



A TOO-MODEST PROPOSAL

A PALESTINIAN PEACEMAKER GIVES UP ON POLITICS

AVNER INBAR AND ASSAF SHARON

Sari Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* Harvard University Press, \$19.95 (cloth)

IN THE SUMMER OF 1988 ISRAELI authorities arrested Faisal Husseini, the Palestinian leader of East Jerusalem. The arrest came after the Israelis discovered in Husseini's office a draft proposal for a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. The document was part of an effort by the West Bank leadership to chart a political path following the eruption of the popular uprising, the *intifada*. Asked for his opinion of the Husseini document, the distinguished Palestinian philosopher and peace activist Sari

Nusseibeh said, "The idea of declaring independence is becoming more necessary by the day. Our state will not arrive by registered mail to the main post office on Salah-al-Din street. It has to be created in stages."

Almost a quarter century and many such stages later, the Palestinian leadership is better prepared than ever for independence. The Palestinians have been steadily building political and economic institutions in the West

An alley in East Jerusalem

Bank, and just a few weeks ago Hamas and Fatah agreed to end a five-year feud and unify control of the West Bank and Gaza. Recent statements by the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund declaring that the Palestinians are ready for statehood verify the success of these efforts. Given his past positions, Nusseibeh—now President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem—could be expected to support these developments and the declaration of Palestinian independence scheduled for September. Yet his new book, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?*, defies such expectations.

That same summer of 1988, Israel arrested and deported another Jerusalemite Palestinian, Mubarak Awad. The offense in this case was the promotion of non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation. A Jerusalem-born, U.S.-educated psychologist who adopted Gene Sharp's strategies of non-violent resistance, Awad returned to Palestine in 1985 to promote his philosophy among Palestinians. Two violent decades later, the practice of non-violence has spread widely among Palestinians. Every Friday hundreds of Palestinians join hands with Israelis and others to protest peacefully in the West Bank villages Bil'in, Ni'lin, Nabi Salih, Ma'asara, and Beit Ummar and in the East Jerusalem neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan. Following the lead of their Egyptian counterparts, young Palestinians have been taking to the streets in Ramallah, Jenin, Hebron, Nablus, and Gaza demanding political unity and freedom. One would expect to find Nusseibeh hailing the Palestinian popular struggle, too. And once again, his new book defies expectations.

SARI NUSSEIBEH IS a foremost Palestinian intellectual. An Oxford-trained philosopher and expert on the thought of the medieval scholar Avicenna, he is heir to one of Jerusalem's most venerable families, said to have descended from one of Mohammed's female companions. Centuries ago, when

rivaling Christian denominations in the city could not come to agreement over who would guard the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the task was given to the Muslim Nusseibehs, a duty they carry out to this day. In a way, this anecdote symbolizes Nusseibeh's unique position in Palestinian politics: impartial, rational, and pragmatic. He has never shied away from criticizing his own and consistently opted for compromise over principle. Despite being held in administrative detention for three months in 1991 under ridiculous charges of being an Iraqi spy, a decade later he collaborated with an Israeli general and former director of its notorious security service, the Shin Bet, in a popular peace campaign.

When a person of such credentials and experience voices a novel view, attention is warranted, and Nusseibeh's views in this new book are indeed novel. He subscribes neither to the Fayyadist strategy of institution-building and independence, nor to the popular-struggle strategy of non-violent resistance. Politically, he supports neither the two-state solution favored by official Israel and the Palestinian Authority (as well as the international community and the White House), nor the bi-national, one-state option supported by parts of the Palestinian opposition and diaspora, as well as some in the radical Israeli left and a few on the right (such as former Likud defense minister Moshe Arens). This reflects a shift in thinking. Until 1987 Nusseibeh advocated for one state with equal citizenship for all. In 1988 he adopted the emerging PLO position favoring an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. But today he has his own plan

for Israel to offer Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza full civil and human rights so long as a permanent settlement has not yet been reached. The result would be an interim step: a single-state but electorally non-democratic consensual arrangement,

that is, a mutually agreed-upon conferral by Israel of a form of 'second-class citizenship' on all Palestinians currently under occupation who wish to accept it.

Under such an arrangement, he says, Palestinians "would enjoy all rights except voting and being voted for in elections to the Knesset and holding elected office."

No mere intellectual exercise, Nus-

A NOVEL SOLUTION FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE IS NO SMALL FEAT. BUT NOVELTY IS NOT ENOUGH.

seibeh's proposal is based on a concrete model:

This type of arrangement, in which people voluntarily partake of civil but not political rights, is not altogether strange to our region: Arab Jerusalemites have lived in this kind of situation for the past forty years.

Coming up with a novel proposal for circumstances that have been studied from every angle for decades is no small feat. But novelty is not enough, and a scheme modeled on East Jerusalem might be hard to swallow. Before the occupation began in 1967, six square kilometers of East Jerusalem were Jordanian Jerusalem, and the remaining 64 comprised 28 villages and their lands. Israel unilaterally annexed this area, multiplying the municipal boundaries of its capital fourfold. Although this annexation has been recognized by no other country or international organization, Israel proceeded to treat East Jerusalem as its own. A third of the annexed territory, most of it privately owned, was expropriated by the state to build Jewish neighborhoods, while Israel makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians in East Jerusalem to attain building permits. Almost all Arab construction in East Jerusalem is illegal according to Israeli law, resulting in mass demolitions, displacement, and fines. Although East Jerusalem-

mites, some 30 percent of the city's population, pay city taxes, their share in the budget is less than 10 percent. Basic services such as clinics, water supply, sanitation, roads, and street lighting are critically deficient in East Jerusalem. Most neighborhoods have no playground or community center. The education system is crippled by a shortage of about a thousand classrooms, forcing some pupils to study in makeshift spaces and many others to drop out. All this without mentioning the appalling consequences of state-backed Jewish settlement within Palestinian neighborhoods. Arabs' residency can be revoked for any number of reasons, from unwelcome political activity to residing out-

side the city for even a few months. In 2008 alone more than 4,500 Arabs had their residency revoked. Since residency does not extend by marriage, many East Jerusalemites whose partners are from other areas of the West Bank are forced either to leave the city or to live apart from their spouses.

Why, then, would Sari Nusseibeh regard East Jerusalem as a model for improvement on current conditions? The answer takes us to the moral and philosophical underpinnings of his position.

NUSSEIBEH IS AN individualist in his metaphysics, an instrumentalist in his nationalism, and a humanist in his values: the point of large-scale political structures, as he sees it, is to protect individuals and improve their lives. His analysis aims to break the clashing tribes into their elementary human particles. In a display of rationality uncommon to discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Nusseibeh takes an impartial vantage point, trying to sort out a mess largely generated by overblown and hyperactive political identities.

He casts his lot with the theory of "reification," arguing that the pathology begins when attributes of individuals—say, "being an Israeli"—are treated as if they derive from some external entity—"Israel." The imaginary entity then takes on a life of its own, compelling us to give up our personal freedom and judgment and invest ourselves in group identities, often to the point of self-sacrifice, whether moral or physical. "What begins as a normal and justifiable psychologi-

cal human need," Nusseibeh writes, "thus mutates into a demented ideological imperative or dictate." Behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies a deeper tension between real biologi-

CHALLENGE NETANYAHU TO DEFINE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH WITHOUT USING THE WORD 'ARAB.' EXPECT A LONG PAUSE.

cal individuals, and "meta-biological" entities. The latter "threaten first to dominate and then to dehumanize the real, flesh-and-blood individuals who created them in the first place."

This is a familiar story, beginning with Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion and culminating in Marxist economic theories and Georg Lukács's critique of bourgeois consciousness. In Lukács's words, reification takes places when

a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.

It might be surprising to find such theorizing in a book about the Palestinian state. For Nusseibeh, however, the story of our submission to our own reified identities is necessary for bringing home the extent to which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a preordained ritual in which free, open-minded, and adaptable persons resign themselves to entrenched worldviews destined, almost by definition, to clash ad infinitum. The reification theory can be a powerful way to stress the tragic inability of Israelis and Palestinians to promote their worldly interests against the backdrop of oppressive historical narratives and ethnic isolationism.

But while the humanist sentiment driving this analysis is undoubtedly noble, its elucidatory force is doubtful. Amid metaphysical observa-

FROM LOVE, IMAGINATION

Sarah Sarai

As many bridges as I can walk
I have, suspended over
water's bounded body,
a bent-limb river flowing
in imitation of life's farewells.
Over opaline bowls and
chipped basins where nets
are cast so fathers and sons
can feed the hungry and
holy daughters work mysteries
of bounty: We are flesh and
gifted sustenance.
Along a roadbed I lose myself in
elemental apocalypse,
earth water air — and fire rushing
over the rumble spilling from
a reedy source to
a greater body demanding tribute.

tions, Nusseibeh leaves little room for agency: the politicians, clerics, magnates, and warlords who maneuver these political identities for their own benefit. He would do well

MORAL VISION ALONE WON'T ALLEVIATE THE PLIGHT OF PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS. POLITICS IS NEEDED.

to have borrowed another Marxian theme, namely that collective identities and ideologies are manifestations of underlying interests (though not, as Marxists would have it, necessarily material interests). Consider the increasing convergence within Israeli identity of militarism and self-righteous victimhood: prominent leaders have mastered the art of manipulating this anxious and belligerent identity for their own benefit. Recall that during his first tenure as prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu was “inadvertently” caught on tape whispering to Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri, one of Israel’s most influential and controversial religious figures at the time, that “the [Israeli] left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish. They think that if we place our security in the hands of Arabs, the Arabs will look after us.” It is impossible to understand the current impasse without recognizing the degree to which Netanyahu’s signature shtick, his brand of the politics of resentment, has pervaded and transformed Israeli society. For what used to be a political dispute between supporters and detractors of “Greater Israel” has in the last decade morphed into a veritable manhunt against a leftist fifth column, i.e., those Israelis who no longer understand what it means to be Jewish. But Netanyahu’s so-called gaff also lays bare precisely what it means to be Jewish for many Israelis today. It means, more or less, not trusting Arabs. Challenge Netanyahu to define what it means to be Jewish without using the word “Arab.” Expect a long pause.

To be sure, political identities, especially when forged in the furnace of a long and painful conflict, usually are essentially negative. Israeli and Palestinian identities did not predate the national conflict of the last hundred years. Rather, they were molded by it, imprinted by it with mutual hatred and fear, and buttressed by powerful interested parties whose hegemony depended, and continues to depend, on its perpetuation. What is projected onto the meta-biological entity—the state, the nation, “us”—is not an image of something about us—our interests, values, and beliefs—but rather a deep-seated aversion toward anything and everything we identify in the other side. Palestinians and Israelis are Janus twins, each defining their own fragile identities by negating the imagined identities of the others. Indeed, one might argue that what currently defines political identities in Israel and Palestine is not even conflicting conceptions of the other side as such, but rather the inexorable presence of the conflict itself.

So when the violence and grief unleashed by the conflict are attributed solely to reified projections run amok, the ensuing account is incomplete. We must not absolve the powers that be from responsibility for the tragedy. And because the most belligerent elements of Israeli and Palestinian world-views have been most thoroughly internalized, many Israelis and Palestinians can no longer understand themselves, as political agents, outside of the conflict.

Nusseibeh’s explanation via the tyranny of meta-biological constructs leads to

perhaps undue optimism. He argues that we should have faith in the moral trajectory of history and recognize the underlying common ground between the parties, namely a humane morality based on compassion and the recognition of universal human values. “It is this account,” he writes,

that allows for peacemakers to break meta-biological barriers: for Israelis and Palestinians to see each other as human beings, and to forge a common fight for the well-being of the two communities.

This faith in humanity may come at the price of losing touch with reality. While a suicide bomber could suddenly realize “that the act he has

SO TENDER BEAUTY

Sarah Sarai

A sign of your times, a rose-happy glow enameled on dawn’s fingertips, a smiling hardhat Phoebus harnessing wild geldings to a mythic time-oiled chariot for another day’s work. You don’t think the sun just hangs around? Illumination rolls in place for your enlightenment. Spirits assess your purpose on the planet. No abyss with you falling falling hurtling big, and yet you’re loath to enter atmospheres of the day. You and oblong room cuddle in swirled string-thin beams swaying like genetic tinsel draping lofting evergreens. At tables in your room of living, huffing scalding coffee perked, their coffee cups clinking in your room of life, a charmed crew, and saucers with tendril and fleur. Square napkins mere, sop spills that are just gonna happen in your room of life in your life eternal as it courtly bops you thriving to extravagant nows, some infused by murderous urges briefly just. The best become expansive. In a spray of silvered light, a butterfly boasting so tender beauty, we forgive its disaffirmation of the cocoon.

vowed to commit in the heart of Tel Aviv will be a crime against humanity,” politics must deal with the world at hand, not with the prospect, attractive though it may be, that this world will somehow transform into another more compassionate and reasoned one. Accordingly, the burning question is not whether we can find a common morality that might enable us to transcend divisive identifications; it is, rather, *how* to loosen the grip of pugnacious and self-destructive identities in favor of inclusive and wholesome ones. But instead of answering that timely question, Nusseibeh sails the seas of timeless meditation:

In a world that has come to be divided in accordance with a power scale between large meta-biological players, the only way we . . . can achieve a peaceful life and minimize conflict and violence is to continue believing in and to be guided by a value system or a moral order we, as human individuals, can all agree upon. If we take the individual rather than the state or some other meta-biological being as our starting point, and if we peel off enough of the layers we have inherited or constructed over our inner identities, we will indeed find that we share, impelled by our common sentiment for compassion, the will to do what we believe is right.

Indeed. But the desperate plight of Palestinians and Israelis at this crucial moment will not be alleviated merely by a moral vision. Rather, a *political* breakthrough, political in the sense that it engages with the difficult choices of a concrete reality, is needed. The question, as always, comes down to the infamous: what is to be done? On this front Nusseibeh’s proposal is unsatisfactory. He identifies political rights with the right to vote and to be elected to political office. Viewed this way, the argument may appear reasonable: give up political rights to ensure human and civil rights. Assuming moral individualism and the

primacy of life and the improvement of its quality, is it not reasonable to give up the opportunity to play the political game—a game played on the field of interests fueling reified identities and pitting meta-biological entities against one another—in order to attain tangible securities for personal well-being?

The supposed separateness of these rights is erroneous. Political rights are conditions for the realization and assurance of human and civil rights. What the case of Jerusalem teaches us is that without political rights, civil and human rights cannot be guaranteed. The same was true of Apartheid South Africa and of women in the United States and Europe before they were afforded the right to vote. Hannah Arendt took this lesson from the rise of totalitarian regimes in the first half of the twentieth century and particularly from the plight of stateless refugees. “The Rights of Man,” Arendt says:

had been defined as ‘inalienable’ because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.

In the contemporary nation-state political order, the opportunity to engage in what Nusseibeh derogatorily calls “politicking” is, as Arendt has it, “the right to have rights.” Absent political participation and representation, what powers will Palestinians have to oppose discriminatory policies of the kind that shape the unfortunate realities of East Jerusalem?

Hardhearted realism should not be countered with excessive idealism. While politics without ethics leads to the treatment of human beings as playthings, ethics without politics amounts to giving up on the possibility of changing human lives for the better. Of course, saying that politics

are not optional is not the same as saying that morally objectionable political solutions should be accepted. But there is a difference between insisting that our decisions and actions must be guided by moral principles and believing that moral principles—“shared human values”—are solutions in and of themselves.

After a century of bloody conflict and two decades of futile negotiations, it is of little surprise that many Palestinians and Israelis have lost faith in the power of politics to transform reality. But recent events may put a dent in this melancholy assumption. In Tunisia and Egypt, two of the longest-standing autocrats of the Arab world were toppled in swift and energetic popular uprisings. As we are writing, masses in Syria and rebel forces in Libya are defying oppressive regimes that until recently seemed unshakable. Regardless of the way it eventually unfolds, the Arab Spring is bound to have a transformative effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian national reconciliation is a case in point. It remains to be seen if Israelis will be able to break free of ossified identities and react to these developments in the spirit of change that is coursing through the Arab world.

Few Israelis will read Nusseibeh’s book; fewer still will seriously ponder his proposal. But Nusseibeh is an experienced and bold politician and a shrewd intellectual. His views, accordingly, demand serious consideration. Scattered remarks in his book suggest that his proposal is intended less as a political program than as “shock therapy” aimed at shaking leaders from their complacent intransigence, and the desperation this betrays must be heeded. Nusseibeh used to be one of the staunchest and bravest supporters of the two-state solution. His departure from that position expresses a growing sense of disillusionment and despair among Palestinians, which does not bode well. **BR**