

THE WORLD IS BIGGER THAN OUR FOOLERIES: INTERVIEW WITH DR. SARI NUSSEIBEH

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Dr. Sari Nusseibeh is the President of Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. He earned a Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy from Harvard University in 1978 and has taught at Birzeit University in the West Bank as well as Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He played a prominent role in the first Palestinian Intifada and represented the Palestine Liberation Organization in East Jerusalem during the second Intifada in 2001. In 2003, together with former Israeli internal security chief Ami Ayalon, he launched a peace campaign called The People's Voice that gained hundreds of thousands of signatures among both Israelis and Palestinians. He published an autobiography, *Once Upon A Country: A Palestinian Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) in 2007. He is married to nonviolence activist Lucy Austin and has four children. New Society interviewed him in his office in East Jerusalem in July 2007

New Society: What do you think the prospects for peace are, now that Hamas has taken over in Gaza?

Dr. Sari Nusseibeh: It's hard to talk about the future because it's not laid out already. It's something you can create. One doesn't know what people are prepared or willing to do. Looked at from a distance, one would think we were in the worst possible situation with Hamas in control of Gaza and a schism in Palestinian society at every level. But it is also possible to think that maybe, because it is so bad, the society would be able to determine what is in its best interests—namely, peace—and therefore we could come out more strongly in favor of peace with Israel than we could five years ago.

NS: What do you think the prospects are for the two-state solution?

Nusseibeh: I think it depends on us. Nothing happens by itself. Politics is a construct of human action. We can always create a two-state solution. We can always create a one-state solution, a three-state solution. Any kind of political structure. It is really within our power.

NS: But which do you think is ideal?

Nusseibeh: I personally am not a nationalist. I've never really been in favor of an Arab Palestinian state per se. I've only been in favor of a Palestinian state—and therefore the two-state solution—because of my sense that Israelis and Palestinians want this solution, and that it is therefore the least bad scenario. I think the two-state solution can be used to construct other scenarios for the future, including a one-state solution, but any solution must be arrived at by consent. If people decided that they wanted a one-state solution or a larger structure that included states like Jordan and Lebanon, then I'd support those suggestions as well. If they wanted to create a system based on a federation of smaller city-states, then I'd support that too. It may come to that. If one looks at the clusters of different populations—Jewish and Muslim—maybe one can think of separating and combining those clusters at different levels.

NS: In 2002, you and Ami Ayalon signed an agreement based on six points. If I remember correctly, you suggested that all Arabs in Israel should get Palestinian citizenship and that all Israelis in Palestine should get Israeli citizenship.

Nusseibeh: No. We did not say that. We said that Israel should be the only Jewish state and that Palestine should be the only Palestinian state. That does not mean that people of different nationalities shouldn't live in each. We said that, with regard to returnees, Palestinians should return only to Palestine and Jews should only return to Israel. After the border adjustment and agreement, we said there should be no more settlements in the Palestinian state—and by settlement, we meant large clusters and planned developments—but Jewish families should certainly be allowed to live in the Palestinian state. Ayalon wanted to allow Israel to annex Israeli settlements into Israel, and I agreed on the condition that Palestine would be compensated and would be able to receive an equal amount of land in return.

Realistically speaking, if the Palestinian government went and asked Arabs from Nazareth or Umm al-Fahm to take Palestinian citizenship, most would probably refuse because they are happy to be Israelis. They don't want to become Palestinian citizens. Sometime in the future, there could be sufficient openness between the two communities that could enable individuals from either group to enjoy the fullness of the entire region so that they would not feel any longer that by belonging to one part they are barred from enjoying

freedoms in the other. This is really an ideal kind of situation. It will take time. In order to achieve it, we have to focus on education, on economic development, on cultural development, on developing an open society of tolerance between people.

NS: One of the other requirements may be building Palestinian institutions. In your book, you talk about your efforts to build many institutions in the early 1990s towards a state. To what extent does that remain a challenge today?

Nusseibeh: It is not really such a challenge. Although we failed to build a proper state structure between 1994 and 2000, I don't think that our failure was due to genetics. There are different reasons why we failed, but I think we are still capable of building a state structure and sound institutions. I think so mainly because of the fact that over all these years, particularly since 1967, the Palestinians have had to look after themselves. And they have been able to look after themselves. I'll give you some examples. Take, for instance, the major hospital that we have in the West Bank, Al Maqasid, near East Jerusalem. This health provider was not a product of the government but of civil society. Palestinian people got together and created it. And they created many similar institutions: universities, colleges, and schools. You name it, we created it. The government did not create those things. Ordinary people did. And this makes me believe that we are indeed capable of building institutions. We did fail to build pre-state institutions between 1993 and 2000, for many reasons. One should study those reasons, and then work again towards success. I think that in the next few years, if we are helped to develop our institutions, we may be able to build a state. And even if it doesn't result in a state, it's important anyway to have good institutions.

NS: We spoke to Bassem Eid and he said: Who needs a state? Palestinians need work permits, food, and services. Do you agree with him?

Nusseibeh: That's a good thing to say in the following sense: I think one should keep in mind that the state is not an end in itself. One must ask the questions: What are states for? You have to think about your concerns and values. And you have to prioritize them. You have to say, for example, my main concern is that I be free. And by that, I mean, having the social space within which I can grow, develop, and achieve happiness. In such a place, I have to feel equal with others. I don't want to infringe upon others' space, nor do I want my space infringed upon. But also, in this sense, there must be equality. You have to think of the balance, of what is most important. Freedom of travel, being able to vote freely, being able to go to school and be educated, having good facilities in school, having access to good services. Do you know Amartya Sen's concept of living standards? People have basic needs. One must ask: how do I achieve all these things? Can I achieve them through a state? If the answer is yes, then I want a state. But if a state does not

provide me with those things, then I do not want it. This is what I say personally. This is my position. I am not for a state, I am not a nationalist, but I want a space for myself as a human being, a space in which I will be provided with the things I need. Now, I do think it is possible to do that in the context of a state. And maybe achieving those things in the context of a state allows others to achieve them in the contexts of their states—Israelis, for example. This is why I think that maybe a two-state solution is a good thing. But it is an open question.

NS: What do you think is the major obstacle preventing Palestinians from achieving those aims? Many Israelis would blame the Palestinian Authority's corruption, use of violence, and desire that Israel disappear rather than exist peacefully alongside it.

Nusseibeh: There are many Palestinians who either don't want to have peace with Israel or who think that peace with Israel is not possible. And there are likewise many Israelis who feel that peace with the Palestinians is not possible. The numbers vary. It probably goes up and down on both sides. The numbers are probably not synchronized. The numbers might be in inverse proportion.

I think one of the reasons why this attitude might exist on both sides is the lack of vision. If all you see is the rigid mountainous landscape surrounding you, if you feel imposed upon, only then is it difficult. You need to free yourself in order to start imagining. Then you can move forward. The obstacle is the lack of imagination on both sides.

NS: Do you think it will be difficult for Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians so long as those negotiations are undermined by Iran?

Nusseibeh: I don't like to believe that Iran has such an influence on how I as a Palestinian think. It certainly has an influence on Hamas—it pays them money. But Hamas is not Palestine. Nor is the Hamas ideology something that is rigid. It is a bit more complex.

What is Hamas? It is a virtual construct. Behind Hamas are individual human beings. Now individual human beings are open systems. In other words, one day they may adopt the ideology of this virtual construct and another day they might adopt something else. Hamas is itself, full stop. It believes, for instance, in the liberation of all of Palestine, in the creation of an Islamic state. The question to ask is who is the person who adopts those beliefs and is such a person also somebody who will continue holding those beliefs. My feeling is that that is not the case. I think a majority of Palestinians are prepared to accept a two-state solution based on 1967 lines, East Jerusalem as a capital, compensation for refugees, all those things. If the Palestinians are given this offer, they will take it.

So I don't believe it's a question of Iran. It's not Iran that prevents them from doing this. So, you might ask me, what does prevent them? And there are a number of different reasons.

First, we don't really know what Israel's intentions are with re-spect to the Palestinians. We are not sure what their intentions are regardless of the statements they make. But if, for instance, Israel were to make a promissory note, saying, "We are prepared to come to peace with the Palestinians on the following terms," and if [Israeli Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert were to state very clearly Israel's ultimate positions with regard to a two-state solution, I personally believe that the majority of Palestinians would take this offer.

That is why Ayalon and I came up with the destination plan. We said the Road Map [for Peace] would not move anywhere unless we outline a destination.

NS: There are some who say that the path of the security barrier is the destination, that the line will be a "plan B" and become the border to which Israel withdraws.

Nusseibeh: I said that a few years ago at a talk. I said this would be a good plan B option for Israel's security regime. When Sharon first put up this wall, I argued with my colleagues and told them that I thought this would be Israel's plan B. I think if I were him I might have done the same thing—if I were also a military kind of guy who didn't really believe in peace with neighbors, if I was only guided by security concerns and a short-term vision. But this is not going to work. Military solutions never work. No matter how clever, military solutions always fail as solutions.

NS: In your book you described how you protested the route of the security barrier to prevent it from being built on Al-Quds campus grounds. I have not been in Jerusalem for several years, but what strikes me since the erection of the wall is how much more integrated West Jerusalem seems. Since the barrier has gone up, people seem to feel safer and less suspicious of one another. There have been some articles about how Arabs from East Jerusalem have been moving to West Jerusalem as people have been moving from one side of the barrier to the other.

(Nusseibeh walked us over to the window and pointed out the barrier to the west.)

Nusseibeh: Now we're looking due west. There's Beit Hanina. This is part of East Jerusalem. Now, if we look west, you see in the middle of the hill another part of Beit Hanina—a continuation of the same community. But between the two parts, there is now a barrier. So it's all a kind of jigsaw. It doesn't make any sense from our point of view, although it makes sense from the point of view of the Israelis. So what are the Israelis doing? They are building a highway that will partly go through and

under Arab areas. So that east and west are joined. At the same time, the Arab habitations are disjointed. They are separated even though—if you look from a bird’s eye view—they are in the same area. Now, does this make Israelis feel more integrated? It is possible. But the Arab inhabitants are certainly more scattered. The living standards of the Arabs are nothing to write home about, except if you are doing a kind of tragic-comic kind of story.

I do think that Israelis feel more secure since the erection of the barrier. You probably know about logical fallacies, though, and one of the first one learns about is post hoc ergo propter hoc—after the fact therefore because of the fact. Because B follows A it is a result of A. So people think now that it is the wall that has stopped suicide bombings, because suicide bombings stopped after the wall. But I do not think this is the case.

NS: Tomorrow is the Jewish holiday of Tisha B’Av, the commemoration of the destruction of the first and second Temples. You write very emotively about Jerusalem in your book. Is there any kind of shared sense of mourning for the city? Are Palestinians developing rituals around Jerusalem in the same way?

Nusseibeh: You know, there’s a competition between Israelis and Arabs to see who holds the strongest connection to Jerusalem. When the Arabs see the Israelis commemorating events that assert the connectedness between Jerusalem and the Jewish people, the Arabs get very upset and say “no, no, no.” Or they say, “Yes, but that was 3,000 years ago. Maybe 3,000 years ago the Jewish people were connected to Jerusalem but the people here today, Israelis who claim to be Jewish, have nothing to do with the Jews who once lived here.” So they’re very angry about any kind of assertion that Jews have a claim to Jerusalem. And I suppose likewise with Israelis. Many look down on the assertions Muslims make that they have a claim to the city, and make fun of stories like the flying donkey. Many like to repeat that Jerusalem is not the first, not the second, but the third holiest city in Islam whereas it is the first holy city in Judaism. But the truth is that after I wrote my book I had second thoughts about Jerusalem. I think we are giving it too much importance. I think that the two sides have gone crazy about Jerusalem in that we’re giving far more weight to things like space and stone, location and geography, than we are to human beings. We are prepared to sacrifice human beings for the sake of location, which is a crazy notion.

I was thinking the other day, going back to the story of when Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son and God said here is a lamb instead. The whole point was—I mean, I imagine—that God’s message to Abraham was that he should not sacrifice human blood over that rock, over Jerusalem, over that specific location where we have been spilling blood, Jews and Muslims. This is a contravention of God’s message.

NS: Are you hopeful for the future?

Nusseibeh: Yes. I'm hopeful for the future and even about the present. I keep thinking that the world is much larger than our fooleries. There is much more than the mistakes and miscalculations we make, than the connivance or whatever we do to suppress other people. So in the end, the world is still much bigger than us. There is more to the world than what we see, is almost how Shakespeare put it, although I think he did so better.

NS: How do you like speaking at universities to students? How did you like speaking at Harvard?

Nusseibeh: I enjoyed the talk at Harvard because the community was a more mature audience than one usually finds on a campus. But I've come across audiences in the States and Europe where I've felt very sad to find that the war is raging out there. And it's like we here are fighting and we go out hoping that we can be finished with this war. What we find instead is that the war is just spreading outwards and replicating itself, becoming the war of Jewish and Arab communities everywhere. What I would like to find when I go abroad is people making peace or people at peace with one another who can help me here to make peace with the party I'm at war with. I don't want to go out and see even more war. Why should I go out? I sometimes get depressed when I see that.

NS: I remember that when you spoke at Harvard the moderator and several students seemed to be pushing you in one direction.

Nusseibeh: (Laughing) I seem to remember they pushed me to the bathroom!

NS: (Joking) I don't know whether you did that on purpose—

Nusseibeh: Of course not! Not every peaceful Palestinian action is a contrivance!

NS: —but I thought it was brilliant. You effectively said, "Let's let reality intrude for just a while."

Nusseibeh: (Laughter) It was very embarrassing. There was the next president of Harvard sitting in the front row and I said to myself "this is Harvard. Can I do this kind of thing?" And then I thought, "Hell, why not?"