Is This Man Dangerous?
Sari Nusseibeh Challenges Middle East Orthodoxies
By HAIM WATZMAN

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Sari Nusseibeh proposes an interim route to peace in the Middle East

By HAIM WATZMAN

SARI NUSSEIBEH’S SOCKS MATCH THESE DAYS, he’s clean-shaven, and he’s a university president rather than an anarchist student or faculty union leader. But his hair, though a bit shorter and a lot grayer than it was in the 1970s and 80s, is still unkempt. Despite his establishment perch and his foothold in East Jerusalem, his head is still in the clouds. It might be the distance between his extremities that makes him the most politically incorrect political activist in Palestinian politics.

In his latest book, What Is a Palestinian State Worth? (Harvard University Press), he brings before the English-speaking readership a bundle of musings, heresies, and paradoxes, ideas that he’s published here and there in the Palestinian press and broached elsewhere in the world in talks and lectures, at academic conferences and peace symposiums. The ideas might sound strange in their departure from conventional wisdom about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the positions of leaders and pundits on both sides, but it’s good policy to pay attention. In the past, Sari Nusseibeh has taken positions that his fellow Palestinians condemned—and then, a couple of uprisings and aborted peace conferences later, embraced.

Standing behind his desk at Al-Quds University’s small campus in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina, Nusseibeh greets me with a bashful and puzzled expression. He is frequently interviewed by foreign journalists, but he looks like he can’t quite comprehend why anyone would want to discuss his book with him. I can’t help being struck by the spacious office he now occupies, with comfortable couches, armchairs, and coffee table, its walls a pleasant jumble of photographs and student artworks.

I first met Nusseibeh in the early 1980s, when he was a philosophy instructor at Birzeit University, near Ramallah. The university, then housed in a set of worn, cramped rooms around a walled courtyard...
the fight against Order 854, an Israeli military decree that threatened faculty members with deportation if they refused to cooperate with the Israeli administration. Those activities required coordination with the PLO leadership through its headquarters in Amman, Jordan.

Since contact with the PLO was a criminal offense under Israeli law, Nusseibeh and others developed a way of smuggling important documents in and out of the West Bank, as he describes in his 2007 memoir: "Messages were written in minuscule script on both sides of very thin paper. The message was carefully folded into a small tight roll. ... This was then wrapped in a layer of protective paper taken from the inside lining of a cigarette packet. Finally, it was rolled up into a piece of plastic cut from a shopping bag. Once the message was properly wrapped, the skillful smuggler lit a match, blew it out, and used the glint from the dying flame to melt the plastic together at both ends. Now the capsule was ready to be swallowed."

One of the main reasons Nusseibeh's Birzeit colleagues chose him to represent them was that he was one of the few who was not associated with one of the many Palestinian political factions. But his independent streak got him into trouble as well.

In 1977, when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made his unexpected peace overture to Israel, nearly all Palestinian leaders and writers condemned him as a traitor to the cause. But Nusseibeh, then a graduate student at Harvard, was enthusiastic. Later, back in Jerusalem, he took part in back-channel negotiations with officials linked to the government of the Israeli hard-right nationalist Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir—for which, in 1986, he got beaten up by a group of Birzeit students. Yet in the end, the Palestinian leadership and public came to realize they had to negotiate with Israel. Nusseibeh still displays little respect for convention, whether of ideas or of protocol. I'm interviewing him, but he asks the first, wishful question, about the conflict that his people and mine have been locked in for a century: "So do you think there is any hope for our situation?"

Gloomily, he remarks that we're at a dead end. But then, brightening a bit, he notes that the despair of the dead end can be an inspiration for new perspectives and original ideas.

More likely than not, press coverage of the new book will focus on one provocative idea that Nusseibeh suggests: He offers it as an interim way of improving the lot of the Palestinians in the West Bank without threatening the Jewish character of the Israeli state. It also might be a way, he thinks, of getting around the continuing debate over how many countries ought to exist between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

The prevailing view among both Israelis and Palestinians since the early 1990s has been that a Palestinian state should come into existence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, alongside Israel. But, in frustration over the failure to reach such an agreement, increasing numbers of Palestinians are arguing that there should be only one state, for both Jews and Palestinians. That idea is a nonstarter for nearly all Israelis, even those who have long advocated accommodation with the Palestinians. They see it as a plan for denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination and self-defense.

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eligible for all government entitlements and services. Yet Nusseibeh stresses that this is not a plan that he sees as the answer to the current impasse in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, nor one he intends to promote in particular.

"I don't have a message in the book. It's more that I was given an opportunity to put my reflections down on paper. A lot of stuff in there is questions, things I haven't worked out properly," he explains.

"I hope people who read it will be able to think about it, raise more questions, that it will allow them to find new ways of going forward." In a lot of ways then, What Is a Palestinian State Worth? is, as one might expect from a university president who still teaches undergraduate philosophy courses, more of an educational project than a polemic. It's meant to get people to think, not give them answers. So it combines an analysis of the history and current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with musings on the nature of identity, the concept of justice, and the proper role of the state.

The 600-page Ph.D. dissertation that Nusseibeh wrote at Harvard delves into the thought of Avicenna, the 11th-century Islamic polymath and philosopher who, according to Nusseibeh, stressed man's metaphysical freedom and rejected inherent identities of the self or the nation. But, tellingly, Nusseibeh's account of his discovery of and engagement with Avicenna and other Islamic philosophers, in his memoir Once Upon a Country (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), appears in a chapter titled "Monticello." There he describes how he was moved to tears during a visit, in the mid-1970s, to the estate of Thomas Jefferson.

And he notes that the obelisk marking the founding father's grave omits mention of his service as secretary of state, vice president, and president. Instead, it cites as his memorable achievements "the authorship of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." One could hardly characterize Nusseibeh better than by saying he is an Avicennist in the West and a Jeffersonian in the East.

After his indifferent career at St. George's, the Anglican school to which many members of the city's elite sent their children, Sari Nusseibeh's parents sent him to Rugby, the prestigious British boarding school—but he ran away. In the end, he ended up at Oxford a year after the Six-Day War, in which Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan; occupied large swathes of their territories; and put the Nusseibehs, like the rest of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, under Israeli rule. He was 18, and had already been recruited into Yasser Arafat's Palestinian nationalist Fatah movement which soon gained control of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Nusseibeh plunged headlong into the radicalism of the 60s and into pro-Palestinian activity. He handed out Fatah fliers and went to meeings. But he soon tired of that, and his political activity turned in a more intellectual direction. He made friends with Israeli students—particularly, with Avishai Margalit, now one of Israel's best-known philosophers—and debated the conflict at a teashop.

"It was easy to discuss politics with Avishai," Nusseibeh writes in his memoir, "because we both had sufficient distance from events back home to scoff at the bugle-blowing victors (his side) and the caviling complainers (mine)."

This independent streak led him to do things that no other young Palestinian dreamed of doing. After the war, Israel's borders were closed and Palestinians from the territories had been out of the country when the war broke out had to sneak across the Jordan River to get home. Nusseibeh published an open letter in the London Times demanding that Israel allow him to return home openly. He was invited to the Israeli Embassy in London and he went, even though his Palestinian friends thought he should tear up the invitation from the enemy. A few days later, he boarded an El Al flight to Tel Aviv. Later, he attended an iftar, one of the intensive Hebrew-language courses that Israel gives for new immigrants, and worked one summer as a volunteer on a kibbutz. At Oxford he fell in love with and married Lucy Austin, daughter of the philosopher of language John Austin.

After completing his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1978, Nusseibeh returned to Jerusalem and, true to type, took a teaching position at Birzeit and another at the Hebrew University. At Birzeit and other colleges and universities in the West Bank and Gaza, factions associated with Fatah, the Islamic movement, and several Marxist-nationalist splinter groups fought out student government elections that, because they were the only elections that Palestinians could vote in at the time, served as barometers of the political weather in the occupied territories. They were also closely watched by the Israeli army and security services, which periodically closed down the campuses in response to student demonstrations.

"The student atmosphere on the campuses then was one of independence, confidence, commitment, and strength of conviction," Nusseibeh recalls. "If you compare it with the situation now, you see it has become transformed. It's upside down, literally."

Many students, he says, are now in the employ of one of the numerous security organizations run by the Palestinian Authority, the self-governing body set up in the 1990s under the terms of the Oslo Accords. Like the classical political philosophers, Nusseibeh sees education as key to creating a just and virtuous state. As a university chief, a teacher, and a writer who frequently publishes articles in Palestinian newspapers and magazines, he sees his main role as encouraging his countrymen to think critically and independently.

What Is a Palestinian State Worth? seems almost deliberately designed to raise the hackles of everyone who reads it. It's not quite clear who its intended audience is. (When I ask Nusseibeh what reader he had in mind when he wrote it, he says—ironically? resignedly?—"Myself.") It is clearly part of Nusseibeh's larger educational project of getting his fellow Palestinians to question their assumptions, rather than adhere fruitlessly to outmoded categories, concepts, and politics positions. His people, he argues, should use the moral force of nonviolence to transform, not defeat, their Israeli adversaries. And precisely because the Palestinians are weaker and under occupation, he argues they have the power to do this.

"It's the paradox of being on top," he explains. "In a wrestling match, the guy on top is the one who is the weakest, because he's the one who's the most vulnerable. But it's the one on top who has the power to change things. That's the power of the weak."
match, you have one contender down on the floor kicking and biting, and another one on top trying to hold him down. It looks as if the one on top has power and the one underneath is the victim. The one on top can never trust the one underneath. But the one underneath can afford to trust because he's underneath anyway.” The victor fears losing his supremacy by trusting his rival, but the underdog can afford to trust his oppressor because he has nothing to lose, Nusseibeh explains.

And while he still thinks that the best recipe for coexistence is a two-state solution, one in which a Palestinian nation-state comprising the West Bank and Gaza Strip would exist side by side with the Jewish state of Israel, he stresses in his book that a state should not be an end in itself. “There is no need for us to have a separate or so-called independent state,” he writes. A state is only a means of achieving collective well-being, of transforming oppression into freedom, he argues. And the Jewish and Palestinian states should exist only as long as they serve that purpose. Indeed, they might be the best way of allowing the two nations to evolve slowly toward a state of Jeffersonian ideals, one in which all citizens are equal and free regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or national identity.

The suggestion that the Jewish state might be just a way station toward some other political arrangement will ring alarm bells with Israelis. Most of the country’s leaders and citizens fear that the Palestinian leadership’s consent to set up a Palestinian state alongside Israel is merely tactical, and that the ultimate goal is to overwhelm Israel militarily or demographically and subsume it into the Arab world. And most Israelis, even fervent supporters of accommodation with the Palestinians, look at the Middle East and conclude that Jews living in an Arab state would almost certainly not enjoy equality, democracy, or physical security.

Most Israelis will also not be pleased that the Israelis that Nusseibeh mentions time and again in the book are radicals and outsiders who are seen even by many in the country’s peace camp as hostile to the Jewish people’s right to self-determination. He suggests, citing Shlomo Sand’s The Invention of the Jewish People, that the Arabs who lived in Palestine before the British conquest, rather than the Jewish immigrants who arrived in the 20th century, were probably the descendants of the region’s ancient inhabitants. Sand, a professor of history at Tel Aviv University, is an avowed anti-Zionist whose book was condemned by nearly all Israeli reviewers, of all political stripes, as awful scholarship and unoriginal polemic. His Tel Aviv University colleague Anita Shapira summed up the book by saying “there is something warped and objectionable in the assumption that for Jews to integrate into the Middle East, they, and they alone of all the peoples in the region, must shed their national identity and historical memories and reconstruct themselves in a way that may (perhaps) find favor with Israeli-Palestinians.” The mere mention of Sand, in the first chapter, as a respectable scholar is likely to make many Israelis and pro-Israeli readers put the book down at once.

Nusseibeh also makes much of Israeli peace activists such as Uri Avneri and Abie Nathan, colorful but not particularly influential radicals on the fringe of Israeli society. Nathan, for example, was the nascent Israeli peace movement’s leading stunt man. In 1965 he flew his own airplane from Israel to Egypt with the goal of delivering a peace petition to Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser (Nasser refused to see him and had him deported). He staged hunger strikes to protest the construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and was jailed for meeting with Yasser Arafat and other PLO leaders.

Nusseibeh clearly admires such figures because they were willing to say things and take positions that lay far outside their own community’s consensus.

“These are the unsung heroes,” he stresses. “Contrary to how many people think about them, that they are peripheral, one should look upon them as the visible points on the surface, underneath which something much more important and significant is happening. They are the human face, evidence of a deep human element that is not necessarily evident in Israeli society.”

Nusseibeh seems to hope that Al-Quds University will produce some Palestinian versions of Avneri and Nathan—people who can see beyond the conventions and tropes in which the rest of their society is caught.

And he thinks that this is sorely needed right now. While large majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians claim to support a two-state arrangement, they vote for political parties that work against that goal—the Palestinians for the Islamist movement Hamas, and the Israelis for the Likud and other parties that promote Israeli settlement in the West Bank. All the efforts of the leaders of both countries, and of the international community, to achieve a two-state solution have failed.

In despair, many Palestinians have abandoned the idea of two separate states—they demand a single state, comprising all the territory of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip, in which the majority would rule. Israelis point out that demographic trends are such that the Palestinians would soon be the majority, and that that would be the end of Jewish independence and self-determination.

That’s why Nusseibeh is floating ideas like giving the Palestinians civil but not political rights.

“I’m not talking about a solution,” he asserts. “It’s not like going to the supermarket and they’re out of two-states so you pick up a one-state. It looks like we are stuck, so the question arises: What are we to do?”

The question, he says, is what is the best alternative for the Palestinians, and for the Israelis too, under the current circumstances?

“…Ideally, one would like to be guided by humanist principles. One should try to bring about as much equality as possible, given differences.

I’m not a magician, but I think that human beings are capable of being creative and coming up with imaginative solutions if required,” he explains.

Despite the current deadlock, there is cause for optimism, he thinks.

“Regardless of the fact that the Camp David talks collapsed, if you look at the relations of Jews and Arabs, we’ve come a long way toward finding some way to reach out for some mode of coexistence,” he says “It didn’t work, but it was nevertheless an immense step forward, if you contrast where we were before.”

At similar junctions in the past, Nusseibeh has been condemned by his fellow Palestinians as a traitor to the cause and dismissed by Israelis as, at best, a lone moderate Palestinian voice among the wolves and, at worst, a fanatic in dove’s clothing (during the first Gulf War, in 1991, Israeli forces jailed him for 90 days without filing charges; according to press reports, he was suspected of spying for Iraq). When he teamed up in 2003 with the former chief of the Israeli Security Agency (popularly known as the Shin Bet), Ami Ayalon, on a grass-roots peace initiative called “The People’s Voice,” he was condemned by other Palestinians for agreeing to a clause stating that Palestinian refugees would not be able to return to their former homes in Israel.

“People haven’t reacted so far to this idea,” Nusseibeh says, referring to the possibility of granting the Palestinians civil but not political rights in Israel. “But if you ask around, they’ll tell you that I’m a person who has crazy ideas. I’m an optimist. I see things going in a good direction. Except I can’t tell exactly what that direction looks like.”