

After Years in Middle East Politics, One Palestinian Still Finds Hope

By [Ethan Bronner](#)

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For some Israelis, Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian intellectual and public figure, has always been a nightmare.

To those who seek comfort in claiming that the Palestinians are usurpers in the ancient Jewish homeland with minimal collective history or attachment to Jerusalem, Mr. Nusseibeh can lay out his family's 1,300 years there filled with teachers, judges and politicians. To those who say that, at Israel's creation, no Palestinian was forced out, Mr. Nusseibeh can note that his pregnant mother and grandmother were expelled from their home in Ramle by soldiers led by Yitzhak Rabin and obliged to walk into Jordan-controlled East Jerusalem.

He can even cite Mr. Rabin's memoir, telling of the expulsion carried out under David Ben-Gurion's quiet nod. And to those who say that Israel has respected Palestinian private property since it occupied the West Bank in 1967, Mr. Nusseibeh can point to his father's 200-acre Jordan Valley estate seized by the Israeli authorities.

In other words, Mr. Nusseibeh's very existence poses a challenge to many Israelis' beliefs about themselves.

But as "Once Upon a Country," his fascinating and deeply intelligent memoir, makes clear, Mr. Nusseibeh is really an Israeli dream. Where Yasir Arafat and his lieutenants asserted that there was no historical Jewish claim to Jerusalem, Mr. Nusseibeh speaks of Jewish roots in Jerusalem as "existential and umbilical."

Having learned Hebrew and volunteering on an Israeli archaeological dig and kibbutz, Mr. Nusseibeh has called publicly for two states, one Israeli, the other Palestinian, for many years.

While most Palestinian officials insist that Israel permit the 1948 Palestinian refugees to return to their homes within Israel in any peace deal, Mr. Nusseibeh has renounced such a demand as unrealistic, shouting at Mahmoud Abbas, the current Palestinian president, at one point: “Either you want an independent state or a policy aimed at returning all the refugees to Israel. You can’t have it both ways.” He has always publicly spurned all forms of violence.

Unfortunately for Israel the period when Mr. Nusseibeh could actually have done it much good — in the 1980s and ’90s, when he wielded influence, before the Palestinian movement was taken over by the Islamists of Hamas — Israel considered him dangerous. He was an early advocate of the argument that if Israel wants to remain both largely Jewish and democratic, it has to shed its hold over the lands captured in 1967, because there are so many Palestinians there. A Palestinian state in those areas, he said, is actually in Israel’s interest. This is now mainstream Israeli thinking, but 20 years ago it was viewed as a threat both by most Palestinians and by the Israeli government.



Sari Nusseibeh, foreground, en route to a conference in Jerusalem during his years he spent with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Credit...From “Once Upon a Country,” by Sari Nusseibeh (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

The story of his Israeli imprisonment in 1991 offers one of many in the book that focus on his sense of the absurdity of the conflict. Upon arrival in a Jerusalem lockup, Mr. Nusseibeh, a boyish philosopher educated at Oxford and Harvard, is thrown in with common Israeli criminals, men with scarred faces and neck tattoos, and wonders if the plan is to let these fellows finish him off. But the radio news of his arrest is on, and soon he hears guffaws.

A tattooed man calls out to him in Hebrew, directing him to a radio broadcast and angrily noting that the Israeli government is preposterously calling him the head of a spy ring for Saddam Hussein. For the rest of the evening Mr. Nusseibeh is the guest of the Israeli inmates. He spends three months in an Israeli desert prison on the charge.

President of Al Quds University in Jerusalem for the past decade, Mr. Nusseibeh comes from one of the city's noble families. Omar the Great made a Nusseibeh governor of the city after taking it from the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century, and Nusseibehs, including a long line of Sufi Muslim sages, have been important there ever since. To prevent disputes among various Christian sects who claim the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a Nusseibeh was given the key to the church to open each morning, a situation that continues to this day.

Nonetheless Mr. Nusseibeh's father, a former governor of Jerusalem, was a man of the modern world who detested entitlement. "My father once told me that we Nusseibehs came from a long line of thieves," Mr. Nusseibeh writes early in the book. "All family dynasties, he explained with an expression between earnestness and jest, can trace their histories back to some act of brigandage. I think he said this because of the pride Arabs often take in their ancient roots."

Such refreshing self-deprecation — rare in Arab public writing — runs throughout this memoir, one of the best personal accounts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ever written. In 1974, for example, he hears on a Palestinian radio program of a guerrilla attack against “a strategic Zionist stronghold.” He and a friend rush to the site, where they find a small huddle of bored soldiers. “I had to look twice until I finally spotted a small tear in the pavement,” he notes.

Mr. Nusseibeh was pulled into politics through the university faculty union. When the first intifada started in late 1987 as acts of public civil disobedience, he became one of its intellectual chiefs as author of its demands and many of its key pamphlets. He wrote communiqués (which were often transported in swallowed capsules), moved across Europe and back and forth across the Jordan River, and carried cash in bags to and from the exiled leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

But by 1991, when the intifada turned endlessly violent, Mr. Nusseibeh wanted no more part in it. He wrote, along with the Israeli scholar Mark Heller, a book calling for a two-state solution, a daring act. He renewed that call four years ago in a document jointly written with Ami Ayalon, a former chief of Israel’s Shin Bet security agency and a leader of the Labor Party. It is one of the clearest set of principles for the conflict’s resolution and enjoys some popular support on both sides.

The idea for his memoir came to Mr. Nusseibeh after reading the powerful autobiography of the Israeli writer Amos Oz, much of which takes place in West Jerusalem. Mr. Nusseibeh was startled that the two men (who know each other) grew up a few hundred yards apart knowing nothing of the other’s world.

Destined to live together, he argues, Palestinians and Israelis must get to know each other. He acknowledges that earlier dreams of coexistence have been shattered in recent years. But again he cites his father: “Rubble, he used to tell me, often makes the best building material.”