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## **A Palestinian Look at the New Historians and Post-Zionism in Israel**

The vagueness and ambiguity surrounding the discourse on the New Historians and post-Zionism in Israel's media and academic community was summed up by Anita Shapira, in *New Jews, Old Jews*.

The debate on the issue of the New Historians, which caused quite a stir in the Israeli media . . . [is] characterized by numerous question and exclamation marks. The many articles and discussions . . . it engendered did not clarify the subjects of the debate, its limits, essence, and purpose. It was fascinating in its vagueness and astonishing in the passions it aroused. Is the heart of the debate methodological, factual, interpretative? Does it relate to one field of study or may it be applied to other fields? Does it take place in the domain of history or has it spread to other disciplines? Is the debate between trends, generations, people? Is it concerned with the past or with the present and the future? And, finally, who initiated the debate and where is it headed?<sup>1</sup>

Nearly six years have passed since this was written, two and a half of which have been dominated by the second Intifada, better known as the Aqsa Intifada. This has dramatically brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a new climax, impacting on, among other things, the essence of the discourse and the views of the actors involved. But the questions raised by Shapira have still not been resolved, nor the vagueness and ambiguity cleared up. And if this is true of the intellectual discourse on the Israeli side, its perception and reception by the other side—the Arab world in general and the Palestinians, in particular—is all the more vague and complicated.

This essay examines the historiographic discourse on the New Historians and the post-Zionist narrative as reflected in the words of

Palestinian and Arab writers and its influence on the formation and consolidation of the Palestinian historical narrative. It surveys Arab diagnoses of the phenomenon and interpretations of its historical context. It also sets forth the attitude of Arab writers toward the New Historians, individually and collectively, and the Arab perceptions of their different backgrounds and approaches.

### **Perceptions and Interpretations**

Arab writers became interested in the issue of the New Historians in Israel in the early 1990s, following the brouhaha caused by Benny Morris's *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*.<sup>2</sup> Published first in English and then in Hebrew and Arabic, the book has served as a source for most of the Arab and Palestinian historians discussing the history of the 1948 war and the Palestinian Nakba (Disaster). They subsequently began to show an interest also in the work of other New Historians, including Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Simha Flapan. Taken together, these works constituted the building blocks of the Palestinian historical narrative, which has taken increasing shape in recent decades. These sources were used by Arab and Palestinian historians as the archival basis for opinions that were similar to those espoused by the New Historians, but which Arab writers, in many cases, had previously not substantiated with archival references; this was due in part to a lack of access to Israeli archives and a lack of proficiency in Hebrew but mainly to the fact that the archives had not yet been opened to researchers. Nevertheless, the broad reliance on the writings of the New Historians did not safeguard Arab historians and writers from a great deal of confusion about the phenomenon of the New Historians and its place in the wider context of post-Zionism. The confusion applied even to the identity of the Israeli writers and their identification with the different trends in Israeli historiography or with trends in other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science. Thus, as interest grew in the phenomenon of the New Historians and post-Zionism in the late 1990s, the discussion was extended from historians specializing in the Palestinian issue, especially the Nakba, to include wider discussions of Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and even globalization and postmodernism. The expanded circle of interested parties and polemicists naturally involved also writers who were not well versed in the Israeli experience. They had only indirect knowledge of the Israeli intellectual discourse, mostly through

translations into Arabic, and these were largely inaccurate (certainly as regards terminology and names). In addition, problematic paragraphs were sometimes entirely deleted or chapter headings changed.<sup>3</sup> All this only added to the vagueness and ambiguity: New Historians were confused with post-Zionists, authors' names were omitted, and writers were wrongly identified with specific trends. For example, Old, or establishment, Historians who objected to the New Historians, such as Efraim Karsh and Anita Shapira, were situated in the camp of the New Historians.<sup>4</sup> The end result was many differing opinions. Some welcome the phenomenon as important, positive, and worthy of Arab attention, primarily because of the support provided by the group's writings for the construction and shaping of the Arab-Palestinian narrative, though also because of the methodology, which, through exposure and contact, could influence Arab and Palestinian research and historiography.<sup>5</sup> Others dismiss the New Historians' conclusions as myths to be debunked, no different from those of the Old Israeli Historians.<sup>6</sup>

An intermediate approach attributes some significance to the discussions of the New Historians and post-Zionism but does not expect any positive outcome to ensue from them. These researchers doubt the ability of post-Zionists to change the foundations of the Zionist platform and the attitudes of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel toward Arabs and Palestinians in the ongoing national struggle. Therefore, they describe the attempts of the New Historians as a youthful rebellion at the end of which the rebels will be exposed, placated, and returned to the "tribe." The proponents of this outlook point to the example of Benny Morris and the change said to have been effected in his views following the failure of the Camp David talks and the outbreak of the second Intifada in late September 2000.<sup>7</sup>

It should be stated here that most of the people dealing with the question have focused largely on the conclusions of the New Historians aside from a few writers such as Nur Masalha, who took issue also with the facts presented, the methods used, and the processes used to arrive at these conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Phenomenon Defined and the Background**

Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, one of the most renowned Palestinian intellectuals, defined and listed the New Historians in an essay published in *Aafak* entitled "The Eighth Israel."<sup>9</sup>

Experts and politicians following occurrences in the field of critical research of Israeli society claim that this phenomenon is a product of the intellectual efforts of a limited number of Israeli academics specializing in history. . . . [Specifically] this list includes Simha Flapan, Benny Morris, Baruch Kimmerling, Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Gideon Shafir, and Ella Shohat, in addition to the younger generation, consisting of Danny Rabinowitz and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin.<sup>10</sup>

Later Abu-Lughod explains that he did not include the works of Israel Shahak as, in his opinion, the latter's training in chemistry, rather than history or sociology, could be the decisive factor in his "different critical approach in discussing the roots of Zionist thought and ideology, not only the performance of the Zionist movement."<sup>11</sup> As for the historical background of the phenomenon, Abu-Lughod relates the emergence of the New Historians and new sociologists, and the development of their writing, to a series of events in the Arab-Israeli conflict that led to a degree of calm in Israeli society and made possible the appearance of a critical, antiestablishment tone.

It is no anomaly that critical studies of the history of the Israeli entity appear in a fixed/specific period and by researchers from the core of Israeli society. This may be perceived as the ultimate realization of Zionist ideology, as these studies appeared in the wake of Israel's recognition of victory over Palestinian and Arab resistance, as a result of which Israel took control of the destiny of the Palestinian people and their land, in addition to its clear political hegemony over the Arab states. This takeover was conspicuous (after signing the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979) in Israel's attitude toward what remained of Arab steadfastness and resistance in Syria, Jordan, the PLO, and Lebanon, and in its attempts to neutralize Arab military power.<sup>12</sup>

Edward Said attempted a sketch of Israel's New Historians in an article in the *Al-Hayat* newspaper, in which he recounts his personal experience with two of the senior members of this group (Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé) at a symposium held in May 1998 in Paris. The Israeli side was represented, in addition to Morris and Pappé, by Zeev Sternhell and Itamar Rabinovich. The Palestinian side was represented, in addition to Said, by Nur Al-Din Masalha and other historians. Said describes his impressions as follows:

One of the strongest experiences carved in my memory after the symposium was the emphasis of the Israeli side, whose members came from different political currents, on the need to distance oneself from one's emotions, be objective and espouse a critical dimension toward events, in contrast to the insistence of the Palestinian side on clinging to emotions and the need to write a new history.<sup>13</sup>

After describing his experience as a party to the discourse, Said explained the views of the two sides expressed at the symposium: "Israel and the Israelis are the side with strength, controlling the conflict. They hold all the land, and they have all the military strength, and this led to their wish for a calm, amiable discussion."<sup>14</sup>

Muhammad Hamza Ghanayim (an Arab Israeli who has introduced Arab and Palestinian readers to many aspects of Israel's written culture through translations and articles on various subjects) also portrayed the New Historians (Benny Morris, Tom Segev, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin) via a series of interviews with important Israeli scholars. The series was published as a book by the Palestinian Centre for Israeli Research (Madar) entitled *Waghan le-Wagh* (Face to Face).<sup>15</sup> In his introductions to the interviews with Morris and Raz-Krakotzkin, he outlines the historical context of the phenomenon as part of the general discourse on postmodernism since the mid-1980s, the welcome influence of the new Western culture imitated almost in toto.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Ghanayim also relates the discourse on the New Historians to developments in the conflict with the Palestinians.

Suddenly the collective memory of the Nakba and all its aspects became a subject of research and discourse. Similarly, the "new" public discussion among Arabs and Palestinians on the question of "transfer" or collective deportation of the Palestinians to Arab countries—which is considered the most sensitive issue in the history of the conflict in Israeli eyes—became a key to understanding the complicated present and perhaps . . . a type of nostalgia for "alternatives that did not exist," alternatives whose historical realization was thwarted by Zionism.<sup>17</sup>

Ghanayim's irony seems to be aimed also at some of the New Historians. In addition, he found fault with the idea of their novelty, terming their emergence "anticipated."

In fact, a certain built-in mechanism seems to be at work behind the appearance of this group of Israeli new historians . . . [which] makes [it] an “anticipated phenomenon.” Israeli archive regulations permit researchers access to documents thirty years after the occurrence of historical events. A number of young Israeli researchers engaged in studying these documents in the 1980s, began to publish the results of their research in academic research journals such as *Cathedra*, *Ha-Tziyonut*, and *Studies in Zionism*, in the first half of the 1980s. Prestigious publishing houses in Britain published these important studies (the most prominent of which was Benny Morris’s on “The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem”). This encouraged them to present themselves as the first historians writing the real history of the establishment of the State of Israel and to present everything previously written as no more than Zionist propaganda striving to favorably portray the “miracle of the establishment of the State of Israel,” primarily for internal reasons and later for external propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

‘Abdo al-Asadi, a Palestinian writing in the Kuwaiti journal *Al-Arabi*, also considered the difficulties of defining and understanding the terms *post-Zionism* and *New Historians*.

The definition of the phenomenon of post-Zionism is indeed complex. This complexity is expressed by the term’s inability to indicate a regression in Zionist ideology or its replacement by another ideology with known, defined substance. We must note here that the word *post* comes from Western philosophical thought, “modernism” and “postmodernism,” but I cannot find similarities between the meaning of the Western term and *post-Zionism*. Western philosophical thought and the development of postmodernism contradict modernism and the prior period; however the philosophical thought of post-Zionism has not yet indicated a wish or call to ideologically circumvent or oppose Zionist ideology.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Asadi, too, deems the term New Historians problematic or, at least in its Israeli context, falling short of the criteria of New History as it is perceived in Europe.

The term *New Historians* in Israel is taken from the term *New History* in Europe, which is the product of the common effort of a number of scientific disciplines documenting, in a social framework, diplomatic history, or the history of the elites, without belonging to the elite. But Israeli *New Historians* were pre-occupied with political history, which they analyzed using the tools of the elite, thus clinging to the foundations formed by members of the classical trend (the Old Historians) concerning the narrative of the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Al-Asadi's generalizations in his definitions of *post-Zionism* and *New Historians*, he tried to show the different trends and opinions in post-Zionism.

We must emphasize . . . three streams. . . . The first is the claim that Zionism has succeeded in realizing its programs in such a way that its existence is no longer justified, and the second calls for Zionism's need to recognize its mistaken attitude toward Palestinians without denying the legitimacy of Zionism, while the third stream sees Zionism as a colonial movement born in colonial sin.<sup>21</sup>

A closer look at Al-Asadi's categorization reveals the fundamental differences between the three streams, although there is no indication of this in his earlier generalized definitions, where distinctions are indiscernible.

Muhsin Khadir, an Egyptian academic specializing in Israel at Cairo's Ein Shams University, has also attempted to sort out the connection and/or confusion between the same two concepts.

The concept of New Historians and the concept of post-Zionism are connected. Indeed, the latter is more extensive than the former, but the one cannot be understood without the other. . . . [T]he New Historians belong to an elite group that does not carry much weight in Israeli society. Ideologically and symbolically, however, it is significant, even if it has not succeeded in influencing Israeli decision makers.<sup>22</sup>

The ideological and symbolic dimension notwithstanding, Muhsin Khadir recommends reserving judgment about the New Historians:

they are definitely not “new angels” since most of them, he says, still believe that “expulsion of the Palestinians was immoral but may have been necessary.”<sup>23</sup>

Unlike these definitions and observations, which approximate a general diagnosis of the phenomenon, there have also been absurd inaccuracies. For example, the Web site of the Arab Center for Future Research (ACFR) states:

The erosion of consensus in Israeli society and corrective efforts resulted in the emergence of a new trend known as “revisionism” or the “New Historians” . . . which aroused great debate between its exponents and opponents. The debate was unusually sharp, in comparison with other countries dealing with harsher truths than those addressed by Israeli revisionism. It is interesting that the Labor Party has embraced this trend as an unspoken creed, whereas the Likud strongly opposed [the New Historians]. This has placed them at the heart of Israeli politics and at the focus of the struggle between the two poles.<sup>24</sup>

The implied relationship between the Labor Party and the New Historians is reiterated, the author going so far as to suggest a historical conspiracy between the two. He describes former member of the Knesset Yossi Beilin as the architect of the group’s ideology, and Yitzhak Rabin as having embraced and nurtured its ideas and introduced its works into the Education Ministry’s curricula during his premiership.<sup>25</sup> He ends by concluding that the New Historians constitute the first stage in the realization of Beilin’s plan to reinforce the secular foundations of the State of Israel, a plan the writer terms the “secularization of the Jews.”<sup>26</sup>

Some writers in the Arab world refuse to see post-Zionism and the New Historians as representative of a clear ideological trend, perceiving them, rather, as reflecting a general condition of Israeli society. Thus, Jalal al-Din ‘Iz al-Din ‘Ali, an Egyptian writer on Israeli affairs for the Kuwaiti *Al-‘Arabi*, tells us:

In considering the post-Zionist phenomenon in the Arab world, the strongest voice belongs to those who perceive [it] . . . as unique to a certain ideological school, consisting of critical sociologists and mainly New Historians. In my opinion, the phenomenon expresses a general condition reached by Israeli society due to a series of intrinsic and extrinsic variables, as a result

of which internal Israeli divisions have reached a peak, making it impossible to continue with the Israeli “social contract” or the ideological framework of Zionism.<sup>27</sup>

Based on this interpretation, ‘Iz al-Din ‘Ali sees post-Zionism as an internal Israeli affair and its exponents—in terms of their approach to the conflict with the Arab world—as not very different from other parts of Israeli society.<sup>28</sup>

Wageh Kawthrani, another *Al-‘Arabi* writer, also objected to the depiction of post-Zionism and the New Historians as representing a new trend in Zionist ideology. He speaks of a slight change in the Zionist “platform” as regards the relationship with the Palestinians, a platform that, in his opinion, aims to explain the nature of the relationship between “butcher” and “victim.” In his view, the tendency differs little from the main trend since, despite their acknowledgment of sin, post-Zionists and New Historians continue to hold on to racial-Zionist foundations, which hope to benefit from European anti-Semitism at the expense of the Palestinians.<sup>29</sup>

Kawthrani sees post-Zionism as an attempt by Israeli writers to flee from Zionism’s poor image in the world, which stems from its performance in the conflict with the Palestinians. Thus, he believes that, as long as these researchers continue to discuss the points of departure of Zionist actions and mechanisms rather than the points at which it harmed others, it should not be perceived as New History; the New Historian must first of all search for justice, as did the scholars who produced new European narratives following a reexamination of anti-Semitic tendencies in their own national movements. Consequently, Kawthrani claims, post-Zionism must be founded a priori on a rejection of Zionism, the mirror image of anti-Semitism.<sup>30</sup>

### **Historians and Sociologists Identified and Differentiated**

As stated, the confusion among Arab writers surrounding the phenomenon of the New Historians affects also the composition of the group. Certain scholars, such as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Simha Flapan, are cited by all writers. Others receive only a single mention, including those who are neither regarded nor regard themselves as part of the group, such as Anita Shapira.

Ibrahim Abu-Lughod in the essay cited earlier lists fifteen scholars who, in his opinion, belong to the group of critical sociologists and New Historians: Simha Flapan, Binyamin Beit-Halachmi, Baruch Kimmerling, Joel Migdal, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Danny Rabinowitz, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Tom Segev, Gershon Shafir, Israel Shahak, Avi Shlaim, Ella Shohat, Sami Smootha, and Zeev Sternhell.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that Abu-Lughod was almost the only one to consistently refer to both critical sociologists and historians, rather than just historians, although his list includes people (such as scientist Israel Shahak) who do not fit into either category.

The essay on the ACFR Web site enumerates the New Israeli Historians as Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Zeev Sternhell, Tom Segev, Noam Chomsky, and Simha Flapan,<sup>32</sup> identical to the list given by Khaled Al-Harub on the subject.<sup>33</sup> The most confused writer seems to be Muhammad Issa Salhiya, a Palestinian reporter, who included Benny Morris (defined as the foremost New Historian and thus, unlike the rest, worthy of a detailed review of his life), Tom Segev, Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Baruch Kimmerling, Shabtai Teveth, Efraim Karsh, Zeev Sternhell, and Israel Shahak.<sup>34</sup> Some of these (e.g., Efraim Karsh and Shabtai Teveth) would undoubtedly be taken aback at their inclusion in Salhiya's list.

Al-'Afif al-Akhdar, a Tunisian intellectual, does not specify New Historians by name; instead, he lists the circles that, in his opinion, constitute the post-Zionist phenomenon, describing them as "the widest sector of Israeli scholars and intellectuals," including "authors, poets, artists, reporters, media people, shapers of public opinion, and the *HaAretz* newspaper."<sup>35</sup> Fadel Sultani, an expatriate Iraqi intellectual and poet, includes among the New Historians Simha Flapan, Ilan Pappé, Yossi Amitai, Michael Cohen, and Uri Milstein.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the inaccuracies may be attributed to the widespread premise of many Arab and Palestinian writers that any Israeli writer who differs from the mainstream is post-Zionist and any historian whose research approach differs from that of establishment scholars is a New Historian. But other inaccuracies—such as identifying Efraim Karsh, Shabtai Teveth, and others as New Historians—are difficult to explain. They may derive from a tendency toward sweeping generalizations in all that concerns discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Be that as it may, some of the Arab and Palestinian writers on the New Historians tend to distinguish also between the various individuals in the group. Some of the observations are quite precise and consistent (e.g., on Ilan Pappé); some are more generalized and result at times from

a change in the approach or views of the historians themselves (e.g., Benny Morris).

Edward Said singles out Pappé from the rest of the group of Israeli historians whom he met in Paris, describing him as an “anti-Zionist, socialist historian” and “the most brilliant historian” of the group.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, Said describes the rest of the group as follows.

Their most conspicuous quality (excluding Pappé) is the profound contradictions in their writings, making them almost schizophrenic, and the best example is Benny Morris, who, ten years ago, composed the most important Israeli work on the roots of the Palestinian refugee problem. His study proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, and based on Zionist archives, that the Palestinians were forced to relocate as part of the “expulsion” policy adopted by Ben-Gurion. Morris’s precise research emphasized the fact that brigade commanders were regularly asked to deport Palestinians, burn their villages, and take systematic control of their homes and lands. However, it is strange that Morris refuses to reach the obvious conclusion at the end of his book . . . and thus it seems that Morris remained a Zionist in order to believe the Zionist ideological narrative, according to which the Palestinians chose to leave rather than being deported by the Israelis.<sup>38</sup>

Said also expressed astonishment at the views of Zeev Sternhell, who, though he recognized the great injustice done to the Palestinians and acknowledged that Zionism was a colonial movement, declared that the colonization was a necessity.<sup>39</sup>

‘Abdo al-Asadi, in his characterization of prominent New Historians, devoted the most space to Benny Morris.

There was an element of schizophrenia in Benny Morris. . . . On the one hand, he held Israel responsible for creating the refugee problem; on the other hand, he decided that there was no prior plan of deportation and that everything that happened was a direct result of military actions. Thus, Benny Morris, the intellectual and the historian, did not manage to break free of the schizophrenia that marked his historical research and his political views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>40</sup>

Based on the above, and in contrast to many other observers, al-Asadi does not believe that Benny Morris's views underwent a change as a result of the outbreak of the Intifada.

In his new writings, Benny Morris did not present new ideas that deviated from his political and ideological-intellectual outlook. I find that he gives voice to his position and his mind-set. From the start of his historical studies, he made clear his outright objection to a comparison between post-Zionism and anti-Zionism, and his lack of desire to diminish Zionism. On the contrary, Morris always emphasized the fact that Zionism is not only a national liberation movement but rather a movement calling for the realization of human-universal values.<sup>41</sup>

In light of this, al-Asadi urges his Arab colleagues to stop "crying" over the so-called change in Morris's views and accusing him of "betraying" his ideas and research. In al-Asadi's opinion, Morris was and remained true to his ideological principles, having never classified himself as leftist or anti-Zionist and having had no intention of eroding Zionist ideology or practice. On the contrary:

He combed the Zionist archives for sources on the Palmah and was shocked by his systematic and critical examination of the material he found; as his scientific research approach did not support a continued critical approach, he returned relatively early to the theoretical framework of Zionist ideology. Thus, while he admitted that there had been acts of expulsion, he refused to acknowledge that expulsion had been systematic or preplanned.<sup>42</sup>

Going on with his review of the New Historians, al-Asadi portrays Avi Shlaim as the antithesis of Benny Morris, Shlaim having reached the conclusions warranted by Morris's work.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, Shlaim's view on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially the failure of the Camp David talks and the collapse of the Oslo process is different from Morris's. Writes al-Asadi:

Shlaim's view was contrary to that of Morris, as he believed that the failure to reach a historical agreement with the Palestinian people stemmed from Israel's policy of expansion rather

than from a tendency of the Palestinians to lie, as claimed by Morris. Shlaim took pains to discredit the fable, which holds that Barak made the Palestinians a generous offer. He also showed that “the proper view for any serious historian is to examine the documents and their significance and not be dragged after the platform of Israel’s formal narrative.”<sup>44</sup>

The last sentence was no doubt directed at Morris, whom Arab writers found “hard to digest.” On the one hand, his books underlie the foundations of the Palestinian historical narrative; on the other, the change in his views, particularly as expressed after the autumn of 2000, considerably shocked wide circles of Arab scholars and writers, who often cited Morris’s works, which they saw as reinforcing claims that they and others had put forth for years. This shock may reflect a concern in these circles over cracks appearing in the foundations of the Palestinian narrative, for which Morris’s works provided strong support.

Al-Asadi defines Ilan Pappé as an “organic scholar,” politically engaged rather than confined to the ivory tower.

Pappé is distinguished from his colleagues in the group of New Historians and critical sociologists by his sober call to view political events in their historical context. Thus, he claimed that the continual deterioration that occurred in the occupied Palestinian territories stemmed from the policy of “power and tyranny” espoused by Israel’s controlling elite, who believe that their military, political, economic, and international strength enables them to force on the Palestinians the political solution that they desire and the territory that Israel determines.<sup>45</sup>

Among the works discussed on the ACFR Web site as it follows the discourse on the New Historians and post-Zionism, is Benny Morris’s *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*.<sup>46</sup> The review describes the relationship of the New Historians with both the Israeli establishment and Old Historians. Written in the summer of 2000, before the outbreak of the second Intifada, it calls Morris the “pioneer” of the group and their most important historian: “Although we Arabs read these works [of the New Historians] as expositions striving to turn the criminal into ‘state’s evidence,’ we cannot deny Morris’s uniqueness and the differences between him and the rest of the group members, as he presents long objective passages in his historical work.”<sup>47</sup>

It must be reiterated, however, that there has been a clear change in the evaluation of Morris, both his person and his works, since the outbreak of the Aqsa Intifada, in all likelihood a consequence of his media interviews, articles, and other statements attributed to him. This shift stands out all the more in light of the consistently high appreciation of Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Simha Flapan (who has since passed away).

### **The Debate on Substance**

Arab and Palestinian writers, as noted earlier, were not overly preoccupied with the substance of the works of the New Historians, generally limiting themselves to a discussion of their conclusions or general leanings. Some, however, pointed to certain shortcomings of the research such as an ignorance of Arabic. This was particularly true with respect to Benny Morris.<sup>48</sup> The exclusion of Arabic sources (available in, among other places, Israeli archives) must detract from a balanced view or full picture of both sides of the conflict. Some critics also remarked on the suppression of specific aspects, such as the British role in subjugating the Palestinian people.

In discussing British-Arab relations, New Historians or sociologists have concentrated on the period between 1947 and 1950 or no earlier than the period of the [1939] white paper. At times, they have noted the “defeat” of the Palestinian people in 1948 and their inability to successfully withstand the Jewish forces . . . attributing this to the weakness of the Palestinian social structure or their political backwardness or the Arab countries, which had taken control of their destiny. Even the progressive critics, however, have neglected the tyrannical, hostile role played by Britain toward the Palestinian people, the clear identification [with the Jewish side] that characterized British policy during the Mandate and contributed to the establishment of the “Jewish State,” and the shattering of Palestinian society and its final surrender during the 1930s, and not, as some believe, during the 1940s.<sup>49</sup>

In this connection, Abu-Lughod finds no difference between the New and Old Historians, as neither related seriously to “the constant re-

sistance of the Palestinian people to British Mandate policy and Zionist aspirations.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition, Abu-Lughod charges all Israeli historians with orientalist tendencies as they deliberately ignored both “the actual presence of the Palestinian people on their land” and the social, economic, and cultural developments that predated the British Mandate, processes that do receive attention in the discussion of other societies in the Middle East. In Abu-Lughod’s opinion, this approach is conspicuous, for example, in Kimmerling and Migdal’s *Palestinians: The Making of a People*,<sup>51</sup> which, while different from the Zionist narrative, is nevertheless typical of orientalism. The book opens with the local rebellion against Egyptian rule in 1834 and then jumps forward eighty years as if nothing happened in the interim.<sup>52</sup> He concludes that when it comes to the Palestinians the New Historians “drift toward orientalism, which does not see [Palestinian] society as evolving like other human societies but as locked into the influence of static factors such as clan or family or tyrannical rule or religion, and they forget the ‘elite factor’ or permanent desire [of ruling echelons] to retain power. . . . The [orientalist] approach portrays the Palestinian people as strange and incomprehensible.”<sup>53</sup> According to ‘Abdo al-Asadi, on the other hand, the New Historians and post-Zionists are mainly at fault in their biased focus on the Israeli side and their periodization of short or defined time spans (1948 or 1967). This leads him to conclude that this is geared to papering over or resolving the contradictions and ensuing crises within Israeli society.<sup>54</sup>

‘Imad ‘Abed al-Ghani devoted the eighth chapter of *The Culture of Violence in Israeli Political Sociology* to a survey of the New Historians and post-Zionists, whom he perceives as attempting to analyze and criticize the Zionist model not in order to change it but in order to cleanse and purify it, making it more moral.<sup>55</sup>

Muhammad Ahmad al-Nabulsi, in another psycho-historical study of Israeli society, describes the writings of the New Historians as filled with “deceit and deception” and the historians themselves as “merchants of air.” He accuses them of regression and even “handing over their weapons” after the outbreak of the second Intifada and the election of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon.<sup>56</sup>

As opposed to the skeptics and faultfinders who question the integrity of the New Historians, other observers stress the significance of their emergence and the need to acquaint oneself with the phenomenon and scrutinize the substance of their writings. Edward Said, for example, noted: “The great significance of the New Israeli Historians is that they

proved in their works that which Palestinians, historians, and nonhistorians had been saying all the time about what happened to us as a nation. They did this, of course, as Israelis; they wrote first and foremost in the name of their people and their society.”<sup>57</sup>

Sayyid Yasin, an Egyptian researcher specializing in Israel and the Arab world, also sees the New Historians as an important phenomenon, the first to write the “real history” of the establishment of the State of Israel. Their core significance, according to Yasin, lies in their having “removed the false consciousness that was dominant in Israeli society and which had emphasized the legitimacy of the establishment of the state and the morality of Israeli policy.”<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, Muhammad Abu Gadir, an Egyptian expert on Israel, sees the significance of the New Historians in the challenge they pose to Israel’s classical historical narrative and the fault they find with the foundations of its statehood.<sup>59</sup> Hisham Sharabi, a Palestinian professor of history at Georgetown University, also emphasizes the significance of the phenomenon and extols what he sees as the most important conclusion in their research, namely, that “the displacement of the Palestinians from their homes in 1948 was a consequence not of Palestinian fears, as claimed by the formal historical narrative of the State of Israel, but of a predetermined Zionist plan.”<sup>60</sup> Sharabi, however, faults the New Historians for describing the injustice but taking no public stand.<sup>61</sup>

### **Arab Cooperation with the New Historians? Palestinian New Historians?**

Interestingly enough, the Arab discourse on the Israeli New Historians rarely addresses the fact that there is no similar phenomenon among Palestinian historians. This may be due to the conspicuous imbalance between the two nations or the disproportionate development of the two societies and the two historical narratives. Discussion of the Israeli phenomenon has nevertheless encouraged some Palestinian and Arab writers to criticize the approach of their own societies and to call for discussion and self-examination. Edward Said, for instance, believed that a dialogue with Israel’s New Historians would be beneficial: “I think that Arab scholars should contact these historians and invite them to symposiums at universities and cultural institutions in the Arab world. Our duty as Palestinians and Arabs is to confront Israeli cultural and academic circles through brave and public participation in lectures at Israeli institutions.”<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, Said did not settle for public confrontation with the New Historians but urged Palestinians and Arabs to learn from them as regards the study of their own history and the examination of their own national myths. He called on Arab scholars and historians to scrutinize their history, including their leaderships and institutions, with a new critical look.<sup>63</sup>

Sayyid Yasin voiced a similar view when calling for Arab historians to build on the efforts of the Israeli New Historians and to translate their works into Arabic.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Muhammad Ahmad al-Nabulsi opposes all cooperation with the New Historians, terming the entire phenomenon no more than a Zionist “ploy,” as they merely made public documents that Israeli law permitted them to see thirty years after the events.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

The concepts of Israel’s New Historians and post-Zionists have drawn the attention of Arab and Palestinian writers and researchers. A large number of those who write about the phenomenon, however, are, despite extensive discussion, insufficiently acquainted with it. They tend to generalize, and their writings suffer from inaccuracies and confusion. Nevertheless, some (mostly those who have had contact with the exponents of the ideas) have succeeded in understanding the historical-cultural context in which the ideas emerged and have striven to derive benefit through increasing contact with these scholars in various arenas.

But since September 2000 the heightened Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen a regression in the evaluation of the group of New Historians. This is especially true with respect to Morris, whose books serve as the foundation for composers and shapers of the Palestinian historical narrative. His so-called change of view has greatly embarrassed those writers who frequently cited and praised his works.

The approach of Arab and Palestinian writers, in my opinion, should not be based on the personal positions of individuals associated with the group. It should be more to the point, relating more to the research methods and findings of the New Historians and post-Zionists than to the individual conclusions based on these findings.

The call of Edward Said and like-minded scholars to establish and maintain contact with these scholars, invite them to universities and research institutions, and confront them at academic conclaves is a step in the right direction. It could lead to reciprocal influences and interaction,

which, in turn, could result in the emergence of a critical current on the Arab side, reflecting, among other things, an insider's view and resting on Arab documents that, to date, have not been adequately utilized, notably as regards inter-Arab relations on the Palestinian question and especially during the crucial period of the 1948 war, its repercussions, and its consequences.

Ignorance of Arabic is considered, perhaps rightfully, a drawback in the work of some New Historians. But let us not forget that their critical approach was aimed primarily at the narrative of the Zionist establishment. This establishment, in describing the rise of the State of Israel, fashioned a series of conventions and myths that in many cases were far from a faithful representation of actual events in the field and were recorded largely in the (Hebrew) documents of, first, various institutions and apparatuses of the Zionist movement and, subsequently, the State of Israel.

Actively combing through Arab archives and using Arab sources on these events will go a long way toward constructing a more solid Arab-Palestinian narrative, which can also help fill in the gaps in the work of Israel's New Historians.

## NOTES

1. Anita Shapira, *Yehudim Hadashim, Yehudim Yeshanim* [New Jews, Old Jews] (Tel Aviv, 1997), 19.

2. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, 1988).

3. This group includes the Hebrew-Arabic translation projects headed by Ghazi Al-Sa'adi in Amman, who specialized in the memoirs of Israeli leaders, as well as books on history and current events, particularly as pertains directly to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. See, for example, Muhammad Ahmad al-Nabulsi, "Khurafat ma ba'd al-suhyoniyyah" [The Myth of Post-Zionism], *Al-Kifah Al-'Arabi* [The Arab Struggle], 30 October 2001.

5. This was the line Edward Said took, for example, in his *Nehayat 'Amaliyyat Al-salam Auslo uma Ba'dahu* [The End of the Peace Process: The Oslo Process and Its Consequences] (Beirut, 2002), 244.

6. Al-Nabulsi, "Myth."

7. An example of this approach can be found in 'Abdo Al-Asadi, "Qira'ah fi fikr mulawwitho Israel" [A Look at the Thoughts of the Troublemakers of Israel], *Al-'Arabi*, 1 October 2001.

8. Nur Masalha, "1948 and After Revisited," *JPS* 24, no. 4 (summer 1995): 92.

9. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, "Israel al-thmenah" [The Eighth Israel], *Ajfa'k* 4 (winter 1999).

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Edward Said, "Tarikh jadid, afkar jadidah" [New History, Old Ideas], *Al-Hayat*, 26 May 1998.
14. Ibid.
15. Muhammad Hamza Ghanayim, *Waghan leWagh* [Face-to-Face] (Ramallah, 2001).
16. Ibid., 49.
17. Ibid., 50.
18. Ibid., 52.
19. Al-Asadi, "Look," 16–17.
20. Ibid., 18.
21. Ibid.
22. Muhsin Khadir, "Al-muarrikhon aljudud fi Israel" [The New Historians in Israel], <http://www.alwatan.com>.
23. Ibid.
24. The article appeared under the title "Harakat Al-muarrikhon al-judud fi Israel" [The New Historians Movement in Israel] on the Arab Center for Future Research Web site, <http://www.mostakbaliat.com>.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Jalal al-Din 'Iz al-Din 'Ali, "Ma ba'ad al-suhyoniyah in'ikas lehalah la letayyar fekri" [Post-Zionism, a Reflection of the Situation and Not of an Ideological Trend], *Al-'Arabi*, 1 January 2003.
28. Ibid.
29. Wageh Kawthrani, "Al-mantiq Al-muhal itha ma istamarat ma ba'ad al-suhyoniyah" [The Irrationality of the Continuation of the Post-Zionist Phenomenon], *Al-'Arabi*, 1 September 2002.
30. Ibid.
31. Abu-Lughod, "Eighth Israel."
32. Arab Center for Future Research, <http://www.mostakbaliat.com>.
33. Khaled Al-Haroub, "Harakat al-muarrikhon al-judud" [The New Historians Movement], *Majallat Al-Shark Al-Awsat* [Middle East Journal] 95 (May 2000): 61–76.
34. Muhammad 'Issa Salhiya, "Al-muarrikhon al-judud wi'adat benaa al-waqa'i" [The New Historians and the Reconstruction of Reality], *Al-'Arabi*, 1 July 2001.
35. Al-'Afif al-Akhdar, "Silah al-salam" [The Weapon of Peace], *Al-'Arabi*, 1 November 2000.
36. The list appeared on his now defunct Web site, <http://www.geocities.com>.
37. Said, "New History."
38. Said, *End*, 241–45.
39. Said, "New History."
40. Al-Asadi, "Look," 18–19.
41. Ibid., 19.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 20.
44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 21.
46. Arab Center for Future Research, <http://www.mostakbaliat.com>.
47. Ibid.
48. See, for example, Masalha, "1948."
49. Abu-Lughod, "Eighth Israel," 5.
50. Ibid.
51. Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *Palestinians: The Making of a People* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 5.
54. On this, see the introduction in 'Abdo al-Asadi's *Ma ba'ad Al-Suhioneyya, Muqaranah Naqdeyya* [Post-Zionism, a Critical Comparison] (Beirut, 2001).
55. 'Imad 'Abed al-Ghani, *Thaqafat Al-'unf fi susiologia Al-seyasah Al-Suhioneyya* [The Culture of Violence in Israeli Political Sociology] (Beirut, 2002).
56. Al-Nabulsi, "Myth."
57. Said, *End*, 244.
58. Sayyid Yasin, *Al-sera'a Al-'Arabi ma'a Israel 'abr maat 'aam* [The Arab Conflict with Israel and Zionism over One Century], 7, 8–12 (Amman, 1999).
59. Muhammad Mahmud Abu Ghadir, "Al-Muthaqafon walsultah fi Israel" [The Scholars and the Government of Israel], *Ibda'a* (July 1998).
60. Hisham Sharabi, "Al-muarrikhon al-judud" [The New Historians], *Al-Safir*, 14 May 1998.
61. Ibid.
62. Said, "New History."
63. Ibid.
64. Al-Nabulsi, *Al-kifah Al-'Arabi*, 30 October, 2001.
65. Al-Nabulsi, "Myth."