

In a Different Time Zone

Sari Nusseibah, a professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University, has provoked a great deal of controversy in both Israeli and Palestinian circles by advocating Israeli annexation of the occupied territories and by meeting with Herut party member Moshe Amirav. Hillel Schenker spoke with him about his political views and the recent Arab summit in Amman.

New Outlook: Were you and your late father (Anwar Nusseibah, a former member of the Jordanian Parliament and Governor of Jerusalem, who died in 1986 - ed.) in agreement on the issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Sari Nusseibah: Essentially, my father and I didn't have any differences of opinion. He was just more extreme in his views. I am more of a moderate.

In what sense?

He felt that Palestinians should not be involved, as Palestinians, in any settlement with Israel. He thought that any settlement the Palestinians might make with Israel would, necessarily, not be in their favor.

Why?

Because the balance of power has not been in their favor. He held the Arabs, in particular, Jordan, primarily responsible for the problem, and he therefore felt that if a price had to be paid it was the Arabs who should pay it. This is why he favored Resolution 242 between 1967 and 1974. As far as he was concerned, Resolution 242 did not talk about the PLO or the Palestinian problem. It talked about the returning of territories and the cessation of hostilities. He believed that this was a way of going back to the situation before 1967. When people told him that we, the Palestinians, wanted to be involved, that we do not want Israel to return the territories to Jordan, the situation changed. In 1974, the official Arab position changed. It no longer talked only about the 1967 territories, but about resolving the Palestinian problem. And it also said that the PLO should resolve it. My father believed that this was a great mistake, because it made the Palestinians responsible for an error they had not committed in the first place. Even so, he accepted the PLO as the spokesman of the Palestinian people in 1974. And when the PLO started calling for a Palestinian state, he started saying, "Fine, all right, if this is the Arab position." But he was never seriously attracted to the idea or convinced that it was the right

thing to do. He believed that if it was possible to resolve the problem at all, it should be in a larger context. As a Palestinian, he was not willing to recognize Israel. He was willing as a Jordanian, as an Arab, but not as a Palestinian, and this is the difference between us. My arguments with him were, in effect, that we, as a Palestinian nation, must deal with the past. It's no good hiding behind the Arabs, protecting our dignity and our honor by not recognizing Israel, to get something in return. What we should get is a Palestinian state.

Have you been disappointed with the response of the Arab countries?

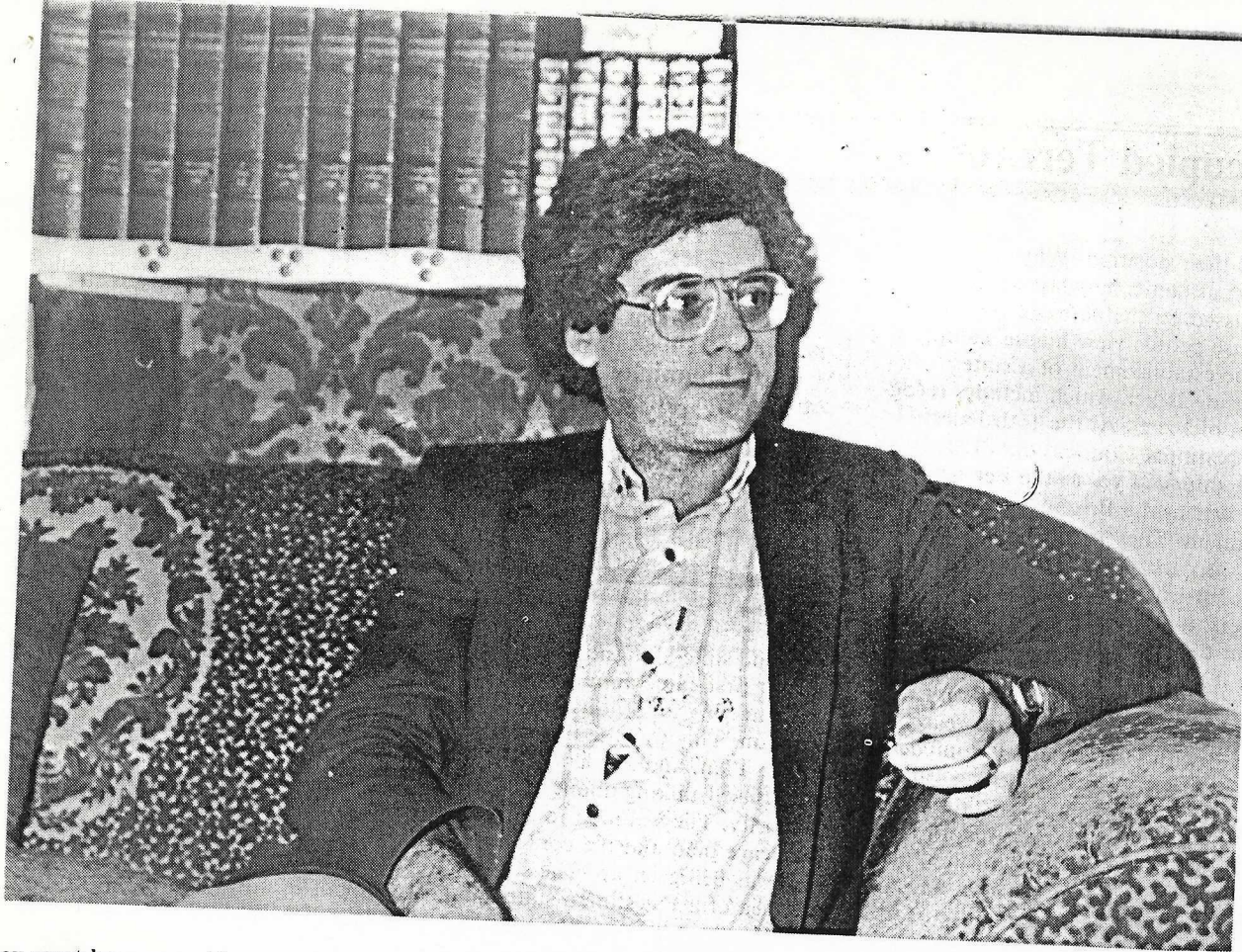
No, not disappointed. I never had any faith to begin with. I still don't have much faith. I believe that the Arabs and the Arab countries constitute potential strength for me as a Palestinian and a Muslim. But at this moment, they don't constitute very much. They are living in a different world. You talk about generation gaps, while I talk about epoch gaps. Which is to say that Israel is living in the 20th century, while the Arab world is living in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. They live in a different time zone from the one Israel lives in.

Are you speaking in terms of mentality or socio-economics?

I am speaking about everything, that is to say, industry, the state of the economy, the state of civilization, and the state of mental development and social habits. We are still having 100-year wars, the wars of princes and principedoms. It's nothing to be ashamed of, but we must try, as quickly as possible, to catch up to the 21st century before it comes.

How can the Palestinians catch up?

It is difficult. One of the reasons that we have so far been unable to meet the Israeli challenge is precisely because we have been unable to deal with Israel since the 1930s. As a nation, we have not realized what challenges Israel poses for us, and, therefore, have not been able to develop and execute a strategy that deals with it.



You must have some idea of how to meet the challenge.

I don't. If I were living in the same time zone as Israel, then I would probably have some idea of how to confront Israel. But, given the time zone I live in, I don't. My father was happier in his identification with the Arab world. I am more strongly connected with my Palestinian identity. When I adopted the idea of Israel annexing the territories and giving the Palestinians equal rights, my father and I disagreed over more or less the same problem: To what extent should the Palestinians depend upon their relationship with the Arab world, while, at the same time, developing their identification with being Palestinians. If you are more committed to being an Arab, then under no circumstances are you willing to accept annexation, even if you are given full rights, because you don't want to be an Israeli. You want to be Arab in the sense of being master. To have equal rights when you are not your own master does not appeal to you. Given that my Arab identification is not as important as being a Palestinian, I can conceive of a situation in which, as an

Arab, I could live in a democratic, binational state with Israelis. A binational state is not necessarily Arab, nor Jewish-Israeli. It is more in the middle, a concoction of two, three, or four cultures. I don't conceive of any problems with my living happily in such a state, even though there would be fewer Arabs. My father would never have dreamed of this. He wanted to be an Arab. He wanted to feel that he had Arabs all around him. He wanted to get rid of Israel. He did not want to be reminded of his defeat every day. Yet he never thought of obliterating the Israelis. He was not that much of a dreamer.

Do you believe that the Palestinians, even the PLO, cannot meet the Jewish challenge and that a Palestinian state cannot be brought about in the near future? Do you see annexation and equal rights as a solution because you cannot meet the challenge on a national basis?

No, no, no. It is because we have not met the challenge that we have neither been annexed nor established a state. Had we been able to meet the challenge, we would have settled for either our own state alongside Israel,

or for full equal rights in a binational state a long time ago.

Does the Palestinian leadership, and the nation behind it, say, "Let us choose: either a state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip or annexation?"

They don't use the word "annexation." When Palestinians talk with each other about a democratic, secular state, they don't agree on the exact meaning of the term. Recently, Arafat called for a democratic, binational state, which was an acceptance, in a roundabout way, of the Jewish nation. Arafat has said this at least five times in the last year. He always talks about the Palestinian state alongside Israel.

He didn't say it.

Not to you, but to me as a Palestinian he did. (In Geneva) they spoke about a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Arafat is very clear. He is not going to tell you in a press conference: "Yes I will have a state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and will recognize Israel." But Arafat, and the PLO leadership in general, have clearly

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stated their position. Why is Arafat viewed as someone who has almost trespassed on the national consensus? Because people view him as calling for the establishment of a state alongside Israel, which includes recognition of Israel. At the 16th Palestinian National Council, the PLO leadership said yes to the Fez peace plan and to the Brezhnev peace document. They talked about ties with Jordan. This was after they came out of Beirut in 1982 and went to Algiers. No one had even talked about ties with Jordan before, and here it was a PNC resolution. After the 17th PNC, when Arafat went to Amman, he said: "I want to reach an accord with Hussein about confederation." It was clear that he was calling for the establishment of a state in confederation with Jordan alongside Israel. As far as I know, all the messages and contacts Arafat has had over the last two, three, or five years, have been directed toward the Israelis and the Israeli government. He has sent a lot of messages through third parties — Arabs, Israelis, non-Arabs and non-Israelis — but Israel has refused to answer.

So why do you say that the Palestinians are not ready to meet the Israeli challenge?

Because we have not developed to the level at which we can confront this challenge properly and get our way, one way or the other. Why else have we suffered one defeat after another over the past eighty years? We have not dealt with the problem in a properly scientific and honest way. I make the analogy of a doctor's attitude to medicine and the Arab attitude to medicine. The doctor sees an ailment. He looks at it, analyzes it, makes a diagnosis, and gives the patient medicine. If in a few days it does not work, he changes the treatment. This is how Israel deals with politics. The Arabs and the Palestinians deal with it differently — in declarations and statements. The Palestinians are better than the rest of the Arabs in this respect — we are closer to being "doctors" because of our close contact with Israel — but we are still dealing with the problem.

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Take the state-alongside-state solution. It first came about at the 13th PNC meeting in 1974 as a transitional program. This was the time of the Rogers Plan, and suddenly the PNC found itself talking about national authority. They wanted to get close to the peace plan and the conference that was being set up. The seeds for the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel were planted then. But if you want to plant such a seed, what is the timetable? How do you do it? You say armed struggle, but where, and how? Which weapons, objects, how often? For the last 14 years, there has been nothing. Even the people who say this is a transitional step toward the liberation of the whole of Palestine don't tell you anything. Why? Because, as a nation, we have not yet developed the ability to think in concrete terms about what we want.

Even those who are more politically mature, like Arafat and his people, do not think this way, because they are afraid of going beyond the national consensus. This is the basic problem with Arafat. He is very mature, very clever, and he wants to lead his nation somewhere. In order to lead his nation the right way, he needs a response from the other side. Yet Israel has not responded to Arafat or his peace plans.

Why should it?

Because it is in its own interests.

The Israeli government, both Likud and Labor, does not want a Palestinian state. Israel is not ready to meet the Palestinian challenge. So the Palesti-

ans cannot convince the Israeli leadership to respond.

I believe that achieving peace requires a partnership. Israeli leaders must sit with Palestinian leaders because it is in both their interests to decide together, step by step, how to construct a framework for peace. It is not like war, where you are sitting on opposite sides shooting at each other. In peace, there are many risks involved. The road to peace is very narrow; you cannot drift. Arafat makes a statement in Tunisia: "I recognize Resolution 242." Peres responds. There has to be an agreement between the two sides that on thus-and-such a date one says this and the other says that, otherwise peace cannot be constructed. Resolution 242 has already been recognized. Arafat is going in the right direction when he says he wants to talk with Israel within the framework of an international conference. In Geneva he said that he didn't want to sit at a conference and talk with Arabs, but that he wants to meet his enemy, Israel. He said these things. The major obstacle that remains is the Israeli leadership. They do not want to come any closer to peace because they do not perceive it to be in their own interests. At the moment, anyway.

If you accept annexation and equal rights, why were you opposed to Hanna Siniora's proposal to participate in the municipal elections in Jerusalem?

My proposal is to study the strategy of working toward a binational, democratic state. Having studied this strategy, having decided that it is

impossible, or very unlikely, for two states to exist side by side, then we proceed with very clear steps. I have written that we should base our strategy on three main elements: the right to exist, the right to return, and the right to be equal. We do not necessarily have to achieve all of them. But on that basis, we can call for the alteration of the electoral system in Israel. Not in the Jerusalem municipal council. One must come before the other. We must develop a strategy of working toward a democratic, binational state. Let's fight for electoral reform, and then perhaps, we can make Jerusalem a testing ground, or maybe Jericho or the Golan.

Who will decide this strategy?
PNC.

It has to be approved by the PNC?

The PNC represents the Palestinians. If I have a position, I can write it down and defend it. Hanna Siniora can write his ideas down and defend them. The problem is not just the problem of Jerusalem. The problem confronts the entire Palestinian nation. It is not just the people in Jerusalem or the people in the occupied territories who constitute the Palestinian nation. We constitute only a small portion of it. The decision has to be made by the entire nation.

Is there a new generation that is ready to talk with Israel?

I don't think it is a new generation. I think it has to do with attitudes. The psychological trend I am going toward, which a lot of people have been going toward in the last few years, is one of openness, of being prepared to talk. However, it has not been successful. Everyone in the national movement who is trying to open doors, to see what is on the other side, and can't, goes in the opposite direction.

Does the Islamic faction have a strong pull among young people?

It has strong elements. But I look upon this as part of the general radicalization process that is taking

place, be it in the national movement or outside of it.

Do you see hope for negotiations?

It's like talking about mathematics: If you are in the business, you understand what is happening. I think Arafat knows exactly what to say to Shamir or Peres, and Peres or Shamir know exactly what Arafat is saying. The question is not whether they understand, but rather, whether they want to respond. Do they want to make use of it? Arafat and the Palestinian leadership have been sending messages to the Israeli leadership. The Israelis continue to turn them down. For a long time I was persuaded by Israelis and by Israeli public opinion that it was my leaders who were the obstacle. But I have seen that they are very open. I didn't realize that they were as open as they are. There is a lot of resilience. This was a case in point when they were prepared to talk to Herut.

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Did Herut agree to speak to them?

I don't know, but I believe that Moshe Amirav and some of his associates went to Shamir and argued with him to try it. Shamir probably figured that the Palestinians would turn them down anyway, and that if it were to work out he would make his mark on politics. Amirav was told to go ahead. He made contact, and suddenly it became serious. Amirav

was on the verge of going to see Arafat. There was even a paper. And then Shamir said, "Where are you going?"

What paper?

There is a paper that crystallizes Amirav's views. Nothing was actually sent. This was Amirav's initiative. He spoke about the plan for two hours, so we told him to write it down. His position is that negotiations are not possible without the PLO. He said that Israel's problem is not with Jordan or Egypt, but with the Palestinians. You are a nation, and we recognize it. You have a representative, and we must recognize it.

Shamir said this?

No, Amirav. The point is, this is a first step. The transitional agreement would be in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We accepted the use of the word "entity." We would have our flag and capital. We would have our own stamps and currency, our own representation outside. One year after this would come into effect, the second stage of negotiations would take place to arrive at the final plan, on the basis of Israel within the 1948 boundaries and meeting the rights of the Palestinian people.

What do you think about the Arab summit conference?

I don't think very much about it. I'm not spending much time reading about it or watching it on television. There cannot be an outcome. They will encourage countries like Saudi Arabia to spread some money around — that's basically what it is. It is nothing very serious. The Iran-Iraq War will continue. The Arab-Israeli conflict will continue. Egypt will stay out. King Hussein will go on vacation. And things continue to get worse, much worse. Before, you know, we had a war over territory, a war that could be fought. Now it is more dangerous. It is a war over people, in the sense of the continuation of the occupation. We are going to see a lot of extremists on both sides. It will become a racial-religious war, as opposed to a territorial war, and this is much worse. □