

## **Man of Peace**

The activism of a Palestinian philosopher who condemns suicide bombings.

Reviewed by Robert Malley  
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### *ONCE UPON A COUNTRY*

#### *A Palestinian Life*

*By Sari Nusseibeh with Anthony David*

In 2002, at the height of the second Palestinian uprising and amid harsh Israeli military offensives, two prominent individuals unveiled a courageous peace plan. The Israeli author was Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, his country's internal security agency. Plunging headfirst into the public debate was, for him, a relatively novel exercise.

Not so for his Palestinian partner. Sari Nusseibeh, the author of the captivating *Once Upon a Country*, is a repeat offender. This Oxford-trained philosopher was an unlikely recruit to politics, which probably explains why he practices such an unlikely brand of it. Born into an illustrious Palestinian family, he sought early on to escape the life of influence and authority for which he appeared to be destined. He ended up deeply involved in aspects of Israeli-Palestinian relations and dealt with virtually every major Palestinian leader. But philosophy was his true calling, and, even as the draw of politics ultimately proved too hard to resist, he always had intellectual pursuits on which to fall back. And so he maintained a distant, insouciant relationship to the perks and privileges of power as well as an affectionate, abiding one to controversy. It shows.

Nusseibeh, now the president of al-Quds University in Jerusalem, was a believer in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue long before it was in favor, an advocate of nonviolence when other Palestinians were glorifying suicide bombers, an embodiment of secularism as the Islamist Hamas movement

was conquering new ground in Palestinian politics. In the late 1960s, when so many of his compatriots still dreamed of ridding the land of those it considered intruders, he argued for coexistence among Arabs and Jews in a secular, binational state. When he later came around to the idea of a two-state solution, with Israel living in peace alongside Palestine, many Palestinians were clamoring for a single state. Even now, one senses that his commitment to splitting the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean may not be everlasting. If a two-state solution is not reached soon, he writes, Palestinians will fight for "one man, one vote" in a unified Arab-Israeli state -- a comment one can take as warning or wish. Not a few Palestinians consider his moderation traitorous; a respectable number of Israelis consider it their most potent threat.

Nusseibeh's new memoir, *Once Upon a Country*, is a remarkable chronicle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, seen through this improbable pair of eyes. His Palestinian colleagues come in for abundant criticism -- for negotiating without a clear vision or sufficient expert knowledge and, above all, for becoming intoxicated with their own deadly delusions about violence. Nusseibeh's message is clear: that the two sides are divided by ignorance, not malice; that the burden is on the Palestinians to win over their Israeli counterparts; that this can be done only through dialogue and nonviolent resistance; that Palestinians should not insist on the right of their refugees to return to what is now Israel proper; that Palestinian negotiators need not be intransigent to be tough and need not surrender their principles to reach a deal with Israel.

Nusseibeh's eloquent and compassionate book no doubt will stir yet another round of polemics; his actions usually do. Like Nusseibeh, most Palestinians have concluded that the ways of the past need rethinking. A decade of peace-processing, they feel, has led to more misery and less security without getting them any closer to their goals of sovereignty and independence. Unlike Nusseibeh, however, many Palestinians are not at all convinced that the answer is more dialogue and less violence, let alone conceding up front on the refugees' right of return. These are familiar Palestinian dilemmas: If you regularize discussions with Israelis, do you

render routine the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? If you abandon armed struggle, do you retain leverage over a militarily superior opponent? If you compromise in advance, do you weaken your hand?

The humane worldview of *Once Upon a Country* is one answer to this Palestinian conundrum. Hamas is another, and Nusseibeh -- who quickly dismisses the radical Islamists as sloganeering, inauthentic fanatics -- does not quite do it justice. To be sure, as he writes, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 discredited the concept of land-for-peace negotiations and so gave a boost to the Islamists, who crowed that their bombs and rockets had driven Israel out. But the roots of their January 2006 election victory run far deeper. Hamas is a response to the Palestinians' material and psychological condition, a reaction to years of lost dignity, an affirmation (however troubling) of a yearning for self-respect.

A Hamas leader recently explained to me that dealing with Israel required retaining Palestinian leverage and displaying patience. Palestinians who had opted for the route of compromise "cannot prevail, because they have defeat in their hearts." He was not referring to Nusseibeh specifically, but one gets the point. *Once Upon a Country* is a magnificent study of hope under siege. Nusseibeh offers a possible means of escape. Far more will be needed to convince his fellow Palestinians it is the best one. ·

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