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The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine

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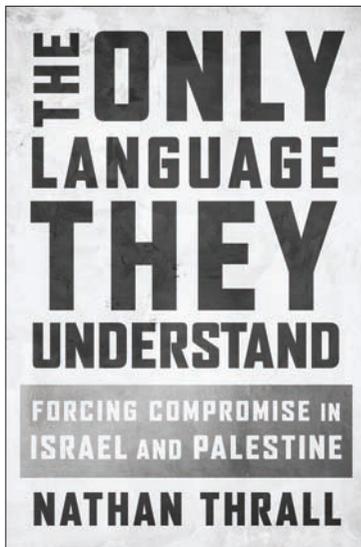
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The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine, by Nathan Thrall. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017. 336 pages. \$28.00 cloth, \$14.99 e-book.

REVIEWED BY NUBAR HOVSEPIAN

Nathan Thrall must have done something right. His book has garnered advance praise from divergent critics: Leon Wieseltier (former literary editor of the *New Republic*), Elliott Abrams (one of the original neoconservatives), and Rashid Khalidi, the editor of this journal. This is a good start.

Thrall's thesis is simple: throughout this enduring conflict, only force or the threat of force has brought "ideological concessions and territorial withdrawal" (p. 2). This thesis would have been more poignant had Thrall characterized the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as asymmetrical.

In chapter 1 he adumbrates four pertinent themes that inform his overall analysis: U.S. pressure, Israeli withdrawals, Palestinian concessions, and peace-industry illusions.

American pressure was clearly exerted on Israel by two U.S. presidents, Dwight Eisenhower and Jimmy Carter, as they "were the only ones who succeeded in compelling Israel to undertake a full territorial withdrawal" (p. 40). President Carter sought to incorporate Palestinians and their concerns in his attempts to reach a peace deal. In his first meeting with Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in March 1977, Carter informed him that his administration deemed Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories illegal (p. 8). Two months later the political landscape in Israel changed drastically; Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud Party defeated the Labor coalition after Rabin's resignation in April. Revisionist Zionism was now at the helm of Israeli politics, with serious consequences for the occupied Palestinian territories.

Carter succeeded in coaxing Begin to accept the peace deal with Egypt, which resulted in Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory conquered in the 1967 war. However, the second agreement, the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East," though not implemented during President Carter's time, served as the basis for both the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo I Accords. Both limited

Palestinian rights to the establishment of a self-governing authority in parts of the occupied Palestinian territories. Thrall concludes that “Carter succeeded in forcing one of the most right-wing, annexationist figures in Israel’s history to do precisely what he had most sought to avoid: plant the seed of a Palestinian state” (p. 26). However, that seed has clearly failed to sprout, mostly because all subsequent Israeli governments have scuttled any serious effort in the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Palestinian sovereignty has a priori been excluded from the equation.

If U.S. pressure was instrumental in securing Israeli withdrawal from some of the occupied Arab territories (for example, the Sinai Peninsula), the pressures on Palestinians demanded a greater price. Thrall notes that “repeated defeats and punishing measures exacted a series of ideological concessions, in which territorial ambitions were slowly narrowed from all of Mandatory Palestine to the 22 percent that Israel conquered in 1967” (pp. 40–41). In addition to affirming the idea of partition as outlined in UN General Assembly Resolution 181, Palestinian concessions included recognizing UN Security Council Resolution 242 and their hopes to establish a sovereign state on the 22 percent of mandatory Palestine. This conciliatory process went through: the adoption of the Palestinian National Council’s ten-point program of 1974, and the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) endorsement of the Fez Plan; support for the Geneva Declaration of 1983;* and the Palestinian Declaration of Independence at the 1988 PNC meeting in Algiers. In effect, the Palestinian national movement, as founding member of the PLO Shafiq al-Hout observed, “abandoned what it long considered a just solution in the hope of achieving a possible one” (p. 53). The possible option is deemed by Israel as “unreasonable, unjust, and maximalist” (p. 53).

Thrall argues that U.S. pressures forced a reluctant Yitzhak Shamir to attend the 1991 Madrid conference; but Israel retained the right to continue building settlements during this period. The expansion of settlements would also continue during Oslo and the various interim agreements. As a result, Israel would have “every incentive to keep Oslo going indefinitely, forestall the choice, and perpetuate Palestinian self-governance under occupation” (p. 60). In effect, Palestinian powerlessness has led to further concessions, with the hope that the “peace process” would lead them somewhere short of the abyss.

Since 1991 American policymakers have debated how to influence Israel, but have been unwilling to use any significant leverage to alter Israeli occupation policies. In this context, Thrall quotes Moshe Dayan who said: “Our American friends offer us money, arms, and advice. We take the money, we take the arms, and we decline the advice” (p. 73). Under such circumstances, the peace process leads to continued occupation, and bolsters the “Israeli view that force is the only language the Palestinians understand” (p. 63).

Thrall adumbrates this synopsis in the remainder of his book, in sections titled: domination, collaboration, confrontation, and negotiation. I found his discussion of Israeli conquest and its justifications most welcome. In the second chapter, “Feeling Good about Feeling Bad,” he deconstructs Israeli journalist Ari Shavit’s claims as presented in his book, *My Promised Land*:

* The Geneva Declaration was adopted by the UN-sponsored International Conference on the Question of Palestine. The PLO delegation played a central role in drafting the plan. For the record, I served as a political affairs officer for this UN-mandated conference.

The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel (Spiegel and Grau, 2013). Shavit is the great-grandson of Herbert Bentwich, who in 1897 sailed from England to Jaffa to survey Palestine for Jewish settlement, to the delight of his acquaintance Theodor Herzl. Like others before him, Bentwich failed to see the non-Jewish natives of Palestine; they were simply invisible. Shavit dubbed his great-grandfather's blindness as tragic, but "necessary to save the Jews" (p. 78). Liberal Zionists like Shavit erase the native to be able to construct an idyllic image of an enlightened Israel. He is aware of some of the darker sides of Zionism, and because of this conscious magnanimity, he urges liberal Jews to "feel good about feeling bad" (p. 90). In effect, he is asking Palestinians to forget their history while urging Jews not to forget theirs. Hence, past mistakes were unavoidable. Like Jabotinsky, Shavit assumes that Zionism is just and thus "what was required of it was justified [displacement of Palestinians]" (p. 93).

In parts 3 and 4, Thrall dissects the failing policies and strategies of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and to a lesser extent Hamas. In the context of PA rule over parts of the West Bank, the United States played a significant role in training and establishing special national security forces. Their job was to bolster the PA and to ensure cooperation (collaboration) with the Israel Defense Forces to guarantee security for the occupier. This security would lead to an independent state based on a "model of liberation without struggle" (p. 146). Palestinians thus experienced the PA as more interested in its self-perpetuation than protecting its citizens against occupation.

There are no signs that a substantive peace process is in the making. However, the fiction of such a process intends to keep a weak, corrupt, and ineffective PA afloat. In so doing, the donors are not financing a state-building project as part of a roadmap to peace and independence. Rather, as Thrall argues, they have put the PA on a "treadmill" to nowhere (p. 195).

In the last part of his book, Thrall deconstructs Obama's legacy. The Obama administration tried and quickly abandoned efforts to freeze settlements. Palestinians were expected to negotiate despite the expanding settlements, and they were admonished for attempting to join multilateral institutions to advance Palestinian rights peacefully. Instead of reversing Israeli occupation, Obama rewarded Israel with the largest military assistance package in U.S. history. Thrall fails to understand Obama's calculations on this score. The latter decided that his strategic interest lay in pursuing the Iran nuclear deal, which he knew the Israel lobby would oppose. Obama was willing to take them on over the deal, but he could not confront them on settlements and ending the occupation simultaneously.

Thrall has produced a cogent and lucid reconstruction of the obstacles that prevent an acceptable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He demonstrates that power in the past has been used effectively (for example, by Eisenhower and Carter). For now, U.S. power has extracted numerous Palestinian concessions, but has failed to thwart continued Israeli occupation. The book lacks a useful overall conclusion. The two-paragraph "coda" the author adds to the last chapter should become a longer but succinct conclusion to a worthy book. The writing style is ideal for undergraduate students, and I have assigned it for my class next semester.

Nubar Hovsepian, chair of political science at Chapman University, is the author of *Palestinian State Formation: Education and the Construction of National Identity* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).
