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Ilan Greilsammer

- 1 As you know, of course, Zionism is a very original political movement, compared with other national projects of the nineteenth century. The idea, as developed by *Hovevei Zion*, the “Zion Lovers” in the 1880’s, then by Theodor Herzl in his book *Der Judenstadt*, and in his presentation at the first Zionist Congress in Basel, aimed at establishing a nation-state for the Jewish People in Palestine (or “Eretz Israel”).
- 2 But contrary to other national minorities in Europe, what is called “the Jewish People” was, after the Emancipation, extremely heterogeneous, and divided by many cleavages, between religious and non-religious, sefardim and ashkenazim, socialists and anti-socialists, bourgeoisie and workers, etc... It was very far from constituting “one people”, and the founders of the Zionist movement should have had... a lot of imagination when they thought that so many different groups of populations could be united one day into a single nation.
- 3 The man, the leader, the thinker who, more than any other, considered as his personal task to fuse and mix all these populations in the Land of Israel, was David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Zionist movement and the Jewish Agency, the founder of the Mapai party in 1930, the initiator of the State of Israel in 1948, and his Prime Minister until 1963.
- 4 Ben Gurion, who arrived in Palestine with the Second Aliya in 1906, witnessed the successive *aliyot* and understood very well the huge differences between the various immigrants: Russian, socialists, Polish, capitalists, German-speaking in the thirties, Shoah refugees, Jews from Yemen and Iraq, Jews from North Africa in the Fifties. The central idea of Ben-Gurion’s political thought, which we call in Hebrew *mamlakhtiut*, or Statism, was that there was a tremendous importance in blending all these people into a single nation and making them “Israelis”. But how do you do that?
- 5 The main idea of Ben-Gurion and the Mapai leadership was to forge this artificial unity by inventing national myths and national symbols, which would be common to all the immigrants and, time passing, would give them, and even more their children and grandchildren, the impression that they belong to one people, the Israeli nation.

- 6 By the way, this is not specific to Zionism. Every nation has its political myths. A political myth is a story which is taught and repeated every day, again and again, a story which gradually becomes common sense, and that every citizen shares with the others. It should of course be a positive tale, a tale which makes ordinary men extremely proud to be members of the national collective, and which create tight bonds between the members of the collective. Concerning France, my country of origin, I don't need to mention the myth of the baptism of Clovis, or the myth of Jeanne d'Arc, or the French Revolution, or in modern times the myth of the Front Populaire in 1936, or the powerful myth of the French Resistance against the Nazis during World War II. To be truly powerful and effective, a political myth has to be based on a certain amount of historical truth. It cannot be totally invented. There is always some reality behind it. Clovis, Jeanne d'Arc, Robespierre, Leon Blum and de Gaulle really existed. But every historical event, to become a political myth, has to be arranged, changed, corrected, distorted in such a way that it will be truly useful. For example, you have to emphasize the humanistic ideals of 1789 and play down the period of Robespierre's terror, you have to transform the poor and tiny Resistance into a huge movement which encompassed the whole population of France at the call of de Gaulle, etc... Let's add that the proportions of historical truth and of falsification are, of course, very different in various political myths.
- 7 From the beginning, Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders understood the utmost importance of elaborating nation - building myths. I will give two examples, which are very-well known. The first is Massada. As you maybe know, the story of Massada, the story of these Zealots who leaved besieged Jerusalem and resisted the Romans in their citadel on the top of the Rock on the shore of the Dead Sea, has no place whatsoever in the Jewish religious tradition. It appears only in Yosefus Flavius and was never considered by rabbinic authorities as a "positive" story of heroism, on the contrary the fact that the defenders committed a collective suicide in order not to be taken by the Romans alive, was considered as extremely negative, as every suicide for the Jewish Tradition. But Zionist leaders understood very well the extraordinary potential of this story and transformed it in a myth of Jewish heroism, emphasizing the connection between the bravery of Massada's defenders and the courage of young Israeli soldiers, who would swear fidelity to the State on a Bible and a rifle on the top of Massada. Another powerful myth was the legend of Trumpeldor who defended the fortified farm of Tel-Hay in Upper Galilee in the Twenties against Arab attackers, and died in a most heroic way, pronouncing four words (in Hebrew) which are known by heart by every pupil in Israel: "*Tov lamout bead artsenou*"; "It is good to die for our country". Everyone knows today that the story of Tel-Hay was largely invented and that Trumpeldor never said these words.
- 8 Massada and Tel Hay are not the only nation-building Israeli myths. There are many others. The secular leaders of Israel picked various stories in the Jewish religious tradition, like the story of the Maccabee revolt against the Greeks (Hanouca), the exodus from Egypt (Pessah), or the story of the Jewish revolt under Mordechai against Aman (Purim) and converted them into national myths of secular modern heroism, just like the Uprising of the Varsaw ghetto in 1943. These stories were taught in schools and youth movements, they appeared again and again in every media, newspapers, books, radio broadcasts and television programs, they became the core of Zionist and Israeli teachings and beliefs. It should also be noted that the first Minister of Public Education of the State of Israel was a long-time colleague and supporter of Ben-Gurion in the Mapai Party, and

himself an important historian at the Hebrew University, Professor Ben-Zion Di Nur, and that he was personally in charge of diffusing this ideologically-oriented mythology.

- 9 During the first years of the State, and even until the Fifties and the Sixties, at the time of Mapai's supremacy, no one even dared putting into question what was considered as absolute historical truth and as the basic Zionist credo.
- 10 But from 1948 on, appeared a new myth, a fundamental political myth which occupied a central place within the Israeli political culture: the glorious story of the War of Independence, 1948-1949. The Israeli victory in this war, a victory of a very small armed force against a coalition of all Arab armies, a victory which permitted the State of Israel to survive, was in fact extraordinary brilliant. It reinforced the unity of the nation, gave Tsahal a tremendous place in the hearts of the citizens, offered a great number of national symbols and memories, but... it included also a lot of – let's say – “problematic” aspects. Mainly the fact that during that war, from the end of 1947 to 1949, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs which lived for many years in this country abandoned their homes, flew away or were flown away, never came back, and became refugees in the Arab countries and elsewhere, an exodus which the Arabs call the *Nakba*, the disaster. In other words, everyone understands that the State of Israel was built on the ruins of the Arab presence in Palestine, and that the Jewish State exists precisely *thanks to* the Palestinian tragedy, something which was probably unavoidable, but would appear to many people in the world as unjust, illegitimate, and immoral. Moreover, it was very well-known that there had been cases of atrocities during the war, such as the famous case of Deir Yassin in the outskirts of Jerusalem, where a commando of the *Irgoun Tsvai Leumi* killed a great number of unarmed civilians. This moral problem appeared very early in the Israeli literature, as in the famous novel of Sameh' Izhar “*Hirbet Izee*” or later on in “Facing the Forests” of Abraham Yehoshua.
- 11 The Israeli leadership, the government, the Knesset, Tsahal, the universities, the education system had to find a satisfactory explanation for this tragedy, an explanation which would preserve the purity of the Zionist dream, the cleanliness of the war and of the newborn Jewish State. So a central theory appeared immediately, during the war itself, and it became something like an axiom in the following years. The theory had to establish without any doubt that we, Israelis, had no responsibility whatsoever in the Palestinian disaster. According to this narrative, Arab leaders had repeatedly called in their radio broadcasts the Arab inhabitants of Palestine to quit their homes and take shelter on the other side of the border, in the Arab countries, because very soon the Arab armies would enter into Palestine, kill all the Jews in a terrible bloodshed and throw their bodies to the sea. After victory, and the destruction of the Jewish presence in Palestine, they could quietly return to their homes, and continue their happy life in a country without Zionism and without the Jews. Supporting this call with enthusiasm, the Palestinian Arabs left their homes and flew away, thinking they would come back a few weeks later. Of course, unfortunately for them, the Jewish forces succeeded, the Arabs were completely defeated and the refugees would never come back.
- 12 Such a canonic narrative put the total responsibility of the *Nakba* on the Arabs themselves and on the Palestinians, and justified, in the eyes of most Israelis, the constant refusal of every Israeli government to take any blame for this tragedy, and the decision to refuse to take back even a limited number of the refugees. This theory was of course reinforced by the arrival in Israel of hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the Arab countries, where they had to abandon their homes and all their belongings, and some

equivalence was made in Israeli minds between their exile and suffering, and the exile and suffering of the Palestinians: if there was suffering on both sides, it was OK.

- 13 This narrative was not only accepted as accurate during forty years, taught by teachers in the school system and diffused by every youth movement and every media, but in fact no one dared to put it into question. It became something like a “sacred tale” which guaranteed the purity and legitimacy of the State.
- 14 Suddenly, some years after the beginning of the first Lebanon war launched by Begin and Sharon, and the tragedy of Sabra and Shatila, a deep moral trauma for the Israelis, in the second half of the 1980's appeared this extraordinary phenomenon, which is called “The New Historians of Israel”. Why? I think there were many reasons.
- 15 The first and main reason for this phenomenon was the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which began as a disaster for Tsahal and for the whole country, and put the State of Israel at risk of destruction. In the aftermath of the war, the Israeli population was in a state of total shock and of extreme anger. It discovered that the whole leadership of the country had lied when it affirmed that Tsahal was ready to face any attack and that, anyway, the Arab countries would never dare to attack Israel. Such a terrible anger and deception led, a few years later, to the fall of the Labor Party and the victory of the Likud. But above all, the Israeli public began to change his mind and to ask questions concerning all kinds of heroic stories of the past which were considered as sacred and untouchable. Because, if the leadership had lied concerning this war, it could have lied concerning other fundamental truths commonly accepted until then. So a lot of people said: let's check our history.
- 16 Secondly, the prestige of the army was badly hurt by the 1973 surprise attack and even if at the end Israel did win, the generals, and the officers in general lost very much of their standing and reputation. Again, in 1982, the Begin-Sharon War in Lebanon did not appear as a tremendous military success. Tsahal was no more sacred, so looking at the behavior of Tsahal during the War of Independence was no more a taboo. “After all, if this bunch of generals has been so incompetent in the Yom Kippur War and in the Lebanon war, let's have a look at what the Israeli army did in 1948!”
- 17 A third element was the gradual opening of new sources of information concerning the War of Independence. After 1948, the Israeli leadership had carefully decided to close the archives for many years, under the pretext of “Security of the State”. But slowly slowly, every year, new archives were open and access was, even if reluctantly, given to young Israeli researchers. In England, but also in France and the US, archives which had not been seriously scrutinized attracted Israeli researchers who began to explore them very thoroughly.
- 18 I would add the fact that Israel, at the end of the eighties, was already a forty years old State, not a new country of the Third World. It was no more in real danger, it had the strongest army in the Middle East, a strong police, a strong economy, so... the well-known Israeli warning: “Be careful, caution, we are weak, we are in a state of danger, the Arabs want to kill us, so be quiet, don't publish thinks which could harm the security of the State, etc...” such a warning began to be obsolete and irrelevant.
- 19 Finally, in our five Israeli universities, Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Beersheba, Haifa and Bar-Ilan, appeared a new generation of first-rate young social scientists, historians, anthropologists, economists, etc., which took their professional work very seriously and decided not to surrender to any ideological constraints, from the right as from the left.

- 20 The first, and most famous of these “New historians”, as he called himself, was Benny Morris. Morris was born in Kibbutz Ein HaHoresh, the son of immigrants from England. His father, Ya’akov Morris, was an Israeli diplomat. His parents left the kibbutz and moved to Jerusalem when Morris was a child. He was raised bilingually. He served in Tsahal as a paratrooper during the Six Days War, was wounded in 1969 by an Egyptian shell at the Suez Canal, and was released from the army four months later. He completed his studies in history at the Hebrew University and received a doctorate in Anglo-German relations from the University of Cambridge. After graduation, he returned to Jerusalem and worked as a correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post* for twelve years. In 1982, he was a field reporter during the Lebanon War, and also served as a reservist, taking part in the siege of Beirut in a mortar unit. In 1988, when he was called up for reserve duty during the first Intifada, he refused and spent three weeks in jail.
- 21 It was while working at the *Jerusalem Post* in the eighties that he began reading through Israeli government archives, at first looking at the history of the Palmach, the elite unit of the Hagana, then turning his attention to the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem. He found evidence that there had been a lot of expulsions and atrocities committed by Jewish soldiers, which he made public in 1988 in a major book: *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*. In this book, Morris argues that the 700,000 Palestinians who fled their homes left mostly due to Israeli military attacks, fear of impending attacks, and expulsions. He says that there was no “centralized expulsion policy” as such, no general plan of transfer, but that expulsions were ordered ad hoc by the Israeli high command as needed. At the same time, Benny Morris documents many atrocities committed by Israeli soldiers, including cases of rape and torture. Morris describes, in chilling detail, massacres that included the arbitrary killing of hundreds of innocents and orderly executions carried out against a wall or next to a well. The book also draws a map of 228 “empty” Palestinian villages, and attempts to explain, in each case, why the Arab villagers left. In some cases the inhabitants were expelled by the IDF; in others, residents fled because they learned of attacks on other villages; and in a few others, they left under instructions of the *mukhtars*, the local Arab authorities.
- 22 Six years later, in 1994, Benny Morris published a new book, as important as the first one: *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians*, a collection of essays on the Palestinian exodus of 1948 and subsequent events. It analyses Mapai and Mapam policies during the exodus, the IDF report of July 1948 on its causes, and some new cases of expulsions that occurred in the fifties.
- 23 Although Morris dismisses again and again the Arab claim that the Palestinians were *systematically* expelled due to orders of the Israeli leadership, he nevertheless quotes an IDF Intelligence Report that concludes that 70% of the exodus was caused by Israeli forces and Jewish militias. Totally destroying the official Zionist narrative, Morris states that “the IDF reports makes no mention of any blanket order issued over Arab radio stations or through other means, to the Palestinians to evacuate their homes and villages”. He proves what had been argued elsewhere, notably by Oxford professor Avi Shlaim, another Israeli new historian, that the myth of the Arab commanders calling Palestinians to flee is unsustainable and without any substance.
- 24 As soon as their first books were published, Morris, Shlaim and the other New Historians were harshly criticized by Israeli right and Zionist left intellectuals, accused of being anti-Semites and “Arab lovers”, and were even compared to Holocaust deniers. A huge historical and intellectual controversy developed for months and even for years, a

tremendous amount of articles were published in all main Israeli newspapers, supporting or attacking the New Historians. Notwithstanding the very high esteem he earned in academic circles out of Israel, Benny Morris was fired by the *Jerusalem Post* and was unable, at that time, to get an academic appointment in any Israeli university. In 1996, he told a journalist that he was thinking of moving to America to find some work. Only years later, he was appointed a professor in Middle East History at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

- 25 In the eyes of most Israelis, somebody who documents Jewish atrocities in the War of Independence or any other Israeli-Arab War, is necessarily an “anti-Zionist” or worse, a “post-Zionist”, an enemy of himself, of his people and of his own country. The harshest critics of Morris, like the important writer Aharon Megged, alleged that Morris’s first book betrayed his deep pro-Arab sympathies, and they said that his scholar work was totally biased because of his “political commitment” against Israel. In the Arab world, even if most intellectuals criticized Morris’ book for failing to find evidence of a centralized Zionist plot to evict the Palestinians, they congratulated him for having revealed Jewish atrocities, and they looked at him in a very positive way, as a friend, as an ally.
- 26 At that point, it seemed that the phenomenon of the New Historians was linked to their “leftist” political commitment. Because, as their research destroys the founding myths which gave Israel its legitimacy, such as the heroism and moral purity of the Jewish soldiers, it seemed that every New Historian was identified with leftist positions and was critical of Tsahal, of Israel and of Zionism. Of course, the presence of self-declared anti-Zionists like Professor Ilan Pappé from Haifa University among the New Historians, reinforced this popular conviction. Pappé himself directed a very controversial PhD at Haifa University, establishing many cases of atrocities committed by the Alexandroni unit of the Hagana, and after having called for an embargo on Israeli universities, he left Haifa University and Israel.
- 27 But very soon, this consideration of the New Historians as a group of leftists appeared as untrue. First, there have been rightist New Historians, for example Professor Uri Milstein, who criticized in a very destructive way Mapai’s military narrative of the War of Independence. Milstein, who had published in 1973 a military history of the early days of Israeli statehood, *In Blood And Fire Yehuda*, published in 1989 the first volume of an important series on the War of Independence, in which he criticized flawed functioning of Palmach and Hagana commanders, who were until then considered as heroes. He then published *Crisis and Its Conclusion*, a research which criticized the functioning of the IDF in the Yom Kippur War, and later on *The Rabin File: How the Myth Was Inflated*, a very negative analysis of Yitzhak Rabin as a commander of the Palmach. Finally, in *The Blood Libel of Deir Yassin - The Black Book*, he claims that the Deir Yassin massacre was a myth invented by the Israeli left to prevent the Irgun from forming an independent unit inside Tsahal and keep Menahem Begin out of the first national unity government. Another example of “New History” coming from the right was the criticism of the official narrative of the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, a major Israeli myth of heroism, because this narrative presented the revolt as having been entirely done by the Zionist-socialists of the ghetto, without any help of rightist ideological groups. As historians linked with the Israeli right pointed out, besides the Zionist-socialists like Mordehay Anielewicz and his friends there were many revisionist pro-Jabotinsky nationalists in the leadership of the revolt, as well as religious or even ultra-orthodox fighters. So, criticism of the official

narrative promoted by the establishment was not, and is not necessarily reserved to leftist historians.

- 28 Then came a huge surprise. The foremost new historian Benny Morris answered his critics that they had completely failed to understand his book on the Palestinian exodus. They assumed that, when a serious and dedicated historian describes Jewish actions in 1948 as acts of violence, he necessarily condemns them and supports the Palestinian cause. In fact, he said, not only he never condemned these actions, but from his own Zionist point of view, he supports them – in the context of 1948. This support, he repeats, did not stop him and should not stop any serious scholar from wanting to describe these atrocities. He said he only did his job as a professional historian.
- 29 Benny Morris' political views hardened in 2000, after Arafat's rejection of Barak's proposals at Camp David and the beginning of the second Intifada. Later on he confessed: "My turning point began after 2000. I wasn't a great optimist even before that. True, I always voted Labor or Meretz or the Israeli left and in 1988 I refused to serve in the territories and was jailed for it, but I always doubted the intentions of the Palestinians. The events of Camp David and what followed in their wake turned the doubt into certainty. When the Palestinians rejected the proposal of [Prime Minister Ehud] Barak in July 2000 and the Clinton proposals in December 2000, I understood that they are unwilling to accept the two-state solution. They want it all: Lod and Acre and Jaffa..."
- 30 Morris still described himself as left-wing because of his support for the two-state solution, but he said, "I don't see the suicide bombings as isolated acts. They express the deep will of the Palestinian people. That is what the majority of the Palestinians want." And in an interview that totally upset and threw into confusion his former admirers, he said that Israel was justified in uprooting the Palestinian "fifth column", once the Arabs had attacked the infant state, and that the number executed or massacred – some 800, was "peanuts" compared with the massacres in Bosnia in the 1990s. He even added: "The Israeli Arabs are a time bomb. Their slide into complete Palestinization has made them an emissary of the enemy that is among us. They are a potential fifth column. In both demographic and security terms they are liable to undermine the state. So that if Israel again finds itself in a situation of existential threat, as in 1948, it may be forced to act as it did then. If we are attacked by Egypt (after an Islamist revolution in Cairo) and by Syria, and chemical and biological missiles slam into our cities, and at the same time Israeli Palestinians attack us from behind, *I can see an expulsion situation*. It could happen. If the threat to Israel is existential, expulsion will be justified..." And when a puzzled Haaretz interviewer called the 1948 Palestinian exodus "ethnic cleansing", Morris responded that "there are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing. I know that this term is completely negative in the discourse of the 21st century, but when the choice is between ethnic cleansing and genocide – the annihilation of your people – I prefer ethnic cleansing." Morris' comments concerning the Palestinian expulsions in 1948 have also proved controversial in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 2004 when he said:
- 31 "If Ben Gurion was already engaged in the expulsion, maybe he should have done a completed job. I know that this stuns the Arabs and the liberals and the politically-correct types. But my feeling is that this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all. It may yet turn out this was his fatal mistake. If he had carried out a full expulsion – rather than a partial expulsion – he would have stabilized the state of Israel for generations."

- 32 Let's say that for us, Israeli historians and intellectuals, Professor Benny Morris remains an enigma.
- 33 In conclusion, I would like to ask: what has been the real place of this phenomenon, the "New Historians", in contemporary Israeli society? I wonder if their extraordinary scholar work of rethinking the past and of destroying Zionist political myths has had consequences in the Israeli public sphere.
- 34 Today, I firmly believe that Benny Morris's work, and New Historians books in general, have had a serious impact on Israeli political thinking. Before these publications, most Israelis were absolutely not ready to acknowledge any responsibility for the 1948 Palestinian tragedy and for the Palestinian problem. After the publication of these books, a lot of people in my country began to understand that we do have a responsibility because we did destroyed the Arab civilization which existed in Palestine, and because our soldiers did commit expulsions and atrocities. Of course, most of us continue to believe that this tragedy was *probably* unavoidable, because the Arab world, and all the Palestinians, totally and absolutely refused any idea of dividing Palestine, and because, if they had remained in their villages and in their homes, no Jewish state could have been established. But I do believe that the New Historians really contributed to promoting and strengthening the idea of the two-state solution. Four years only after the publication of Morris' fundamental work, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres came to power, and in 1993 the Oslo agreements were signed, which potentially included the birth of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, with an emerging support of Israeli public opinion.
- 35 I always wondered if Rousseau's *Contrat Social* truly influenced Robespierre and the leaders of French Revolution, but the New Historians of Israel are really a case in which academic and intellectual writings influenced, even if slightly, the way of thinking in my country.
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ABSTRACTS

At the end of the 1980's, appeared in Israel a remarkable and fascinating intellectual phenomenon: the "New Historians". Young social scientists, working in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology and economics, began to put into question fundamental ideas which, until then, had been considered by the Israeli society as perfect "truth". In particular, these young and brilliant academics undertook to review various chapters of contemporary Israeli history, in order to check if these events were true or were "political myths" created by the Zionist establishment to support the national aim. The main debate was initiated by Benny Morris and dealt with the exodus of the Palestinian Arab population during the War of Independence (1948-49). The book written by Morris and published in 1988 was the first revolutionary event in this national controversy. The questions raised by the "New Historians" provoked a major intellectual debate in Israeli media. These young academics were harshly criticized, or enthusiastically supported. The aim of my paper is to try to explain the importance of this controversy in the context of the Israeli society, in the wake of my book: *La Nouvelle histoire d'Israël : essai sur une identité nationale* (Gallimard).

À la fin des années 80, un phénomène remarquable et fascinant apparaît en Israël : celui des “nouveaux historiens”. De jeunes scientifiques, travaillant dans les domaines de l’histoire, de la sociologie, de l’anthropologie et de l’économie, remettent en question des idées fondamentales qui, jusque-là, étaient considérées par la société israélienne comme l’unique “vérité”. Ces jeunes et brillants universitaires ont entrepris d’examiner différents chapitres de l’histoire contemporaine israélienne, afin de vérifier si ces événements étaient réels ou bien des “mythes politiques” créés par l’establishment sioniste dans le but de soutenir l’objectif national. Le principal débat a été lancé par Benny Morris qui traitait de l’exode de la population arabe palestinienne pendant la guerre d’Indépendance (1948-49). Le livre de Morris publié en 1988 est le premier événement révolutionnaire dans cette controverse nationale. Les questions soulevées par les “nouveaux historiens” ont provoqué de grands débats intellectuels dans les médias israéliens. Ces jeunes universitaires ont été sévèrement critiqués, ou soutenus avec enthousiasme. Le but de mon article est de tenter d’expliquer l’importance de cette controverse dans le contexte de la société israélienne, à la suite de mon livre: *La Nouvelle histoire d’Israël : essai sur une identité nationale* (Gallimard).

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Ilan (Alain) Greilsammer was born in Paris and settled in Israel in 1972. Author of twelve books and numerous articles on Israeli politics, France and Jewish politics, he is Professor of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University.