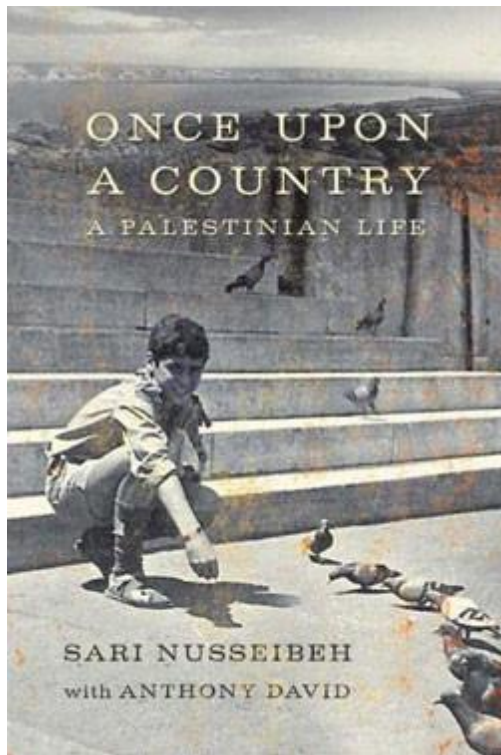


Shades of grey: Nusseibeh's "Once Upon A Country"

[Miko Peled](#) [The Electronic Intifada](#) 29 November 2007



The recent so-called peace summit in Annapolis, Maryland, reminds me of a time in early 1995. Then, as the cancer was taking over his otherwise perfectly healthy body, my father Matti Peled gave an interview that became the weekend cover story for the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*. The headline for the story was: "Rabin Does Not Want Peace." This was in the midst of the Oslo euphoria when Rabin was The Man of Peace. This headline sealed the relationship between Rabin and my father, two men of steel who for thirty years had fought side by side, and worked together to build the Israeli army and then in 1967 lead it to the final conquest of the "Promised Land." Rabin never called to say farewell to my dying father as other comrades in arms did nor did he come during the *Shiva*, the traditional seven days of mourning, to express his condolences. Eight months and three bullets later Rabin himself was dead.

At the time, people were shocked when my father said that Rabin's government had no intention of allowing the Palestinians to establish an independent state. Some even attributed his words to his old age and ailing body. But that was not the case at all. The Oslo accords were flawed, and he knew it then because he took the time to read them. Arafat agreed to recognize the state of Israel and in return he got an agreement to a step-by-step process towards an objective that was never clearly defined. Arafat's willingness to agree to this exhibited a great deal of faith and courage for which he never received credit. There were others, like Edward Said, who had read the accords and refused to be blinded by exhilaration of the moment. The bottom line was this: Rabin, the man who swore to break their bones, was not going to let Palestinians establish an independent state of their own.

Sadly, it seems that today Abu Mazen is making the same mistakes as his predecessor: Participating in a process that gives Israel credibility but is ill defined and promises nothing for the Palestinians. In his new historical autobiography *Once Upon A Country*, Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, who many accuse of selling out due to his comments regarding the right of return, shows how Israel never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He shows that neither Rabin, or Barak or any other Israeli prime minister had ever intended to make peace with the Palestinians. Their intention was, and still is, to turn the Palestinian people into "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the Jewish state that was established on the ashes of a country that, as the book title suggests, once upon a time existed.

In this book, Nusseibeh highlights the shades of grey in a conflict that most people prefer to see in black and white. He writes to the Israelis as much as he writes about them. He sums up his feelings about the Israeli people when he describes his first encounter with day-to-day Israelis: "they were normal people just like us." His first

impression was that there was no reason why he “couldn’t live in the same democratic, secular state with these people who had cut in line for a taxi.” The Israelis, however, want the land for themselves and they see no reason why they should live in a country with him in it.

Nusseibeh’s book makes a strong case for the rights of his people, whose wisdom, traditions and sense of dignity he extols. He writes about the Palestinian existential ties to Jerusalem, which are clear and obvious to Palestinians but in the so-called “Judeo-Christian” world these ties are conveniently overlooked. Little is known in the West and in Israel of the deep historical and cultural ties that Muslims in general and in particular Palestinians have to Jerusalem. Nusseibeh writes: “You see this in our literature, our symbols, and our language, in the city’s architecture, its climate ... all of these formed us as a people.” Nusseibeh then summarizes the reality of today’s Jerusalem: “the long term Israeli plan to degrade Arab Jerusalem into a ghetto of a greater Jewish city.”

The book describes the history and the richness of the Arab culture of Palestine and while this too is obvious to Palestinians and to people in the Arab world, it is not at all clear for others. People in Israel and the West know little if anything about the Arab culture and history of Palestine. Israelis for example learn very little about what happened in Palestine in the two thousand years between the destruction of the Second Temple and the establishment of the Zionist movement.

Nusseibeh also illuminates aspects of Islamic thought and traditions that are rarely brought up in today’s discourse on Islam: elements of openness and inclusion. “At the deepest metaphysical levels, Jews and Arabs are allies,” he says and he adds, perhaps alluding to the inevitability of a shared future based on the shared past, “any

attempt to separate them is a product of the modern European myth of a 'pure' nation purged of outsiders.”

Even on religion, arguably the most contentious of the issues we face, Nusseibeh points to the grey area in which we can find common ground. Contrary to what many in the West think, the violence that plagues our land is not the fault of our respective religions, even though they claim deep ties to the land. As Nusseibeh sees it, the problem lies in the policies represented by leaders such as the former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the one hand, and the slain Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin on the other, both of whom use religious sentiment to their own political ends. Hamas he says, may well “bristle at the thought of the enemy being the source of our identity as Muslims. But the religious fanatics can eradicate the Jews from Jerusalem only by first doing violence to Islam.”

Nusseibeh goes on and confirms our common bond with the story of the Caliph Omar, who conquered Jerusalem but entered the holy city unarmed. Then, with the help of a local Jewish man, Omar found the site of the Jewish temple, which was used as a rubbish dump, and together the two men cleaned the rubbish off of this holy site with their robes.

If religion will have its say regarding the future of the 10 million people who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, then it might as well be part of the solution, rather than the oil feeding the fire. Nusseibeh suggests that “despite Hamas, Islam may well be part of the solution to healing our terribly violated land. The fanatics like to hold up the Koran [sic], they just don't like to read what it says about the Jews and Jerusalem, Israelis would similarly be wise to read what their own prophets have to say about oppression.” Indeed they would, and indeed between Muslims and Jews there are more bonds than differences.

Another example of the bond that ties our two cultures exists in the story of Abraham the patriarch preparing to sacrifice his beloved son. The story exists in both the Torah and the Qur'an; in the Torah the beloved son is Isaac and in the Qur'an it is Ishmael. But that is less significant; what is significant is that in both holy books, the Almighty God does not allow Abraham to slaughter the boy. In both cultures, the prohibition to sacrificing our children comes directly from God. Whether it is for religion or for land, if we are to fight we would all do better to heed this commandment and use nonviolent means to achieve our goals, rather than send our young to kill and be killed.

Another aspect of Palestinian life that is rarely talked about, and that is highlighted in this book is that of the Palestinian political prisoners. Although they currently number around ten thousand men, women and even minors, little is said of this remarkable facet of the Palestinian struggle: local leaders and activists who sit in Israeli prisons have been part and parcel of Palestinian political life since the occupation began. Nusseibeh calls them "one of our greatest national success stories."

The list of Palestinian leaders Israel has murdered is too long to count and that of those wasting away in Israeli prisons is longer still. Israel has created an entire penal system for the purpose of the so-called "security" prisoners. Through this system, Israel has over the span of forty years violated practically every international law regarding political prisoners, by denying them their rights as human beings and as freedom fighters.

As we look forward, we are faced with two options: as Nusseibeh puts it, from the Palestinian perspective, "Either we get our state or they will have a battle for equal rights on their hands." Among Palestinians, he writes "readiness for a two-state

solution is not a permanent fixture” and if Israel does not act soon to allow an independent Palestinian state “Israelis might have an anti-apartheid campaign on their hands.” Today the anti-apartheid campaign seems almost inevitable.

Either way the future has to be determined by the two sides as equal partners. As long as the occupation exists and the Israeli military has the upper hand there can be no equality. Clearly, it’s going to be an uphill battle to end the occupation, but Nusseibeh’s experience shows that a serious nonviolent campaign can yield results. As he puts it: “Israelis had nothing in their repertoire to defeat a dedicated nonviolent campaign of civil disobedience” and apart from using excessive force, they still don’t.

Our two nations have been manipulated and lied to for a very long time, and the gap is deep as the wall is high. Still, as improbable as it may seem today, what this book suggests is true: what we as Israelis and Palestinians have in common is far greater than the issues that divide us. We now need to join hands, tear down the wall and work together to determine our future as equal partners. As I look back to 1995, I can’t help remembering that among those who called to wish my dying father a speedy recovery was the late Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat.