

Benny Morris: One State, Two States. Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Yale University Press: New Haven & London 2009. 240 pp.

Objective historian or staunch ideologue?

Professor Benny Morris – a key member of the group of Israeli scholars known as the ‘new historians’ – devotes almost the entirety of his latest book to shooting down the case for both one state and two states in all their variations. Despite the book’s subtitle, ‘Resolving the Israel/Palestine conflict’, the writer keeps us in suspense about his big idea until the last three pages when all is finally revealed. But the denouement is a huge disappointment. His less-than-novel solution, echoing the much derided and subsequently withdrawn ‘federation’ proposal by King Hussein in 1972, would be tantamount to a reversion to the situation, with some adaptation, that prevailed for nearly two decades prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Morris plan would entail tacking the Gaza Strip onto a “Palestinian-Jordanian” state, to come about through fusing the present-day Kingdom of Jordan and “the bulk of the West Bank and East Jerusalem”.

His advocacy of this plan – more afterthought than rounded idea – is so lacking in conviction, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he is far from persuaded by it himself. And for good reason: it is firmly at variance with the aspirations and needs of all the principal actors. For the Jordanians, the proposal – which the king decisively disowned in 1988 – “would most likely incur opposition from the Hashemites and their Jordanian Bedouin constituency...”, to use Morris’s own words (p200). For the Israelis, if there is resistance to withdrawing from East Jerusalem and the bulk of the West Bank in favour of a Palestinian state, what reason is there to believe there would be less reluctance to cede these territories to a Palestinian-Jordanian state? And for the Palestinians, the last few decades of honing a national consciousness and striving for political independence are imagined away.

Six years after the 1967 war, I interviewed a range of Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank as part of a research project. What I was told time and again was that the Israeli occupation was “preferred” to the previous 19-year Jordanian occupation. Why was this? “Because one day the Israeli occupation will come to an end” (a certainty that has come

to be held with rather less conviction nearly four decades on), implying that outside powers were less likely to perceive Jordanian rule over fellow Arabs and fellow Muslims as an unjust and unsustainable foreign occupation. Is it really credible that the Palestinians, some forty years later, would seriously embrace an effective reversion to the status quo ante?

In the light of this, it seems, if we follow Morris's line of thinking on the other two options, that we are left with no solution at all. The essence of Morris's thesis is that Palestinian support for either one binational state or two states for two peoples is baloney – that the truth is the Arabs want it all for themselves: “The idea of sharing Palestine ... – either through a division of the country into two states, one Jewish, the other Arab, or through a unitary binational entity, based on political parity between the two communities – is alien to the Muslim Arab mindset” (p188/9).

This, according to Morris, is how it always has been and always will be: “Nothing has changed since 1937 [the year the Peel Commission ruled against a binational state]. Or, more accurately, things have changed mainly in directions that make the establishment of a viable binational state even less likely than seventy years ago ... These [heightened] fears and hatreds make a shared binational state ... inconceivable” (p179).

The call for one binational state – no less than the call for its phoney predecessor, the ‘democratic secular state’ – is therefore a con, designed to mislead the gullible, especially among the naïve liberal intelligentsia in the West (of which Morris singles out the late Tony Judt and Virginia Tilley). It is simply a ruse to rid Palestine – the whole of Mandatory Palestine – of its Jewish population and establish an Arab state dominated by Muslim law.

While Morris's ire is directed primarily against the “illogical and unrealistic” binational proposal, in “strictly geographical terms” he considers there to be “an unavoidable logic to the one-state solution” (p176). By contrast, “the very shape and smallness of the Land of Israel/Palestine ... makes its division into two states a practical nightmare and well nigh unthinkable” (p177).

But this is not the main reason for his opposition to two states. After all, there are many countries around the world that are smaller in size and comply less with the rules of logic than either of the two projected states. His objection stems principally from his belief that the Palestinians are not and never have been sincere about two states.

The evidence for this proposition, and the inferences he draws from it, is the most polemical and least convincing part of his book. It also brings into question the claim made on the front sleeve regarding Morris's "commitment to objectivity that has consistently characterized his approach". If what is meant by objectivity is faithfulness to historical facts even when they expose his own country's past misdeeds or reveal the extent of original Zionist territorial ambitions, then fair enough. Parts of this book, as with previous Morris books, don't pull their punches when exploring the events surrounding the establishment of the Jewish state and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem.

To cite just two examples: Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion – respectively the first Israeli president and prime minister – "had hoped ... that Transjordan or at least the hilly spine east of the Jordan would remain part of Palestine and open to Jewish settlement, ultimately becoming part of the future Jewish state" (p41). With regard to the future state's Arab inhabitants, Ben-Gurion reportedly declared in 1938: "I support compulsory transfer. I don't see anything immoral in it" (p67), a view said to have been shared by Weizmann (p68).

Although both leaders subsequently joined the ranks of the pragmatists and fought for partition, these earlier quotations, along with other slices of archival evidence, suggest that Palestinian fears of Israeli expansionism and expulsion – often dismissed as Arab hyperbole – were not without foundation.

While being truthful about these matters is commendable and edifying, when it comes to divining present-day Palestinian and Arab attitudes towards Israel, Morris abandons all pretensions of objectivity, revealing a strong ideological bent. Every statement that rejects Israel is unquestioningly authentic while all evidence to the contrary is ignored or dismissed. The Arab League's three "noes" at Khartoum in September 1967 are pointed up whereas their comprehensive reversal in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative – which holds

out the prospect of full normalization of relations between Israel and all Arab states – does not even warrant a mention.

Hamas leaders' most extreme pronouncements on Israel are ardently cited but no space is found for any of their recent more nuanced declarations that intimate a pragmatic evolution towards a conditional acceptance of two states. The standard Israeli version of the Camp David Clinton-Barak-Arafat summit in 2000, casting the Palestinian leader as the supreme villain, is uncritically regurgitated despite its well-documented frailties. As regards the bigger picture, "The assault on the West, epitomized by 9/11" was not the doings of a ruthless band of Muslim fanatics with an extremist but limited following but, according to Morris, the work of "the Islamic world" (p6). This outlook tallies with the worldview he had revealed in an interview with Ha'aretz on 8 January 2004: "The Arab world as it is today is barbarian."

Anyone who deviates from Morris's inexorable truths risks the sharp end of his derision. Thus, the distinguished American Jewish Middle East analyst, Professor Henry Siegman, is one of life's "Wishful thinkers and naïfs" (p219). A supposed implication in the writing of the eminent American Palestinian historian, Professor Rashid Khalidi, is not misleading but "mendacious" (p114). George Antonius's classic history of the rise of modern Arab nationalism, *The Arab Awakening*, is "lopsided" (p103). The American Palestinian journalist Ali Abunimah's book "is suffused with liberal blather" (p219). And defenders of Palestinian positions are "Palestinian apologists" (p174).

Twenty-one years after the stunning military defeat of 1967 and the abrupt inception of enemy occupation – a bewildering development that compounded the trauma of the Naqba catastrophe nineteen years earlier – the Palestinian National Council momentarily lowered its hitherto immutable demand for 100 per cent of the land and agreed to accept a state on the remaining 22 per cent. The realization, long in coming, had finally embedded itself within the Palestinian psyche that – whatever their innermost dreams – if they were to gain their own state it would have to be alongside Israel rather than in its stead. This solemn decision was the Palestinians' grand historical compromise. After an agonizing struggle, the pragmatists had won out.

For as long as Israel's leaders continue to believe a further deal can be cut over the 22 per cent and for as long as they try to enforce this through further settlement expansion, peace will prove elusive. And the Palestinian pragmatists may eventually reach the conclusion that pragmatism no longer favours two states. The opportunity for a comprehensive peace agreement based on the 1967 borders, albeit with agreed equitable land swaps, still exists. It is Israel's best and possibly last hope for a secure future within the region in which it resides. Benny Morris's doctrinaire trashing of this option does his fellow countrymen and countrywomen no favours.

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