



DAVID RUBINER FOR TIME

## Palestinian with a Plan

Amid violence, Sari Nusseibeh, scion of an ancient Jerusalem family, is trying to make his city a safer place

**W**HEN PALESTINIAN RADICALS ASSASSINATED an Israeli cabinet minister outside his East Jerusalem hotel room last week, they brought the rage of the West Bank and Gaza to a city whose Palestinian neighborhoods have escaped the worst ravages of the year-long Aqsa *intifadeh*. The tough Israeli response to the murder pushed Palestinian leaders into further bloodthirsty statements that can only perpetuate the cycle of violence. Sari Nusseibeh is one of the few leading Palestinians still prepared to buck the growing extremism and to urge a rejection of the hatred and vengeance that have engulfed the region this past year. "This is no longer an *intifadeh*," Nusseibeh says. "It's a convulsion of violence, not a popular movement. There needs to be a rekindling of rational debate, even more so after the attacks in America."

Since the death in July of Faisal Hussein, the revered Palestinian figurehead of East Jerusalem, Nusseibeh has gradually assumed that leadership role. The scion of a family that came to Jerusalem with the Caliph Omar 1,300 years ago, Nusseibeh, 52, stands out among the city's remaining political leaders. He carries intellectual heft as the head of Al-Quds University and wields political clout as the organizer of Jerusalem's 1987-93 *intifadeh*, which helped spur Israeli leaders to negotiate with the Palestinians. Nusseibeh is using his position to push a dovish line at a time when extremists have the upper hand.

Though Nusseibeh says he is not trying to take over directly from Hussein, two weeks ago Yasser Arafat appointed him head of a new council for East Jerusalem's 260,000 Palestinian residents. Nusseibeh hopes it will link them more strongly to Arafat's Palestinian Authority (P.A.) in the West Bank while also smoothing relations with Israel. He intends that council members join with bureaucrats from Arafat's ministries to allocate P.A. money to the city's hospitals, schools and services, which are currently funded piecemeal by Israel and private charities. But he also argues that the council would have to coordinate with Israeli authorities. "If the Palestinians want to move ahead, that can only be through cooperation with the Israelis. That's obvious," he says, "to me, anyway."

It is a measure of Nusseibeh's desire for compromise and coexistence that after the terrorist attacks against the U.S., he showed up at a sparsely attended Muslim-Christian prayer service for the victims at the Dominican Church in East Jerusalem. You might call it a family custom—each day since Omar's time, a Nusseibeh has unlocked the heavy doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the spot where most Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected; at night, a Nusseibeh is entrusted with locking them, safely and securely. It will take all the rationality of this Nusseibeh to ensure that the *intifadeh* doesn't become such an enduring tradition. —*With reporting by Jamil Hamad/Jerusalem*

**Q: Some Palestinians celebrated on Sept. 11, but aren't these U.S. terror attacks bad for Palestinians?**

**A:** This certainly hasn't helped us. It's been a blow to us in the sense that it totally swept away the international community's interest in our case. If anything, it unfortunately made it possible for many people to try to connect terrorism with the Palestinian cause.

**Q: It was your plan to set up a council of leading Jerusalem Palestinians. Did this have Yasser Arafat's approval?**

**A:** It doesn't need his approval. The best way to get things done is to just do them. People misread Arafat. He isn't so controlling. We set up the council and if it works, he'll be in favor of it.

**Q: How would you feel if Arafat asked you to take over from Hussein in Jerusalem.**

**A:** Faisal was head of the household through the force of his achievements. But by itself it's a house of cards. Having a luminary as a replacement will not make the house stand. We need to think of how to represent the needs of the Arab community in Jerusalem for physical services. That's why I circulated this plan of mine for a council.

**Q: What will be the political role of the council?**

**A:** There needs to be a voice that will be raised to call on people to use their reason. This is the major issue, now that events are basically leading us into a trap of insanity, a whirlpool of vicious acts and bloodletting. Listening to the radical rhetoric on both sides now is terrifying. People need to be made to take decisions about the issues that seem irresolvable and which have become more entrenched during the *intifadeh*.