

***Enemies and Neighbours: Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel, 1917-2017.* Ian Black. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2017, 606.**

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November 2017, marked a century of the Balfour Declaration which promised the “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. In the book, *Enemies and Neighbours*, Ian Black, who is a veteran British journalist and has spent over three decades covering events in the Middle East, writes an insightful, although mostly dispiriting, history of the Arab-Zionist conflict from 1917 till date. The book takes the reader along a linear history of the conflict, moving sequentially through its main events.

Each chapter is an excellent introduction to how the conflict unfolded. The book’s main argument is that Zionism and Palestinian nationalism were conflicting from the start but the ordinary Jews and Palestinians have cooperated in creative ways nonetheless. As Black notes, “The Israel-Palestine issue has a strong claim to be the most closely studied conflict on Earth,” (p.2). However, it adds that the Israelis and Palestinians have spent the last century dodging each other’s narratives and are still doing nothing to write a new one.

Interestingly, unlike other historians of the conflict that limit their study to politics mostly, Black shows the impact political decisions and armed clashes have had on average citizens’ lives. A case in point is when Black notes how the Hebrew and Arabic, along with their culture and daily lives, have been affected and shaped by the conflict. He explains how the Jews, who began to arrive in the late 19th century, gradually merged into a new Israeli society and how the Arabs living in Palestine began to define themselves as a distinct national group, primarily as a reaction to the Zionist arrival (p. 21).

Moreover, something that is laudable is how the author gives equal attention to each side and records how the different Palestinian communities

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were created. Unlike previous narrations of the conflict, Black pays less attention to the role of world powers in the region and in Arab-Israeli relations. Though this may feel like a shortcoming, the book's unyielding focus on the Israelis and Palestinians is one of its strengths. Another strength of this book is Black's objective analysis — he spares no side from critical examination. The Israeli extremities and official policies are impassively recorded together within criminatory verdicts from Israeli academics who are challenging the traditional versions of Israeli history. Sheltered in the echo chamber of its own melancholic media, convinced only of its own righteousness, mainstream Israeli society has drifted ever further to the right. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has ruled over a sequence of radical alliances which include openly racist ministers who describe Arabs as “animals” and call for the expulsion of non-Jewish citizens (p. 457).

Black does not sentimentalise the Palestinian nationalism either. Again and again, he shows how the Palestinian leaders damaged their own cause. He reprimands them for boycotting the legislative council elections that Britain held in 1923, while the Zionists participated. He criticizes the Mufti of Jerusalem for rejecting a 1939 British White Paper that was momentous toward meeting Palestinian demands. And he reports that in the mid-1990s Palestinian businessmen made millions of pounds supplying cement for Israel's controversial security barrier in the full knowledge of Yasser Arafat.

Black does savour the moments when the ideological facade lifts and Jews and Palestinians see each other not simply as threats but as human beings. An example is where he tells the story of the future Prime Minister Golda Meir, during Israel's war of independence, visiting neighbourhoods of Haifa and encountering an elderly Palestinian woman, whose sorry state moved Meir to tears (p. 120). In this President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu era, the gulf between the two people has only widened. Black notes “the growing belief that a two-state solution” is now “defunct” (p. 10). This issue has in essence taken a back burner. Black offers no vision for progress and no expressions of hope. The book ends with the words: “No end to their conflict was in sight,” (p. 484).

Thus, after 100 years, the intent of the original Balfour Declaration is disappearing. Due to continued settlement expansion and Israeli control over the entire territory between Jordan and the Mediterranean, the

Palestinian Authority has been subjugated. Where the old conflict was between two separate national liberation movements, it is now more of a domestic conflict between two ethno-religious groups, though almost demographically equal but deeply divided and unequal when it comes to civil rights.