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THE ARMING OF THE ZIONIST MIND

In his book, *The Making of Israeli Militarism*, Uri Ben-Eliezer described Israel as a nation-in-arms. He meant that the Jewish collective identity in Palestine was constructed mainly through the militarisation of the society; the Zionist leadership used the army as its principal agent of development and integration. Through the ongoing enforcement of *miluim* or annual reserve duty and the organising of seasonal mass manoeuvres, the army became the forger of the Jewish nation state.

But as the years went by the army did more than that. It influenced the character of Israeli policy both inside and outside the country. Externally, it produced aggressive policies towards the country's neighbours, and internally, a coercive policy towards any group with an agenda that contradicted the overall objectives of Zionism as understood by the political elite. Civilian spheres of government activities were militarised from the very early years of the state and remain so today: the army is a dominant factor in economy, politics, administration and culture.

One such sphere of activity was settlement. Until 1948 this task was in the hands of the Jewish Agency, the

embryo government of mandatory Zionist community. After the 1948 war, settlement meant occupying the deserted villages from which Palestinians were expelled. This mission was entrusted to the IDF. The army had, and still has, a special unit to implement this prime Zionist imperative.

Media in Arms

The media were recruited very early on behalf of the nation-in-arms. Military reporters helped to create the mythology of Israeli heroism in the battlefield, even when the raw material was spun out of bloody reprisal operations against a civilian population in the 1950s. These heroes would become the core group from which many future leaders of Israel would emerge: Yitzhak Rabin, Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon. The Israeli media's co-optation, as is the case with other cultural systems, curbed any significant criticism or alternative thinking. It was corrupted by its submission, if only because of the secretive nature of the army. The media could serve as the IDF's spokesman, but not as its watchdog; very rarely was the army's immunity from outside supervision questioned or challenged.

In the more optimistic air of the post-Oslo period after 1993, critical Israeli sociologists reported the beginning of a new era and found abundant evidence to suggest that the nation-in-arms model had weakened.[1] Then came the Second Intifada, at the end of 2000, and

all the sanguine assessments of a different Israel were crushed by the powerful IDF's re-entry into the Israeli public space.

There had been reasons for the optimism. One was the emergence of post-Zionist scholarship, described in the previous chapter. But it also seemed for a moment that the media were undergoing a dramatic change because of Oslo's new political reality. In Oslo's heyday, editors and reporters for the first time refused to pass their pieces to the military censor, as had been required since 1948. This resistance had begun during the First Intifada, when reporters felt that the army's coverage of events was false and misleading and they wished to show a more accurate picture. But in the end, only in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* could alternative reporting on the first uprising be found; the rest of the print and electronic media did not venture a counter-version to that provided by the army's spokespeople.

Following Rabin's assassination and Netanyahu's first term in office (1996–99), and even more so under Ariel Sharon's two governments (2001–06), these early signs of a less militarised media disappeared. It became even worse under Ehud Olmert's government (2006–09). Post-Zionism proved to be a passing phase, rather than a new chapter in the history of Israel. The election of Ehud Barak in 1999 aroused new hopes. Always verbose, although often impotent in action, Barak talked about an 'army of peace'. He promised to cut the IDF's budget, or in his words to 'cut anything that does not shoot'.[2] He charted a vision of a future

professional army that would replace the 'people's army'. This might have meant restricting the militarisation of the media as well. But the army was not reduced in size, nor was it professionalised. It assumed an air of professionalisation, such as adopting the American model of academisation of officers' careers, but its deep hold on the society in general and on the public space in particular continued, and even increased. In fact, the academisation of the officers' corps created the false impression that they were fit to be parachuted into civilian life at short notice. The number of former-generals in politics and the media grew, and with it their influence on the public space. Moreover, this nexus between the army and academia corrupted the traditional university ethos, strengthened the army's ideological grip over academic performance and disempowered the universities from playing an independent role in society.

For a short time, when public debate in Israel over the IDF's presence in southern Lebanon soared, the public space and the discourse on military affairs were successfully challenged by the Four Mothers' movement. In 1997 this group of soldiers' mothers formed a lobby calling for the army's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon, which eventually took place in July 2000. For a while mothers, and not only generals, were invited into the public space to debate the issue. But this was a brief episode that reflected Israelis' lack of interest in southern Lebanon, even on the far right, rather than

a fundamental change in the composition and hierarchy of those invited to participate in media debates.

In spite of all the tribulations and dramas of the 1990s, the new century began with the army as formidable a factor as ever in Israeli public space. Apart from shunting aside civilians from having a say in such crucial matters as the fate of the Occupied Territories or the future of the peace process, the capturing of the public space meant that a macho male subculture marginalised alternative contributions to these important national topics, particularly from women or feminists.[3]

The 1990s added new features that counter-balanced the more optimistic signs of pluralisation. The most important of these was the growing presence of religious nationalists among the senior officers' corps, most of them from West Bank settler communities. In the Second Intifada these officers were directly responsible for implementing the army's reprisal actions in the Occupied Territories. They assumed an even more central role during Operation Protective Shield – the April 2002 reoccupation of most of the West Bank in response to a particularly bloody wave of human suicide bombs inside Israel. One such officer, Ron Shechner, from a settlement near Hebron, was the commander-in-chief of the troops besieging Arafat's compound, the *Muqat'a*, in Ramallah. He was and still is a popular participant in TV and radio shows, where he appears as a 'neutral' and 'professional' expert on the current crisis.

When the al-Aqsa or Second Intifada broke out in September 2000, after Defence Minister Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, both the military and the media willingly echoed the right-wing agenda even without a significant presence of settler officers in the army. The media allowed the army to become its only source of information and interpretation from the moment the Intifada erupted. This process reached an unprecedented level of moral corruption in 2006 during Israel's attack on Lebanon – the Second Lebanon War – and even more so when Gaza was attacked in 2009.

In all three events: the Intifada, the Second Lebanon War and the Gaza War, the media was engaged in what one scholar called 'hermetic self-persuasion of righteousness'.[4] The printed and electronic media presented their constituencies with a one-dimensional and distorted picture of reality. The message was simple: Israel was once again at war against a barbaric enemy that had attacked it for no good reason.

We now know, with the help of research, that the message broadcast was not the natural consequence of what flowed from the field, through reporters, onto editorial desks. On the contrary, a strenuous effort of selection and distortion took place in order to fit news items to the required image of reality. In the Second Intifada, the end result in terms of tone and news selection stood in stark contrast to what reporters brought in from the Occupied Territories. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, and nowadays, these *Pravda*-ish tactics by the media's editorial boards

turned the Israeli press and television news into one of the world's most biased and nationalist media, providing a twisted picture to their readers, viewers and listeners. The media behaved as they did because they were motivated by hate, fear and ignorance. But more than anything, they adopted uncritically the government's and the army's narratives and interpretations. A few years after the Second Intifada broke out, you could not find any counter-narrative to that provided by the army of why the violence erupted: the official Israeli explanation was the only one we knew about.[5]

Against this background, it was very easy for the army to dictate the media's language as the Intifada progressed. Abiding by the army's structure of images, values and interpretations meant first and foremost portraying the Intifada as a war. A war demands a consensus and a recruitment of the media, just as it demands the calling up of reservists and a recruitment of the economy. Journalists in the print media and TV and radio personalities were asked to form a national consensus. This meant re-embracing the settlers, after they had been somewhat marginalised in the wake of Rabin's assassination. It also meant the exclusion of the Palestinian minority in Israel from what was considered to be 'our society' and their inclusion in the enemy camp, and it required the silencing of any alternative thinking, as well as a condemnation of any 'subversive' acts such as the refusal to serve in the army of occupation.

The central actors in the local media must have surprised the army by going even further than was required of them. From the very start, the electronic media in particular made an effort to exclude any reference to the conflict as the 'War of the Settlements' and frequently used the term 'War of Survival', or in the words of the Labour party leader and defence minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, 'A war for the survival of our homes'. When this was the opening gambit, it was very hard to introduce a wider outlook or alternative perspective.

When one adopts a military perception of reality, certain questions that would be essential for a conventional journalistic investigation disappear. For instance, the army's direction of media coverage absolved it from dealing with the question of why Palestinians resorted to terrorism and guerrilla warfare in the first place, and allowed it to focus instead on how to combat such threats effectively. Needless to say, the term 'occupation' has vanished from the media's vocabulary. Similarly, the army was absolved from providing an explanation of its overall objectives. The result was that the task of the media became to present audiences with information on tactical moves and successes, like a daily bulletin read aloud by commanders to their troops, rather than referring even obliquely to an overall strategy or to the political horizons behind military action.

The army provided and the media willingly received a pre-packaged, well-structured mythology that helped

to avoid any deeper analysis. Several intertwined myths were inside this wrapping. Each was substantiated by 'facts' provided by the IDF, the Shabak (internal security force, or Shin Bet) and the Mossad (external security force). This meant that in many cases there was no need to expand a news report beyond an elusive reference to its source, let alone furnish any details about it.

First and foremost was the Camp David myth, which was that Israel made an offer to give all or nearly all that was demanded, and the Palestinians rejected it. This was reinforced by providing a false picture of overall Palestinian behaviour during the Oslo meetings, which misrepresented the genuine Palestinian effort to comply with the Accords.

The second myth was that the Intifada was a pre-planned Palestinian campaign of terror and not a popular uprising. Although it was known that there had been no Palestinian decision on its outbreak, the press accepted the army's lead that this was a major, pre-planned act of terrorism. The early demonstrations in the Intifada were therefore reported as 'assaults on soldiers' and not as the peaceful protests and marches against the occupation that they really were. This myth was also applied later to the Palestinian Israeli community's attempt to voice its dismay about the situation. At first, the media were ready to accept that the case of the 13 Israeli Palestinian citizens killed by police in a demonstration in October 2000 should be officially investigated by a committee of inquiry (established by Ehud Barak, who probably also hoped

that he could win over the country's Palestinian citizens in the February 2001 elections). While exposing that the 13 were unarmed, the commission's report left in the air the important questions of responsibility and morality, and distanced the political elite from an act against its own citizens that in other democracies might have toppled the government and shaken the society.

The media's conclusions were even more negative, suggesting that these citizens of Israel did not just demonstrate, but were an integral part of the terrorist campaign against Israel, intent on causing unrest and disturbances, which led to the tragic and unprecedented consequence.

The third myth was about the humane Israeli reaction: that troops only used their weapons when in direct danger. The shooting of unarmed demonstrators – 65 in October 2000 alone – in the Occupied Territories and Gaza was never revealed to the Israeli public. The fourth myth was constructed independently by media leaders and presented the PLO as part of the al-Qaeda network in the wake of 9/11. The army soon joined in, providing – as media sources have it – classified information on the connection between al-Qaeda and the Palestinian Authority, the source of which was never disclosed.[6]

The mythology was cemented with the help of a list of laundered words prepared by the army that was willingly used by the media. Audiences and viewers could employ the new jargon and avoid calling a spade a spade. There were several categories of

word in this militarised discourse. The first could be called a 'surgical language': the use of technical terms intended to conceal questionable actions. Such was the vocabulary employed to describe the assassinations of wanted Palestinians as 'focused prevention' (*sikul memukad*). Another lexicon consisted of what could be called a discourse of incitement; it encouraged public support for the military *vis-à-vis* any criticism of the IDF's conduct, whether from Palestinian leaders, Palestinian Israeli politicians or the few Jews in Israel who dared to question the general consensus. This was done in a way that released anyone appearing in the media from past inhibitions. It was now possible to give vent to the innate racism in Israeli Jewish society.

The language of incitement was mostly used in radio chat shows. It is not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon to find such a vocabulary in talk-back shows. All over the world, jingoistic and fanatical views are freely vented in them. In this case, however, it intensified the feelings of hatred and racism that best served the army's war against the Palestinians. The most popular among the moderators of these programs was – and is still – Jojo Abudbul, whose opening line is quite often: 'If I were in charge of the gunships, I would bomb Ramallah and Bethlehem and let as many people as possible die'. This was expressed during a discussion on how to solve the political deadlock in these places. Similar remarks have been made by two cultural heroes in Israel, veteran pop singers Yoram Gaon and Yigal Bashan, each of whom

presented two-hour programmes on Israel Radio in the twilight zone between Friday and Saturday.

Third, army experts concocted an investigative rhetoric for the use of interviewers, which turned every journalist into an interrogator on behalf of the Israeli Jewish community when conversing with someone who does not belong to 'us': a foreign diplomat, a Palestinian leader, an Israeli Palestinian politician, or an Israeli Jew who supported the Palestinian cause. This newly-acquired technique cast strong doubt on the ethics of some journalists and affected their style. It was in these exchanges that they came out most clearly as servants of the army. For instance, Aryeh Golan, who hosts a daily morning show, interviewed a considerable number of Palestinians at the beginning of the Intifada (such interviews were later prohibited on directions from above). In one conversation with Ziyad Abu Ein, a Palestinian Authority official, he ended the discussion by threatening him with: 'You want war, you are going to get war. Israel is a powerful state, did you know that?' Abu Ein, however, replied: 'We want peace'.

These techniques helped to dehumanise Palestinians in general and armed Palestinians in particular in the eyes of the Israeli public. According to Dr Khalil Rinnawi, an Israeli Palestinian media analyst from Tel Aviv University, 'bloodthirsty' was the most common adjective.[7] In such a way, the media adopted uncritically all the adjectives suggested by the army for describing Arafat, thereby preparing the ground for lack of

objection to his long-term confinement in the *Muqat'a*, his compound in Ramallah, from 2002 to 2004.

The limited tactical analysis, the reservoir of stock images and the absence of alternative analysis of causes and possible objectives were particularly evident in Israeli talk shows. Despite the privatisation and decentralisation of Israeli radio and television, political talk shows on the national channels, such as roundtable discussions in prime time, still command very high ratings. Between 2000 and 2006 the Intifada was the principal topic and was mainly debated by generals or former generals. They were presented as authorities on the subject and were introduced as 'objective' and 'neutral' observers compared to politicians, who were also invited but were considered to be 'biased'. The uniformed participants conveyed the message that the military should be trusted without hesitation, and took every opportunity to urge the audience to support the army.

The views of these military experts were repeated daily via military correspondents and especially by 'our senior military commentator', of which there were only four or five in the media, and 'our experts on Arab affairs', also an exclusive group of four or five individuals, who usually had little to add to the statements of the military experts because they shared the same military and security intelligence sources. Sometimes on TV one of them would energetically wave a piece of paper that nobody could read, as documentary proof of one or another claim – usually one that the official spokesman of the army had just made.

The leading expert on Arab affairs at the time was Ehud Ya'ari, who was closely connected to military intelligence. He was a friend of Amos Malka, the chief of military intelligence, as well as of some of the popular guests on the talk shows, former generals or ex-colonels of the IDF. The result was that it did not really matter who provided the commentary, the military man or the journalist, as they all portrayed the Intifada in the same way, loyal to the army's interpretation.[8]

The corruption of the media was particularly evident in the lack of empathy with foreign colleagues who had been banned since 2000 from obtaining proper coverage of Israeli actions, especially of Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank in 2002 and Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2009. These foreign reporters were not only prevented from obtaining coverage, but they became targets of army harassment and abuse. In addition, the local media agreed to impose a blackout on its screens, radio transmissions and newspaper pages.

The desire to report only on what the army deemed right and useful sometimes ended in a public relations flop. Such was the case in March 2002, in the last big operation before Defensive Shield, when the army entered the refugee camp in the Palestinian town of Tulkarem. The IDF spokesman invited national TV crews and senior military correspondents to accompany its operation, hoping to show what it called 'the humane face' of the Israeli army. But the close-up pictures of soldiers hammering their way through walls from one house to the other, frightening women and children,

humiliating the men and destroying most of what was in their path, did not fit a commentary on a surgical operation intended to avoid harming innocent citizens. Shocked viewers responded angrily and the army learned the lesson: this type of public relations exercise was never tried again. The following month, in April 2002, the IDF did not allow any television cameras, even loyal local ones, to accompany troops into the Jenin camp. Only the military correspondent of Israel Radio, Carmela Menashe, was allowed to be present, and she read on air a prepared text handed to her by military commanders.

This is the sad story of the media in a society that presents itself as democratic. In the year and half after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, most of its elements were voluntarily militarised as part of a more general militarisation of the public space and political system. When the media performs such a dubious role, it helps to block the public mind to alternative analysis. It should be said that had the Israeli media wanted to be demilitarised, it had the means of doing so. The fact that it willingly chose to become the spokesman of the IDF, the Shabak, the Mossad and the ministry of internal security is worrying in itself. If one adds to this dismal state of affairs the hijacking of party politics by former generals and the militarisation of the education system, it is possible to grasp how profoundly Israel had become a nation-in-arms at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Sir Thomas Rapp, the somewhat unusual British colonialist who headed the British Middle East Office in the early 1950s, was a keen observer of Israeli society. Although in 1950 he favoured, as did almost all British officials at the time, closer ties between Britain and the newly-founded Jewish state, he warned: 'The younger generation [in Israel] is brought up in an environment of militarism and thus a permanent threat to Middle East tranquillity is thereby created, and Israel would thus tend to move away from the democratic way of life towards totalitarianism of the right or the left.'[9]

The Intellectual Eunuchs and Tamed 'Peaceniks'

The closed mind was not, of course, limited to the media, but extended to academia as well. Some scholarly critics from previous years, like Benny Morris, openly retracted their positions and returned to the all-embracing consensus, while others simply abandoned their previous interests.[10] What is very clear when analysing the fortunes of Israel's 'new history' from its inception in the late 1980s until its temporary disappearance in 2000, is that historical demythologising and reconstruction are closely linked to general political developments and upheavals. In societies torn by internal and external rifts and conflicts, the work of historians is constantly pervaded by the political drama around them. In such geopolitical locations a pretence of objectivity and impartiality is particularly misplaced, if not totally unfounded.

Anyone visiting Israeli academia in the mid-1990s must have felt a fresh breeze of openness and pluralism blowing through the corridors of a stagnant establishment that had been painfully loyal to the prevailing Zionist ideology in every field of research touching on Israeli reality, past or present. The new atmosphere allowed scholars to revisit the history of 1948, and to accept some Palestinian claims about that conflict. It produced local scholarship that dramatically challenged the historiography of early Israel. In the new research environment, pre-1967 Israel was no longer a small defensive country and the only democratic state in the Middle East, but a relatively strong nation that oppressed its Palestinian minority, discriminated against its Mizrachi citizens and conducted an aggressive policy towards neighbouring states in the region. The academic critique spread beyond ivory towers into other cultural areas such as theatre, film, literature, poetry, and even documentary television and official school textbooks.

Less than ten years later it would have taken an imaginative and determined visitor to find any trace of that openness and pluralism. Its disappearance was part of the general demise of the Israeli left in the immediate aftermath of the Intifada. The left was that part of Jewish public opinion which, with varying degrees of conviction and honesty, held peace-promoting and conciliatory positions on the question of Palestine. Academia had always had a strong presence in the left, and when it began to disappear, academia changed with it.

Since 1967, when the West Bank was conquered and then occupied by Israel, activists on the left had declared their willingness to withdraw from the Occupied Territories; they accepted a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital next to Israeli West Jerusalem, and they spoke of the need to grant full civic rights to the Palestinian Israeli minority within Israel. A large portion of this group, after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, publicly and privately confessed how wrong they had been to trust the Palestinians. They voted for Sharon in the February 2001 and March 2003 elections and later for Sharon's new party, Kadima, in 2006 and 2009. The 'gurus' and leaders of this group expressed their 'disappointment' with Israel's Palestinian citizens – with whom, they claimed, they had concluded an 'historical alliance'. The boycott by Israeli Palestinians of the February 2001 elections was the last straw that broke the back of this 'historical pact'.

The co-opting of the Israeli cultural, intellectual and academic scene and the disappearance of a political and moral voice that accepted at least the Palestinian right to independence and equality, if not the right of return, were twin processes that occurred at amazing speed. One would have expected, especially in the society's more learned and intellectual circles, a longer process of reflection and deduction. But it seems that what took place was a frantic rush, accompanied by some sighs of relief, to shed the few thin layers of democracy, morality and pluralism that had covered Zionist ideology and praxis over the years. The swift

disintegration of the institutes that had advocated peace policies and compromises, the hasty removal of peaceful and moral terminology from the public discourse and the disappearance of any alternative views to the sticky Zionist consensus on the Palestine question, all testified to an intrinsic shallowness in the Israeli peace discourse and the peace camp before the Second Intifada.

At the time, Israeli analysts attributed the U-turn to a genuine trauma caused by three factors: Arafat's insistence on the right of return, the Palestinian Authority's (PA) rejection of Barak's generous offer at Camp David and the violent uprising in 2000. But these explanations are hollow, as many of those who bring them up would be the first to recognise. Arafat never relinquished the right of return – he could not, even if he had wished to do so. He openly and constantly talked about it from Oslo onward. As for the so-called generous offers made at Camp David, it seems that (as Shlomo Ben-Ami and Yossi Beilin later admitted) if there were any 'generous offers' they were made only at a meeting at Taba, the resort village on the border of Israel and the Sinai, that took place a month after the Camp David summit, and then only tongue in cheek, since those concerned already knew that Barak was a lame duck prime minister and had no power to execute agreements.

Moreover, many Israeli leftists had read the American reports from Camp David, translated into Hebrew in *Ha'aretz*, and knew that Arafat had been presented with a diktat he could not accept under any circumstances.

Did he really disappoint them a couple of months later by failing to resist the popular anger in the Occupied Territories at the *cul-de-sac* into which both sides had been pushed, and which for the Palestinians meant perpetuation of the occupation?

The great prophets of the leftist camp, A B Yehoshua and Amos Oz, warned long before the al-Aqsa Intifada that if peace were not achieved in Camp David, war would reign instead. This was not an analytical statement, but a condescending threat to the Palestinians. When the Intifada broke out, the left exploited it to move back from an uncomfortable position of dubious patriotism to the consensual centre. There, at the heart of the Israeli polity, the lost sons were embraced in a process of erasing any ideological differences between left and right in the Jewish state, which continued into the next century.

It seems now that those like the present writer, who had warned that the Oslo Accords were no more than a political and military arrangement intended to replace Israeli occupation with another form of control, were right. Oslo did not cause any significant change in basic Israeli interpretations (from both left and right) of the past, present and future in Palestine. Most of Palestine, in the view of both left and right, was Israel, and there was no right of return – just as the Jews' only hope of survival was within a Zionist state, extending over as much of Palestine as possible, with as few Palestinians in it as was feasible. The argument was about tactics, not goals. The 'moderate' tactic was presented to the

Palestinians in Oslo as a 'take it or leave it' proposal, in return for which they were expected to cease all attempts to achieve more than had been offered. This did not work, although it seemed for a while that it would. Its initial success was due to three factors: President Clinton's deep involvement, the impressions conveyed by Palestinian leaders that this was indeed a peace process, and the indifference of the Arab world. Out of this, Israel reaped dividends and paid nothing back.

The 'peace camp' in Israel had enemies: those on the right, especially the settlers, who regarded the Oslo enterprise as dangerous. In the name of God and nation, they preferred to use force to impose the Zionist reality over all of Palestine. Because of these opponents and their violence, the Oslo peace camp had a martyr (Yitzhak Rabin). Now that it had a *shahid* or martyr (only one, it should be said), it was convinced it was at the midst of a genuine struggle for peace. In fact, what they were struggling for was the creation of a *bantustan*, a protectorate on most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In return, they sought to solicit from the Palestinians an 'end to the conflict' declaration. This did not require a reassessment of Israel's role in, and responsibility for, the ethnic cleansing carried out in 1948; nor did it require a revising of its brutal polices in the Occupied Territories or a review of its refusal to allow the Palestinians a full sovereign state on at least 22 per cent of Palestine (the entire West Bank and the Gaza Strip).

It also led to the illusion that the Israeli left had succeeded in Zionising the Palestinian minority in Israel as part of the overall deal. It took time for the Palestinian minority and its leaders to understand that a final peace map included the perpetuation, if not accentuation, of discriminatory policies and practices against them inside the Jewish state. Just as the Palestinians at Camp David were told to accept the 'mother of all deals' – meaning they were expected not to raise any more demands in the future – so the Palestinian citizens of Israel were expected to forsake any aspiration of turning their country into a state for all its citizens, as well as giving up any hope for its de-Zionisation.

When the al-Aqsa Intifada broke out in the Occupied Territories and within the Palestinian community in Israel, the very narrow limits of the genuine Jewish peace camp were exposed. It had always been small, but with the help of the international media, the American peace discourse and the fanaticism of the Israeli right, it had appeared large enough to justify hopes for a comprehensive and just solution in the Middle East as a whole.

To move for a moment from the general scene to a personal biography, the process of the disappearance of the peace camp and the demise of any ideological pluralism on the Jewish side left people like myself as pariahs. With like-minded friends, I could not find a social reference group to belong to, nor could we associate with any of the existing political formations on the Jewish side. Both personally and professionally,

things became worse in the immediate aftermath of the Camp David summit, as my main agenda continued to be the struggle against *Nakbah* denial in my homeland.

The struggle against denial of the *Nakbah* in Israel then shifted to the Palestinian political scene inside the country. Since the fortieth anniversary of the *Nakbah* in 1988, the Palestinian minority in Israel has linked its collective and individual memories of the catastrophe with the general Palestinian situation, and especially with its own predicament, as never before. This was manifested through an array of symbolic gestures, such as memorial ceremonies on *Nakbah* Commemoration Day, organised tours to deserted or former Palestinian villages in Israel, seminars on the past and extensive interviews in the press with *Nakbah* survivors. The process was to become sufficiently successful to lead to an (unsuccessful) attempt in the Israeli Knesset, years later, to pass a law banning public mention of the term *Nakbah*.

Through its political leaders, NGOs and media, the Palestinian Israelis were able to force the wider public to take notice of the *Nakbah*. Its re-emergence as a topic of public debate was helped by the misleading impression that the Oslo Accords and Camp David summit would lead to a genuine discussion about the refugees' future, or would even locate Israel's responsibility for the *Nakbah* at the heart of the peace negotiations. Despite the collapse of the summit – due mainly to an Israeli desire to force its point of view on the Palestinian side – the catastrophe of 1948 was for a while brought to

the attention of a local, regional, and to some extent global, audience.

Not only in Israel, but in the United States and even in Europe, it was necessary to remind those concerned with the Palestine question that the conflict impacted not only upon the future of the Occupied Territories, but also upon that of the Palestinian refugees who had been forced from their homes in 1948. Israel had earlier succeeded in sidelining the issue of refugees' rights from the Oslo Accords, an aim helped by poorly managed Palestinian diplomacy and strategy.

Indeed, the *Nakbah* was so efficiently kept off the peace process agenda that when it suddenly appeared, the Israelis felt as if a Pandora's box had suddenly been opened before them. The worst fear of Israeli negotiators was the possibility that Israel's responsibility for the 1948 catastrophe would now become a negotiable issue, and this 'danger' was, accordingly, immediately tackled. In the Israeli media and Knesset a consensual position was formulated: no Israeli negotiator would be allowed even to discuss the right of return of Palestinian refugees to the homes they had occupied before 1948. The Knesset passed a law to this effect, and Prime Minister Barak made a public commitment to it on the stairway of the plane that took him to Camp David.

The media and other cultural institutions were also recruited to discourage discussion of the *Nakbah* and its relevance to the peace process, and it was in this atmosphere that I became involved in a direct

confrontation with my own university. It was an inevitable consequence of the attempts that I and others had made to introduce the *Nakbah* onto the Israeli public agenda. Until it erupted, I tried in several articles to assess the impact of these efforts. What emerged was a very mixed picture. I could detect cracks in the wall of denial and repression that surrounded the *Nakbah* in Israel. These had come out of the debate on the 'new history' and the new political agenda of the Palestinian Israelis. The adverse change in atmosphere, however, and the renewed opposition were helped by a clarification of the Palestinian position on refugees towards the end of the Oslo peace process.

As a result, after more than 62 years of repression it is now more difficult in Israel to deny the expulsion and destruction of the Palestinians in 1948. The limited success evoked two negative reactions, formulated after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada. The first was from the Israeli political establishment. The government of Ariel Sharon, through its minister of education, initiated the systematic removal of any textbook or school syllabus that referred to the *Nakbah*, even marginally. Similar instructions were given to public broadcasting authorities. The second reaction was more disturbing: a considerable number of Israeli politicians, journalists and academics not only affirmed what happened in 1948, but were willing to justify it publicly – not just in retrospect but as a prescription for the future. The idea of 'transfer' entered Israeli political discourse openly for the first time since it was propagated in the early years

of Zionism, gaining some legitimacy as the best means of dealing with the Palestinian 'problem'.

Indeed, if I were asked to choose what best characterised Israel's response to the *Nakbah* in the twenty-first century I would stress the growing popularity of the 'transfer option' in the Israeli public mood and discourse. After 2000, the expulsion of the Palestinians from Palestine seemed to many in the political centre to be an inevitable and justifiable consequence of the Zionist project in Palestine. If there was any lament, it was that the expulsion was not complete. When even an Israeli 'new historian' such as Benny Morris in 2004 subscribed to the view that the expulsion was inevitable and should have been more comprehensive, it helped to legitimise any Israeli plans for further ethnic cleansing.[11]

A circle has thus been closed. When Israel took over almost 80 per cent of Palestine in 1948, it did so through settlement and ethnic cleansing of the original Palestinian population. When Yitzhak Rabin based his 1992 election on the votes of the Palestinian minority in Israel, the first and only leader to do so, he signalled the possibility of a different policy. After his assassination in November 1995, Palestinian Israelis were once again excluded from the political arena and West Bank Palestinians were still exposed to the danger of further expulsion. All three main political parties, Labour, Kadima and Likud, took the view that resorting to settlement was the best way of maintaining a Jewish state in Palestine, and they resisted

any significant Palestinian independence in areas left outside Jewish control.

Thus, for some the *Nakbah* never existed and for others it was a necessary and morally justified act of self-defence. Whatever the interpretation, the full story remains to be told, as there may still be some Israelis who are sensitive about their country's past and present conduct. They should be alerted to the fact that horrific deeds carried out by Israeli troops in 1948 were concealed from them, and they should be told, too, that such deeds have been recurrent in Israel's history and will be repeated if they, and others, do not act to stop them before it is too late.

These political developments led me to write several articles connecting the research on Palestine to the present Palestinian predicament and to contemporary attempts to reach a solution.[12] History as a facet of existential life in Palestine and Israel was no longer an abstract idea for me. I found venues in which to explain the connection, mostly in articles abroad, which to my relief were accepted as legitimate academic studies. When I tried to import this approach into Israel I was instantly rejected. In the eyes of many of my colleagues I ceased to be a genuine scholar.[13] The fact that I had joined the anti-Zionist party, *Hadash* (a front with the Israeli Communist Party in its centre and non-affiliated members like myself), only reinforced the criticisms of my work as political and ideological. These barbs came from the very scholars who were ideologues of the Labour Zionist movement, and whose

main writing was on that movement's history. I was branded as a 'postmodernist' by colleagues who had little understanding of or interest in postmodernism – to which I did not subscribe – or in relativism – to which I did subscribe – in the work of the historian.

Internationally, however, the need to find avenues for a joint narrative and a new agenda was warmly welcomed. In 1999 I collected Palestinian, American and Israeli historical works together into one volume that shared a common perception of Palestine's history over the last 200 years.[14] I then condensed this research agenda into a single narrative in *A History of Modern Palestine; One Country, Two Peoples*.[15] In its introduction, I explained that I had attempted to write a history out of sympathy to the subaltern, the oppressed, the occupied, the exiled and underprivileged. In most historical junctures in Palestine's history these were the Palestinians. But it also included Jewish women, children, peasants, workers, town-dwellers and peace activists. These new heroes and heroines who take centre stage in the story sidelined the old heroes – politicians, diplomats, notables, religious dignitaries and generals – who are examined more sceptically than in standard textbooks on the subject.

The general flow of my book aimed to dissociate the narrative from modernisation theories, in which change comes always from outside and for the better, to an approach guided by a search for internal and quite often positive dynamics of transformation clashing with powerful, quite often negative, foreign interventions.

Beshara Doumani's impressive work, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900*, was an important source of reference for both projects.[16]

Parts of the book were written during the whirlwind of autumn 2000 that sucked into it almost everyone in Israel and Palestine. My attempt to write an overall history of Palestine coincided with the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada. In my study at home, I felt that I could no longer shut the windows to the outside world and its influences; there was no more room for the traditional reclusiveness of the professional historian. While writing on the Palestinians in Israel, I was simultaneously talking on the phone to friends who were being arrested, attacked and shot at in the October 2000 demonstrations that marked the beginning of the Intifada. While writing on the occupation, I received emails from friends in the West Bank describing yet another Israeli attack on their lives and dignity. And while completing research on the 1948 massacres, I was listening to distressing reports in the background coming in from the Jenin refugee camp, where dozens of innocent citizens were killed by the IDF and many more wounded.

History, historiography, ideology and academia now fused into a single reality that resembled more a battlefield than a library or a serene common room in the university. I was ill-prepared and inadequately armed for the confrontation I had never wished or asked for, and which was around the corner.

3

THE KATZ AFFAIR

In the late 1980s I gave a course at Haifa University on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Students were allowed a free hand in choosing how to present the issue. One older student, Teddy Katz, a member of Kibbutz Magal a few miles south of Haifa, decided to look into the chronicles of his kibbutz from the 1948 war.

Teddy is the ultimate kibbutznik of the left-leaning movement, Hashomer Ha-Zair. Sporting a Stalin-like moustache and always wearing shorts, even on the coldest day of the year, he was looking at history as a way of enriching his life and contributing to his already deep involvement in the local peace movement.

In his particular assignment he discovered that his kibbutz was built on the ruins of an Arab village called Zeyta. He further ascertained that this village had not been occupied by troops in 1948, but that its inhabitants were forcibly evicted after the war by the Israeli government, because the site was coveted by the kibbutz movement for its fertile soil and convenient location between Haifa and Tel Aviv. As was quite common in the years between 1948 and 1955, such a request from the kibbutz movement could easily become