Ilan Pappé: Exactly. That's why when I apologise to people and say my last book is the longest I've ever written, 500 pages, it's because you have as an historian to follow the development of these ideologies. The ideology cannot be separated from its historical dynamism, the way it changes over time, which is true about any "ism," not just Zionism.

Chris Marsden: Then you have to work out which social forces, what class, is represented. But the cultivation of the Zionist movement by the major powers in Europe was because it was conceived of as hostile to the Enlightenment, and integration, but above all it was hostile to the socialist movement.

Ilan Pappé: Exactly, you know, for example, I knew but I've never examined this as an historian, how supportive the Labour Party in Britain very early on was of Zionism. Partly from misguided ideas about it. Partly because, contrary to what people remember of the Atlee government, it played a very hawkish role in the Cold War. All kinds of things that I think you need to patiently go through and look at the facts, and then have a much better picture. You don't learn everything from history, but I think it does tell you a lot about the present realities and the foundations are there.

Chris Marsden: I must send you this. We put out a series of lectures by David North, who is the chair of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, *The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide*. It places Zionism in the context of the fundamental struggle in

Europe at the time between the emerging socialist movement and the defenders of capitalist orthodoxy and the nation state system.

One of the points I found strongest about your book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, was that you took a sober and correct approach to the role played by the Soviet Union under Stalin, including the arming of the Zionists. When did you become aware of this?

Ilan Pappé: Well, it was not easy to become aware of this because I found it out when I was still a member of the Communist Party. I was made aware of it by talking to one of the leaders at the time, Meir Vilner, who has passed away.

It began by me asking him why did he sign the Israeli Declaration of Independence? And he said, well, we believed in the right of the two national movements to have a state. But of course, he said, without discriminating against the Palestinian citizens. And then I understood that because of the loyalty at the time of the Communist Party to Stalinism and the Soviet model, they were willing to use their contacts to bring weapons to the emerging Jewish state.

So it was through conversations. There was also some documentation in the Israeli archives about it. And it seemed to be quite known to a lot of people who lived at that period, but wasn't spoken of. And yeah, it was also difficult because, you know, talking to people who were from that period they denied it. The Palestinian members of the party are very angry when this issue is brought up.

I'm glad a lot of Palestinian historians took it over to deal with it, because it's not so much the moral dilemma of the Jewish members of the Communist Party, it's the moral dilemma of the Palestinian members of the Communist Party, who were part of this.

Chris Marsden: The role of the Communist Party at that time was despicable, including splitting the party in two and having members killing each other.

Ilan Pappé: I think one day someone will write a good book about the Communist parties in the Arab world. The people in the West think that they understand them, as if they are just sort of models like the European ones. They're not. It's a far more complex story.

The story of the Jews who led the Communist parties in Iraq and Egypt is incredible. In the 1930s, before Zionism is trying to destroy them. It's a far more authentic local version of communism. I always say the best way to try to indicate how complex it is is that when I was a member, during Ramadan, our communist members were fasting.

Chris Marsden: In an article I read, you raised that the Zionist left was "in limbo," a good term but I would say rather in a state of intellectual, political and moral collapse.

Ilan Pappé: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And it's a long process and it didn't happen yesterday. This whole idea that you can reconcile universal values with the settler colonial ideology. I mean, with all the juggling of words and the squaring the circle, it doesn't work. And usually you're aware it doesn't work in the moments when you expect some sort of humanity or universal values to trump other national ideological values. And always in these moments, like now in the genocide, they push aside the universal values.

They're very angry with what they call the "global left" for not allowing them to determine what should be the moral position towards what happened on October 7 and afterwards. If you read their angry articles, they are published mostly in Hebrew, day after day, saying that the left in the world doesn't understand that it should have condemned October 7 without any context. And it should understand the right of Israel to do what it does in in Gaza.

Of course, they say Israel should not feed the violence and so on. But it's like they live on another planet, you know, not understanding that this "left" that they're talking about has been trying to tell them for more than two or three decades, "You cannot be a Zionist, a leftist Zionist, just as you cannot be a progressive ethnic cleanser." And you cannot be a leftist

genocider, and you cannot be a socialist occupier. What matters is that you are an occupier, an ethnic cleanser or a genocider, that's what matters. And if you are one of those things then you're not part of the left.

Chris Marsden: That was played out on a mass scale in the anti-Netanyahu protests, which were massive, but they never challenged the occupation and the oppression of the Palestinians. And they allowed leading Zionists, the supposed anti-Netanyahu opposition, to lead them—the same elements that are now in government with him and supporting genocide.

Ilan Pappé: That's what I'm saying. It was before the 7th of October, but they were unwilling to see the tragic situation that begins with the idea of imposing a European-settled state on the Arab world, in the midst of the Arab world, in the midst of the Muslim world.

OK, not everything can be rectified. You cannot turn the clock backwards for sure. That's fine. And there's already a third generation of settlers and everybody, most of the Palestinians and most of the people in the Arab world, accept it, say, "OK, you're here. But you cannot be here as a super military Sparta that alienates and endangers the region as a whole and most importantly, continues by force to oppress the colonised people." Not in the 21st century. This is not going to work.

It doesn't matter how many nuclear bombs you have, you know, and how strong your connection with American imperialism is. It's not going to work and you got the taste that it's not going to work from the smallest guerilla force in history that already nearly brought you down. You would have hoped that this was something of a wake-up call. But there's no indication that there was a wake-up call.

Chris Marsden: Netanyahu's calculations are not based on popular public opinion, but on the fact that Israel is backed by US imperialism, British imperialism, French imperialism. And that they also confront these absolutely filthy Arab regimes, who are oppressing their own peoples, and that the "normalisation of relations" continues.

Ilan Pappé: Yeah, definitely. That's a big question. You know, how far can it go? So 40,000 Palestinians are dead, and this is not enough to wake up the powers that be. But it has changed the public opinion and the civil societies' action. The student encampments are a new phenomenon in the case of Palestine. And I'm sure we'll see next year, even more, the galvanising of a united solidarity movement.

So we should never lose hope. As you rightly say, it's a fundamental issue not just for the sake of the Palestinians but for the sake of us as a human society. We can't take a deterministic view about this and say let's reconcile with it. We're not. We do all we can to change it.

Chris Marsden: Your initial position was support for a two-state solution. I know that you now support a unitary state.

Ilan Pappé: That went hand-in-hand with my realisation that Zionist ideology is an obstacle for any kind of genuine reconciliation. And the moment you realise it, the idea that it would be good enough to have a Zionist state just over part of Palestine instead of having it all over Palestine, is not a solution. If you want to decolonize you don't de-Zionise just part of the country.

It wasn't easy to do this move because I had these very good, influential friends who were really admired, Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein, who, as you know, are still today advocates of the two-state solution. With the argument that this is what international law suggests and it has the best chance of being implemented. I'm strong enough intellectually today to disagree with them. But you know, it wasn't easy, because they're powers to reckon with.

Chris Marsden: When did you transition to this viewpoint?

Ilan Pappé: I think after I published my book on ethnic cleansing. I saw the structure and not just the event, you know. And in 2010, I wrote this book with Noam, *On Palestine*, in which we argue about how this can be fixed. You learn so much by arguing with him because he knows so much. But I was happy that, after the dialogue with him, I was even more

convinced I'm right.

You meet some of your idols, almost, and then you are not following everything they say. It's a very good thing for everyone. I say it also to my students. Do argue, do put the counterpoint. None of us is perfect and it's good to challenge us and maybe get even better ideas of how to move forward.

Chris Marsden: I don't know how much you know about the *World Socialist Web Site*, but it's published by the International Committee of the Fourth International. We are a Trotskyist publication. And our position was to oppose the setting up of the State of Israel.

An early statement that was published in 1948, "Against the Stream," insisted that partition was not meant to solve Jewish misery, nor was it ever likely to do so. It insists, "The Hebrew state may well turn out, as Trotsky said, a bloody trap. For hundreds of thousands of Jews."

It said it was utopian to believe that harmonious development within an isolated and closed economy in the midst of a capitalist world is possible. Without the expansion of the economy, millions of Jewish immigrants could not be absorbed to a Jewish state that could not exist amid the open hostility of tens of millions of Arabs, or that antisemitism could be eradicated simply granting nationality to the Jews, ignoring its social, historical and ideological roots.

And it was reactionary because Zionism serves as a support for imperialist domination, including by dividing Jews and the Arabs and encouraging nationalism on both sides. The Fourth International's call was for a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

Ilan Pappé: Very prophetic.

Chris Marsden: I admire the fact that you don't accept that this situation is inevitable: you're fighting to change it, you've dedicated your life to changing it. Your position is for a unitary state. But how can that in-and-of-itself be an answer, given the fact that, throughout the Middle East, you see regimes which have achieved unitary states of sorts, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc? These Arab regimes are filthy despotic governments who are hostile to their own people and are more interested in preserving relations with US imperialism and its Zionist attack dog than they are with the suffering of the Palestinian people.

Our position is for the unified mobilisation of the working class of the region to resolve these questions. You have raised comparisons with the anti-apartheid struggle, but if you look at the government in South Africa it's pretty disgusting and presides over huge inequality.

Ilan Pappé: Just very quickly to respond to this. First of all, I think one of the reasons the Arab regimes don't want a democratic, secular state in Palestine is exactly their realisation that such a state can have an immense influence on the future of their own regimes. I think you have to start somewhere. Waiting for a coordinated revolution in the whole region is very fine, but I don't think it's very easy to achieve and I think it's good to start somewhere.

And the second point I would like to make is that the Middle East has socioeconomic problems, and you're absolutely right about the unified action of working class people. But I think the left sometimes misunderstands the importance of group identities for people like the Azeris, the Alawites and so on. They can be very good communists and they can be very great believers in social equality and the working class. But their collective identities are still important to them and will be important to them. So in order to make this revolution successful, all these affiliations also have to be taken into account.

But as I say, it's not fair for me to give this as a sound bite. This is really something that demands a more profound response because it is very important. And we saw what happened when the "left" left a void behind it in the 60s and the 70s, giving up to authoritarian regimes. You saw who filled the void. Political Islamic groups representing, in some cases, the working class much better than the bourgeois left.

Yes, we need a soul searching, analysis, and it has to be done here in the

Middle East, not in London, for finding a new and enhanced role for the left, both for the sake of Palestine and, you're absolutely right, for the sake of the region as a whole.

But I think our main starting point is that if you want to discuss human rights violations and workers' rights violations and civil rights violation in the Arab world, you cannot exempt Israel from this discussion. And I think that's not a bad starting point for a discussion that connects the predicaments of the Arab world, social ones, economic ones.



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