

## 'Once Upon a Country': a path to Mideast peace?

Arab philosopher Nusseibeh insists on our ability to effect change – even in the Middle East.

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- By Carol Huang

"Emotions ... can be transformed through an act of will. It's up to us to turn hatred into understanding."

In his recent memoir, Palestinian intellectual and public figure Sari Nusseibeh lays out his legacy – and his ideal – as a Palestinian nationalist: One who tried to foster a nonviolent, grass-roots movement for statehood, founded on the belief that the human will is powerful enough to realize freedom under oppression.

His optimism is buoyant and rare.

In more than a decade of a downward-spiraling conflict that's entering its second century, Nusseibeh reiterates his freedom-of-the-will mantra so frequently that readers might wonder whether he's trying to convince us, or himself.

Yet this Harvard-trained scholar seems to revel in radical ideas and fairy tales – such as peace and Palestine. Hence the title, **Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life**.

Part of Nusseibeh's challenge is convincing Palestinians that his peacenik ideas have been in their interest. With 13 generations of his family born in Jerusalem, many holding high office, Nusseibehs were committed public servants in the Holy Land long before Yasser Arafat donned his first kaffiyeh.

Nusseibeh's positions would certainly peg him as a Palestinian. To him there's no doubt his people belong on the land or that Israel is full of bad guys. "A more radical generation of settlers ... grew more and more brazen" and "Shin Bet agents ... beat them [Palestinians] to death," he writes, clearly fingering the Israeli perpetrators.

But through artful sentence constructions, Palestinian agency often vanishes: "Violence was taking root," and "Lebanese-like terror had reached Israel in the form of a bus-bombing." Still, Nusseibeh's loyalty doesn't lie squarely with Palestinians. He scorns extremist "Islamic loonies" and avoids Arafat's often-corrupt inner circle.

Ultimately, Nusseibeh identifies with humanism – the power of humans to effect change. He sees and appreciates it everywhere, even in the "enemy" he worked with briefly as a boy growing up in Jerusalem.

"The standard kibbutznik was a model humanist [whom] I had no choice but to admire," he says. That he had "no conception of the steep price we Arabs had paid for his freedom ... wasn't a product of malevolence...."

Studying at Oxford and Harvard, Nusseibeh finds strength for his convictions by reading medieval Islamic philosophers, such as Avicenna. Through their writings, he becomes convinced that no matter how hopelessly entrenched Palestinians and Israelis seem in their positions the feud can be overcome through reasoning.

In 1978, Nusseibeh returns home, flush with the idea of spreading tolerance and the power of logic and will.

It's 11 years after the 1967 Six-Day War confounded Palestinians, and Israeli occupation has crept through the West Bank. But to him life is not too hard for his ideals to take root. Nusseibeh's activism soon begins, from a campus effort to defend

academic freedom to the first intifada which began in 1987 as a nonviolent, nationalist movement.

"The intifada ... voices the Palestinian cry for peace," a leaflet proclaimed. "It is not to destroy another state, but to create our own. It is not to bring death to others, but to give life and hope to ourselves."

Initial peace talks in the early 1990s bring jubilation. "Maybe you'd have to go back to Jefferson's America to find such spirited activity among would-be state-builders," he says.

People feel empowered. Even his many students who spend time in Israeli prison assert their freedom there by not capitulating in their minds. Nusseibeh practices this himself during his own brief prison stay, in 1991. "A glorious state," he says of solitary confinement. "The long hours alone left me with my thoughts."

But as the intifada gives way to years of failed negotiations and a "macabre cycle" of violence, Nusseibeh's optimism shows cracks. Behind the "revolution's philosopher" emerges a human, grappling with the sense of enormous loss. "I felt as if I was watching a slow act of homicide, the killing of a city that constituted the soul of my family and of my people," he writes.

Still, he insists, "All that was needed was calm, reasoned deliberation.... The tempest would pass, I had no doubt."

Nusseibeh's lofty attitude can seem a bit far-fetched, even insensitive. Yet he remains proud of his efforts to grow a grass-roots movement for a future state, even though it's been trampled by aggression.

"Over the past few years I've seen my share of smashed dreams," he writes, " but ... rubble ... often makes the best building material."