

# Benny Morris: “The 1948 War Was an Islamic Holy War”

*Benny Morris is professor of history in the Middle East Studies Department at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva, Israel. For many years, his academic work has provoked controversy on both sides of the political spectrum. One of the group of “New Historians” who sought to rewrite the Zionist view of Israel, his notoriety stemmed from an argument, based on a wide reading of sources, that most of the Arabs who left their homes in what had been British Mandatory Palestine did so as a result of the 1948 war and in that sense were “driven out” by the Jews. However, unlike other “New Historians” like Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim, Morris was and is a staunch Zionist. Any criticisms of Israel’s behavior he may have had were, he states, permanently changed by the events of 2000, which saw Yasser Arafat turn down a more than generous peace offer by Israel and the start of the second intifada.<sup>1</sup> He has since revisited the controversies of 1948 in two books and many articles, using fresh materials to modify his political views. More broadly, he takes a strong political position with regard to Islam, arguing, with the late Samuel Huntington, that there is a global clash of civilizations that sees Islamic fundamentalism in a state of conflict with the West. The following interview appeared in Yedi’ot Aharonot, May 14, 2010. The excerpts below, without ellipses, focus on issues related to the war of 1948. It was translated from Hebrew by Jonathan Adam Silverman.<sup>2</sup> The introductory remarks to the sections are by Amira Lamm, the interviewer.—The Editors*

## THE EMERGENCE OF CONTROVERSY

Prof. Benny Morris has always had an inclination to take history one step forward and bring it to the edge of consensus.

“I am not a historian who conceals things,” he says. “There are historians who are always pre-occupied with concealing things, but I always have believed it is important to teach the truth. Many people are deterred from publishing things of this sort because they believe this will undermine self confidence and the feeling of justice inherent in Zionism, and if we lose this feeling of justice, it will

weaken us. I don’t think this is correct. It is more important for people to know the truth, and if this causes them to be a little unsure in their self justification—so let them be a little unsure.”

Both in his book and in our conversation, a different Benny Morris emerges: Every time I mention the sensation the book is creating, he hastens to put the fire out: In the book itself *1948: History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, even when difficult facts come up, Morris tries to preserve

1 Ari Shavit, “Survival of the Fittest: Part I, Part II,” *Ha’aretz Friday Magazine*, Jan. 9, 2004; idem, “Survival of the Fittest? An Interview with Benny Morris,” *Ha’aretz Friday Magazine*, Jan. 9, 2004.

2 Editor and publisher of SARTABA Publications.

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balance and composure.

He is considered one of the leading “New Historians”

and was essentially the historian who first coined the expression, at the end of 1988, in an article he published in an American scholarly journal.

“Just then, a group of books by Tom Segev, Avi Shlaim, and me came out, and there was good reason to see a new wave in this,” he explains. “We were the first to employ archives. Before then, everyone wrote about the Zionist enterprise on the basis of testimonies, recollections, and wishful thinking.”

*Amira Lamm:* Are you saying that if they had had all the documents to which you had access, the accounts by the “Old Historians” would have looked different?

*Benny Morris:* No, they would have written different books from ours anyway. It is also a question of perception: We were young, a more left-wing generation and less establishment oriented, so we could also see the documents in a more sober and open-minded way.

In the context of that “sober and open-minded perspective,” he wrote among other things the books *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, *Righteous Victims*, and *The Road to Jerusalem*. Each has aroused powerful emotional debates. In *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Morris claims that the Palestinians did not leave their homes willingly in 1948 but were chased out. This is not a simple claim even today, and definitely not when it was first articulated in 1988, five years before Oslo, when the repercussions of the first *intifada* were still reverberating [in Israel].

“I was burned at the stake,” says Morris. “Shabtai Tevet claimed that the things I wrote served the needs of the PLO; it questioned all the myths in the accepted Zionist narrative. The establishment turned its back on me.”

Morris, holding a doctorate in history from Cambridge University, found that no university would hire him. It was Ezer Weizman, then Israel’s president, who finally gave Morris an official seal of approval. Weizman heard Morris say in an interview that he was considering leaving Israel, and

he invited him for a chat.

“I came to the president’s house, and he started asking me questions. I think he wanted to determine if I am really a good historian and if I am really anti-Zionist like they accused me of being. During the meeting he went to the bookshelf, pulled down his autobiography, *On the Wings of Eagles*, and paged through until he reached a passage about the refugees. He asked me to read it. I read it, and it sounded reasonable to me; he wrote that some of the refugees were expelled and some ran away. I told him that this description was fair and balanced.

“So he shouted for his office director, ‘Shumer,’ and Aryeh Shumer flew in. Weizman told him: ‘We need to find a job for this fellow.’ Shumer went out and started phoning every university president in the book. This was already evening, and he could not reach anyone. He said to me: ‘Go home, you will hear from us.’ I then lived a fifteen-minute walk from there, and when I opened the door to my apartment the phone was ringing. It was [Avishay] Braverman phoning, the president of Ben Gurion University. And he said, ‘Don’t worry Benny, you have a job.’ And I have been there ever since.”

**THE FIRST ROUND  
OF MODERN JIHAD**

Over the years, Morris has had his share of troubles. After he accused the Palestinians of being responsible for the failure of the peace talks, some claimed that he had swung right. Lately, some claim he has swung left again. On the basis of his new book—far-reaching historical research on Israel’s first year in creation—it is hard to judge. Morris spent three years rummaging in archives in England, the U.S., and Israel, putting one piece of the puzzle next to another and building a work of history, well aware that outside they were already waiting for him with their knives drawn.

“The left wing and the right wing will both find things to attack in the book,” he says. “Anyone who wants can find things to bash the Arabs with; and anyone who wants can find things to bash the Jews with. The book has everything in

it, because that's the nature of history: it is really quite intricate."

But despite his desire to exercise restraint, the book's central thesis, its basic idea, is a powder keg: If until now the War of Independence was characterized as a "territorial struggle between two national groups or a political battle with a military façade," in his new book, Morris claims that the facts necessitate a different assessment: "The War of Independence was a jihad—an Islamic holy war" as well as a territorial and political war.

*Lamm:* You mean a religious war from square one?

*Morris:* What I discovered in the documentation relating to the war, at least from the Arab side, was that the war had a religious character, that the central element in the war was an imperative to launch jihad. There were other imperatives of course, political and others—but the most important from the enemy's perspective was the element of the infidels who had the nerve to take control over sacred Muslim lands and the need to uproot them from there. The decisive majority in the Arab world saw the war first and foremost as a holy war, but until today historians have not examined the documentation that proves this. In my view, they have also ignored Arab rhetoric of the day, which universally included religious hatred against the Jews, because they thought the Arabs adopted this as normal speech that did not emanate from deep mental resources. They thought this was something superficial, that everyone talked like this. But I am positive the Arab spokesmen in 1948 did go beyond this and clearly and explicitly talked about jihad.

*Lamm:* Where did you find this exactly?

*Morris:* During my research I found a British document that described a *fatwa* [religious edict] by the ulema at Cairo's Al-Azhar University calling for jihad. The ulema are religious sages, who repre-



**Benny Morris**

sent one of the highest authorities in the Sunni Islamic world. The Al-Azhar ulema declared a worldwide jihad involving every believing Muslim: There is a need to mobilize for a holy war, to return Palestine to the bosom of Islam and annihilate the Zionists.

I'm not sure I understand why historians have not paid attention to this until now. It could be that I paid attention to it more because we live in an age when jihad has clearly raised its head. It is a bitter struggle between a black Islamic world and an enlightened world, and I think that in 1948, the War of Independence here was the first round of jihad post-World War II.

*Lamm:* What exactly does that mean?

*Morris:* The meaning is not simple: If this is a religious war, it revolves only around absolutes. Out of such absolutes it is extremely difficult to derive any compromise. So, for example, between Israel and Hamas, I strongly doubt there will ever be any compromise. Perhaps there will be tactical posturing, but there can never be basic compromise. They do not accept us because, from their perspective, this is Islamic land. Allah commanded them to annihilate us, and that's precisely what they wish to do.

In 1948, the standard Israeli perception was that [the Arabs] were all simply backward peons who understood nothing. But this is nonsense. Just as in 2006, when they voted for Hamas. We said this

*Two Jewish women look down at wreckage after a blast rocked Ben Yehuda Street, Jerusalem, killing 52 people and injuring more than 100, February 27, 1948. Morris believes that Israeli soldiers were more motivated because they knew they were fighting for their lives and those of their families. The Arab populace, he contends, did not really wish to fight.*

was because Hamas hands out gifts and free milk. This was a mistake, however. They know exactly what they are voting for, just like the Arabs in 1948 knew. Religion is extremely important for them and assassinating the Zionists is also extremely important. The fact that this war was essentially religious is also reflected in the fact that after the war, it was not possible to negotiate peace between Israel and the Arabs as certain individuals thought might happen.

*Lamm:* But what about the peace agreements that were signed with Jordan and Egypt?

*Morris:* It is a cold peace. Perhaps in the view of the men who signed, at least Sadat, it was a tactical peace. Regarding Sadat, I personally believe he signed mainly under the shadow of concern over Israel's atomic bombs. He believed that Egypt

would be obliterated if there was another round of war against Israel, and in order to protect Egypt, he felt he had to reach peace with us. He thought in terms of tactics lasting decades, fifty years, 100 years, that another generation will deal with us. He was a man of faith. He never really conceded on his dreams.

Hussein [of Jordan] is a different case. Hussein was educated essentially as a British gentleman. He was never a religious man and never had anything to do with jihad. But the Arab people in his populace never reconciled themselves with the peace or with the existence of Israel. The religious element in the conflict has only increased over the decades, and now this element is also prominent in large segments of the Jewish community here, which complicates the picture even more.

## THE BRUTALITY OF WAR

In accordance with the theory of Arab jihad against the Jewish *yishuv* [pre-state community] in Palestine, Morris sees the War of Independence as “a just war for defense and existence.” But this does not prevent him from also describing in the book atrocities that Israeli soldiers committed during the fighting. During his archival expedition, for example, he came upon a letter that an Israeli soldier wrote from prison to Ben Gurion. Morris explains:

“It seems that he and two other soldiers raped a Palestinian girl in Acre, murdered her father in front of her eyes, and also finally murdered her. They were sentenced to three or four years in jail. This one soldier wrote to Ben Gurion asking for a reprieve. Ben Gurion refused. In the final analysis he received a relatively light sentence for an extremely savage crime.”

This isn't the only case, and in fact Morris accounts for a dozen rapes of Palestinian women in his book, including the rape of a 12-year-old Jaffa girl.

“I believe there were more than a dozen,”<sup>3</sup>

**I believe Sadat signed the peace treaty under the shadow of concern over Israel's atomic bombs.**

he says, “[but they are not discussed] because women in general and Arab women in particular prefer not to talk about this.”

*Lamm:* However, you only relate one case of a “near rape” of an Israeli woman.

*Morris:* This incident took place in Gush Etzion. A young woman named Aliza, who was a Haganah wireless operator, jumped into a pit to protect herself from a sudden barrage of bullets. Two Arab Legion soldiers who heard her shouts pulled her out, and it seems they tried to rape her. An Arab Legion officer shot them both to death with a Tommy gun and rescued the young woman by placing her in an armored car. Except for this incident, I found no documentation for other things like this.

*Lamm:* So, from Israel's side this was a brutal war in your view?

*Morris:* Compared to the wars of other nations, the number of these criminal acts is low. But it is true that if you compare this to the behavior of the Israeli army in other wars, there were more black deeds in 1948. There were people who lost control of their inhibitions. There were people who came out of the death camps in Europe and this stuck in their minds. They wanted to take revenge on the *goyim* [non-Jews]. There were men who fought for an entire year because the Arabs forced them to fight. They felt they were coerced into war, and they wanted to avenge the deaths of their comrades in arms. Every nation has stains on its history. And the black deeds in this war are one of the stains on our history. One needs to study these things and derive conclusions.

## DEIR YASSIN AND AFTER

*Lamm:* You also devote much attention in the book to the incident of the killings in Deir Yassin.

Is this the biggest stain in your view?

*Morris:* What happened in Deir Yassin has two

meanings: One for the Jews and one for the Arabs. For us the most important thing is that what happened there helped in a big way in instigating the general flight of Arabs from all around the country. The Arabs talked about Deir Yassin on radio broadcasts and, all the time, inflated the character of the atrocities that took place there. Arabs in Haifa, Jaffa, and elsewhere frightened themselves by shouting, “Deir Yassin, Deir Yassin,” and the villagers would run away. We know this for a fact, that in Haifa and Jaffa, the Arabs thought that the Etzel<sup>4</sup> was coming to do to them what they had done in Deir Yassin. On the Arab side, Deir Yassin has a different meaning: It is the symbol or embodiment of everything that happened in 1948. For them Deir Yassin epitomizes Jewish evil.

But this is not the sole and exclusive atrocity. There were places where there was even more killing, like Lod, where 250 people were killed, many of them it seems noncombatants, and they also killed prisoners inside a mosque. And there was also a slaughter in the sand dunes in Jaffa that I reveal in the book: After the Haganah took control of Jaffa, about a dozen corpses were found in the sand, and in their clothes were Israeli ID cards—which indicates that this thing happened after the Haganah took control of Jaffa and distributed ID cards to the inhabitants there.

*Lamm:* In the book you compare the expulsion and flight of the Palestinians from Israel to the way in which the Jews abandoned their homes in Arab countries. Are these things truly parallel? How do they offset each other?

*Morris:* Firstly, I prefer the word flight: In general the Arabs fled; afterward we destroyed their vil-

3 For details of several of these rapes, see Ari Shavit, “Q & A with Benny Morris,” *Jewish Journal*, Jan. 29, 2004.—Eds.

4 A modern acronym for the Israeli militant organization, Irgun (*Ha'Irgun HaTzva'i HaLe'umi BeEretz Yisra'el*), which carried out the Deir Yassin attack.—Eds.



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**Arabs never absorbed their refugees, and the problem has remained an open sore.**

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lages and did not permit them to return. There were only cases of expulsion in a few places.

With regard to your questions, these are cosmological issues, and as a historian, I can't answer them. What I can say is that the war caused the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem; and to the same degree, the war also caused the flight of the Jewish communities from their homes in Arab countries. Their property was also confiscated, and the numbers are relatively similar. Israeli politicians from that period, like [Israel's second prime minister, Moshe] Sharett, for example, said in 1949 that this was an exchange of populations. But this was not planned. This is what history created.

There is logic in this. But also a contrast. The problem of the Jewish refugees was solved, and they were absorbed in Israel and other places while the Arabs never absorbed their refugees, and the problem has remained an open sore.

*Lamm:* And the fact that they did not absorb "their" refugees is supposed to alleviate our bad conscience?

*Morris:* About this each reader needs to decide for himself; I don't deal in conscience. This isn't what a historian is supposed to do.

## THE MILITARY BALANCE

The book is also filled with data: relations of forces, quantities of weapons. And here Morris shatters another myth: the idea that the Israelis were few and fought with sparse weapons against many well equipped Arab armies.

"The number of Arab armies participating went down during the war," states Morris. "After the first round the Jordanians actually tried to leave the war. Indeed from the first, they did not want to enter it. And after Lod and Ramle, they were already completely out of the picture. After a certain period, the Syrians also ceased fighting, mainly because they ran out of ammunition and because they understood that in the

fullness of time they would lose. The only ones who remained to the last rounds in October, November, and December were the Egyptians."

*Lamm:* So it wasn't the few against the many?

*Morris:* Potentially, the Arab countries were far stronger than the Jewish *yishuv*. The Arab countries had tens of millions of inhabitants. But they did not properly mobilize for the war, and their armies were, therefore, relatively small. The Jewish *yishuv* on the other hand took pains to recruit a very large army. Out of a population of roughly 650,000 to 700,000, around 100,000 were recruited, which is a tremendous number. So if you compare populations, indeed it is a matter of the few against the many. But when you compare the number recruited on each side, it seems we had an advantage in numbers not only relative to the Palestinians but also relative to the Arab armies participating.

There was also a big gap in motivation, insofar as the Israeli soldiers knew that they were fighting for their lives and the lives of their families. The soldiers who came from Iraq or from Egypt knew they were not fighting for Baghdad or for the Nile Valley, and the Arab populace did not really wish to fight.

*Lamm:* And the Palestinians? Did they fight for their homes and villages?

*Morris:* Among the Palestinians, the men from the middle class and the upper class did not enlist for the war. You did not see dozens of members of the Husseini clan, attorneys, government officials, and physicians enlisting for the war. But afterward they were among the first who fled because they were the ones who could rent a house in Beirut while for the poor it was somewhat harder to flee. All of them were primarily interested in saving themselves. In other words, making money and showing loyalty to the clan. This was much more important to them than loyalty to the nation.

Regarding the national spirit: National political awareness was then quite weak among the

Palestinians, and this casts much doubt indeed on the credibility of the concept of the “Palestinian people” in 1948. This was hardly something clear or palpable then, but it took hold later. One of the important indications of this is their inability to establish a national militia. Each separate city and village had its own isolated group of soldiers.

One also should remember that we did not win easily, and to lose 1 percent of the population (around 5,800 killed on the Israeli side) is a very high percentage. Numbers like these would be intolerable in a normal society.

## FOG OF THE FUTURE

*Lamm:* You conclude the book with the question: “Was 1948 a passing front, or an endless flame inscribed on the region’s flesh? The answer is concealed in the fog of the future.” You leave a big question mark about the future. What were your feelings on concluding the book?

*Morris:* I think the last sentence says what I felt: That there was a victory in 1948, but this did not ensure the existence of the state of Israel ad infinitum. Our success in 1948 aroused in the Arab mind a reaction of rejection and a tremendous desire for revenge. The Arab world adamantly refuses to condone our existence. Even if peace treaties have been signed since then, the average Arab, the educated man in his home, and the soldier in his fox hole persistently refuse to recognize Israel. This is a terrible tragedy for both nations. And if peace between the nations is not achieved, one of the nations will end tragically.

*Lamm:* Are you optimistic about Israel’s chances?

*Morris:* It is hard to find reasons for optimism. The Arab world and the Muslims that support it are getting stronger, and shortly they may have possession of atomic weapons. This does not

*Sheikh Saleh al-Ja’fari (d. 1979), seated left, and Sheikh Abd al-Halim Mahmoud (d. 1978) in the courtyard of Cairo’s Al-Azhar University. They were members of the Al-Azhar ulema who declared a worldwide jihad in 1948 calling for a holy war to return Palestine to Islam and annihilate the Zionists.*

bode well for the future here. I also do not see a settlement on the horizon between us for the next fifty years. In order for that to happen, there needs to be a great weakening of the Arab world. This definitely will happen when the oil runs out. But this will not happen for another fifty or 100 years. Who knows when?

So, yes, if Israel survives the next fifty or 100 years, and the Arab world weakens, it is likely to be easier to reach peace. On the other hand, in scientific terms, the whole Zionist experience is a miracle, so that you cannot foretell what will happen. Indeed everything that has happened here until today flies in the face of logic.

