

What future for Palestine? An interview with Sari Nusseibeh

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31 March 2004

openDemocracy: Is the [assassination](#) of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin just another provocation or does it mark a qualitative change of Israeli policies at a time when the Israeli leadership has declared that it will withdraw from Gaza?

Sari Nusseibeh: I don't think that it is a qualitative change. Such actions happened in the past, and they were always part of official Israeli policy.

openDemocracy: But surely, this time, Israel killed the most prominent figure they could possibly have hit?

Sari Nusseibeh: [Sheikh Yassin's](#) prominence was certainly a determining factor in this decision. The appeal that he had to the Palestinian masses, his charisma and influence, undoubtedly contributed to the decision to eliminate him. Is this all part of a more general picture? Probably, but we would need to ask [Ariel Sharon](#) for this. But it is no secret that the decision is connected to Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza.

openDemocracy: Sharon's farewell [present](#)?

Sari Nusseibeh: Yes, something like this. The other day I read an essay written by someone associated with the Hebrew University here in Jerusalem which argued that it is ultimately in Israel's interest eventually to leave the West Bank and Gaza - but only after it has killed or massacred a substantial number of Palestinians in order to demonstrate Israel's strength and might to them. Only if we do so, he continues, will the Palestinians understand that we have not left out of weakness. From an Israeli security point of view, he concludes, a withdrawal would then be acceptable.

openDemocracy: Some observers say that Sharon does not even want to leave [Gaza](#). Do you agree?

Sari Nusseibeh: I think they are right. Sharon is actually pretending that he is making a step towards peace while he is in fact undermining it. In this way, he reinforces his image on both sides.

openDemocracy: How will the assassination affect [politics](#) inside Palestine? What will it do to Yasser Arafat's near-moribund Palestinian Authority (PA)? What does the new

Hamas leader, [Abdul-Aziz Rantisi](#), mean by pledging continuing operations against Israel based on democratic decisions?

Also in openDemocracy, [Eoin Murray's](#) "Night falls in Gaza"

Sari Nusseibeh: The immediate result is to strengthen Hamas - in the eyes of the Arab world as well as the Palestinians. People of different minds have simply vanished - you do not see them right now. However, what this means in terms of organisation I am not sure. People are already competing within Hamas for influence and positions. But as far as Gaza is concerned, Hamas will be stronger than the PA in the short term. But in the end, it all depends on the Palestinian people. Their public opinion is not always what it seems and it does undergo changes. It is possible that the people themselves will at some point turn against the Islamists.

openDemocracy: Where is Yasser Arafat?

Sari Nusseibeh: Yes, where is he? I am not sure. All I know is that he is under house arrest, totally impotent.

openDemocracy: In his absence, who runs Palestinians' [affairs](#)?

Sari Nusseibeh: No one. The PA ceased to be an authority a long time ago. Its leader is imprisoned and its territories are completely isolated from one another. There is no authority.

openDemocracy: How does this restrict the political space of manoeuvre of the Palestinians?

Sari Nusseibeh: If Israel retreats from Gaza, [Rantisi](#) will declare this a victory and thus thwart other, competing political ideologies. In such circumstances, you cannot see much future for an agreement.