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## **Review of *Israel on the Brink: And the Eight Revolutions that Could Lead to Decolonization and Coexistence* by Ilan Pappé**

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Pappé, Ilan. *Israel on the Brink: And the Eight Revolutions That Could Lead to Decolonization and Coexistence*. (Boston: Beacon Press), 216 pages.

This is an unusual book. It is both pessimistic and hopeful. The details of the colonial violence are not as widely known as they should be, and those details do not, on their own, generate much reason for optimism. And, the book was written to offer a vision of a better future. It is fiction and non-fiction. It is about the past and the future. Ilan Pappé is a widely respected historian and associate editor of this journal. The book summarizes the relevant history in a highly readable way, and it ends with an imagined diary about the future that could be. Elements of it are utopian, yet detailed. The changes Pappé sees as possible, especially projected out to 2048, have an idealistic feel, though the on the ground specifics, in the diary, are compelling. Reading the book fills one with despair and hope. The history has so much suffering and so much anti-Arab racism that it is hard to see any way out as possible, and yet, by the end, one has a feeling that this really could work.

*Israel on the Brink* stays grounded in reality—it is written by a historian. If—and it's a big if—the eight mini revolutions Pappé discusses were to transpire, one can see how Israel and Palestine could be transformed. Palestine is a place of incredible natural and human resource. Pappé sees the latter as especially vital and potentially transformative. The idea to keep in mind is that almost no one thought South Africa could be transformed in the time frame in which Apartheid, there, was ended. I was involved with the Shanty Town that was constructed on the campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder, at that time. There was a sense that change was in the air and we were participating in that in our own small way. But I don't think anyone involved thought Apartheid there would end as soon as it did.

Still, *Israel on the Brink*? He can't be serious? But he is. For the purposes of seeing a possible transition we are reminded the current situation has a beginning in 1967: "The entirety of historical Palestine was now under Israeli control, as were more than one and a half million Palestinians" (5). Obviously, the history is much longer, but it was not until 1967 that Israel was seen formally as an occupying power.

Pappé is a well-known advocate of the Single-State Solution. The political reality Israel has created is a single state rendering the Two-State Solution a fantastical option. Pappé (13) quotes surveys from December 2022 that show only about a third of Palestinians and about a third of Israelis favor a Two-State Solution.

Pappé identifies eight cracks in Israel's existence. First, the ongoing and deepening friction between religious and secular Jews in Israel. Second, BDS: "But it seems only a matter of time before the actions of [global] civil society in boycotting Israeli products and pushing their institutions to divest from Israel will compel governments to adopt sanctions on Israel" (23). In a sign of how fast this is happening, consider two recent examples. First, there is this report from Israel:

In February 2025, the Association of University Heads in Israel released a report warning of a dramatic increase in boycott activity, documenting a 66% rise in 'incidents'—including suspended partnerships, canceled conferences, rescinded invitations, grant refusals, and journal editors declining to publish Israeli scholarship—between October 2024 and February 2025 compared with the previous year, with US cases doubling. (Rosen, 92)

And, on December 4, 2025: "Public broadcasters in Ireland, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Spain said ... they will boycott the 2026 Eurovision Song Contest, after the European Broadcasting Union refused to hold a vote on whether to exclude Israel" (Democracy Now!).

The third crack is that more and more Jews around the world, but especially in the US, are growing critical of, or out-right rejecting, Zionism, causing an unprecedented generational divide. Fourth, Israel's economic situation is becoming desperate. The gap between rich and poor is growing, as is long-term unemployment; social mobility is down and over 20% of Israelis live in poverty (30). In 2024, the poverty rate in the US was 10.6%, for perspective (USA-Facts.org). Fifth, incompetent military: "On social media, you might have encountered the joke that the IDF is unused to fighting anyone who actually fights back" (31). The point is, "[t]hey are not trained for war but for policing, while the air force is treated as Israel's main offensive power" (31). Sixth, Israel has politicized its civil service, leading to corruption and a basic failure of the state to do what states normally do (from infrastructure to emergency planning and military planning). Seventh, the Palestinians are a generally young population, full of energy and ideas, which suggests to Pappé that a new movement is possible. But we are cautioned, "[c]ollapse is not always followed by a better alternative" (35). Eighth, and finally, the environmental conditions have been exacerbated by the failure of the state, which can only add to the other social frictions.

*Israel is on the Brink*. The other side is what is possible.

The next section of the book is an extended discussion of the past and the possibilities for Palestinian resistance. There are problem areas and reasons for optimism. Palestinian factions do not organize together. The various attempts

at peace have been a failure. The Palestinian Authority [PA] functions as an advocate of Apartheid and not the people. And yet, the factions may be brought together, the PA can be replaced (Pappé is pessimistic about reforming it), there are historical and newer think tanks working on various ideas for the future, there is a vibrant youth movement, and an astounding history of resistance.

Pappé discusses ways in which justice might be pursued. Here the historian reminds us that this is not a new idea and processes need not be invented from scratch. There have been attempts at Transitional Justice with varying degrees of success around the world in recent history, in South Africa, for example. Victims need to feel heard and respected, perpetrators must be held to account, and, somehow, there must be admission of crimes and acceptance of apologies to be able to move forward (65). More specifically, Pappé mentions this process must include “the three A’s.” First, Acknowledgement. The major one, here, is ending Nakba denial in Israel and acknowledging that it is, at present, ongoing. Second, Accountability. Accountability can come in the form of financial and material support for the absorption of returning refugees, reconstructing urban spaces, offering compensation for the victims and survivors, and investing in other restorative work. Third, Acceptance. Here, Pappé has in mind Palestinians accepting large numbers of Jews amongst them. This can only happen alongside something like a Truth Commission. And, curiously, there is some history, here, from which Pappé gleans some optimism. There are neighborhoods where Palestinians and Jews live alongside each other. Pappé sees this real-world experience, of living with and knowing The Other, as providing a helpful model of co-existence.

“The Way Forward,” as this section is called, also includes discussion of the Right of Return, and the future of settlements. Both would seem to be massive problems, admitting of no easy solutions. And while the solutions Pappé discusses are not easy, they turn out to be much easier than one might first assume. This comes out in the details, of what settlement was built on or near what village. And, it turns out, that, while some villages have been totally destroyed and covered over, others can be revived. Settlements would have to be reimagined and re-worked. Settlers would have to move. And, we are reminded, Israel has experience with this from its pull back from Gaza. What seem insurmountable obstacles in the popular press, turn out to be hurdles to overcome.

Reconnecting Palestine to its historical ties in the area of the Mashreq, the eastern Mediterranean, is an unexpected and fascinating detail. Palestine had a long history with the area, one that has been fractured and must be repaired for economic development to really take off. The Zionists wanted to recreate the look and feel of Europe and ignore this history. Pappé is especially critical of the effort to plant pine trees in a climate where they do not belong and now have become vulnerable to fire. Peppered throughout this discussion are many curious details of the ways in which Palestine is culturally Arabic but much broader than that because of Ottoman history.

One of the complicated factors is the debate over what is Judaism and what are Jews. To liberal Judaism (such as members of the Reform Movement), Judaism is a religion. Jews are those people who practice the Jewish religion. Jews

are not a culture (Jews come from many cultures), not a people (Jews come from many peoples around the world), not a civilization (again, many of them, not one), nor an ethnic group (though Ashkenazi Jews do have a shared history that makes them an ethnic group). The larger point here is that Judaism is a global religion, and, culturally, people feel attached to different elements of Jewish cultural history around the world. This contradicts the Zionist claim that Jews are a single people in need of a homeland (how the Reform Movement lived with this contradiction is a curious bit of history on its own and beyond our scope here). And it leaves Pappé optimistic about developing non-Zionist and non-religious Jewish identities.

The future Israel/Palestine will have a place for Jews as a religious group, as it will have a place for Muslims as a religious group, alongside Druze, Bedouin, and Christians. It will be a place where Jewish cultural variety can flourish. And importantly, a place where Palestinians are Arabs once more. The undoing of anti-Arab bigotry is a major challenge for the future, we are reminded at various places in the text.

The last chapter of *Israel is on the Brink* is a work of fiction. The last nonfiction chapter is called “Can We Redefine Politics?” It left me wondering about the role of oil. Pappé doesn’t mention this, but if in the next couple of decades, the world did, meaningfully, move beyond oil, that would presumably make the oil states in the Middle East largely irrelevant. In that situation, would the US empire need the “unsinkable aircraft carrier” called Israel? The larger point of this chapter is the need for socialism, even while Pappé presumes the value of democracy and liberalism (in the form of social liberalism). This leads him to a curious place, where he affirms the Left as a solution, but then he mentions an embarrassingly racist policy position the French Communist Party [CPF] had in 1981(145) and implies that nothing has changed (146). But, in fact, the CPF repudiated those policies, starting as early as 1987 (see Parsons). I also found Pappé’s reliance on a book called *Wrong Turnings* unhelpful, as it conflates Liberal and Left (see Goldsmith).

The last line of the book, in the final, utopic fictional chapter, is the last line of an imagined diary, written between 2027 and 2048, and it reads, “May the next year be the first boring year in the history of Palestine” (182). The inverse of the famous Chinese proverb or curse, “May you live in interesting times.” It made me think of the Pesach Seder and its “Next year in Jerusalem,” to which we could add, “for the first time without soldiers in the streets.” It is a glorious vision. What sells it is the details, however imaginary they may be. Pappé offers us a nearly year by year account, written by an imagined academic, and at times political insider, of the way this change could unfold. This future starts with a fourth Lebanon War in 2027. Then comes a reformed and renewed PLO, many negotiations, and a fifth *Intifada* in 2031. The US elects leadership critical of the Apartheid system, followed by the British, both after 2032. There is a Palestinian revolution in 2040, followed by the formation of a Restorative Justice Committee, a renamed National Assembly, and more. I think, because it is so specific in these imagined details, the account has a feeling of reality to it. I suppose this is true of any good work of imagined futurism. Even in the imagined

future, it seems the US plays the vital role. Once support for Zionism collapses in the US, change is really possible.

Pappé reminds us, over and over, that change is not necessarily for the good. For good change, people will have to organize, so that 2049 may, actually, turn out to be the most boring year in Palestinian history. *Insha' Allab / Im yirtzeb Hashem.*

## Biography

Dr. **Richard Curtis** is a retired Philosophy instructor from the Seattle area. His research focuses on the nature of religion as an evolved human phenomenon.

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