Benny Morris's mistakes

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In an article by Benny Morris, published here a week ago, he correctly describes the past in the context of the War of Independence and the issue of the Palestinian refugees. It is therefore fitting that what he wrote would be studied and we could all avoid ignorant minded articles (Haaretz, 18.1). However, Morris interprets the present one-sidedly, misrepresenting the "facts" and perceiving the century-old conflict as one historical continuum without changes - the sea is the same sea and Mahmoud Abbas is Haj Amin al-Husseini. More so, in it he helps in advancing his own dire outlook for the future - the collapse of the State of Israel and its transformation into an Arab state, as was the case of this land a century ago.

Morris mistakenly believes that the Palestinian refusal to compromise in 1937 and 1947 is identical to the Palestinian refusal in 2000 and 2008. In their first refusals, the Palestinians conducted a discourse based on their interpretation of justice. In their view, the right to self-determination in Palestine which was theirs at the end of the First World War (because of their dominance in more than 90 percent of the land's population, their ownership of all of its private lands, and their 1,300 years of territorial ties to the land), was unjustly denied to them. Therefore, the Palestinians rejected the international resolutions that recognized and supported the Zionist claim to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine: the Balfour Declaration, the San Remo Conference, the Mandate of the League of Nations and the UN Partition Resolution.

The latest rejections are different. In a long process, culminating in 1988, the Palestinian leadership, the PLO, changed its approach and moved to a discourse of claims *based* on international resolutions, primarily UN Resolutions 181, 194, 242 and 338. In Abbas's own words in an interview with Al-Arabiya in 2008: "The opportunity for the partition of 1947 was lost, and before that the opportunity for the partition of the Peel Commission was lost. We do not want to lose another opprotunity. Therefore, we accepted the partition of 1948 and 1967, which does not include more than 22% of historic Palestine". The refusal of Yasser Arafat in 2000 stemmed from the fact that Israel headed by Ehud Barak sought to impose a permanent agreement that was different from the accepted interpretation of international resolutions – a Palestinian state on less than 22% of the land, without a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem (al-Quds).

Morris interprets the present one-sidedly, misrepresenting "facts" and perceiving the century-old conflict as a historical continuum deprived of any changes.

Accusing Abbas of recalcitrance is a one-sided presentation of reality. First, as a historian, Morris can not ignore Abbas's statements regarding two states for two peoples. For example, in his September 2005 speech in Gaza, he said: "The traces of the Nakba must be eradicated through a permanent solution based on the principle of two states for two peoples". The establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel will lead to a historic reconciliation between the two peoples". This statement and others turn Moris's claim that Abbas merely uses deception to absurd. Secondly, at Annapolis in 2008, Ehud Olmert and Abbas agreed that international resolutions would be the basis for negotiations. Abbas indeed rejected Olmert's proposal, but on the other hand, Olmert also rejected Abbas's proposal, which was most generous in Palestinian eyes: Leaving most of the settlers under Israeli sovereignty in the framework of land swaps, demilitarized Palestine, Jewish Jerusalem that includes neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city, the Western Wall, the Jewish Quarter, half of the Armenian Quarter, the rest of Mount Zion, and a symbolic and demographically insignificant return of refugees. Why does Morris ignore this refusal? Why doesn't he see it as a historic missed opportunity? Had Olmert accepted this proposal, wouldn't an agreement been signed?

Regarding the present, Morris maintains his claim that the PLO is not prepared for territorial compromise, that he does not recognize the right of the Jewish people to the land and desires the destruction of Israel. Morris claims this because he assumes that a peace agreement between Israel and the PLO must be the product of reconciliation and sincere recognition of the right of the other, but this is not what the history of the conflict teaches us.

Morris refrains from noting that the Jewish community's willingness to compromise territorially since 1937 was not a result of recognition of the right of the Palestinian people but of the realization that in the demographic reality and spatial balance that clearly favored the Arab side, which had national aspirations of its own, a democratic and Jewish state in all of Palestine could not be established.

"Reduction of land - this is the price we must pay for the fatal delay of the Hebrew people in building the land and for the rapid growth of the Arab movement ..." Mordechai Namir said at the Mapai Conference in June 1936. This, too, was a temporary compromise, a stage in the Jewish Stage Theory, as David Ben-Gurion added: "A partial Jewish state is not an end, but a beginning" (in a letter to his son, Amos, 1937).

The same is true of the Jewish demand for partition in 1947. In a letter sent by Ben-Gurion to the British Foreign Secretary in February of that year, Ben-Gurion wrote: "The only possible immediate arrangement that is fundamentally lasting, is the establishment of two states, one Jewish and one Arab". In other words, a democratic state with a Jewish majority can arise only if an Arab state is established in that land. Although Ben-Gurion claimed at the end of the War of Independence that "the IDF had the power to occupy the whole area between the sea and the Jordan River," he refrained from such a step, because "a Jewish state, in the existing (demographic) reality ... Is impossible, if it is to be democratic". This decision also guided Yitzhak Rabin to begin the Oslo process, and Barak and Olmert to strive for a final status agreement at Camp David and Annapolis. Not because of the Palestinians' right but to keep Israel "Jewish and democratic."

The same applies to Palestinians. Due to the global and regional changes that predated the Oslo Accords - the fall of the Soviet Union, the peace with Egypt, the first Intifada, the emergence of competing leaderships for the PLO, the exile in Tunisia and the economic crisis - they were forced to recognize in 1988 the partition resolution recognizing a Jewish state and in resolutions 242 and 338, leaving the Palestinians only 22% of Mandatory Palestine. That is, the first stage of an agreed political separation that leaves each side with partly what they wanted can be realized without full reconciliation, but this creates the conditions for future reconciliation and familiarity with the other's narrative.

Morris admits that "the current Israeli leadership also rejects the idea of ​​two states for two peoples and therefore increases settlement in the territories, but he omits all its declarations regarding the annulment of the Oslo Accords, the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority and the transformation of Jordan into Palestine. This seems to balance the picture, but it is misleading. Because who is the one controlling the dynamic between the two refusing sides? Has Abbas changed his positions since 2008?. In a document entitled "The Position," which is distributed in the Muqata (PA headquarters) in three languages, it is written: "In Algeria in 1988, the Palestinian leadership announced the acceptance of the principle of a two-state solution of June 4, 1967 lines as a basis for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" - yes, "to end the conflict!" And later on it reads: "The establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 lines, with small and agreed upon border adjustments". Does Morris not know that Netanyahu has withdrawn from the principles agreed upon during the Annapolis process?

"The position" also states that the capital of Palestine will be in East Jerusalem, as agreed at Annapolis. What is Netanyahu's position on the matter? "We will forever preserve a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty," he stated in 2015". In this way, Morris prevents Israelis from recognizing the present reality and working to change it and implement the two-state solution. In any other scenario, Israel will be the bigger loser in the long term.

One must listen carefully to Moris's warnings, which reject the one-state solution, and the vision of "and the wolf shall dwell with the lamb", of those who call for the establishment of one state and ignore the history of the current conflict and conflicts elsewhere in the world. Any arrangement of a one state will only lead to civil war and eventually to an Arab state.

Morris supports the two-state solution based on territorial compromise, but believes it is not feasible. But his non-feasibility argument is weak, and his main concern is the absorption of Palestinian refugees. As Morris notes, this is the absorption of the Palestinian refugees from Syria and Lebanon, since half of all the refugees have lived in the West Bank and Gaza since 1948, and most of the rest in Jordan. The negotiations between Israel and the PLO stipulated that refugees would be given the right to choose their place of residence. One option would be to stay where they currently are and receive compensation. In the surveys conducted, most of the refugees in Jordan chose this option. The number of refugees in Lebanon, according to the last census there, is only 174,000, and only 45% of them live in refugee camps. In Syria, following the civil war, the number of refugees dropped by half and is estimated at 250,000. Therefore, even under the strict assumption that all these refugees will seek to return to the State of Palestine in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and will not the option agreed at the negotiation to go to a third country, their absorption in a multi-year plan is not expected to pose a major challenge to the State of Palestine or to the international mechanism that would be established in favor of that.

The feasibility of a two-state solution exists, and is based on the basic package deal of Annapolis. The current Israeli leadership refuses to re-adopt it, and is doing all it can to move from a creeping annexation to the full annexation of the West Bank or parts of it through Knesset legislation. Unfortunately, most of the candidates who want to replace Netanyahu are not yet ready to adopt it either. On the Palestinian side, the growing schism between the PLO and Hamas, and the despair gripping every corner of Gaza and the West Bank, are urging many Palestinians to adopt the one-state dream. The US's exit from the status of fair mediator and Europe's weakness ensures that salvation will not come from outside, and the scenario that Morris describes - and that others described before him - may come true.