

Faith, not optimism: an interview with Sari Nusseibeh

[Linda Benedikt](#)

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Linda Benedikt: The campus of al-Quds University which you [head](#) was going to be cut into two by Israel's separation wall, but after months of peaceful campaigning, Israel agreed to change the wall's route. Your achievement is entirely due to non-violent protest. Is this something you would recommend to Palestinian resistance as a whole?

Sari Nusseibeh: Once the city has decided where it will build its new ring road, we will have to negotiate again. But the answer to your question is: yes, definitely! I strongly believe in non-violent protest, always have and always will. What we have achieved within the university should serve as a model. It deserves to be studied by every Palestinian.

openDemocracy has published two major series by the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman:

["The politics of verticality"](#)

(April-May 2002) and ["Ariel Sharon and the geometry of occupation"](#)

(September 2003)

The weakness of violence

Linda Benedikt: Aren't there situations, like an extreme imbalance of power, where other than non-violent means are permitted?

Sari Nusseibeh: In a situation where one side holds absolute supremacy in military terms, the strengths of the other side rests, seemingly paradoxically, precisely in its military inferiority. Successful resistance to military oppression can only be non-military.

An example: in the past three years of the second [intifada](#) many Palestinians have opted for violence to fight the Israelis. They have employed guns, rocks and suicide bombers. But by doing so, they immediately lost their real strength: the support and the participation of the Palestinian masses. Because as soon as one limits one's protest to military means alone, one automatically excludes everyone who has neither the ability nor the willingness to engage in military resistance. You actually lose your source of power.

Also in openDemocracy: Linda Benedikt talks to Sari Nusseibeh about Israel's killing of the [Hamas leader](#), Sheikh Yassin, in Gaza in March 2003

Linda Benedikt: If the majority is involved neither in violent nor in non-violent resistance, what then?

Sari Nusseibeh: In that case you have a disengaged majority that just waits until the storm is over. The strong point of our teachers, merchants and doctors simply is not military might. It is a different case with our enemy, the Israeli army. Israel's strength derives indeed from its military

power. Thus, the minute we enter this game of violence and counter-violence we are bound to lose.

Linda Benedikt: Why do the Israelis seem always to win the [moral battle](#), so that the west is inclined to identify more with Jewish than Palestinian suffering?

Sari Nusseibeh: Because we give them every reason and excuse – like the suicide bombers. In addition there are other cultural differences. Just compare the pictures of a Jewish funeral with a Palestinian one. When a killed Israeli is buried you see images of mourning people crying solemnly and one automatically gets emotionally involved. But when a murdered Palestinian is buried you see TV pictures of people all dressed in black and white that are shouting and shooting. And even I think to myself that they are terrifying.

I am not saying that emotions are generally bad. It just depends how you express them. We Palestinians are always trying to express a moral statement and we just don't know how to do it. We have a proverb in Arabic that says that an expert in public relations is someone who manages to walk crying loudly in the front row of a funeral procession of someone he just has killed.

Linda Benedikt: –that is very close to the Hebrew definition of chutzpah.

Sari Nusseibeh: (laughs) and something we are definitely not good at! The Israelis are much better in restraining themselves and thus in upholding a rational image. As to the west and their support and ability to identify with us: in the 1970s it was quite fashionable to support the Palestinian cause. This changed when our struggle became solely identified with terrorist acts. During the first [intifada](#) this negative image was replaced by the much more positive one of simple women and children who fought Israeli occupation in their villages and homes. The new intifada destroyed this image once again and the result is a true public relations disaster.

Linda Benedikt: Israel has used military force at all times to control Palestinians, well before Palestinian violence, yet, without any lasting consequences.

Sari Nusseibeh: Israel could and can afford it. Despite its violent behaviour, Israel always managed to come across as a rational actor. Which also goes together with the fact that the stronger you are the less openly aggressive you have to act. We, the Arabs, on the other hand were always the weaker ones and compensated our military inferiority with an aggressive rhetoric.

Those different ways of either expressing political and military power or covering up such impotence was transmitted to the international community. And since our voice was always louder and much more violent than Israel's we came across as extremists and radicals. I always regretted this fact and thought that we should concentrate on our objective abilities and capacities instead of engaging in such exaggerated propaganda. As I said, we are simply not good in promoting our cause.

Dialectics of resistance

Linda Benedikt: Do you get the impression that Israel is raising its voice recently?

Sari Nusseibeh: (smiles) Maybe the Israelis are catching our virus? However, we cannot overlook the very difficult background of the existence of the Israeli state in particular and the Jewish problem in general. Europe had and still has a Jewish problem. And this region, together with its people, has somehow been pulled into it and has been made to pay the price for a very European problem.

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We have to think how to deal with Israel's still existing sense of insecurity. It is in our own interest not to allow ourselves to fall victim to our frustration and anger in such a way that it becomes a source of even greater insecurity for Israel. After all, we are trying to make peace with Israel, to find a way to coexist, and it simply cannot be in our interest to reinforce Israel's fear.

Linda Benedikt: You once said that the Israelis know how to play the Palestinians and that they always know how to trigger the reaction they want.

Sari Nusseibeh: Oh, absolutely! We are living in a situation where the stronger one wants to create an excuse to beat the other weaker one. So he provokes him until the weaker one reaches a point where he hits back without thinking. The stronger one in turn uses this opportunity to smash him. In a sense the whole occupation business only works when provocations of the occupier trigger predictable reactions of the occupied.

In my opinion we are making a fatal mistake if we continue to submit to those provocations. If we continue to accept that our actions are reduced to mere reactions to Israel's conduct, instead of following our own rationality, then we are not only deprived of our rationality and but truly occupied, not only physically but also mentally. The Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, unfortunately, is a master in tactical manoeuvres and is playing with us in a very logical manner.

Linda Benedikt: But can the Palestinians, particularly after what happened during and after the Oslo [peace process](#), be expected to act only in a level-headed manner? And who would there be to lead such a protest?

Sari Nusseibeh: It is of course very difficult. Shooting a bullet or throwing a stone is easier whereas self-restraint is a constant struggle. And if we talk about the Palestinians as a whole: you are right, we do not have such a leader and we are greatly hindered by our classical perception and understanding of resistance which is and always was associated with violence. The only exception so far was the first intifada. Then the predominant strategy was non-violent. This time people like me failed so far to organise peaceful protest. But I will continue to try to give an example of what can be achieved without resorting to violence.

If the people were sovereign

Linda Benedikt: According to recent newspaper reports US lawmakers are pushing the American president to adopt the Geneva Accords and your initiative with the Israeli Ami Ayalon, which are both initiatives coming from the people. Have you been aware of the Geneva Accords?

Ami Ayalon, an Israeli, and Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian, together created the Peoples' Voice civil initiative in July 2002 in favour of a "two states for two peoples formula". 175,000 Israeli and 173,000 Palestinians have expressed their support for it. Its statement of principles is [here](#)

Sari Nusseibeh: I knew that [Yossi Beilin](#), together with some Palestinians, wanted to write a book about the basic principles of a future peace. That was right after the Taba talks of [January 2001](#) had failed. But I had no idea that this academic exercise at one point turned into a political initiative. But I disagree with you that both initiatives are from the people. The only thing they have in common is that they are both unofficial.

But the [Geneva Accords](#) once more propagates a top-down approach whereas ours is a grassroots initiative and thus much simpler, more basic. We are going from house to house and talking with people. It is also not an agreement but a request, a demand of our

leadership, to negotiate on its [basis](#). We are not telling the leadership what exactly they have to agree about; rather, we have formulated some principles that should be involved in any lasting agreement. Geneva, if you like, could be one possible scenario.

Linda Benedikt: Do you trust the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to listen to this request?

Sari Nusseibeh: That is exactly the reason why one should turn to the people. The source of authority for any agreement can either be the respective governments or the people. Since we have so far not gone anywhere in our pursuit of peace on the level of leadership, it becomes necessary to develop the alternative source of power, or authority: the people. If the political leaders should once more be unable to agree, it would not be the end of the road as long as enough people come forward and say: but we want it!

Linda Benedikt: Isn't there a great sense of disempowerment among the Palestinians, a feeling of being an object rather than a subject of history and [politics](#)?

Sari Nusseibeh: Yes, until we started our initiative. If you go back in history and look at all the peace initiatives so far then you will find out that they were all attempts by political and intellectual leaders to find a formula for peace, which in the end never materialised. We are now going

the other way round and thus transmitting a sense of power to the people.

But it is true that in general the Palestinian people do feel powerless. So far the only power they ever experienced was the power of rocks and guns. They never had a chance to realise that they can exercise as much power if not more by peaceful means. Therefore we have to make them understand that they gain power by being peaceful.

Linda Benedikt: Palestinian [civil society](#) suffered tremendously under Israeli occupation. Isn't your reliance on Palestinian civil society very optimistic?

Sari Nusseibeh: I would rather use the term "faith" than "optimism". And I do have faith in the ability of the Palestinian people to rise to the occasion. I also believe that this is of tremendous importance concerning our collective future. My understanding of democracy is that the individual needs to have the feeling that he can influence and participate in shaping his future. And our future will depend on whether we continue to have war with Israel or make peace on the basis of two states.

The way through which we will obtain our state will be decisive in shaping the character of our society. If we ever have a [democratic state](#) then it must come about by peaceful means and from below. I would much rather have a state through this route and thus get

a state I want to live in than a state that comes from the top in which I have all the formal manifestation of democracy but no more. Am I optimistic? No, I have faith.

The road to peace: self-interest not rights

Linda Benedikt: You have mentioned the schizophrenia Palestinians developed as a result of the discrepancy between Oslo's promises and realities. Isn't this also true for the Israelis? After all they were made to believe that they were exchanging "land for peace".

Sari Nusseibeh: I think that both sides truly believed that they would achieve peace, especially in the early days right after the [Oslo agreement](#). They soon had to discover that it was an illusion. Were both people tricked? I don't know. But there certainly was a lack of seriousness in both leaderships. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians were open about the true costs of Oslo; they did not place it on the top of their agenda and did not dedicate every single minute to implementing it, as they should have. Instead they got lost in details and forgot the overall aim.

The first thing which both sides should have done was to recognise Oslo for what it was " then they should have made every effort to make it work. They didn't and thus Oslo, which was a child of two parents, died of negligence. You cannot blame the mother or the father alone; both were guilty.

Linda Benedikt: But you still think Oslo was a good idea?

Sari Nusseibeh: It was certainly not a bad idea. I personally think it was a momentous change: much delayed but great nevertheless. At that time I was involved in the Madrid talks and completely taken by surprise. I was very happy and I thought: this is it. Once you connect the Palestinian Liberation Organisation with the Israeli government, things will work out.

Linda Benedikt: The Canadian philosopher [Charles Taylor](#) said that in order to make peace you need to accept the equal worth of the one you want to make peace with. Do you think Israel has accepted the Palestinians as equals?

Sari Nusseibeh: With due respect to Charles Taylor: that question is irrelevant.

Linda Benedikt: If there is no sense of equality how can one achieve a true peace?

Sari Nusseibeh: You are right, but I still think it is irrelevant. I can accept you as an equal and think that you have as much right as me, but still I might decide to get rid of you. In the case of this conflict: it has nothing to do with having equal rights or not. Israelis do not believe in my rights as a Palestinian. That is not the reason why they signed any documents. They did it out of pure and cold-blooded calculation. They believe that by

making peace they can preserve themselves. And if we, as a result, are getting a state or an empire, they could not care less.

Linda Benedikt's interview with Sari Nusseibeh is also published in Media Monitors Network: click [here](#)

The same is true for the Palestinians. We too do not suddenly believe that the Jews have a right to this land. Just like the Israelis, we have come to the conclusion that from a tactical point of view and regardless of whether we are equal or not this is the only way that we will get a state. It's pure self-interest on [both sides](#).

Linda Benedikt: This does not make for a very nice peace. But this is obviously not the point?

Sari Nusseibeh: You are right. Once we have two states, there are two ways of dealing with each other, just like in any other relationship. We can either respect or accept each other or not. The former describes of course a much better relationship. Unfortunately this is not something one can force.

Linda Benedikt: Would Israelis and Palestinians have been able to hammer out an agreement if they had been left alone?

Sari Nusseibeh: I'd like to say yes, but I cannot. Even when you have only us two parties and no constant outside involvement there is no guarantee that this conflict would have been solved. In our case I think it is in fact very good that there is this flurry of peace activities: Geneva, Bush

Linda Benedikt: George W. Bush? He seems to have all forgotten about the roadmap

Sari Nusseibeh: In my view he has said the unprecedented thing namely that there must be a [Palestinian state](#). Neither Jimmy Carter nor Bill Clinton went that far. However, the most important thing concerning any future peace settlement will be that Israelis and Palestinians realise what price they have to pay for it and decide whether they are willing to pay that price or not.

In present circumstances, if Ariel Sharon fulfils his declaration of pulling out of Gaza, the new Hamas leader [Abdul-Aziz Rantisi](#) will declare it a victory and thus thwart other, competing political ideologies. Basically, you cannot see much future for an agreement.

Looking history in the eye

Linda Benedikt: [Omar Barghouti](#) uses the concept of "relative humanity" when describing in particular Israeli attitudes towards Palestinians. In addition, and in contrast to you, he declares the idea of a two-state solution dead and argues for a bi-national state.

Sari Nusseibeh: I agree with him that a bi-national state would indeed be great. And maybe, one day, it will come about. However, it will need to come about by consent and not by force. It will need a complete new strategy and thinking. At this time however, I think it would be better to go for a two-state solution.

I have been reading [Immanuel Kant's](#) "categorical imperative" again (and I guess one has every reason to read it [again and again](#)). What Charles Taylor, and Omar Barghouti are saying is that, yes, maybe you can only really arrive at some kind of stable relationship with someone when you start seeing and accepting "the other" as someone who is just like yourself, who, like you is governed by the same rules and laws

Linda Benedikt:...as in universal laws?

Sari Nusseibeh: "as in universal laws. However, I also believe that very often in life people managed to compromise not on the basis of equal worth, but because they were guided by interests. According to Kant not a desirable thing, certainly not an ideal thing, but this is what is happening and has happened if you look at history.