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The Ten Mythologies of Israel

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CJPME Introduction to Article

In May, 2012, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) was proud to host Israeli author and historian Ilan Pappé for a speaking tour in six cities across Canada. His talk – *The False Paradigm of Peace: Revisiting the Palestine Question* – challenged the conventional Western thinking about the Palestinians, and how to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict.

At several points through his tour, Dr. Pappé was asked to enumerate the most important of the “false paradigms” to which he referred during his tour. Although an exhaustive enumeration was more than could be fit into a 45-minute lecture, Dr. Pappé and CJPME promised to follow up with Canadian audiences. What follows is Dr. Pappé’s description of the ten most prevalent and pernicious of the “false paradigms.” The effort and summary below from Dr. Pappé are a special treat to Canadian audiences, and CJPME invites you to enjoy Dr. Pappé’s musings on the topic.

The Ten Mythologies of Israel

Ilan Pappé

Any attempt to solve a conflict has to touch upon the very core of this conflict and the core more often than not lies in its history. A distorted or manipulated history can explain quite well a failure to end a conflict whereas a truthful and comprehensive look at the past can facilitate a lasting peace and solution. A distorted history can in fact do more harm, as the particular case study of Israel and Palestine shows: it can protect oppression, colonization and occupation.

The wide acceptance in the world of the Zionist narrative is based on a cluster of mythologies that, in the end, cast doubt on the Palestinian moral right, ethical behavior and chances for any just peace in the future. The reason for this is that these mythologies are accepted by the mainstream media in the West, and by the political elites there as truth. Once accepted as a truth, these mythologies become a justification, not so much for the Israeli actions, but for the West’s inclination to interfere.

Listed below are these ten common myths that provided an immunity shield for impunity and inhumanity in the land of Palestine.

1 Myth 1: Palestine was a land without people, waiting for the people without a land

The first is that Palestine was a land without people waiting for the people without land. The first part was successfully proved to be false by a number of excellent historians who showed that before the arrival of the early Zionists, Palestine had a thriving society, mostly rural, but with a very vibrant urban center. It was a society like all the other Arab societies around it, held under Ottoman rule and part of the empire, but nonetheless one which witnessed the emergence of a nascent national movement. The movement would probably have turned Palestine into a nation-state, like Iraq or Syria, had Zionism not arrived on its shores.

The second part of this mythology is also doubtful, but less significant. Several scholars, among them Israelis, doubted the genetic connection between the Zionist settlers and the Jews who lived the Roman time in Palestine or were exiled at the time. This is really less important, as many national movements create artificially their story of birth and plant it in the distant past. The important issue, however, is what you do in the name of this narrative. Do you justify colonization, expulsion and killing in the name of that story, or do you seek peace and reconciliation on its basis? It does not matter whether the narrative is true or not. What matters is that it is vile if, in its name, you colonize, dispossess and in some cases even commit acts of genocide against indigenous and native people.

2 Myth 2: Palestinians resorted to acts of terror against Jewish settlers prior to the creation of Israel

The second foundational mythology was that the Palestinians from early on resorted to an anti-Semitic campaign of terror when the first settlers arrived, and until the creation of the state of Israel. As the diaries of the early Zionists show, they were well received by the Palestinians who offered them abode and taught them in many cases how to cultivate the land. It was only when it became clear that these settlers did not come to live next to or with the native population, but instead of it, that the Palestinian resistance began. And when that resistance started it was not different from any other anti-colonialist struggle.

3 Myth 3: Myths around the creation of Israel

The third myth is set of Israeli fables about the 1948 war. There were four foundational mythologies connected to this year.

3.1 *The Palestinians are to be blamed for what happened to them because they rejected the UN Partition Plan of 1947*

The first was that the Palestinians are to be blamed for what occurred to them since they rejected the UN partition plan of November 1947. This allegation ignores the colonialist nature of the Zionist movement. It would have been unlikely that the Algerians, for instance, would have accepted the partition of Algeria with the French settlers – and such a refusal would not be deemed unreasonable or irrational. What is morally clear is that such an objection, in the case of any other Arab country, should not have justified the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians as a ‘punishment’ for rejecting a UN peace plan that was devised without any consultation with them.

3.2 *The Palestinians left their home voluntarily or as a result of a call by their leaders*

Similarly absurd is the myth that the Palestinians left their homes voluntarily or as a result of a call by their leaders and those of the neighboring Arab states, supposedly to make way for the invading Arab armies that would come to liberate Palestine. There was no such call – this myth was invented by the Israeli foreign minister in the early 1950s. Later on Israeli historians changed the mythology and claimed that the Palestinians left, or fled, because of the war. But the truth of the matter is that already half of those who became refugees in 1948 were expelled before the war commenced, on May 15, 1948.

3.3 *Israel was a David fighting an Arab Goliath*

The research proved that the Palestinians had no military power whatsoever. On the second point, the Arab states sent only a relatively small contingent of troops to Palestine, and they were smaller in size, and far less equipped or trained than the Jewish forces. Moreover, and highly significant, is the fact that these troops were sent into Palestine after May 15, 1948 when Israel had already been declared as a state, as a response to an ethnic cleansing operation that the Zionist forces had begun in February 1948.

3.4 *After its war of creation, Israel extended its hand for peace to its Palestinian and Arab neighbors*

As for the myth of the extended hand of peace, the documents show clearly an intransigent Israeli leadership that refused to open up negotiations over the future of post-Mandatory Palestine, or consider the return of the people who had been expelled or fled. While Arab governments and Palestinian leaders were willing to

participate in a new and more reasonable UN peace initiative in 1948, the Israelis assassinated the UN peace mediator, Count Bernadotte, and rejected the suggestion by the Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC), a UN body, to reopen negotiations. This intransigent view would continue and as Avi Shlaim has shown in *The Iron Wall* that, contrary to the myth that the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss peace, it was Israel that constantly rejected the peace offers that were on the table.

4 Myth 4: Israel was a benign democratic state prior to 1967

The fourth mythology is that Israel was a benign democratic state, seeing peace with its neighbors, and offering equality to all its citizens before the June 1967 war. This is a myth propagated alas by some notable Palestinian and pro-Palestinian scholars – but it has no historical foundation in facts. One fifth of the Israeli citizenship was subjected to a ruthless military rule based on draconian British mandatory emergency regulations that denied them any basic human and civil rights. Within this period more than fifty Palestinian citizens were killed by the Israeli security forces. At the same time, Israel pursued aggressive policies towards its Arab neighbors, attacking them for allowing refugees to try and return, or at least retrieve their lost property and husbandry. In collusion with Britain and France, Israel also tried to topple Gamal Abdul Nasser's legitimate regime in Egypt.

5 Myth 5: The Palestinian struggle has no aim other than terror

The fifth myth is that the Palestinian struggle is that of terrorism and nothing more. The struggle led by the PLO was a liberation struggle against a colonialist project. Somehow the world finds it difficult to grant legitimacy to anti-colonialist struggle when most of the oppressed are Muslims and the oppressor is Jewish.

6 Myth 6: Israel was forced to occupy the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and must hold these territories until others are ready for peace

The sixth myth is that the 1967 war forced Israel to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza strip and keep them in custody until the Arab world, or the Palestinians, are willing to make peace with the Jewish State. The Israeli political and military elite regarded the 1948 war as a missed opportunity: a historical moment in which Israeli

could have occupied the whole of historical Palestine (from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea). The only reason they did not do it was because of a tacit agreement with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: in return for Jordan's limited participation in the general Arab war effort, Jordan would be allowed to annex the West Bank. Following 1948, the Israeli elite were looking for an opportunity and planned carefully from the mid-1960s how to implement a plan to have it all.

There were several historical junctures in which the Israelis nearly did it – but held back at the last moment. The most famous instances were in 1958 and 1960. In 1958, the leader of the state and its first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, aborted plans at the last moment due to fears of international reaction. In 1960, Ben-Gurion held back because of his demographic fears –thinking that Israel cannot incorporate such a large number of Palestinians. The best opportunity came in 1967, regardless of the Israeli mythology of not wishing to go to war against Jordan, but being forced to react to Jordanian aggression. There was no need for Israel to remain in the West Bank, if this were just another round of tension between the two states.

Incorporating the West Bank and the Gaza Strip within Israel was an Israeli plan since 1948 that was implemented in 1967.

7 **Myth 7: Isreal occupied the West Bank and Gaza with benevolent intentions, but was forced to respond to Palestinian violence**

The seventh myth was that Israel intended to conduct a benevolent occupation but was forced to take a tougher attitude because of Palestinian violence. Israel regarded from the very beginning any wish to end the occupation – whether expressed peacefully or through a struggle – as terrorism. From the beginning, it reacted brutally by collectively punishing the population for any demonstration of resistance.

The Palestinians were offered two options: 1) to accept life in an Israeli open prison, enjoy limited autonomy, and the right to work as underpaid labor in Israel, bereft of any workers' rights, or 2) resist, even mildly, and risk living in a maximum security prison subjected to instruments of collective punishment, including house demolitions, arrests without trial, expulsions, and in severe cases, assassinations and murder.

The major reality change that Palestinians had to accept - or risk enduring punishment – was that Israeli would unilaterally decide which part of the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip will be taken from them forever and annexed to Israel. At this point in time, more than half of the West Bank has been annexed in one way or another, while the Gaza strip has been left alone eventually as an area over which Israel wishes to exercise a direct rule.

Part of this myth related to assertions about the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) – assertions promoted by liberal Zionists both in the USA and Israel, and shared with the rest of the political forces in Israel about the PLO's struggle. The allegation was that the PLO – inside and outside of Palestine – was conducting a war of terror for the sake of terror. Unfortunately, this demonization is still very prevalent in the West and has been accentuated after 2001 by the attempt to equate Islam, terrorism and Palestine. The PLO was, in fact, recognized as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by more states than have recognized Israel. It is noteworthy that this demonization continued even after the Oslo Accords of 1993, through which Israel supposedly recognized the PLO as a legitimate partner. Even the Palestine Authority is still depicted by Israel as an outfit that supports terror. The worst kind of demonization, which convinced the Western world to resort to political boycott, was directed at the Hamas. While international civil society continues to question such a characterization, mainstream media and politicians still fall foul to this slander.

8 Myth 8: The Oslo Accords reflected a desire on *both sides* to reach a solution

The eighth myth is that the Oslo Accords were a peace process that was born out the wish of both sides to reach a solution. The idea of partitioning Palestine already back in the 1930s was a Zionist concept that the Palestinians refused to cave in to until the late 1980s. In the meantime, the share of the land the Israelis were willing to offer the Palestinians went down from half of the land to 15 percent of it. The willingness to call this 15 percent a state could not hide the fact that the Oslo process, devised solely by Israelis, offered only a fragmented Bantustan for the Palestinians, and no "right of return" or other solution for the millions of Palestinian refugees.

Oslo was the result of a matrix of events that had disempowered the PLO and its leader, Yasser Arafat, to such an extent that against the advice of his best friends, he went into this process hoping to gain independence in at least part of Palestine. The end result was an almost total destruction of Palestine and the Palestinians.

9 Myth 9: The Second Intifada was a mass terror attack orchestrated by Arafat

The ninth myth is that the Second Intifada was a mega terrorist attack sponsored and, in a way, planned by Arafat. The truth is, it was a mass demonstration of dissatisfaction with the betrayal of Oslo, compounded by the provocative action of Ariel Sharon and his likes around the holy places for Islam in Palestine. This non-violent protest was crushed by brutal force by Israel, which led to a more desperate Palestinian response: the expanded use of suicide bombs as a last resort against Israel's overwhelming military power. There is telling evidence by Israeli newspaper correspondents how their reporting on the early stages of the Intifada – as a nonviolent movement that was crushed violently – was shelved by the editors so as to fit the narrative of the government.

That narrative of the Palestinians aborting the peace process by force, and thus “reaffirming” what Israel has always said about them – i.e. that they do not miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity for peace and that ‘there is no one to talk to on the Palestinian side’ – is particularly cynical. The Israeli government and army had tried by force to impose its own version of Oslo – one which was meant to perpetuate the occupation forever but with Palestinian consent – and even a feeble Arafat could not accept it. He and so many other leaders who could have led the Palestinians to reconciliation were targeted by the Israelis; and most of them, perhaps even Arafat as well, were assassinated.

10 Myth 10: A solution in Israel and Palestine is just around the corner

The last and tenth myth is that there is a solution in Israel and Palestine just around the corner: the “two state solution” will fall into place, and the conflict will be nearly over. This corner is definitely not upon this earth, maybe somewhere in the universe. The reality on the ground, that of a massive colonization and direct annexation of vast part of the West Bank to Israel, would render any resulting state a sad Bantustan. If such a state is ever agreed to, it would be a Bantustan without any proper sovereignty. Even worse, Palestine would be defined as only 20 percent of what it actually is, and the Palestinians would be defined only as those who live in the West Bank. (Significantly, the Gaza strip seems to have been excluded from discussions of a future state, and many parts of Jerusalem are also not included in the envisaged state).

The “two state solution,” as mentioned above, is an Israeli invention that was meant to allow it to square a circle: to include the West Bank within Israel’s control without incorporating the population that lives there. Thus, it was suggested that part of the West Bank would be autonomous and maybe even a “state” in return for the Palestinians giving up all their hopes: hopes for the return of refugees, for equal rights for the Palestinians in Israel, for the fate of Jerusalem, and for a normal life as human beings in their homeland.

Any criticism to this mythology is branded as anti-Semitism. But in fact, this policy and mythology is the main reason why anti-Semitism is still exists. Israel insists that what it does, it does in the name of Judaism. Hence it creates an association between the Zionist colonization and Jewish religion in the minds of twisted people. This association should be rejected in the name of Judaism.

Indeed, for the sake of universal values, the right of everyone who lives in Palestine (or was expelled) should be respected. The right for all peoples in Israel and Palestine to live as equals should top the agenda of all efforts for peace and reconciliation in the region.