

Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life by Sari Nusseibeh

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ONCE UPON
A COUNTRY
A PALESTINIAN LIFE

SARI NUSSEIBEH
with ANTHONY DAVID

A realistic oil painting of Shimon Peres, an elderly man with grey hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a purple patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark.

SHIMON
PERES

The Biography

MICHAEL BAR-ZOHAR

Bring together Palestinian philosopher Sari Nusseibeh (1949-) and Israeli statesman Shimon Peres (1923-) and the first thought that occurs to any longtime observer of the Arab-Israeli conflict is: Get a room.

That is, get them a room. Or a suite. With fax machines, smart young aides, BlackBerrys, and plenty of gun-toting bodyguards.

The whole mess might be over in a week.

No?

For many Western experts, Nusseibeh, the Oxford- and Harvard-educated president of Jerusalem's Al-Quds University, long married to a daughter of famed Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin, counts as the most reasonable of Palestinians.

Though he differs severely on policy toward Israel from the late Edward Said, Nusseibeh, like that longtime Columbia University professor, boasts an intellectual pedigree that makes him the Palestinian nationalist you can take home to mother, or at least to a West Side wine-and-cheese reception.

Over the years, he's argued for many positions that endangered his life among his own people, such as that Jews have a historic right to live in Palestine, or that some top PLO leaders steal money almost by reflex.

At the same time, Nusseibeh has also sought to get along with more militant peers. He tried to lobby Arafat in liberal directions, and helped to orchestrate the "first intifada." He has played both sides so sufficiently well that some right-wing Israelis unfairly label him "the smiling face of Palestinian terror."

Peres, in turn, stands to many, at age 83, as the most intellectual, literary and reasonable of Israeli leaders, the last serving founding father of Israel -- he's currently the country's vice-premier. Co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Peres has always mixed pragmatic concern for Israel's security with an openness to the Arab "other."

The publication of Nusseibeh's absorbing autobiography and a semiauthorized major biography of Peres by Michael Bar-Zohar, a prolific author and former Knesset member, provides an occasion to reflect on how this pair of "two-state-solution" types came to hold the views they do. At the same time, it reminds us of how even the best of each people remain yoked by circumstances to the master narrative of their own tribe, not to mention the worst and dimmest of their peers.

Nusseibeh's memoir presents an introspective gloss on his life and times, starting with his dilemma at 19 over how to get his wife, Lucy, to move back to troubled Jerusalem with him after Israel conquered East Jerusalem in the 1967 war.

Crucial to Nusseibeh's self-identity is the prominence of his elite family, which dates to the coming to Palestine 1,300 years ago of Omar the Great, one of Islam's foremost imperialists. That family history foreshadows one of Nusseibeh's problems in rallying Palestinians to his ideas: his image among some as a patrician more concerned about accolades from the West than Palestinian interests.

Nusseibeh acknowledges his lifelong curiosity about the "others" that he once knew only across the barbed wire of a divided pre-1967 Jerusalem, where he'd listen to Beatles songs on Israeli stations. As a young man, Nusseibeh studied Hebrew, participated in an Israeli archaeological dig, lived on a kibbutz, and made friends at Oxford with the future Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit.

Not the kind of training program likely to lead one to become a suicide bomber or martyr, or be sympathetic to their tactics (Nusseibeh is not).

Despite his privileged social status, Nusseibeh grew up with vivid evidence of the costs of Israeli-Arab enmity -- his father lost a leg in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. Like his father, however, Nusseibeh believed that Israel would persist. He long supported one state for both Jews and Arabs.

Perhaps the most volatile idea Nusseibeh embraced as he taught philosophy at Birzeit University was that Jews had a right to live in

Palestine. Nusseibeh did not argue "real estate fairness" -- that if Arabs rule 99 percent of a Mideast once full of Jewish communities, it's simple fairness that Jews rule one sliver.

No, Nusseibeh accepted a historical argument. He cited "the greatest Islamic tale of all," Muhammad's "Night Journey" to Palestine in the Quran, and quoted, as he does in this memoir, the first Palestinian mayor of Jerusalem, Zia al-Khalidi.

Al-Khalidi wrote in the 19th century to his friend Zadoc Khan, the chief rabbi of France, "Who can contest the rights of the Jews to Palestine? God knows, historically it is indeed your country." Yet al-Khalidi counseled against European Jews' resettling Palestine because it had become, Nusseibeh observes, "thickly inhabited by Arabs."

So, in turn, Nusseibeh angered the PLO, Hamas and Arab leaders elsewhere by rejecting "a blanket right of return into Israel" by Arab refugees from the 1948 war, and their descendants.

As Nusseibeh takes us through his experiences at the periphery of Palestinian power -- often present without clout, as at Arafat's funeral (which he fled because of its chaos), he assigns blame in a way almost unique among Palestinian commentators: to aggressive Israeli settlers and Palestinian suicide bombers alike.

Today, after the death threats, jail time, a beating, Nusseibeh, who prefers Gandhian civil disobedience to guns, travels with bodyguards when on home territory. They are not around, we understand from this book, to protect him from assassination by Israelis.

Bar-Zohar's admiring biography of Peres, by contrast, displays a career - - decades as an official shaper of his nation -- that Nusseibeh might have had if his peers had compromised with Israel. Twice prime minister of Israel, Peres has also held almost every other senior portfolio.

Bar-Zohar explains that contrary to his subject's image on the Israeli right as being too accommodationist toward Arab interests, Peres always thought that Israel must achieve security first before making concessions.

It was Peres, never a soldier himself, who helped build Israel's military might in the 1950s, and persuaded France to help construct Israel's nuclear deterrent.

Yet, Bar-Zohar elaborates, the "mass-production of creative plans and ideas" by Peres (among them the Oslo negotiations) has guaranteed him enemies. Peres' endless political strategizing, "mediocre" skills as a politician, and what columnist Nahum Barnea called a history of "absorbing blows and insults," conferred on this highly competent statesman the image of an electoral loser. The Israeli public never backs Peres sufficiently to turn his peace ideas into reality.

On closing these books, we find ourselves back to that wished-for room. Many power players on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict would happily support the idea.

They'd lock Peres and Nusseibeh in the room and throw away the key.