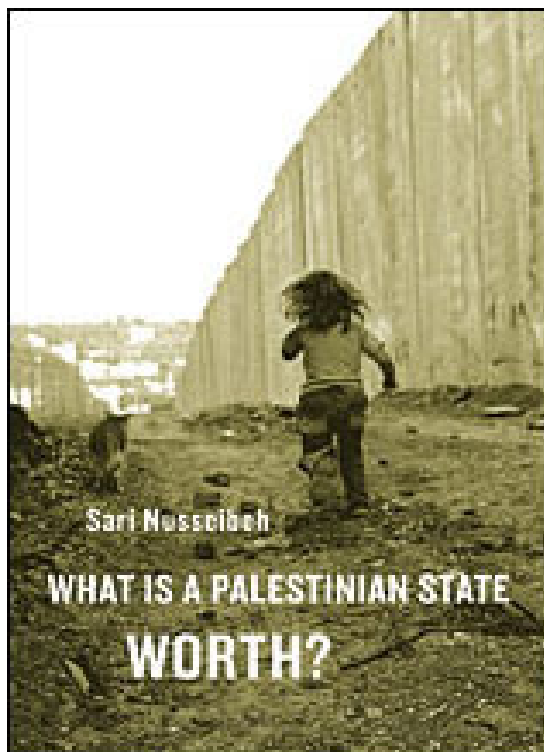


## ***BOOK REVIEW***

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### ***What is a Palestinian State Worth?***

**Sari Nusseibeh**

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**Review by**

**P R Kumaraswamy**

*MEI@ND*

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**O**f late, the one-state solution has become a popular notion among many Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike. The stalled peace process and prolonged violence has made it more attractive and enticing. In a world divided over conflicting identities and narratives, the one-state option sounds inclusive, non-discriminatory and even politically correct. The notion of Arabs and Jews co-existing as equal citizens without any favouritism or

discrimination is highly appealing. However, as critics have pointed out, the one-state solution is merely a euphemism for the destruction of the State of Israel. This idea is not akin to the Europe Union unity where individual states are prepared to voluntarily surrender at least part of their sovereignty to a supra-European identity. The one-state solution is no more imaginative than Saddam Hussein's call for Kuwait being the 19th province of Iraq. If one can extend the logic further, perhaps the restoration of the Ottoman Empire with all its territories would be the best way to resolve much of the ethnic and national tensions in the Middle East!

The frustrations over the peace process propelled some intellectuals to resurrect the 1947 Arab arguments for a unitary Palestinian state; the only difference being that, unlike the Arabs of 1947, the proponents of the one-state solution do not speak of expulsion of Jews, especially those who have emigrated to Israel since 1948.

The growing frustrations among the Palestinians evoke a difference response in Sari Nusseibeh, a sober, serious Palestinian intellectual who recognizes the false hopes of the peace process and shattered dreams of the Palestinians. While the situation is desperate, he is not in despair but seeks out the human goodness inherent in every individual. Relying on the example set by the leader of the Indian nationalist struggle, Mahatma Gandhi and his reliance on the "power of the soul" Nusseibeh feels that the ultimate purpose is "not to *defeat* Israel, but rather to win it over to a Palestinian vision of peace" (p.209, emphasis original). Nusseibeh recognizes the 1987 Intifada as a civil disobedience movement along the Gandhian model. By emphasizing on the largely non-violent nature of the popular movement, he also underscores his disapproval of the al-Aqsa intifada, which largely remained violent, and lacked popular participation.

Balanced in its understanding of the issues and appreciating contrary views, the leading Palestinian intellectual constantly highlights the inherent human goodness. "If my values as a Muslim conflicted with my values as a human being", he argues, "it would make no sense for me to reject the latter in favour of the former" (p.58). Reminding Israelis and Palestinians that they are individuals before they became the possessor of a collective identity ("meta-biological entities" as he calls them), Nusseibeh appeals to their rationality to recognize rights and wrongs. He appeals to the inner self of the individuals to transcend the human-made barriers of religion, nation or ideology.

Nusseibeh illustrates his argument with the example of Arab Knesset Member Dr. Ahmad Tibi and underscores the dilemmas facing both Israel and its Arab minority. At one level, Tibi's presence and active participation in the Israeli parliament reflects the complex nature of the Israeli polity. If Tibi's identity as the citizen of Israel "is rooted in the democratic rather than the religious aspect of the State of Israel", it also highlights "preferential treatment" of one group and the disenfranchising of the other (p.68) At the same time, Nusseibeh also highlights the inner

struggle of Israel's minority symbolized by Tibi himself. As Nusseibeh rightly argues, "Dr. Ahmad Tibi, who is not Jewish but is a state stakeholder" (p.91) and hence is not prepared to give up or swap this for a membership in a future Palestinian state.

The ability of Gandhi to successfully lead a mass movement and to achieve India's independence through non-violence is highly appealing to Nusseibeh. However, can one disconnect the context within which Gandhi led the non-violent struggle as the British were less brutal towards nationalist struggles than other European colonialists? Though Nusseibeh does not address the subtle difference, the Arab Spring that has swept the Middle East since January 2011 provides some hope for peaceful changes. Writing months before these popular protests, Nusseibeh urges Israelis and Palestinians that "we need to have faith in our ability to bring about a particular end" (p.180) because "solutions are *made*, not discovered (pp.183-4, emphasis original)

Nusseibeh however has excessive faith in the Federal Plan which was proposed by India at the UN Special Committee on Palestine in 1947. Unlike the majority partition plan, this called for greater autonomy for Jews within a single federal Palestine. It proposed autonomous Jewish and Arab states within one federal state of Palestine. Ironically, the rejection of the Indian plan was the only occasion when the Arabs and Jews agreed in 1947. Jews rejected it because it offered them civil and religious rights when they were demanding political rights and sovereignty; Arabs rejected it because it gave too much rights to the Jews who came from outside. Rejected by both contending parties, the Indian plan was never discussed in the United Nations and was confined to the dustbins of history. Moreover, the Federal Plan was suggested exactly two weeks after the Indian sub-continent was partitioned along communal lines. Indian leaders were advocating a federal solution for Palestine though they were not prepared to accept it in a more favourable South Asian context. A federal plan was not a solution in 1947 and it is still not a solution in 2012. If there ever were to be a federal state, it would have to come through a voluntary union of sovereign Israeli and Palestinian states; otherwise it would be yet another disaster in the Middle East.

Likewise, Nusseibeh's criticisms of the "predominantly exclusivist" nature of Israel are valid but the problem is not unique to the Jewish State. None of the post-Ottoman states of the Middle East, including Turkey, has developed an inclusive national identity and other minorities cannot partake in the national identity imposed from above.

Some of Nusseibeh's ideas, though controversial among Palestinians, are thought-provoking; he is not enamoured by the idea of statehood. As he admits, after spending his adulthood in support of the idea, "I have come back to feeling... that there is no absolute need for us to have a separate or so-called independent state" (p.6). He is also critical of the Arab rejection of the 1947

partition plan that proved catastrophic for the Palestinians and equally admires President Anwar Sadat for his “faith that he could change history” (p. 219).

At the same time, Nusseibeh is cognizant of the present frustration. Until both sides could reach a settlement, he offers an interim solution: Palestinians in the occupied territories could voluntarily give up their statehood option for greater civic rights from Israel. In exchange for the Israeli annexation of the occupied territories, he suggests that “Palestinians in the enlarged Israel agree that the state remain Jewish in return for being granted all the civil, though not the political, rights of citizenship” (p.14). This, he feels, would address Israel’s concerns about the demographic dilemma while mitigating the lives of the Palestinians from their daily sufferings.. This idea might not be ideal and may not even be popular among Israelis and Palestinians alike, but it is worth considering, especially when both sides are not prepared to reach an agreement. This far different from the one-state solution or the calls for the renewal of the intifada.

In short, *What is a Palestinian State Worth?* is not only a stimulating intellectual essay but also food for thought for anyone interested in peace in the Middle East. Nusseibeh once again establishes that there is still hope and space for moderation, sanity and fairness in the Middle East.

**Note:** A slightly different version appeared in *The Pioneer* (New Delhi) on 19 August 2012, Web like: <http://www.dailypioneer.com/sunday-edition/sundayagenda/books-reviews/88192-sanity-amid-turmoil.html>

**Professor P R Kumaraswamy is the Honorary Director of Middle East Institute at New Delhi. Email: [mei.newdelhi@gmail.com](mailto:mei.newdelhi@gmail.com)**

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