

# One State?

---

JRB [jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/190/one-state](http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/190/one-state)

Peter Berkowitz

On June 14, 2009, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a historic speech at Bar-Ilan University, in which he declared his support for the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the Jewish state. Netanyahu was not the first Israeli prime minister to make such a statement—that honor belongs to Ehud Barak. But he was the first right-wing prime minister to do so, and his speech marked the consolidation of a consensus that has emerged in Israel over the past decade that a two-state solution is, for the long term, the only viable and just outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Unmoved, however, by the Obama administration's determination to quickly wrap up a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to bring a Palestinian state into existence, a majority of Israelis doubt that what is necessary and right for the long term can safely be implemented in the short term. Their doubts are rooted in a sober assessment of the security challenges that confront Israel. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad lack popular support in the West Bank, where they are currently in charge. How, Israelis wonder, can one entrust such insecure leaders with sovereignty over a territory from which Iran-sponsored Hamas and other terrorist groups could launch rocket attacks and more against the heart of their country—the greater Tel Aviv area, Ben Gurion International Airport, and Jerusalem? The majority is convinced that Israel cannot afford to have an independent neighboring state that might be even more menacing than the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, where an unremittingly hostile regime already possesses missiles that can reach Tel Aviv. While Fayyad has made real progress in the past several years in expanding the West Bank economy and forming a Palestinian Authority Security force, it has not persuaded most Israelis to let down their guard.

In *What is a Palestinian State Worth?* the estimable Sari Nusseibeh, a professor of philosophy, the president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, and the author of the political memoir, *Once Upon a Country*, also comes to the conclusion that prospects are dim for achieving a separate and independent Palestinian state any time soon. Yet contrary to Netanyahu, the Israeli consensus, the Obama administration, and indeed the weight of international opinion, Nusseibeh contends that a separate and independent state, desirable as it may be in theory, is probably the wrong answer. Owing to Israeli settlements and (though here he is less explicit) a Palestinian Authority that “has managed to rob the people of their wills,” Nusseibeh thinks that the time has passed in which a viable Palestinian state could be established in the West Bank. Instead, the political logic of the current contours of the conflict and philosophical reflection on justice point to a one-state solution.

This is not an altogether new position for Nusseibeh, long considered a leading Palestinian moderate. Already in the 1970s he was attracted to the idea that Palestinians beyond the Green Line should be made citizens with fully equal rights in Israel. In 1987, he called publicly for the creation of a binational state out of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. But in the aftermath of the first Intifada, in which he played a prominent role, he changed his mind. In 1991, he and the Israeli political scientist Mark Heller co-authored *No Trumpets, No Drums*, which argued for a two-state solution. Twelve years later, in June 2003, with retired colonel and former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon, he launched “The People’s Voice” to mobilize support for a two-state solution among both Israelis and Palestinians.



*Sari Nusseibeh. (Photo courtesy of Harvard University Press.)*

If Nusseibeh has now returned to the idea that he abandoned more than twenty years ago, he has nonetheless given it a surprising new twist. Instead of calling for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza to be incorporated into Israel as full-fledged citizens, he proposes an arrangement whereby Israel would protect their civil rights and confer upon them healthcare and other benefits, but would not provide the political rights to vote, hold elective office, and serve as ministers in the government.

Nusseibeh describes this as “a mutually agreed upon conferral by Israel of a form of ‘second-class citizenship’ on all Palestinians who wish to accept it.” Under this proposal, he rather nonchalantly assures his readers, Israel would be able to retain its Jewish character, and “the only negative side” for reasonable Israelis “would be having to put up with the Arab population living among them.” At the same time, it would be for Palestinians “a far more bitter pill to swallow” because it would involve “giving up the dream of having a Palestinian state and having to make do, psychologically, with being subjects rather than citizens in their own country.”

This is where the apparent skepticism embodied in Nusseibeh’s title *What is a Palestinian State Worth?* emerges. As he recently explained in an interview in *Le Monde*:

They can keep their government, and keep it Jewish if that’s what they want, as long as we enjoy all our human rights. Personally, I don’t want a state. If they want to be in charge of everything, and they offer me the services a state offers, that suits me. What I want, what the Palestinians want, is to live a decent life.

Here it sounds as if Nusseibeh might be calling upon his fellow Palestinians to relinquish forever any dream of attaining a state of their own. But in his book, he more tentatively describes his innovative idea as merely “a thought experiment,” a temporary “halfway measure . . . ‘without prejudice’ to any later negotiated outcome,” or as a solution that ought to appeal to the Israeli right-wing who “covet” the West Bank and Gaza. At other times, however, he indicates that what he is proposing is merely a “transitional phase” leading to a future in which the Jewish state will become obsolete. What he does not do in any serious way is explain his proposal’s crucial assumptions or work out its practical implications.

Nusseibeh has been politically engaged for several decades. But he was educated at Oxford and Harvard, built a career as a philosophy professor, and his new book reads more like a set of loosely structured (and loosely philosophical) common room monologues than it does a policy proposal. It is still surprising that he does not address the obvious and all but insurmountable obstacles to the implementation of his proposal.

Since the Palestinian Authority would be dismantled (how he doesn’t say), the proposal would create two categories of Arab Israelis: those already living inside the Green Line, who will presumably continue to enjoy full civil and political rights, and those living beyond the Green Line with merely civil rights. Or, perhaps, three categories, since some number, and perhaps a significant number, of Palestinians who support the PA and its leaders and those who support Hamas and its leaders will reject such a deal.

Beyond the intra-Palestinian conflict that Nusseibeh’s proposal would generate, it would also create an Israel that for the first time was not a fully democratic polity promising equal rights to all its citizens. This might be the point. Perhaps Nusseibeh, who believes that the first Intifada was a lost opportunity for Gandhian tactics, would like Israel to become an apartheid state not merely in the incendiary rhetoric of its critics but in reality. He seems to appreciate that given Israel’s commitment to freedom and democracy, maintaining actual apartheid conditions would be unbearable for most Israelis, and so what he on occasion acknowledges to be a “halfway measure” and a “transitional phase” would in reasonably short time generate an irresistible pressure in Israel to grant full political rights to the new Arab citizens from the West Bank and Gaza. Once enfranchised, these people would, as Nusseibeh knows, very soon constitute a formidable minority or even slender majority of the voters in the enlarged State of Israel, and would no doubt attempt to do away with any semblance of a Jewish state, in accordance with Nusseibeh’s own argument that Israel’s Jewish and democratic character are simply and entirely incompatible with one another.

In short, Nusseibeh’s one-state solution hardly seems the way toward his professed goal of freedom, equality and “a decent life” for Palestinians, or for Israelis. A far more likely outcome would be violent conflict and probably civil war, not only between Arabs and Jews, but also within each camp.

It might seem unjustifiable, from Nusseibeh's point of view at any rate, for the Jews of Israel to put up a fight to hold onto a state of their own. For states, in his opinion, are not of value in themselves but are merely instruments for securing individual freedom and the satisfaction of private lives. But this is not a position that he maintains consistently. He is also capable of contending, "the question of what states are for is ultimately about what it is to feel at home, about our inner emotions and aspirations, about who we are as human beings and how we can best live together." It was precisely this aspiration that inspired the creation of a Jewish state, a state that was understood since its founding also to be dedicated to the protection of the rights of all its citizens. And according to a powerful consensus that has formed in Israel, the United States, and throughout the international community, it is again to fulfill this aspiration that a Palestinian state should be created, by Israel's side, a state that would likewise protect the rights of all its citizens.

It is ominous that Nusseibeh employs contradictory conceptions of the state in his book to simultaneously undermine Israel's claims to be both Jewish and democratic and to set the stage for a single state in which Palestinians would feel at home and Jews would not. It suggests that despite his apparent evenhandedness, Nusseibeh is drawn to the same destructive all-or-nothing logic of his intransigent colleagues: there can only be one state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Apparently, he, like them, believes that dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state is historically inevitable and morally and politically just.

In the final pages of his book, Nusseibeh, who has dedicated his professional life to higher education, offers reflections on what "education is meant to do, and on what it can do for the next generation of Palestinians." It is a fitting final topic for a work that draws upon political philosophy, since if there is one point on which political philosophers ancient and modern tend to agree it is that true political reform depends on educational reform. But Nusseibeh's conclusion is disappointing. It does not go much beyond the trite assertion that "what our students need most is faith in themselves-and faith that they have it within themselves to shape history."

Surely that faith must be built on solid knowledge, the capacity for independent thought, and an understanding of the political implications of liberty and democracy. But as things stand, the curricula of many Palestinian schools still foster hatred of Jews and Israel. Despite UN Resolution 181, which in 1947 gave international authorization for the creation of a Jewish state in the land of Israel (and, at the same time, the creation of an Arab state), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) continues to promote the idea of Israel's illegitimacy in the West Bank and Gaza. In a recent poll by the respected American firm of Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner, two-thirds of Palestinians affirmed that "over time Palestinians must work to get back all the land for a Palestinian state" and 60 percent agreed that "the real goal should be to start with two states but then move it to all being one Palestinian state."

A truly liberal education, one that educates Palestinians for freedom, would cease to cultivate seething resentment of Israel as a Jewish state. It would also teach that a state can protect the rights of all of its citizens, including those who belong to national minorities, while maintaining its distinctive national character. Such an education would both strengthen Palestinians' respect for Israel's achievements, and enhance their own ability to build a stable and prosperous liberal democracy in the West Bank and Gaza, one which would in the end offer a positive answer to the timely question of what a Palestinian state is worth.