

## Interview with Sari Nusseibeh

Nusseibeh, a Bir Zeit University professor of philosophy, has stirred up considerable controversy of late by arguing that the Palestinians under occupation should adopt a strategy of struggling for equal rights within the Israeli system.

Whether or not one agrees with Nusseibeh — and it ought to be spelled out clearly at the outset, he is basically a minority of one — his proposals are worth examining. The following interview was conducted at the end of October.

*You and Meron Benvenisti are often cited as proponents of the view that the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza is an irreversible process. But whereas this leads Benvenisti to a bleak prognosis of bantustanization and institutionalized inequality, you have argued that this can possibly work to the benefit of the Palestinians. How do you view this disparity?*

Perhaps I can begin by explaining that from my point of view the solution that I favour at this stage is a settlement in which the Palestinians are able to gain full political rights in their own independent state under their own leadership. This to me is the starting point. Now, what Benvenisti says is that under the present circumstances the possibility of the Palestinians obtaining this goal is receding and we are reaching a point where it is quickly becoming impossible in the political — though not in the logical — sense to obtain these rights in the manner which the Palestinians desire. He therefore foresees a situation in which the Palestinians will continue to live under occupation with no possibility of obtaining their rights.

Now, I do not disagree with Benvenisti on this. I agree with him that it is indeed extremely difficult at this stage for the Palestinians to obtain their independence and that therefore we are going to enter an era in which for several years we will live in a situation which is objectively similar to the South African situation.

What I have added is a kind of optimistic angle. After several years have elapsed, the subjective elements will begin to change. Now what I mean by this is the following: people under occupation will begin to realize that although they cannot perhaps attain their political rights outside the system, it may be possible and indeed, at some point in time, it may even be desirable for them to start demanding their rights within the political system. Obviously they will not be granted those rights, but I could imagine a situation developing which will follow the South African pattern, not only in the objective sense but also in the subjective sense. They may demand to be enfranchised. If they are denied this, which is likely, they will probably then demand that the existing legislative system be replaced by another legislative system that will indeed give them such rights. While nothing may come out of this immediately, I believe that in the long run, maybe in 50 years or

60 years, this will be the logical and politically the most natural development that could take place.

*In an article recently published in Al Fajr you write of the Palestinians achieving equal rights "within the existing political superstructure." But isn't the existing political superstructure built and maintained for the express purpose of denying the Palestinians the same rights as the Jews?*

Let me repeat what I said earlier. We want an independent Palestinian state. The fact that Israel is not ready to agree to this does not mean that we are prepared to abandon our aspirations. If in ten years time the subjective conditions evolve in —

*What exactly do you mean by "subjective conditions"?*

What I mean very simply is that at the moment subjectively what we aspire to is the establishment of an independent state and separation from Israel. In the future, after several years have passed and people begin to see that this is very difficult to bring about, they will begin to think that it's desirable to utilize prevailing conditions to demand political rights within the system.

Now, when you demand political rights within the system — a system which is Zionist and which is based on the deprivation of your rights, you are not in fact involved in a contradiction, for you are continuing to demand something which the Zionist establishment denies you. But what is the difference? It is that your aspirations, your position has changed. Instead of seeking your rights independently of the Zionist state, you seek your rights within the Zionist state, in the full knowledge that the Zionist state will not grant these demands.

Why should anyone ask for something when it is clear that Israel will not grant it? The answer to this is that it may become the most logical thing for a Palestinian to do because he will then start asking for the replacement of the existing legislative system, which is based as you say on the premise of denying you your rights, with another system which grants these rights. The end result will be the establishment of a democratic secular state in the whole of Palestine, one in which Jews and Palestinians live side by side.

I think that in the same way there are at present Israelis who support the demand for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, in the future there will be Israelis who will support the establishment of a democratic secular state.

*In other words, the enfranchisement of the population of the occupied territories would entail the abolition of the Zionist state.*

Well, by definition, the existing state is one in which objectively we have a South African situation in which we the Palestinians are denied rights. I'm not referring solely to the Palestinians in the occupied territories. I'm speaking also about the Palestinians within the green line and the Palestin-

ians in exile. If we are able to set up a state which gives us our political rights, then by definition the state we are talking about will be different from the state which exists at present. The abolition of the Zionist state is a heady phrase. I don't use the term abolition. I'd rather use the terminology of political equality, which will eventually lead to the restructuring of the state in a new way which is truly democratic.

*But doesn't that entail the abolition of the Zionist political superstructure?*

Okay. But the problem is that this is rather sensitive. When in the past Palestinians have spoken about the abolition of the Zionist state, I think people have understood them to mean that basically what they want to do is to throw the Jews into the sea or turn the clock back. This unfortunately is the way a lot of Israelis understand what Palestinians mean when they speak about abolishing the Zionist state. This is something I want to avoid.

*You have spoken about three stages in the process, the first being the refusal of the Zionist state to grant these rights, the second stage being the establishment of a binational state and the third being the setting-up of a democratic secular state. How do you see these transformations coming about?*

I think that the precondition for any evolution in this process is that people begin to see that this is both logical and natural. Now once this happens and they begin to seek their rights we will be in a situation which is not only objectively South African but also subjectively South African. Once we begin to formulate these rights and work together — Palestinians and Israelis — to attain those rights, we will enter a long period of struggle. Nobody can know how long it will take, but I believe that after several years, we will be able to change the system enough to gain some of our rights — perhaps not the replacement of the Law of Return by a law of Palestinian return, but we will achieve equal political rights for the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

In regard to method, we are talking about a popular struggle, about people who are basically unarmed seeking their rights. Today we demonstrate against the closure of Bir Zeit University or whatever, tomorrow we will demonstrate to get into the Knesset. I'm not naive, I realize that coupled with this kind of internal struggle, we must also take the strategic balance of forces into account. You cannot draw a line between the internal civil struggle and the strategic balance between Israel and the Arab states.

*But what form do you think such a struggle would take?*

I'm not a Marxist. I feel that a situation would develop in such a way that it would become very clear to Israelis on moral grounds and on the grounds of national self-interest that the struggle of the Palestinians for enfranchisement is a just struggle and they would therefore stand by them.

don't think the working class of the occupied territories will form an alliance with the Israeli working class to topple the Zionist system. I see the majority of Palestinians in the occupied territories — whether working class or peasants, intellectuals or middle class — will find common ground with progressive Israelis regardless of their class identification.

*"Progressive Israelis" only make up a minority of the overall Israeli Jewish population. In regard to the majority, it's doubtful that the kind of universal values you're talking about carry much weight, especially when they must compete with Zionist exclusivism.*

I don't know how large a community you need, but if you have the majority of Palestinians living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, a majority of the Arab population within the green line and progressive Israelis, together you constitute quite a strong force. If you add the external situation, the balance of forces between the Arab states and Israel and a third dimension, European and American involvement, I think it would constitute a major form of leverage.

*In regard to the United States, it's hard to see the US power elite being concerned with equality or civil rights here, in the Middle East, or anywhere else in the world. Concerning the short-term interests of the majority of the Israeli population, do you expect some kind of moral turnaround to occur?*

I think we have to distinguish between two things. Is what I'm saying attainable and is it desirable? Let's talk about an independent Palestinian state. Now the fact that some people may argue that it has not been attained does not make it any less desirable. If you argue that what I'm talking about is not attainable, it will not necessarily change the way I view the desirability of the outcome. Nobody can predict the future, but to my mind, given the present circumstances, given the continuation of the occupation, I think it's possible to see a light at the end of the tunnel, one which can give some hope.

If you come to details and ask how this is to be done, how many people will stand by you and so on, I would say something very basic. I think Israel has played a very safe game internationally. When the Americans or the Europeans ask why the Palestinians aren't granted an independent state, they say: of course we are democratic, we are humanitarian, but our security is at stake — of course we'd give them this, we'd give them that, but if we give them their own state they'd attack us.

This fear that they've created has made Israel's standing abroad more comprehensible and less reprehensible. Now, what I think will happen is that if we turn the table on Israel and say we don't want territory, we don't want to set up a PLO or pro-Moscow state, we are peaceful citizens who want our human rights, Israel will find it more difficult to defend its position. And it will isolate

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Israel in the international arena more than has been the case so far.

*Do you see the struggle for enfranchisement as being the main trajectory of the struggle?*

Not necessarily. If it's possible to be enfranchised first and then change certain laws, well and good. But I don't think that this will come about. I don't think it will be possible for me as a Palestinian to be enfranchised and then to be in a position where I could work to change the flag or the law of return for example. But you see to demand to be enfranchised is one thing and to think that you will be enfranchised is another. What I'm saying is that the demand to be enfranchised should be made although we know that within this system we will not be enfranchised.

*And what do you expect?*

I expect that the struggle for equal rights will change the system, introducing laws in the system that will enable me to be enfranchised in a political system which by definition will be different.

*You speak about the transformation from a binational state to a secular democratic state coming about solely through Palestinian demographic superiority. Why should demographic superiority vouchsafe a democratic secular state?*

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Well, you know I've had all kind of responses. The predominant response has been one of shock. People have been shocked. This shock has manifested itself in different forms. Some people have been very much against it, others maybe a bit less. Very few people have been supportive, not publically but privately. It's very strange, but when you come up with an idea, people always are shocked and aren't very happy about it. Then you're faced with two choices, either you pull back or you stand your ground and if you stand your ground and develop your ideas and argue with your critics, people begin to support you and I think this has been happening. I haven't received any public support but I have received support from individuals.

*What sectors of the population do you think are the most likely to accept your ideas?*

There are two kinds of support of course, what I'm talking about is intellectual support. I think that I will have intellectual support, from students, colleagues. But you see, more than anything the main support will be the evolving situation on the ground, I think that this will happen.

In some periods of history, ideology can govern people's behaviour and attitudes, for example over the last ten or fifteen years the ideology of an independent Palestinian state has ruled the behaviour of unions in the occupied territories. Instead of trying to achieve rights as workers, they have held to the ideology of an independent Palestinian state regardless of whether this is in their interests as workers. The unions are not really workers' organizations so much as political organizations. Now, in some periods behavioural attitudes pull ideology in their wake, especially when the predominant ideology begins to falter.

If you look at how people behave in the territories, you will see that actually they behave in a manner similar to what I'm talking about. In 1967 when Israel annexed Jerusalem, people would not put Israeli license plates on their cars

Supposing that after 30 or 40 years we have a situation in which we have a democratic state but not a secular state. Suppose the Palestinians have gained political rights, but the state itself is binational, where you can go to Tel Aviv and see Jews who have a different culture from Arabs in Nazareth—

*Isn't that the situation at present?*

Yes, it's a binational state but it is not democratic in the sense that I'm talking about. But suppose it is democratic throughout the whole country, so that people retain their culture, their identities. Now, let's say we have a peaceful settlement. I think that you have to take into account not only what's happening within the state, but also what is happening in relation to the Arab world. Israel is in the middle of the Arab world, sooner or later Arab culture will affect Israeli culture and it will become more Arab. It will retain a lot of European elements but it will become more of a part of the area. But still we will not have a secular state, and for that to be achieved more time is needed. To get to a secular state you must get rid of your national identity and affiliation and I see this as taking place further in the future.

*What has been the predominant response to your proposals?*

but now people will pay to have a car with Israeli license plates. The population of East Jerusalem has doubled because it is in peoples' interests to have Israeli identity cards because of the social benefits and so on. Look at the workers — the 80,000-100,000 that work in Israel — they have interests in getting the benefits from the taxes which they've paid out of their salaries for the last 19 years. It makes sense for them to start asking for the benefits. Look at the way we've dealt with the courts. Or our relations with Arab members of Knesset.

*Do you think that enfranchisement will be of universal benefit to the Palestinians or that it will benefit certain groups more than others?*

Of course it will be universal. But obviously, even within Israeli Jewish society there are different levels of equality. At each level I'll have allies, whether Arab or Jew. And slowly I can form alliances with whoever is on my level in order to reach a situation in which everyone has equality.

*But do you think that the middle class, for instance, have more of an interest in attaining certain formal rights than the population of the refugee camps?*

I think it will certainly help the refugees more and the working classes because if any rights are achieved at all of the kind I'm talking about, to begin with it will be rights for such people, people in the refugee camps.

*Why?*

Because what I'm talking about is that people in the refugee camps are immediately given the right to go back to their old homes — not perhaps to their own homes, but in a community to be built close to their homes. Although I can see that the land that was confiscated from them is now state land and wouldn't be returned to them, still I think its possible to build an economic and industrial infrastructure for them to live. The first beneficiaries on my list are the people who are the most dispossessed.

tion of the Arabs of Haifa [in 1948]. This  
along with others which point to the