

A risk-taker for peace / Palestinian intellectual braves death threats to end conflict with Israel as PLO representative

Reviewed by Charles Matthews

April 8, 2007



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Photo: Rina Castelnovo

Sari Nusseibeh, author of *ONCE UPON A COUNTRY: A PALESTINIAN LIFE*. Credit: Rina Castelnovo. FOR USE WITH BOOK REVIEW ONLY Contact Sarita.Varma@fsgbooks.com

No one is in more danger than a sane man in an insane world, especially a sane man who tries to do something to end the insanity.

In his memoir, "Once Upon a Country," commenting on the so-called "second intifada," the viciously bloody cycle of Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli reprisals, Sari Nusseibeh invokes the conclusion of Voltaire's *Candide*: "In dark times the wisest course of action is surely to tend to your own garden."

Nusseibeh's garden was Al-Quds [University](#) in Jerusalem, of which he was president. After a long struggle to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by nonviolent means, Nusseibeh, a leading advocate of a two-state solution, had given up politics to try to create Jerusalem's only Arab university out of a ramshackle collection of underfunded colleges. But when violence erupted in September 2000, after the collapse of the [Camp David](#) summit between [Ehud Barak](#) and [Yasser Arafat](#), Nusseibeh ignored the "wisest course" and returned to the fray.

Nusseibeh is not a naif like *Candide*. Educated at Oxford and Harvard and a member of a prominent Palestinian family that traces its roots in Jerusalem back 1,300 years to the days of the caliph Omar the Great, Nusseibeh has been ineluctably drawn into the vortex of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His father had been the minister of defense, governor of Jerusalem and ambassador to Britain when the West Bank was under Jordanian rule, and lost a leg in a fight with a Zionist faction in 1948. That was also the year Sari was conceived; he and the state of Israel are almost coevals.

So, while Nusseibeh's inclinations are academic and his degrees are in philosophy, he was unable to remain in his garden; at Arafat's request, he became the [Palestine Liberation Organization's](#) representative in Jerusalem. As he explains, "if the so-called 'intellectual' of a society

refuses to oppose misguided public opinion, either because he fears for his life or hopes for personal gain or popularity, then that 'intellectual' has lost his role in society, and his society will end up as lost as he is."

Nusseibeh's opposition to the extremes on both sides of the struggle, Palestinian as well as Israeli, has indeed given him reason to fear for his life and that of his family: his English wife, Lucy, their three children and his widowed mother. An assault by a group of Palestinian thugs left him with a broken arm; the Israelis arrested and imprisoned him for three years; and he discovered he was next on the hit list of an assassin working for [Hamas](#) -- the extremist [Islamist organization](#) -- who had already killed three men. "My death sentence, which for some reason he hadn't yet carried out, was punishment for mobilizing the public for peace."

Yet through all this, at least as he tells the story, he maintained his equanimity, his sense of humor and his ability to see the faults and the virtues of both sides. "One reason a Manichean view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with one side all light, the other all darkness, is impossible to take," he comments, "is that just when you are happily convinced of the total justice of your position and conversely of the bestiality of your opponent's, your own side shoots itself in the foot, while the enemy actually does something right for a change."

"Once Upon a Country" is an often enthralling book, with a lucid unfolding of the issues and a subtle analysis of the games played on both sides. The narrative radiates both an empathic understanding of the Israelis and a deep love of his own people and their religion, which he sees as grossly perverted by the fundamentalists. It also gives us a poignant portrait of the city of Jerusalem, which becomes the tragic embodiment and victim of the struggle.

It's full of richly drawn characters, too, among them the often baffling and enigmatic Yasser Arafat. Nusseibeh credits Arafat for forging "a nation out of a people without leadership and divided by clan, geography, religion, and class. ... He ... rekindled their national identity and provided them with hope." Yet he's acutely aware of Arafat's faults, his "chronic indecision and never-ending suspicion," his "playing the trapeze act, carefully balancing himself between moderates and militants, unwilling and perhaps unable to come down firmly on either side," and his inability "to give up violence unequivocally and publicly as a strategic option."

In the end, Arafat becomes a pathetic figure, "the old revolutionary, harmlessly holed up in a half-bombed compound mumbling to himself." One might only wish Nusseibeh had extended his sympathetic imagination a little more toward Arafat's nemesis, [Ariel Sharon](#), whom he treats as a caricature villain, "strutting like a flatulent Rambo." Not that Sharon needs or deserves Nusseibeh's sympathy, but the resort to caricature belies a premise he sets forth at the beginning of the book with a rhetorical question: "Isn't this inability to imagine the lives of the 'other' at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?"

Any memoir should be read with a shaker of salt at hand. Nusseibeh has a cause to promote, and he's skillful at shaping his life story to that end. But it's a story worth hearing, and this complicated man -- shrewd idealist, pragmatic dreamer, peaceful warrior -- is very much worth knowing.