

What Is a Palestinian State Worth to the Palestinians?

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Sari Nusseibeh proposes that Palestinians accept civil but not political rights in a Jewish state because, as he puts it,

the state, as we had conceived it, is no longer practical or realistic [And] if we are facing an obstinate occupying power . . . we need to think of proposals that may work as shock therapy to awaken Israelis to the inhumanity of continued occupation, or that may provide halfway measures to reduce . . . the occupation's deleterious effects on our daily lives. (pp. 10-11)¹

Nusseibeh claims that his proposal breaks through what have become fruitless negotiations to end Israel's occupation while it provides ordinary Palestinian men and women the chance to improve the quality of their lives. Without sovereignty, Nusseibeh argues that Palestinians can only escape their predicament by acknowledging and accepting the futility of pursuing their national cause. The recommendation is intended to force Palestinians and Israelis to think about the purpose of a state—hence, the provocative title, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* Focused with sympathetic intensity on the Palestinian ordeal, the book illuminates, as though from within, the tension between the reality of despair in the present and an imagined hope for the future. On one side of the Middle East conflict, Nusseibeh sees military might and massive material resources, while on the other, the most potent of motivations: the desire of Palestinians for the freedom to control their own lives. But can Nusseibeh's vision be translated or even connected to any discernible political reality? For even if just an exercise for the mind, there must be some truth in it to be taken seriously.

Binationalist, proponent of the two-state solution, supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, critic of the Palestine Liberation Organization—these can be said to describe Nusseibeh's political convictions at one time or another. Although the list might suggest that Nusseibeh has adopted the most prosaic of Palestinian aims, he has, in fact, crossed semi-sacred lines in presenting his views. Taxing both the vocabulary

¹ Sari Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Page references are in parentheses in the text.

and principles of Palestinian identity, Nusseibeh has, on more than one occasion, boldly stated that the right of return will carry Palestinians from their refugee camps only to a newly born Palestinian state and not to the towns or villages left behind in 1948. It is worth remarking that there are few articles of faith as firmly fixed in the Palestinian national canon as the right of return. For Nusseibeh to challenge this principle shows the measure not only of his intellectual audacity but more importantly of his personal courage, for what he advocates amounts to no less than a nationalist heresy with potentially lethal consequences.

From his birth into a family renowned for its educational achievements and national service, Nusseibeh resided at or near the pinnacle of Palestinian politics in a society where lineage matters. Born in Damascus in 1949 but coming of age in the aftermath of the 1967 War, Nusseibeh understood that as much as Palestine belonged to the Arab world, it happened to be located in Israel's geographic domain. That realization led him to learn about Israel by studying Hebrew, traveling across its Jewish communities, and establishing ties with some of its leading intellectuals. He earned respect for his scholarship and admiration for his efforts to understand all sides of the Middle East Conflict while remaining enchanted by none.

Surprisingly, then, given the reputation of the man as an original thinker, Nusseibeh has nothing new to say in this book about Israel's occupation nor about its effect on Palestinian life and behavior. But *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* warrants attention because it restores focus on the central and critical issue of statehood even as it demonstrates how the best of Palestinian thinkers has really not thought about the state in a serious way or delved deeply into how authoritative institutions can ensure security and protect rights by drawing their energy from political sovereignty. Perhaps because Nusseibeh's views of the state retain a heavy influence of leftist ideology, they emphasize the negative aspects of state power. He tells us that he once believed in

a Palestinian state embodying our national identity on a part of our homeland . . . enabling those in the diaspora to return to the homeland, those under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza to become free, and those within Israel to gain full equality with their Jewish fellow citizens. (p. 6)

But that belief did not last and was replaced by his identification of the state as an entity erecting an army, siphoning off what is likely to be a meager national treasure from health care and education, and as a place where the trappings of power would be disposed to march in response to a highly chauvinistic discourse emptied of consideration for human rights. For this reason, Nusseibeh says that he has no use for politics, and although he has engaged in activism on behalf of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, he sees himself, first and foremost, as a fighter for human rather than for national rights. The great structural fault of nationalism, then,

on Nusseibeh's reading of history, is the elevation of state power over people's human rights but, paradoxically, also the conventional assumption of a link between the two. But the linkage is misplaced, he now asserts, for a state may not always bestow on its people the capacity to shape their own lives. Thus the crux of Nusseibeh's formulation, the relationship between state and individual, is also the source of its major weakness.

Nusseibeh has come to regard Israel's occupation as too powerful to be removed by any conceivable combination of diplomacy and confrontation, but he apparently believes that the Jewish state would be willing to accord Palestinians individual rights if they stopped short of demanding citizenship. In other words, Nusseibeh, in effect, turns into a reality the polemical charge of *apartheid* against the Jewish state since Palestinians would, in accordance with his proposal, be formally denied full citizenship.

Although the book has been described as putting forward an original proposition, it ends up providing a spurious logic wrapped in a tone of moral loftiness. Its argument stays close to conventional Palestinian claims about their rightful title to all of the land mapped as Palestine after the end of World War I and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. Still, it is worthwhile to ask: What would happen to Palestinians and Israelis, if the very unlikely scenario put forward by Nusseibeh were to occur?

If Israel were to grant Palestinians civil rights so as to open up their opportunities and raise their standard of living, would the bestowal of such limited privileges actually raise the level of control Palestinians exercise over their lives and over their destiny? Would Palestinians be granted the possibility of establishing the kinds of communal institutions necessary for a creative culture? If not, and if many individuals were to enjoy professional success, would they be able to live with the fact that their personal ambitions actually result in enfeebling their community?

In effect, Nusseibeh's thesis also posits that Palestinians should claim a special moral mission for themselves by demonstrating the costs of statehood. But can Palestinians remain aloof from politics for the sake of becoming an ethical balance sheet for Israelis and Palestinians as they assess the profits and losses incurred by leaving this conflict unresolved and partly unattended? Is the full cultivation of the mind and spirit possible without political engagement, and would Palestinians, living without citizenship, feel they are pouring their creative energies into a place they will never call their own?

The civil rights that Nusseibeh discusses already reside in Israel's legal system.² If Israel can serve as the provider of civil rights, it is presumably because of the country's commitment to a set of high ethical principles. But why, then, isn't that same state, whose governments since

² David Kretzmer, *The Occupation of Justice: The Supreme Court of Israel and the Occupied Territories* (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 2002).

1993 have pledged to negotiate an end to the occupation of Palestinian lands, be trusted to fulfill its commitments to bring this conflict to an end?

Finally, describing Palestinian national goals as secular is evidently less discomfiting than acknowledging how much these aims overlap with Muslim religious strictures. For Nusseibeh, the culture and political aspirations of Palestinians emerge from the totality of their work and family ties. Ironically, while Nusseibeh sees no religious imprint on Palestinian nationalism, he discerns only persecution and the call of God as the foundational basis for Zionism. Silent on the religious themes, values, and rituals embedded in Palestinian nationalism while highlighting the Biblical promises as a pillar of Zionism—even as Zionism sought to preserve Jewish culture by redefining it away from its past dependence on supernatural, God-centered meanings—Nusseibeh generates a false impression of which nationalist ideology is more flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.

It is worth stating that Zionism's own history provides one of the best reasons why Israel would adamantly oppose Nusseibeh's proposal. Opening up a pathway for Palestinians to galvanize their creative energy into cultural organizations is the groundwork for revitalizing a national movement that would inevitably make political demands for equality, a path to citizenship recalling the Jewish state's own trajectory. No one better than the Zionists knows that the development of a secular Jewish culture gave birth to the idea of a Jewish state and to the conviction that only sovereignty could guarantee communal survival.

Look, then, more closely at the dynamics of the power hovering over Palestinians, and you will see how much Nusseibeh misses in his search for ways to remove the obstacles blocking their capacity to exercise control over their daily lives. Ordinary Palestinians are actually caught not only in the crossfire of violence and checkpoints, but also in the clash of diverse political forces that subject them to a multitude of conflicting imperatives. Palestinians struggle with an explosive mixture of strategies for independence, national liberation, and for what might be called redemption. Nusseibeh's argument offers no guidance on how to accommodate the contradictions inherent in simultaneously trying to build a state, create a new nation, and restore justice to a people whose very identity is etched in the injustices meted out to it: exile, dispossession, and subordination.

Apart from Israel's occupation, all Palestinians confront a profound disharmony of political forces that constrain their freedoms. State-building requires the structuring of political life around institutions and laws in borders that can be drawn on a map. This process calls for calculating the costs and benefits not only of policy options, but also of adherence to sacred principles. National liberation inserts Palestinians directly into highly volatile Arab political dynamics as they seek both material resources and land bases for their confrontations with Israel. For this reason, Palestinians are as much creatures of Middle East politics as they are instruments deployed by the area's various regimes to service their own particular interests. For Palestinians, mobilizing resources and support from the Arab states without

diminishing their own autonomy is an almost impossible task to imagine, let alone to discharge. Palestinians also wage their struggle at a third level where memories of past injustices become the warrant for political action. The impulses at play in this kind of redemptive politics mean that returning to Haifa can command more attention and resources than creating a state. Redemptive politics, with its narrowly construed ethical choices, promises much more than it can deliver.

Leaving aside its many flaws, does *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* offer a new currency for personal autonomy as Palestinians navigate their lives? An essential element of freedom is the power to choose and live with the consequences of choices freely made. Fair elections count because people are voted into office who presumably reflect the popular views on budget allocations and on the priorities to be set for the nation: army and weapons or schools and health care, sewers and roads or buildings and bridges. Without citizenship, Palestinians will have their choices determined by others and their lives regulated by an agenda formed by those who do possess full political rights. Under Nusseibeh's plan, Palestinians would still be living, then, in an environment based on someone else's understanding of what is important. One might well ask how such a situation is better or even different from the occupation Nusseibeh insists is the obstacle to self-fulfillment and self-determination for Palestinians.

Nusseibeh's proposal, even as a theoretical construct, thus appears to change no dynamic or shift no reigning paradigm. Palestinians need and deserve freedom, but they also must give up the notion that their freedom can be won by relying on the correct combination of regional alliances. More importantly, they must liberate themselves from the myth that sovereignty has no value if it fails to produce absolute and perfect redemption from all of the injustices of the past. No strategy can bring Palestinians all they may want or even deserve, nor can any state-building process—anywhere—meet the kinds of ethical commands generated by the belief in political action as a means to redemption.

