JPS Responds to CAMERA's Call for Accuracy: Ben-Gurion and the Arab Transfer

In November 2011, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) alerted us to an erroneous citation in an article by Ilan Pappé published in the autumn 2006 issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* under the title "The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine." In that article, Dr. Pappé combined sections from several chapters of the manuscript that was soon to become his *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, published in 2006 by One World Press of Oxford, England.

The citation in question refers to a passage that appears on p. 9 of *JPS,* vol. 36, no. 1. The passage concerns the thinking of the Zionist leadership, especially David Ben-Gurion, on the kind of state it wished to establish in Palestine. Its immediate context was the July 1937 recommendation by the Palestine Royal [Peel] Commission (dispatched to Palestine to investigate the causes of the Arab rebellion that had broken out the previous year) to partition Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state as a solution to the conflict. Given the density of the Arab population in the area allotted to the Jewish state, the Commission recommended that 225,000 Arabs be transferred out of the proposed Jewish state, and that this transfer be "in the last resort . . . compulsory;" in exchange, 1,250 Jews were to be transferred from the proposed Arab state.[1]

Many Zionists opposed the principle of partition because it meant giving up a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine. The official Zionist leadership accepted the principle of partition, but not (in effect) the proposed boundaries of the Jewish state. With this background, the relevant passage in the *JPS* article is reproduced below. A phrase attributed to Ben-Gurion, the significance of which will become clear in due course, is highlighted.

> That the top leaders were well aware of the implications of this exclusivity [of a purely Jewish state] was clear in their internal debates, diaries, and private correspondence. Ben-Gurion, for example, wrote in a letter to his son in 1937, **"The Arabs will have to go, but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as a war."**

The endnote appended to the Ben-Gurion quote (note 9 in the *JPS* article) gives as reference Charles D. Smith's *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (2004). According to the letter we received from CAMERA, "the

[1]See Palestine Royal Commission [Peel Commission], *Report Presented by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Parliament by Command of His Majesty July, 1937* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937; Cmd. 5479), pp. 391–392.

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quote attributed to Ben-Gurion does not appear in the citation provided." Verification by *JPS* revealed that this indeed is the case.

In checking the passage as printed in *JPS* against the corresponding passage in Pappé's hardcover edition, however, we discovered a yet more serious error in the *JPS* text, notably in the phrase highlighted below. Although CAMERA in its website posting of 4 November 2011 ("Ilan Pappé, Check Your Sources") presents the Ben-Gurion quotes in both versions as being the same, in fact a misplaced quotation mark had significantly changed the meanings. The passage in the hardcover text (p. 23) reads:

> Ben-Gurion himself, writing to his son in 1937, appeared convinced that this was the only course of action open to Zionism: **"The Arabs will have to go," but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as a war.**

Thus, the corrected punctuation in the latter version distinguishes between Ben-Gurion's own words and Pappé's paraphrase of the gist of the Zionist leader's thinking on transfer, an essential distinction that does not exist in the *JPS* article.

It is worth noting that in its correspondence with us, CAMERA made no mention of the substantive error arising from the misplaced quotation marks in *JPS,* which we ourselves are highlighting in the interests of accuracy. In our view, far more important than an inadvertently misplaced or missing citation or a punctuation lapse—which, while misleading, can be corrected—is the overall accuracy of Pappé's presentation. This is because of its absolute centrality to the historical record of Ben-Gurion's stance on partition and transfer. This issue is the more cogent in view of an article (by a CAMERA official) that claims that the quote attributed to Ben-Gurion (as it appears in the *JPS* article) is a complete fabrication, a "fake" (see "The Faux Zionist History of Ilan Pappé," posted 12 November 2011 on the website CIF Watch). Even taking into account the punctuation error, this contention is totally at odds with the known record of Ben-Gurion's position at least as of the late 1930s. Thus, because *JPS*'s dedication to accuracy is no less deep than CAMERA's, we feel it important to pursue the question beyond the regrettable misattribution and punctuation lapse committed in *JPS*.

As for the "accurate, verifiable source" for the Ben-Gurion quote sought by CAMERA, it is in fact "hiding in plain sight" in the very same sentence as the quote itself, with Pappé explicitly referring (in both the *JPS* article and the hardcover book) to a 1937 letter Ben-Gurion wrote to his son.

Ben-Gurion's 5 October 1937 letter to his son Amos is well-known to scholars of the conflict. Benny Morris, Ben-Gurion biographers Shabtai Teveth and Michael Ben-Zohar, Nur Masalha, and numerous others have all quoted from it. Interestingly, however, the letter appears never to have

been published in full in English. Yet in order to properly understand the allegedly "fake" Ben-Gurion quote, it must be seen in the context in which it occurs. In the interests of optimal accuracy, therefore, *JPS* asked the Hebrew Department of the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS) in Beirut to translate the full text of the letter from the original Hebrew, which was obtained from the Ben-Gurion Archives Online, housed at the Ben-Gurion Heritage Institute in S'de-Boqer, Israel, affiliated with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

For our purposes here, the following excerpts (over half the entire text, with all cuts indicated by ellipses) are sufficient not only to establish the placement and context of the Ben-Gurion (direct) quote at the heart of the controversy, but also to follow the full progression of Ben-Gurion's argument, and in so doing assess the accuracy of Pappé's paraphrase. Passages of particular relevance have been highlighted.

> . . . Of course the partition of the country gives me no pleasure. *But the country that they [the Royal (Peel) Commission] are partitioning is not in our actual possession; it is in the possession of the Arabs and the English.* What is in our actual possession is a small portion, less than what they [the Peel Commission] are suggesting as a Jewish state. . . . But *in this proposed partition we will get more than what we already have*, though of course much less than we merit and desire. The question is: would we obtain more without partition? If things were to remain <u>as they are</u> [emphasis in original], would this satisfy our aspirations? *What we really want is not that the land remain whole and unified. What we want is that the whole and unified land be <u>Jewish</u>* [emphasis in original]. *A unified Eretz Israel would be no source of satisfaction for me—if it were Arab.*
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> From our standpoint, the status quo is deadly poison. We want to change the status quo. But how can this change come about? How can this land become ours? *The decisive question is: Does the establishment of a Jewish state [in only part of Palestine] advance or retard the conversion of this country into a Jewish country?*
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> *My assumption . . . is that a Jewish state on only part of the land is not the end but the beginning. . . .*
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> We will admit into the state all the Jews we can. We firmly believe that we can admit more than two million. We will build a multi-faceted Jewish economy—agricultural, industrial, and maritime. *We will organize an advanced defense force—a superior army which I have no doubt will be one of the best armies in the world. At that point I am confident that we would not fail in settling in the remaining parts of the country, through agreement and understanding with our Arab neighbors, or through some other means.*
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> . . .
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> Our ability to penetrate the country will increase if we have a state. Our strength vis-à-vis the Arabs will likewise

increase. The possibilities for construction and multiplication will speedily expand. The greater the Jewish strength in the country, the more the Arabs will realize that it is neither beneficial nor possible for them to withstand us. On the contrary, it will be possible for the Arabs to benefit enormously from the Jews, not only materially but politically as well.

I do not dream of war nor do I like it. But I still believe, more than I did before the emergence of the possibility of a Jewish state, that once we are numerous and powerful in the country the Arabs will realize that it is better for them to become our allies.

They will derive benefits from our assistance if they, of their own free will, give us the opportunity to settle in all parts of the country. The Arabs have many countries that are under-populated, underdeveloped, and vulnerable, incapable with their own strength to stand up to their external enemies. . . . This need for protection means subjugation and dependence on the other. But the Jews could be equal allies, real friends, not occupiers or tyrants over them.

Let us assume that the Negev will not be allotted to the Jewish state. In such event, the Negev will remain barren because the Arabs have neither the competence nor the capability to develop it or make it prosper. They already have an abundance of deserts but not of manpower, financial resources, or creative initiative. It is very probable that they will agree that we undertake the development of the Negev and make it prosper in return for our financial, military, organizational, or scientific assistance. It is also possible that they will not agree. People don't always behave according to logic, common sense, or their own practical advantage. . . . *[I]t is possible that the Arabs will follow the dictates of sterile nationalist passions and tell us*: "We want neither your honey nor your sting. *We'd rather that the Negev remain barren than that Jews should inhabit it." If this occurs, we will have to talk to them in a different language—and we will have a different language—but such a language will not be ours without a state.* This is so because we can no longer tolerate that vast territories capable of absorbing tens of thousands of Jews should remain vacant, and that Jews cannot return to their homeland because the Arabs prefer that the place [the Negev] remains neither ours nor theirs. *We must expel Arabs and take their place.* Up to now, all our aspirations have been based on an assumption—one that has been vindicated throughout our activities in the country—that there is enough room in the land for the Arabs and ourselves. *But if we are compelled to use force—not in order to dispossess the Arabs of the Negev or Transjordan, but in order to guarantee our right to settle there—our force will enable us to do so.*

Clearly in such event we will have to deal not only with the Arabs living in *Eretz Israel, since it is very probable*

> *that Arabs from the neighboring countries will come to their aid. But our power will be greater, not only because we will be better organized and equipped, but also because behind us stands a force still greater in quantity and quality.* This is the reservoir of the millions in the Diaspora. The entire younger generation of Poland, Romania, America, and other countries *will rush to our aid at the outbreak of such a conflict. I pray to God that this does not happen at all. Nevertheless the Jewish state will not rely only on the Jews living in it, but on the Jewish people living in every corner of the world: the many millions who are eager and* <u>*obliged*</u> [emphasis in original] *to settle in Palestine. . . .* Of course it is likely that Arab adventurers and gangs will come from Syria or Iraq or other Arab countries, but these can be no match for the tens and hundreds of thousands of young Jews to whom Eretz Israel is not merely an emotional issue, but one that is in equal measure both personal and national.
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> For this reason I attach enormous importance to the <u>conquest</u> [emphasis in original] of the sea and the construction of a Jewish harbor and a Jewish fleet. The sea is the bridge between the Jews of this country and the Jewish Diaspora—the millions of Jews in different parts of the world. *We must create the conditions that will enable us in times of necessity to bring into the country, in our own ships manned by our own seamen, tens of thousands of young men. Meanwhile we must prepare these young men while they are still in the Diaspora for whatever task awaits them here.*
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> . . .

Readers (including CAMERA) are invited to reach their own conclusions concerning the letter, which is available in full on our website at www.palestine-studies.org, along with a link to the Hebrew original.

For our part, however, we find Ben-Gurion's thoughts on partition and transfer as expressed in this letter strikingly clear. The letter unambiguously demonstrates that Ben-Gurion's acceptance of a Jewish state in only part of Palestine is tactical, only a beginning, enabling the Zionists to build their economic strength and an advanced army that will allow them to settle in all parts of the country (and even Transjordan). To be sure, Ben-Gurion emphasizes the benefits that the Arabs themselves will derive from Jewish settlement and development throughout the land. He expresses his hope that agreement can be reached with the Arabs, that they will consent to unhindered Jewish settlement in line with their own interests; he states his dislike of war. But the entire logic and flow of the argument speaks not to consent but to war: the "some other means," the "different language," the emphasis on organization and equipment, the build-up of force, "the conquest of the sea," the construction of a Jewish harbor and fleet, the bridge to the millions of the Diaspora, the "preparation" of tens of thousands of young men in Europe and America who could be brought

to the country in times of need. And in the last analysis, if the Arabs stand in the way, they must be expelled.

Ben-Gurion's 5 October 1937 letter thoroughly vindicates Ilan Pappé's reading; indeed, the Pappé quotes to which CAMERA objects seem almost mild when compared to the actual words Ben-Gurion penned to his son. The more *literal* translation of the Ben-Gurion direct quote ("We must expel Arabs and take their place") is actually stronger than Pappé's freer rendering ("The Arabs must go"), although the meaning is basically the same. As for Pappé's paraphrase, it is as accurate and comprehensive as any so succinct a sentence could possibly be.

In more than forty years of publication, *JPS* has always prided itself on its high editorial standards. We very much regret the occasions when we inadvertently fall short, but we would be more distressed had the *essential* accuracy of an important article on so important a topic been found wanting. Finally, we are grateful to CAMERA for giving us the opportunity to make available for the first time the full English translation of a crucial document. We hope that in so doing we can contribute, to a better understanding in the English-speaking world of David Ben-Gurion's thinking on transfer and the Arabs.

In accordance with CAMERA's request, we are publishing this text in the winter 2012 issue of *JPS*—the first to appear since we learned of the erroneous citation. The correction will also be posted on our website at www.palestine-studies.org.

—The Editors of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*