

A Palestinian Two-Step

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<https://www.nysun.com/arts/palestinian-two-step/53631/>

Book Review

Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life
by *Sari Nusseibeh*

MY MOST MEMORABLE MEETING WITH SARI NUSSEIBEH TOOK PLACE IN LONDON IN THE SPRING OF 1989. I WAS THEN A SENIOR FELLOW at Tel Aviv University's Jafee Center for Strategic Studies, and like many well intentioned Israelis at the time and since, we aspired to lay the ground for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation through secret talks with Palestinian interlocutors, including members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, then an outlawed organization in Israel. The group we met was headed by Faisal Husseini, the PLO's most senior official in the disputed territories, flanked by Mr. Nusseibeh, a number of prominent London-based Palestinian Arab academics, and an allegedly well connected Syrian expatriate.

The meeting was pleasant and informative enough, with the courteous British hosts going out of their way to accommodate both sides, yet I was left with a nagging sense of foreboding. I was particularly taken aback when Mr. Nusseibeh, even then widely considered the epitome of Palestinian moderation and a staunch proponent of Arab-Jewish coexistence, turned out to be the most extreme member of the group. Dismissing out of hand the two-state solution — Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — he instead sang the praise of the "one-state paradigm" — a standard catchphrase for Israel's destruction — demanding the incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza population into the Jewish state as full-fledged citizens, to be followed by the refugees from the neighboring Arab states and beyond.

In subsequent years, Mr. Nusseibeh continued to pay lip service to the two-state solution and consistently questioned the very legitimacy of the state with which he ostensibly wished to make peace. On a few occasions he even let the mask drop, unveiling his true agenda. In the late 1990s, for example, he told an old Oxford friend that "one day, in the near or further future, all this [Israel and Palestine] will be one binational state. It's just a question of how we get there." In an April 2005 debate at Dartmouth College, Mr. Nusseibeh advocated the creation of a binational state as the only viable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. "We will have spent 100 years killing and fighting each other, doing our best to avoid a one state solution, and we will find ourselves in that exact situation in 40 or 50 years," he argued.

That this advocacy of the destruction of an established member state of the international community has hardly dented Mr. Nusseibeh's "moderate" image can be partly explained by the desperate yearning among Jews and their supporters worldwide for Palestinian and Arab peace partners, dating back to the 1920s and the '30s, despite countless setbacks and disillusionments. It is also a corollary of the narcissist and patronizing mesmerization among educated westerners with the "noble savage" in general, and the westernized native in particular. With his posh Jerusalem high school education, his Oxford and Harvard degrees, and impeccable western demeanor, Mr. Nusseibeh, like cultured Arabs and Muslims before him, represents the ultimate product of the "white man's civilizing mission," a contemporary replica of George Antonius, the Cambridge-educated Syrian political activist who was the toast of British chattering classes in Palestine and beyond during the 1930s.

From the 1940s the same attitude can be seen in America. As the Washington Daily News wrote of a visit to the capital by Ahmad Shukairy, later the first head of the PLO, but at the time a 40-year-old Western educated lawyer: "Mr. Shukairy turned out to be a young lawyer, dressed in a natty blue suit and a little moustache, with his black hair slicked back over a high forehead. He spoke better English than most Americans ... and he is a smoothie."

In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that "Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 542 pages, \$27.50) has been received with alacrity. The Israeli novelist Amos Oz applauded it for casting "a fresh light on the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy," while for Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the New Republic, it was "a deeply admirable book by a deeply admirable man." Though dismissing Mr. Nusseibeh's account of the 1948 war as "grotesque" and regretting his comparison of Israeli prisons to the Soviet gulag, Mr. Wieseltier insisted that "there is nothing mean or heartless in Nusseibeh's writing about Israel," as if his equating the incarceration of lawfully convicted terrorists with the arbitrary detention and extermination of tens of millions of innocent civilians is not mean or heartless enough.

Neither is the gulag diatribe that Mr. Wieseltier took exception to an isolated exception. Quite the contrary, Mr. Nusseibeh misses no opportunity to denigrate and delegitimize Israel through sharp, short, often subtle yet always false readings of history. When describing the building of Jerusalem's Russian colony in the late 19th century, for example, he cannot resist the temptation to note that "the Israelis turned it into a prison." In fact it was the British who turned the compound into a central police station and prison well before the establishment of the state of Israel, which only inherited the facility. Likewise, he ends a description of mid-1940s Palestine with a wholly unrelated aside about the (alleged) "attempts by the Israeli government to shut down Al-Quds University, which I now head." Again, at the time of the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, not a single university existed in these territories. By the early 1990s, when these territories were transferred to Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, there were seven such institutions, boasting some 16,500 students.

Or take the terror war waged by the Palestinians since September 2000, which has thus far claimed some 1,130 Israeli lives (equivalent to 45,000 American fatalities, when you adjust for Israel's smaller population) with seven times as many wounded. According to Mr.

Nusseibeh, this terrorist spree has been a pretext, rather than a cause, for the erection of the security fence (which he misrepresents as a "twenty-foot-high concrete wall," whereas in reality the wall constitutes less than 5 % of the fence's total length), as if the above death toll is not sufficiently severe to merit this counterterrorism measure. Besides, if the fence was designed to dismember the West Bank and disrupt Palestinian national development (a complete nonsense given that its route runs largely along the pre-1967 "green line"), why did it take Israel some 35 years, after its conquest of the territories, to initiate its erection?

But Mr. Nusseibeh is not someone to be bothered by the facts. His text is marred by countless factual errors and inaccuracies that cast a serious doubt on the validity of his personal narrative, not to mention the wider historical and political picture he seeks to paint. The British foreign secretary who made the famous declaration (in November 1917) on "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" was Mr. Arthur James Balfour, not "Lord Alfred Balfour," and the declaration was made in a letter to Lord Rothschild, not to Chaim Weizmann. Lawrence of Arabia had nothing to do with the Anglo-Hashemite correspondence that led to the "Great Arab Revolt" of World War I, and the person with whom the British plotted the revolt was Emir Hussein ibn Ali (later King Hussein of the Hijaz), not his son Emir Faisal (misrepresented by Mr. Nusseibeh as "Sheikh Faisal Hussein"). Neither did the British ever promise Faisal (or Hussein for that matter) the headship of the Arab kingdom that would be established on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. General Edmund Allenby did not occupy Palestine with his Mule Corps but rather with the powerful Egyptian Expeditionary Force, and the Ottoman potentate Djemal Pasha did not surrender to the British in 1917, as it was only in late September 1918 that Allenby scored his culminating victory, in the Battle of Megiddo. Sheik Izz al-din al-Qassam, the Syrian religious fanatic operating in Palestine in the mid-1930s, was not hanged by the British but killed in action. The Higher Arab Committee (established in 1936) comprised 10, rather than six, members and Jaffa's Arab population in 1948 didn't amount to 200,000 people, but to about a third of this figure. The Dome of the Rock was built by Caliph Abdel Malik ibn Marwan and not Mu'awiya, and Caliph Omar did not capture Jerusalem in 638 C.E. after the bloody conquest of Baghdad and Cairo for the simple reason that both cities were established long after the Muslim capture of Jerusalem. And so on and so forth.

Yet this astounding sloppiness pales in comparison with Mr. Nusseibeh's inability to rein in his deep anti-Israel prejudice. Time and again we hear of the rootless "Russian Jewish upstarts streaming into the country" to dispossess its indigenous population. Readers of "Once Upon a Country" will never know of the countless Zionist attempts at reconciliation, or the real opportunities for statehood offered to the Palestinians in the decades preceding the 1948 war. Instead, they are treated to an uninterrupted story of the victimization and abuse of the hapless Palestinians by the heartless Zionists who in public spoke peace but in private "spelled out their [expulsive] plans."

If the Arabs reverted to violence, as they occasionally did, it was invariably the Jews' fault. The 1929 massacres, for example, in which some 133 Jews were slaughtered by their Arab neighbors, and hundreds more were wounded, were but "a nasty backlash among Muslims" to Zionist nationalist aspirations regarding the Wailing Wall; just as Arafat's war of terror was a logical reaction to Ariel Sharon's short stroll along Temple Mount. But then, why should Muslims act differently when Jews, who have no valid claim to Palestine, let alone to the Wailing Wall — "a most likely candidate for being the wall of a fortress built for Roman legions" — make outrageous demands on this

holy Muslim site.

This absurd assertion — part of a lengthy historical fabrication of Jerusalem's history posted on the homepage of Al-Quds University, an institution headed by Mr. Nusseibeh — is hardly different from the countless misrepresentations and distortions contained in "Once Upon a Country." It is also congruent with the persistent Palestinian denial of the existence of King Solomon's Temple, and by extension the Jewish millenarian attachment to Jerusalem and the land of Israel. Small wonder that in 2002 he was appointed PLO Commissioner for Jerusalem affairs by Arafat, who in the Camp David summit of September 2000 had told President Clinton that the Temple had been located in Nablus rather than in Jerusalem. To judge by the gist of "Once Upon a Country," Arafat could not have made a better choice.

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