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TERRITORIES

Anti-nationalist

A prominent Palestinian academic recently proposed that the Palestinians should urge Israel to annex the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and then make use of their demographic advantage to gain equal rights. Dr. Sari Nusseibeh spoke to *Spectrum's* editor Susan Hattis Rolef about the plan and its implications.



Father and son: Sari Nusseibeh with a portrait of the late Anwar Nusseibeh

Spectrum: Your ideas first gained wide publicity in an interview in *Newsweek* of January 13, 1986, in which you advocated that the Palestinians should encourage Israel to annex the West Bank and Gaza Strip. You argued that according to some demographers, Palestinians will form the majority by the year 2020, so that after gaining Israeli citizenship and a majority in the Knesset, you would pass a "Law of Return" for the Palestinians. Is this some sort of game or intellectual exercise?

Nusseibeh: It is no game. It is a serious proposal and a serious threat. Serious from the Palestinian point of view, in that it shows that a continuation of the current situation is not so bad after all, even though the immediate price we pay is high. A

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threat in that it shows the Israelis clearly what will happen if the current situation continues. However, if Israel annexes the territories, in the first instance we would be subject to a clear state of apartheid...

Spectrum: Wouldn't you make annexation conditional upon being granted equal rights?

Nusseibeh: No. I recognize our inability to become citizens at first. I believe we are already living in a situation of apartheid, only people are not conscious of the fact, and we need to change this situation. But since the ultimate aim of the Palestinians is the establishment of a state in the whole of Palestine, we must ensure as a first step that Palestine is not partitioned, and then struggle for a system which will ensure equal rights for Palestinians.

Spectrum: Why are you against partition and the establishment of an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza?

Nusseibeh: To me, the establishment of such a state under PLO leadership, with its capital in East Jerusalem, would represent a great compromise. It would mean a state in only 19% of Palestine – a state deprived of any real strategic assets, with no water resources, no agricultural land, whose establishment would be conditional upon limitations demanded by Israel and the Americans. But if this is what people want then I am prepared to accept it. However, there would have to be real independence.

Of course, if Israel were willing to come to terms with the Palestinian people on the two state basis, the Palestinian leadership would have to make it absolutely clear that they accept this solution as permanent – not as a stepping stone to something else. This would not exclude our children or grandchildren deciding that the two states should unite, but that should not be the intention when the Palestinian state is established.

I do not believe though, that anyone is willing to let us have real independence. They say: no Arafat, no "Soviet satellite", no arms, nothing. The two state solution is an imposed ideology in that it did not emerge as a natural consequence of the people's wishes over the years, but as an academic solution to a problem.

Spectrum: And the idea of Israel annexing the territories is not academic?

Nusseibeh: No, it is a grass roots idea which expresses the real daily practical needs of the people and their behavioral attitudes.

Spectrum: What do you mean by "behavioral attitudes"?

Nusseibeh: In 1967 the Palestinians totally rejected the situation. Then, gradually, they started to exploit it. Take the case of the newspapers. In June 1967, all the Arabic press in the West Bank and Gaza ceased to appear. The following year there were heated debates in the territories whether to adapt to the new reality and start publishing newspapers subject to Israeli terms. *Al-Quds* was the result. Many believed it was subsidized by the Israeli authorities, but it was the base from which all the existing newspapers, emerged.

There is another recent example. Several weeks ago, farmers in the Jericho area

staged a sit-in. This was very different from most demonstrations staged in the occupied territories.

This demonstration was by old farmers and had nothing to do with politics. They were asking for economic rights – for the opportunity of selling their produce on equal terms in Israel. They were not saying: “build a wall between us and Israel,” but rather, “break down the economic wall, the barriers.”

Arab psychology has been changing; moving slowly away from total rejection of the system towards an attitude of: “lets make the best use of the system – of the reality”.

“We shall be playing a totally new game, a game which we Palestinians can win.”

Spectrum: Where is all this leading to?

Nusseibeh: As “extremists” we seek a democratic-secular state in Palestine, but as realists we accept that due to Israel’s political, military and economic power, its alliance with the U.S., we are unlikely to set up our own state. Thus, it makes sense that, rather than plan to destroy buildings and throw people into the sea, we should accept the system and adopt a strategy of slowly changing it from within. We shall have to go through many stages, some of them painful, before we reach our goal. Just as the farmers in Jericho were turned down, when we ask for equal democratic rights the answer will be: “No, we are very sorry”. Why? Because there are “conflicting interests”. But then we shall be playing a totally new game, a game which we Palestinians can win. At first it will be a bi-national state with discrimination...

Spectrum: But by definition, a bi-national state is one in which each of the two nations is recognized as a “state forming” element with entrenched rights which cannot be changed by the other nation, even if that nation is the majority.

Nusseibeh: It will be a bi-national state in the sense that we shall have two nations in one state, and it will be a racist state, in which one nation will discriminate against the other. But when, after 20-30 years, we attain our political rights, including the “right of return” (the right of all the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes – the editors) then we will have a bi-national state which is also democratic – the sort of state which Judah Magnes and the other Jewish bi-nationalists advocated in mandatory times.

The national differences will continue to

exist and ought not to be buried at first. But after 50-100 years the state could turn into a democratic – secular state, if its Arab and Jewish citizens wished it to.

I believe that in order to be a secularist, an anti-nationalist or an internationalist you must be a nationalist first.

Spectrum: Your idea is less likely to be accepted by the Israelis than the two state solution. Though minimalist Zionism, at least, could accommodate itself to the idea of partition, bi-nationalism or democratic secularism is contrary to the very essence of Zionism – the solution of the Jewish problem through national self-determination.

From the Israeli point of view the only alternative to “prevarication and postponement” is the “Jordanian option”.

Nusseibeh: Well, if Israel decides to come to an agreement with Jordan, on the basis of which it will withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967, I will certainly not stand in the way of the Israeli army withdrawal. By reaching an accommodation with Jordan, Israel might solve some of its internal problems. However, if such a settlement does not address the Palestinian problem, it will not receive Palestinian endorsement and will not be lasting. It is an illusion to imagine that by going to Jordan, Israel will be able to attain some sort of stability, because the essential component of stability is the consent of the Palestinians.

In the two state solution, on the other hand, in return for its withdrawal and

recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination, Israel will have a settlement with the Palestinian people.

Spectrum: But taking the longer term view, the Jordanian option is really a Palestinian option. In a Jordanian-Palestinian state the Palestinians would constitute 80-90% of the population. It is inevitable that the Palestinians would eventually take over.

Nusseibeh: In my view, any Palestinian or non-Jordanian who gained control over Jordan would be a transgressor – an enemy of Jordan.

The Palestinians who live in Jordan, or would live in the Jordanian-Palestinian state, can choose whether or not to consider themselves Jordanians. If they do, they can participate in the Jordanian government (Sari Nusseibeh’s father, the late Anwar Nusseibeh, was a Minister in the Jordanian government from 1952-1955 – the editors). But if they do not, they have no right to take over the Jordanian government.

Spectrum: Have you considered the possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian confederation?

Nusseibeh: I have come across Abba Eban’s “Benelux idea” which is an association between the Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, although I am not familiar with its details. It seems to me a cosmetic formulation. To be acceptable, it must be predicated on the essential element of recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination.

My own ideal is the democratic-secular state. For me, a national liberation movement is a precondition for liberation from nationalism. ■

BINATIONALISM

Bi-nationalism is a system of government in a two nation state, in which both nations are recognized as state forming elements, and neither rules over the other. The national rights of each nation are entrenched in the system, and both must be represented in the government on some agreed basis, irrespective of their relative size. A bi-national state may have a federal or unitary basis, involving territorial or communal autonomy. In mandatory times, various Jewish groups advocated bi-nationalism, as a solution to the Arab-Jewish conflict which would avoid partition. The idea lost its attraction after the 1948/49 war, although it was raised once again in Israel after 1967 by marginal figures.

The democratic-secular state proposed by some PLO circles is not a bi-national one, since it advocates the blurring of national differences, while the bi-national state emphasizes these differences and encourages their perpetuation. In Dr. Nusseibeh’s plan, bi-nationalism is not an ideal, but merely a stage towards democratic secularism.

Looking at existing bi- or multi-national states, it is clear that among the pre-conditions for their success are: cooperation between leaders of the national groups; no history of armed hostilities or the rule of one nation over the other; lack of any feasible alternative and common external security concerns. None of these pre-conditions exist in the case of the Israelis and Palestinians.