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Inside story

A betrayal of history

Yesterday in G2, Benny Morris said there was no chance of peace in the Middle East, and laid the blame at the door of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians. Rubbish, says fellow historian Avi Shlaim - Morris's views have more to do with propaganda than with proper research



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[The Guardian](#)


'A nation,' wrote the French philosopher Ernest Renan, "is a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours." By this definition, Benny Morris may now be counted as a true member of the Israeli nation. In his account of his "conversion" in yesterday's Guardian, Benny explains that, although he has not undergone a brain transplant as far as he can remember, his thinking about the current Middle East crisis and its protagonists has radically changed during the past two years.

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Willingness to re-examine one's thinking is always a commendable trait in a historian. Unfortunately, in Benny's case the re-examination is confined to only one protagonist in the Middle East conflict: the Palestinians. As a consequence, his new version of the recent history of the conflict has more in common with propaganda than with genuine history. Like most nationalist versions of history, it is simplistic, selective and self-serving.

By his own account, Benny's conversion was a pretty dramatic affair. He imagines that he feels a bit like those western fellow travellers rudely awakened by the trundle of Russian tanks crashing into Budapest in 1956. But there is surely some mistake in this analogy. Benny could not possibly have heard the trundle of Palestinian tanks crashing into any Israeli city because there are no Palestinian tanks. What he might have heard is the sound of Merkava tanks invading Palestinian cities on the West Bank and refugee camps in Gaza in the most

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flagrant violation of a long series of agreements that placed these areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Another minor flaw in Benny's analogy is that the Palestinians, by any reckoning, can only be seen as the victims, while Israel is the aggressive and overbearing military superpower. If we are going to look for historical antecedents for this grossly unequal contest, it would make more sense to update the biblical image of David and Goliath: a Palestinian David facing an Israeli Goliath.

There is a historical irony in Benny's conversion to the orthodox Zionist rendition of the past, for he was one of the trailblazers of the "new history" which placed Israel's political and military conduct under an uncompromising lens. Indeed, it was he who coined the term "the new historiography" in order to distinguish it from the traditional pro-Zionist literature about the birth of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war of which he was so savagely critical.

His 1988 book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, drove a coach and horses through the claim that the Palestinians left Palestine of their own accord or on orders from their leaders. With a great wealth of recently declassified material, he analysed the role that Israel played in precipitating the Palestinian exodus. Three or four subsequent books consolidated Benny's reputation as the standard-bearer of the new historiography. The hallmark of his approach was to stick as closely as possible to the documentary evidence, to record rather than to evaluate. While his findings were original and arresting, he upheld the highest standards of historical scholarship, and he wrote with almost clinical detachment.

Sadly, the article in the Guardian does not display any of Benny's former scholarly objectivity or rigorous use of evidence. Instead of evidence we are treated to a rambling and self-pitying monologue, seething with contempt and hatred for the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular.

The message, pithily summed up in a long interview that Benny gave to *Yediot Aharonot* about his highly publicised conversion, is that "the Arabs are responsible". Where no evidence is available to sustain the argument of Arab intransigence, Benny makes it up by drawing on his fertile imagination.

According to Benny, what stayed the hand of Hafez Assad of Syria, and that of his son and successor Bashar, from signing a peace treaty was not quibbles over a few hundred yards but a basic refusal to make peace with the Jewish state. The evidence? Benny can see the father, on his deathbed, telling his son: "Whatever you do, don't make peace with the Jews; like the Crusaders, they too will vanish." It would appear that Benny can no longer tell the difference between genuine history and fiction or fabrication along the lines of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. At this rate Benny is in danger of becoming what Isaiah Berlin once described as "a very rare thing - a genuine charlatan".

Most of Benny's venom and vitriol are, however, reserved for the Palestinians in what amounts to a remarkable attempt to blame the victims for their own misfortunes. He trots out again Abba Eban's tired old quip that the Palestinians have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity, blithely disregarding all the opportunities for peace that Israel has missed since 1967. But the main reason, we are told, around which Benny's pessimism gathered and crystallised was the figure of Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian movement since the late 1960s. Arafat-bashing has become a national sport in Israel of late, and Benny has a field day, calling him, among other things, an "implacable nationalist and inveterate liar". To be sure, Arafat is no paragon of virtue, but it is far too easy and too simplistic to place the entire blame for the failure of the Oslo peace process on the shoulders of one individual.

Like Benny, I was cautiously optimistic after Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation signed the Oslo accord in September 1993, but our interpretation of the subsequent history is very different. Oslo represented a historic compromise for the Palestinians: they gave up their claim to 78% of mandatory Palestine in return for a state of their own over the remaining 22%, comprising the West Bank and Gaza. Israel, for its part, recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the two sides agreed to resolve their outstanding differences by peaceful means.

For Benny the principal reason for the collapse of this historic compromise is Palestinian mendacity; for me it is Israeli expansionism. The building of settlements in the occupied territories has always been illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace. Expanding Jewish settlements on the West Bank is not a violation of the letter of the Oslo accord, but it is most certainly a violation of its spirit. Israel's protests of peaceful intentions were vitiated by its policy of expropriating more and more Palestinian land and building more Jewish settlements on this land. By continuing to build settlements, Israel basically went back on its side of the deal that had been concluded at Oslo.

The main landmarks in the breakdown of the Oslo peace process are the Camp David summit of July 2000 and the outbreak of the intifada towards the end of September of that year. Israel's official history is full of myths, as Benny knows so well from the earlier stage in his career when he was in the business of exploding national myths and slaughtering sacred cows. The latest national myth is that of the generous offer that Ehud Barak is said to have made to Arafat at Camp David, only to be confronted with a flat rejection and a return to violence. There is a broad national consensus behind this myth, including the left and the peace camp, but popular support is not the same as evidence.

The role of the historian is to subject the claims of the protagonists to critical scrutiny in the light of all the available evidence. In this instance, however, Benny seems to have

swallowed the official Israeli line on Camp David hook, line and sinker. The first-hand account of the American official Robert Malley is not even mentioned. It suggests that Barak mishandled the summit from start to finish. Benny also glosses over the fact that the al-Aqsa intifada, which has so far claimed the lives of 941 Palestinians and 273 Israelis, broke out not on orders from Arafat but in response to a provocative visit to Haram al-Sharif by the then leader of the opposition, Ariel Sharon.

Benny's account of the next phase in the "final status" negotiations is hopelessly inaccurate. On December 23 2000, President Bill Clinton presented his "parameters" for a final settlement of the conflict. These parameters reflected the long distance he had travelled from the American bridging proposals tabled at Camp David towards meeting Palestinian aspirations. The new plan provided for an independent Palestinian state over the whole of Gaza and 94-96% of the West Bank (with some territorial compensation from Israel proper); Palestinian sovereignty over the Arab parts of Jerusalem, Israeli sovereignty over the Jewish parts; and a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in which the new state would be the focal point for the refugees who choose to return to the area.

According to Benny, the Palestinian leadership rejected "the Barak-Clinton peace proposals of July-December 2000". In fact, they rejected Barak's proposals of July and accepted in principle Clinton's proposals of December, as did the Israeli leadership. Both sides had their reservations. On Jerusalem, the Israeli reservations were more substantial than the Palestinian ones. Benny not only conflates two entirely separate sets of proposals; he makes no mention at all of the negotiations at Taba in the last week of January 2001.

At Taba the two teams made considerable progress on the basis of the Clinton parameters and came closer to an overall agreement than at any other time in the history of this conflict. But by this time Clinton and Barak were on their way out and Sharon was on his way in. During the run-up to the elections, Barak hardened his line on Jerusalem. At this critical juncture, as so often in the past, the peace process was held hostage to internal Israeli politics. With Sharon's election, all the progress made at Taba towards a "final status" agreement was rendered null and void. A new and grisly chapter in the history of the conflict was about to begin.

Benny's conclusion follows naturally from his deficient and defective account of the history of the last decade, and especially of the last two years. His conclusion is that the root problem today is the Palestinian leadership's denial of the legitimacy of the Jewish state. The conclusion that I draw from my version of history is that the root problem today is the Jewish state's continuing occupation of most of the Palestinian territories that it captured in June 1967.

All the neighbouring Arab states, as well as the Palestinians, recognise Israel's right to exist within its pre-1967 borders. None of them recognises the legitimacy of the Jewish colonial project

beyond the green line. Nor do I. This is where Benny Morris and I part company. His post-conversion interpretation of history is old history with a vengeance. It is indistinguishable from the propaganda of the victors. He used to have the courage of his convictions. He now has the courage of his prejudices.

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