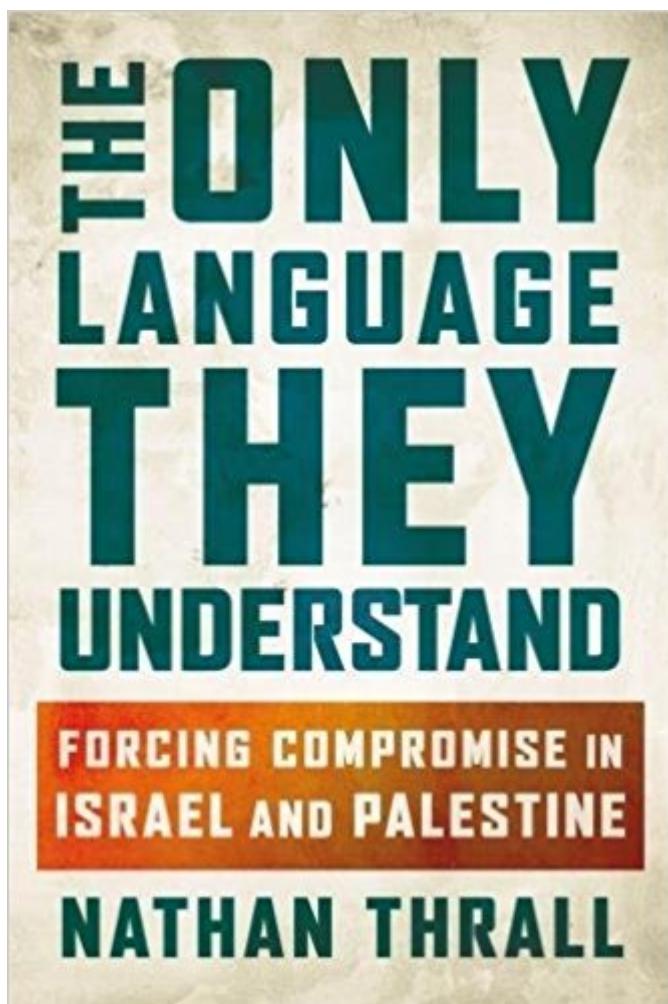


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# The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise In Israel And Palestine



## Synopsis

In a myth-busting analysis of the world's most intractable conflict, a star of Middle East reporting, "one of the most important writers" in the field (The New York Times), argues that only one weapon has yielded progress: force. Scattered over the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea lie the remnants of failed peace proposals, international summits, secret negotiations, UN resolutions, and state-building efforts. The conventional story is that these well-meaning attempts at peacemaking were repeatedly, perhaps terminally, thwarted by violence. Through a rich interweaving of reportage, historical narrative, and powerful analysis, Nathan Thrall presents a startling counter-history. He shows that force—including but not limited to violence—has impelled each side to make its largest concessions, from Palestinian acceptance of a two-state solution to Israeli territorial withdrawals. This simple fact has been neglected by the world powers, which have expended countless resources on initiatives meant to diminish friction between the parties. By quashing any hint of confrontation, promising an imminent negotiated solution, facilitating security cooperation, developing the institutions of a still unborn Palestinian state, and providing bounteous economic and military assistance, the United States and Europe have merely entrenched the conflict by lessening the incentives to end it. Thrall's important book upends the beliefs steering these failed policies, revealing how the aversion of pain, not the promise of peace, has driven compromise for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Published as Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza reaches its fiftieth anniversary, which is also the centenary of the Balfour Declaration that first promised a Jewish national home in Palestine, *The Only Language They Understand* advances a bold thesis that shatters ingrained positions of both left and right and provides a new and eye-opening understanding of this most vexed of lands.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

âœNathan Thrall does a brilliant job describing the political and geostrategic reasons for the intractability... His argument is smart and hard to dispute.â•âœThe New York Times Book ReviewâœThis June, Israel is marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Six-Day War. Not surprisingly, a number of new books have appeared in this grim anniversary year.... By far the most cogent... is Nathan Thrallâ™s *The Only Language They Understand*, which surveys the last five decades and comes to a remarkable conclusion: the only way to produce some kind of movement toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to apply significant coercive force to the parties involved, and in particular to Israel.â•âœThe New York Review of BooksâœThrall has consistently been one of the sharpest observers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the United Statesâ™ role in trying to end it, and his most recent contribution, *The Only Language They Understand*, is true to form.... His argument is a compelling one, and Thrall expertly marshals historical evidence to demonstrate his thesis that both sides respond to sticks rather than carrots.â•âœForeign AffairsâœThrall is one of the best-informed and most trenchant observers of the conflict.â•âœFinancial TimesâœLife is short, and writings about Israel and the Palestinians can be very, very long. So itâ™s a good thing thereâ™s Nathan Thrall.â•âœTimeâœReaders of the New York Review of Books and other intellectual publications know Nathan Thrall to be one of the best-informed, most insightful, and least polemical analysts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflictâœ| *The Only Language They Understand* brings unparalleled clarity to the dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian relations, and is an essential guide to the history, personalities, and ideas behind the conflict.â•âœJewish Book CouncilâœEven the most ardent defenders of Israeli policies should acknowledge Thrallâ™s mastery to facts on the ground, historical context and diplomatic tactics and strategies on all sides.âœ| Just about everyone interested in peace between Israelis and Palestinians will learn something and find something to ponder.â•âœJerusalem PostâœNathan Thrall, an analyst with the International Crisis Group and consummate observer of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, adds substantially to our understand of the status quo in his perfectly timed new volume.â•âœTabletâœThrall makes a persuasive case that instead of leaving the Israelis and Palestinians alone or limply warning of the peril facing Israeli democracy if a two-state solution isn't achieved, the only weapon in the US arsenal that has ever produced meaningful gains on the issue is forceâœdiplomatic, economic, or

otherwise.â • Viceâ œ An important new bookâ | eloquently expresses what has long been clear: that there is no hope of a breakthrough unless the international community forces it on the parties.â • The Independent (UK)â œ Nathan Thrallâ ™s commentary on the most intractable dispute of our time is something shocking: it is fair. Into a debate consumed by ferocious passions he enters dispassionately, except that he has a passion for peace. For this reason he is uncommonly trustworthy. His familiarity with the infamous complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian tangle is remarkable, as is his mental composure. This learned and candid book is a genuine contribution to our understanding of an increasingly frightening conflict.â • Leon Wieseltierâ œ Both the book and the title of *The Only Language They Understand* perfectly encapsulate the attitudes of the two sides to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The title also illustrates Thrallâ ™s main thesis: that over the entire hundred years of this conflict, only force or the threat of force, whether military, political, economic, diplomatic or in another form, has obligated the two sides to compromise. This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand why this conflict is so intractable and remains unresolved.â • Rashid Khalidi, author of *Brokers of Deceit* and Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies, Columbia Universityâ œ A terrific piece of analysis by a keen and empathic observer of the region.â • Lawrence Wright, author of *The Looming Tower* and *Thirteen Days* in Septemberâ œ These are the toughest criticisms anywhere of decades of Israeli policy. The failings of the Palestinians are here as wellâ • but the arrows are aimed at Jerusalem. Serious supporters of Israel should have their answers readyâ • or be prepared to lose debates to opponents quoting Nathan Thrall.â • Elliott Abrams, Deputy National Security Advisor, George W. Bush administrationâ œ For those who look at the Middle East and throw up their hands at a hopeless morass, Nathan Thrallâ ™s brilliant book is a compelling corrective. This most well-informed and well-connected of experts gives rigorous attention to the reality lurking behind the myths: that in this seemingly frozen conflict, carefully applied power and assiduous compulsion have often been the midwives of progress. Eloquent, fact-rich, full of vivid characters, and relentlessly contemporary in its narrative, *The Only Language They Understand* is a withering indictment of conventional wisdomâ • and a necessary, essential book.â • Mark Danner, author of *Spiral: Trapped in the Forever War*â œ Nathan Thrall argues with great power and lucidity that the only language the two sides to the conflict understand is force. This strong view, strongly held by Thrall, has serious political implications. He may be right, he may be wrong, but he must be read by anyone who hasnâ ™t given up the idea and the hope of ending this bloody conflict.â • Avishai Margalit, author of *On Compromise* and *Rotten Compromises*

Nathan Thrall is a leading analyst of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is a regular contributor to The New York Review of Books and the London Review of Books and is a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, for which he has covered Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza since 2010. His writing and analysis are often featured in print and broadcast media, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg News, the Financial Times, The Guardian, The Economist, Time, CNN, Democracy Now!, PRI, and the BBC. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and daughters.

I picked up an advance reader's copy of this book at my local used bookstore because I was curious about it after seeing the endorsements from figures on different ends of the political spectrum. Having read it, I can see why - the author is equally harsh toward all the parties. The book is exceptionally fair and objective. It totally upends the conventional wisdom about progress made toward ending the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. And it made me question everything I've been told since I was a kid in Hebrew school. It's not just dispelling the myths about the Jewish pioneers coming to a largely empty desert land and making it bloom, or about Arab refusals to accept 'generous' peace offers from successive Israeli and American leaders; the author also shows how the formula for negotiations between the parties is misguided and won't lead to peace in the short or long-term. I came away from this both depressed about the prospects for peace and strangely optimistic - the author demonstrates pretty convincingly that with the right kind of pressure an end can be brought about to this hundred-year-old conflict. It's a provocative, fast read - highly recommended.

In December, 2015, Public Policy Polling conducted a survey. The organization asked voters if they would support bombing Agrabah — the fictional city from the Disney film, "Aladdin". Surprising results? 41% of Donald Trump supporters responded with a resounding. Yes, bomb the place! Even excluding the then presidential candidate's supporters, 30% of Republicans supported the bombing of — the city of mystery and enchantment, while 13% were opposed. About 57% were not sure. Not to be outdone, among Democrats, 19% supported the bombing mission, 36% were opposed and 45% were not sure. Despite that unfortunate insight into the intellectual sophistication and geographic currency of modern Americans, most inhabitants of the Land Between the Sea-to-Shining-Sea can locate the Middle East on a world map. Even those who can't locate the region on the globe are familiar with it, in part due to its major exports (oil and terrorism), its ongoing internecine wars (Iraq, Kurds, Sunnis,

Shiites, Alawites, Yeminis, and a host of others), its religious significance and - not to be eclipsed - the seemingly interminable Arab Israeli (or Jewish/Palestinian, if you prefer) conflict. This land dispute represents the modern equivalent of Chamberlain's Czechoslovakia pithy insight of September, 1939 wherein he remarked, "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is, that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing." Of course, many forests worth of trees and terabytes of bandwidth have already been devoted to commentary and analysis of the benighted "Holy Land", but Nathan Thrall's "The Only Language They Understand" is a brilliant new addition to the subject. Thrall is a long-time resident of the region: the better part of a decade. As a representative of the NGO "International Crisis Group" and as a respected contributor to such august journals as "The New York Review of Books", Thrall gained access to important participants for interviews. He is intimately knowledgeable of the literature on the subject. For "The Only Language", he assembled a series of previously published articles (about 2013 through 2016), wrote an overview introductory chapter, synthesized the material into an updated and cogent whole: the result is this brief book. For those who want the bottom line, here it is: the book is an unabashed polemic but it's a damn good one. Its arguments are compelling and convincing. The author's basic points are these: 1) Despite the "land without a people for a people without a land" rhetoric of early Zionists, there were quite a few Arabs living in the region now known as "Palestine/Israel"; 2) Many of them were kicked out or otherwise induced to leave; 3) Israel has been manifestly unfair to subsequent generations of neighbors and natives when dealing with grievances; 4) The Arabs/Palestinians have been more-or-less accommodating to just about any combination or permutation of offers (the Israelis have been nasty and intransigent); 5) The only conceivable solution is for the US (and maybe the EU) need to squeeze the Israelis but good (placing Thrall into his personally defined category of "Reproachers", rather than the "Skeptics" and "Embracers"); 6) Since Eisenhower, every US president has leaned on Israel (some even achieving transiently gratifying - if entirely ephemeral - results until Obama: avatar of high falutin' rhetoric and accomplisher of precious little). Do those points seem simultaneously trite and oversimplified for a conflict of so many decades duration, byzantine complexity and so many competing claim? No, because Thrall does a superior job of mustering what amounts to an onslaught of documentation buttressing his arguments. Indeed, the reference section in itself is well worth the price of the book. Abba Eban's epigram "The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity" still resonates despite the fact that most of the missed opportunities and ideologically motivated depredations appear to have been perpetrated by Israelis. Is this a "balanced" presentation? No, it's not. Most of the blame accrues to the Israelis in

this analysis and most of it seems to fairly reside there. However, there are a couple of problems, some of which are due to the dynamic nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics; some due to religious differences; other due to revanchist and absolutist claims by the "Arab Street". There are some attributable to bad governance (mostly on the Arab side, with authoritarian, corrupt and self-interested regimes catalyzing regional chaos and limited domestic prospects for economic, social, religious and political improvement) and some, of course, that innate tendency to "put off until tomorrow what you can do today." Frankly, right now it's really not in the major players interests to solve the problem, a fact the author acerbically notes. Think of PLO officials driving Mercedes past refugee camps en route to the airport for the next flight to Davos, Switzerland and a Five Star hotel suite for more "negotiations". A pivotal claim is this: Whose land is this anyway and by what standard? The Ottoman Empire was the regional suzerain for about 400 years, governing an ill defined area mostly by loose proxy. Much of the land was owned by absentee landlords, many residents were nomadic, but there were significant numbers of Arab inhabitants, certainly outnumbering Jews. Thrall claims that, "The PNC (Palestine National Council) approved the declaration (the 1949 UN partition plan), accepted negotiations for a political settlement on the basis of Resolution 242 and consented to a state on only 22 percent of the homeland..." (p. 52). The pivotal "22 percent" claim and other statistical divisions of the land used by Thrall were based on an article in "Israel Affairs" by Prof Gideon Biger in 1999 (this per a personal communication to me from the author). Prof. Biger notes that the UK ruled the area from 1917-1948 and his paper states that, "...one of the most important legacies of this period was the creation, for the first time, of politically recognized boundaries." That's the baseline. Other sources (e.g., "A Peace to End All Peace", by David Fromkin and the demographically discredited but cartographically accurate, "From Time Immemorial", by Joan Peters) suggest much more vaguely defined boundaries. Whilst rhetorically barbed and though the percentages might be disputed (they favor of the Arabs), the gist of Thrall's argument still holds: Israelis displaced a number of Arabs. Here is an excerpt from the Biger manuscript. The major point is here from page 9 of the paper: "The boundaries of Mandatory Palestine were the first defined lines in the history of modern Palestine. These lines were totally new and without any connection to the 4,000 years of history that had gone before. The discussions on border delimitation only ended in 1927 with the final establishment of the boundary between Palestine and Transjordan inside the Jordan River, wherever it ran. Biger also noted that: "For six centuries, Palestine had been part of a vast empire, linked physically and politically to the rest of the Ottoman world and having no independent existence or administration of its own. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century (in 1856 and later, in 1873) did southern Palestine become a

separate, delineated administrative unit - a mutessariflik -under a governor who ruled from Jerusalem and reported directly to the Imperial government in Istanbul. The rest of Palestine remained within the jurisdiction of the province, or velayet, of Beirut."So according to Thrall's primary source and as David Fromkin pointed out (in his excellent book, "A Peace to End All Peace"), the percentages Thrall notes are accurate, but only insofar as they correspond to a decision made in either the mid- to late 19th century, circa 1916 (Sykes-Picot) and somewhat later in about 1927. In other words, there were no generally accepted, "sacrosanct" borders defining a distinct and historically accepted entity, at least per Fromkin, Peters and Biger.Of course, this doesn't in any way vitiate Thrall's arguments and it doesn't substantively detract from his conclusions. Still, the percentages convey a misleading impression about how much land the Arabs "own" and how much the Zionists "grabbed". Unless the entire enterprise is considered illegitimate (something I personally don't buy), the land division in the Middle East is no more sacrosanct than any other border, such as that between the US and Mexico (which we grabbed by conquest in the mid-1800s).One might hope that Thrall would offer a solution. Aside from exercising pressure (hence the book's title), there are no bromides or facile prescriptions to provide because there are none on hand. Israel is riven with religious and political factions and faces the infelicitous prospect that partition will create major domestic disturbances and the likely fall of the government. Abbas' PLO/Fatah doesn't govern Gaza (HAMAS does) and neither group will clearly benefit from a settlement. For that matter, as Israelis are fond of noting, neither holds representative legitimacy (n.b.: this is the "no partner for peace" argument, some of which has merit).For many though, the major intractable issue is this one, as Thrall reports: "...the conflict is neither primarily territorial nor based on grievances stemming from Israel's 1967 conquest. In this view, the century-long struggle is insoluble, because for Palestinians the core of it is not occupation but their displacement due to Zionist settlement (p.187)" Indeed, the revanchist nature of Palestinian claims for the "right of return" is a major obstacle and, if a deal depends on that, it won't happen. Furthermore, refugee claims of this nature have gone unrequited in every instance of displacement from the distant past to the present. To note but one recent example, consider the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans expelled from post-war Poland and Czechoslovakian lands. In short, there is no historic precedent. Plus, the "might makes right" argument holds a lot of water. As examples, the US grabbed most southwestern states from Mexico in the 19th century, Russia just snatched Crimea from Ukraine...the list is too exhaustive to cite.Those points aside, this is an excellent book. In fact, the highest compliment I can give it is this one: it changed my perspective on the conflict based on its relentless logic, penetrating analysis and abundant documentation. Even Leon Wieseltier (a firm

Israel supporter and target of Thrall's criticism) endorsed it. The "Little Shop of Horrors" known as the Middle East will eventually achieve some sort of resolution. That's almost inevitable. How, when and why are unknowns. As Henry Kissinger wrote, "If order cannot be achieved by consensus or imposed by force, it will be wrought, at disastrous and dehumanizing cost, from the experience of chaos (World Order)."

Nathan Thrall's book, *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing compromise in Israel and Palestine*, offers an honest look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the so called Peace process. Both parties will maneuver, manipulate and trick each other and the Great Powers (mostly the United States) to: 1. assure they are not to blame for the certain-coming-collapse of negotiations and shift blame to the other party. 2. Extract maximum financial and diplomatic benefits from the US and the Europeans. To date Israel did better benefiting from the non-resolution of the conflict. It controls 78% of the land and managed to limit the discussion to the remaining 22%. The result is that Israel now controls similar numbers of Jews and Arabs but offers a say to Jews and only a small group of Palestinians (the Israeli Arabs). All the rest are occupied/administered with no political say. Both, though, are responsible. The reader of this enlightening volume will see how Israel and the Palestinians only compromise under pressure. They indeed only understand force, violence political and economic pressure and pain.

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