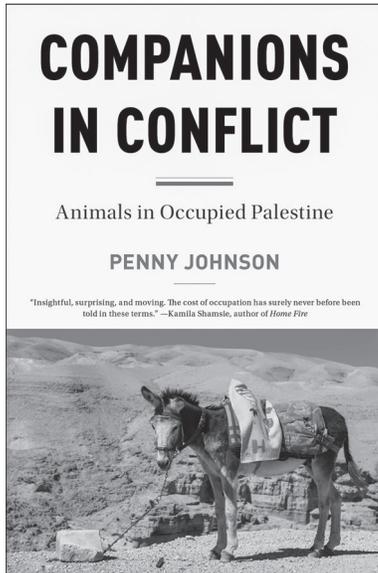

Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine, by Penny Johnson. New York: Melville House, 2019. 256 pages. \$26.99 cloth, \$12.99 e-book.

REVIEWED BY IDA AUDEH

“I explore the histories and intertwined fates of some of the large mammals that live in this fractured land” (p. ix), author Penny Johnson tells us in the second paragraph of *Companions in Conflict*, and in eight chapters she takes the reader on her excursions through the West Bank in search of indigenous familiar (donkeys, goats, sheep, cows, boars) and endangered (hyenas, jackals,

** See Noam Sheizaf, “One or Two States? The Status Quo Is Israel’s Rational Choice,” *+972 Magazine*, 25 March 2012, <https://972mag.com/one-or-two-states-the-status-quo-is-israels-rational-third-choice/39169/>.

ibexes, wolves) mammals to understand what human engagement with them tells Palestinians and Israelis about themselves and their future in this common land. She describes the changes in the environment over the years and the people she encounters along her walks, digressing to recount



stories told to her and to relay interesting facts gleaned from wide-ranging reading, the nagging question never far from her mind: what conditions are needed for humans and animals to flourish?

The threats to both are varied, as each chapter makes painfully clear. Chapter 1 begins with the story of Kojak the Jerusalem camel, whose business license (his keeper hired him out for rides) was revoked, which made his presence in Jerusalem illegal; he was soon carted away to a “nature reserve” built near the remains of Lifta, a Palestinian village depopulated in 1948. His fate mirrors that of Palestinian Jerusalemites, a growing number of whom can never seem to produce the “right papers” that would allow them to live safely in the city. Jerusalem makes a fitting starting point for a book about shrinking habitats, cut off as it is from Gaza and the West Bank by the separation wall (the latter as much an actor in Palestinian life as the Israeli military orders that define life under a colonial regime).

Hyenas (the focus of chapter 2) evoke fear and loathing disproportionate to the actual danger they pose to humans. The author tells of Hebron-area villagers protesting an “infestation of hyenas” and appealing for protection (p. 40). Alas, it was their misfortune to live outside the sliver of land called Area A, and thus beyond the reach of the Palestinian Authority; like Hebronites in the old city, at the mercy of sadistic Jewish settlers, they must fend for themselves. Johnson draws parallels between a group of young men stoning a hyena to death and young stone throwers on trial for attacking soldiers and settlers and suggests that both acts are motivated by a desire to protect their communities from aggressors.

Some of Palestine’s animals have featured in acts of resistance and drawn international attention. West Bankers respond with incredulity when learning that an animal rights organization sent a letter to Palestinian Authority president Yasir Arafat at the height of the 2002 siege, asking him to prevent the use of donkeys to carry explosives (p. 93); with the entire population terrorized by Israeli shelling and door-to-door house searches, it is safe to conclude that he had more pressing issues on his mind than the unjust killing of one unfortunate donkey. Beit Sahour’s cows became international stars after inspiring Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan’s film, *The Wanted 18*, which tells the story of an attempt by Beit Sahour residents to break their dependence on Israeli sources of milk and yogurt during the First Intifada (chapter 5). The short-lived experiment ended when the Israeli military descended on the farm and confiscated the cows as security threats.

Johnson skillfully weaves a substantial amount of research and observation into a compassionate account that is humorous, engaging, and thought provoking. Readers who are generally familiar with the issue will find that her perspective offers new insights; readers who are less familiar will get

an introduction to the main events in Palestine's twentieth-century history (British Mandate, Nakba, the 1967 occupation, the First Intifada, and the post-Oslo period), with literature, poetry, and folklore seamlessly woven in, along with cameo appearances by Mark Twain, Gustave Flaubert, and Franz Kafka. Johnson moved to the West Bank in 1982 to do human rights work at Birzeit University, at a time when the university was undergoing repeated closures by the occupation authorities and its students were being arrested, and many of the anecdotes she recounts date to the First Intifada, which broke out a few years after her move. She remained to cofound the women's studies program at Birzeit University, to coedit the journal *Jerusalem Quarterly*, and to write and edit books, including *Shifting Sands* (Profile Books, 2015).

One cannot help being moved by the valiant efforts of Palestinian environmental and animal activists to preserve and protect animal life and the environment, to the extent that they can. Curfews, closures, and explosions terrorize humans as well as animals, but for the latter, at least it is possible to find Israeli and other zookeepers who respond to appeals from Palestinians desperate to find safe havens for creatures under their care.

Meditating on what would be lost if these mammals were gone from the landscape, she observes: "Acts of environmental imagination can also contribute to reviving a desolate landscape, whether resurrecting memories, preserving what is left, or envisioning possible futures" (pp. 210–11), acts that embody the concept of radical hope—hope despite an often unbearable present.

Ida Audeh is the editor of *Birzeit University: Story of a National Institution* (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 2010).
