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## Politics & Ideas

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# A Peaceful Palestinian's Perplexing Plan

### *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?*

BY SARI NUSSEIBEH  
Harvard, 234 pages

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Reviewed by ELLIOTT ABRAMS

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**S**ARI NUSSEIBEH is a man without a country. Nusseibeh is a member of one of the most distinguished Arab Jerusalem families and is now president of

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Al-Quds University there. He holds degrees in philosophy from Oxford and Harvard, has received dozens of awards and citations for his activities on behalf of Israeli-Palestinian peace, and has served as an official of the Palestinian Authority. But he is a Palestinian, and there is no Palestinian state. In his new book, he asks how much it matters for Palestinians to “have” a state. What is a Palestinian state worth? His answer is, not much: “There is no absolute need for us to have a separate or so-called independent state.”

“What would a state be for, anyway?” he asks. “What needs would it satisfy?”

In his view, only individuals count, so in politics “you are searching for

the best way to realize yourself as a Palestinian, as a citizen, as a human being.” This leads Nusseibeh to some interesting speculation about the relationship between Palestinians and the many entities in which they live. Palestinians are refugees without rights in Lebanon; refugees with citizenship in Jordan but in a state that is clearly not theirs; members of a global diaspora where they may live in democracies and be loyal to the states of which they are citizens. And Palestinians, he writes, live in Israel with full political rights but, again, in a state that another group, Jews, controls. They are citizens, but it is not “their” state. “Palestinian Israelis,” he writes, “can feel they have a state in the weak sense (they belong to it)

but not that they have a state in the strong sense (it belongs to them or they own it).”

Of course, this relationship to the state is a choice made by the Palestinians. In early November, Israel’s most popular newspaper, *Yediot Ahronoth*, carried a story about a Bedouin from the Negev who was described as a fervent Zionist. His sons serve in the Israel Defense Forces, he is in the reserves, and his daughter recently enlisted as the first female soldier from the Bedouin sector in southern Israel. The man in question, Salame Abu Ghanem, told *Yediot* that “I am a proud Muslim, and I am proud of the State of Israel... it says in Israel’s declaration of independence that the state is Jewish. It’s clear to me that this is the situation, from the day I was born. It’s clear to everyone, including Arabs—so what is the problem? As far as I am concerned, you, my cousins, can run the country as you see fit... this is my country, I love it, I want to serve.”

Oddly enough, Nusseibeh comes to view a twisted version of Ghanem’s approach as the ideal solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He believes it is likely too late for the two-state solution, or at least too late to achieve it at a reasonable price. Nor does he think Israelis will ever agree, peacefully, to a one-state solution that creates a new entity in which they live as a minority. And he is a man of peace and wishes perhaps above all else to avoid more violence.

“During the period after 2000,” he writes, “when Palestinian suicide attacks almost became the norm to express resistance to the occupation... I began asking myself what the state we were fighting for is worth. How much killing can a group suffer or commit before the suffering and the loss of life begin to outweigh the values on whose behalf the killing is being commit-



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ted?” Rejecting what Palestinian groups call “armed struggle” and most of us call terrorism, Nusseibeh thinks Palestinian statehood is clearly not worth the fight.

He then ponders what other arrangements might be made and comes up with this bizarre answer:

One future path that, I believe, deserves serious consideration by both Palestinians and Israelis is a one-state but electorally nondemocratic consensual arrangement: that is, a mutual agreed-upon conferral by Israel of a form of “second-class citizenship” on all Palestinians who wish to accept it. For those Palestinians, the result would be like having a state in the weak sense [of] belonging to the state without being its co-owners.... This scenario... would maintain Jewish ownership of the state while

guaranteeing Palestinians their human rights and all services a state normally provides for its citizens, including their collective cultural rights.... Simply put, in this scenario the Jews could run the country while the Arabs could live in it.

Nusseibeh mentions this proposal several times and examines it at length, so he means it seriously. It helps clarify why he has never had much success as a political figure, for this proposal engenders zero support among Palestinians. Palestinian opinion is divided between those who seek an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza, and those who continue to wish for a one-state solution in which Israelis are eventually outnumbered and the Jewish state becomes another Arab state. What Nusseibeh calls his “halfway measure” is politically demented.

But he is a sensible man, so it is worth asking what he is up to here. Some may suspect that this is his version of the phased approach whereby Palestinians will, step by step, eliminate Israel, but that is not his goal. This slim volume makes clear that he is wrestling with the relationship between individuals and the collective entities in which they live. He explains:

States exist for us... in the sense of their being our extended homes, familiar public spaces, constructed by us, where we feel entitled to speak our minds, and where we can expect our general well-being to be attended to and cared for. In this light, the question of what states are for is ultimately about what it is to feel at home, about our inner emotions and aspirations, about who we are as human beings and how we can best live together.

The problem for Nusseibeh is that such entities as states or indeed any political collectives end up denying or destroying that which we seek in them. He calls these entities “meta-biological” (the book is full of far too much jargon of this sort). But his fears are evident:

On one side of this picture are ordinary human individuals...who seek their own well-being. On the other side...are lifeless layers of structures and entities through which individuals seek and/or articulate this well-being. As meta-biological structures, they may take the form of ideologies, norms, belief systems, religions, regimes, states, and so on. And as meta-biological entities, they may take the form of gods, families, tribes, nations, political movements....But whatever form they may take, they threaten first to dominate and then to dehumanize the real, flesh-and-blood individuals.

This is an astonishingly grim view of human associations, all of which are in Nusseibeh’s view not vehicles for human fulfillment but threats to it. His approach is radically individualistic, then, and it is no wonder he does not think a Palestinian state worth much.

How does a thoughtful, civilized man reach such a view as this of human life? Perhaps Nusseibeh’s conclusions are less surprising if one considers him not, well, not as an “ordinary human individual” but as part of various “meta-biological” entities and structures. He is an Arab, and there is not one single Arab state that meets his definition of what states are “for.” Not one, for example, is a democracy whose citizens or subjects “feel entitled to speak our minds.” He is moreover a

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Palestinian, a group led over the past century first by Haj Amin al-Husseini (the notorious Mufti of Jerusalem) and then Yasir Arafat into paroxysms of violence and terror that have deeply corrupted their political culture. It is startling and depressing, but Nusseibeh appears in this book to be saying that Palestinians might be better off under permanent Israeli rule, where at least they would have civil (if not political) rights, while in their own state, they might well have neither.

Toward the end of the volume, Nusseibeh expresses some of his pessimism in describing the trajectory of Palestinian politics. He explains that he has taught generations of Palestinian university students and is

struck by the change in their general character since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Before, students

seemed poised and ready to take on the world....Those young Palestinian students had faith in themselves....Two decades later, however, that faith seems to have vanished, both among students and in the population at large. The change seems to have begun as soon as the Palestinian Authority was installed and began to construct official Palestinian leadership edifices. Somehow, almost imperceptibly, people began to turn over the power they had possessed and exercised during the uprising to the various arms of the newly-established Authority.

Here he conceals some critical facts of which he must be aware. The period he lauds, of Palestinian character and “faith in themselves” before the PA was established, is precisely the period of direct Israeli rule after 1967. And he is right: as soon as Israel replaced the Jordanians, Palestinian civic associations sprung into life and a vibrant civic culture began to appear, mirroring Israel’s democratic society. And it disappeared not when “the Palestinian Authority was installed” in some bureaucratic sense, but when Yasir Arafat returned as its head in 1993—and proceeded to install his corrupt satrapy. People did not “almost imperceptibly” begin to “turn over the power they had possessed.” It was violently taken from them by Arafat and his 13 “security forces.”

It is surprising that Nusseibeh does not make this point, but perhaps Arafat remains too holy an object to be described in any realistic fashion by a Palestinian in public life. More surprising still is his ignorance of, or perhaps refusal to support, the current efforts of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to re-create a sense of civic involvement and virtue, to eliminate

corruption, and to restore law and order to Palestinian streets. Fayyad has—to say the least—a tough row to hoe given the sordid history of Palestinian politics, the corruption and incompetence that continue to characterize the Fatah Party still dominant in the West Bank, and the Islamist extremism and terror in Hamas-ruled Gaza. But this ought to be Nusseibeh's fight as well.

The Nusseibehs are one of the oldest families in Jerusalem; since Saladin's reign in the 12th century, they have been entrusted to lock and unlock the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. (The only solution to the fighting among Christian communities was to give this job to Muslims.) It is depressing to see a philosopher and peace activist like Sari Nusseibeh so fearful or despairing of Palestinian self-rule that he ends up explaining why Palestinians will perhaps be best off as second-class citizens in Israel.

A Palestinian state is not—in this, Nusseibeh is certainly right—worth Palestinians seeking if the main method is terrorism that destroys their own values and the outcome is just another Arab “republic” like Syria, Egypt, or Tunisia, where freedom is lost. But watching Salam Fayyad and many other Palestinians trying to revive a sense of self-worth, one wonders why Nusseibeh does not enlist. Last year, Fayyad commented on the failure of the “peace process” since Oslo and said, “After 16 years why not change the discourse? We have decided to be proactive, to expedite the end of the occupation by working very hard to build positive facts on the ground, consistent with having our state emerge as a fact that cannot be ignored. This is our agenda, and we want to pursue it doggedly. It is empowering to even think that way.” Indeed, far more empowering, in any event, than disquisitions about “meta-biological structures.” 🍌