

**The Guardian:** "[Double vision](#)" By *Jonathan Wittenberg* - March 15, 2008

## **Double vision**

Jonathan Wittenberg applauds Sari Nusseibeh's sensitive look at the Middle East, *Once Upon a Country*

"Isn't this inability to imagine the lives of the 'other' at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" writes Sari Nusseibeh. It is this capacity for imaginative insight, coupled with his dedication to his own people's struggle, which makes Nusseibeh so remarkable a man and *Once Upon a Country* such an important book. For me, as a Zionist Jew committed to Israelis' existence and welfare, those others are the Palestinians. For Nusseibeh, they are the Israelis.

Scion of an ancient and aristocratic Palestinian family, philosopher and dreamer by temperament, secular in spirit and academic by training, Nusseibeh is a visionary from a land of visionaries. As a boy he looked out with curiosity across the no man's land which divided the Jerusalem where his family had resided for 1,300 years. There is a tragic parallelism between Amos Oz's memories of severed alleyways ending in brick walls and Nusseibeh's glimpses of "a parallel city on the other side of the wall". It comes as no surprise to learn that the two men are friends and, in a way, allies.

After the 1967 war Nusseibeh took "the most astounding trek of my life", into Israeli Jerusalem. He even volunteered on Kibbutz Hazorea, (founded by members of my own family fleeing Nazi Europe) where he admired the ideological commitment of its members.

It is precisely this breadth of vision that gives Nusseibeh such stature as a Palestinian leader. Head of the academic union at Birzeit University, later president of Al-Quds University, he is, by his own admission, a reluctant politician. Yet he bears forceful and implacable witness to the immense injustice and outrage of occupation, from the confiscation of lands that belonged to his family for generations, to the daily degradations, imprisonments, deportations, threats and violence his people have suffered, and still do.

Deeply opposed on moral and pragmatic grounds to violence and guerrilla tactics, he suggested in the 1980s that Israel either annex the territories and offer Palestinians equal rights within the Israeli democratic system, or give them independence. This drew him into a series of negotiations, covert and overt, with Israeli politicians: "It was worth the risk if I could help avert the brewing war between our peoples," he writes. Attacked outside his Birzeit classroom by local Tanzim - militants aligned with Yassar Arafat's Fatah - he declared, still in his cast and bandages, to a rally of Israeli peace activists: "They can't beat that out of me."

During the first intifada Nusseibeh was responsible for drafting the leaflets which guided the uprising and gave it its moral and political objectives. He helped people evade arrest, distributed money, and learned to be so astute in his movements that he managed to elude not only the Israelis but even his own bodyguards. That did not prevent him, however, from spending three months in jail, a period of reflection which he, surprisingly, rather enjoyed. But then he was not subject to the tortures practised on others.

Nusseibeh's insights into Palestinian and Israeli leaders are sharp. Arafat likes plain talking but has "an actively mistrustful mind"; he is not personally corrupt, but fails to act to prevent the Palestinian Authority descending into a sleazy kleptocracy. His embrace of Saddam Hussein is a moral and political disaster. Yitzhak Shamir may really desire negotiations, but he undermines them: his true intent is to waste 10 years talking, by which time half a million settlers will render the notion of a Palestinian state impossible. Abu Jihad is

in Nusseibeh's view the man most responsible for keeping the first intifada relatively free of violence; his assassination in Tunis by Israel is both criminal and stupid. Sheikh Yassin commits "terrorist outrages against Israel".

To me, certain key issues are still missing. The conflict is not properly contextualised within the pan-Arab and later Islamist narrative of wanting to wipe Israel off the map. It may be impossible for a non-Jew to estimate fully the impact of this existentialist threat, repeated in words and bombs, on the psyche and politics of a people who have survived genocide within living memory.

But for anyone interested in a just and enduring solution which recognises the tragic histories of two peoples, this book is essential reading. At Birzeit Nusseibeh wanted his students "to think for themselves, without kowtowing to the opinions of their fathers or Muslim clerics or priests or professors like me. I wanted them to deconstruct their inherited mental horizons." He forces his readers to do likewise.

Has Nusseibeh lost hope after Hamas' election victories and their violent control of Gaza? Certainly not. He reminds us of one of his father's sayings: "Rubble, he used to tell me, often makes the best building materials." Has he a political constituency? He's a good man, it's said, but who does he represent? Once Upon a Country shows

that his true constituency is ordinary people, both Palestinians and Israelis, two nations which, he insists, are not enemies but "natural allies".

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