



Sari Nusseibeh

**WHAT IS A PALESTINIAN STATE
WORTH?**

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*For Sarimir
and the others to follow*

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Introduction: Is a State a Siren Song?

Politics for me has always been a means, not an end. I say this because, over time, I have come to realize that for many people it is an end in itself. Beginning with the heated political discussions I heard as a boy growing up in my parents' house in Jerusalem—discussions by acquaintances, relatives, and friends—and continuing through my own participation in political activities and debates as an adult, I have learned that some people enjoy engaging in politics, pure and simple, never mind the objectives in whose name they are supposedly doing it.

I want to distinguish straight away between politics as an intellectual (academic) pursuit and politics as a bread-and-butter job, a street activity, or a daily obsession, for want of better phrases. I understand

and even admire scholars of politics, those who try to untangle the quantum laws of group human behavior: why people act as they do, how they are likely to act in the future. But outside such academic pursuits, if you find that a discussion about a pressing political problem is going around in circles rather than focusing on finding a solution, caught up in a loop created by the very people with whom you are having the discussion, you may justifiably conclude that those people are probably more invested in the discussion itself than in solving the problem. It was in that spirit that a Palestinian colleague of mine, after we had worked together to set up a grassroots movement to encourage Israeli and Palestinian leaders to negotiate, suggested that we not disband our organization, as other tasks would surely come up—tasks that, as he said, would keep us going as players in the *political game*. His interest was clearly in politicking, never mind what the politicking was about. For him it was less important who scored, or what was scored, than that he continued to be a player.

My lack of interest in politicking (politics as a game) probably explains my lack of interest in a separate Palestinian state except as a means toward an end—toward achieving our collective well-being,

or transforming a state of oppression into a state of freedom. I think that some people's enthusiasm for a Palestinian state simply reflects their interest in politicking, or in negotiation as a pursuit. I have at times even suspected some of our politicians (both Palestinian and Israeli) of viewing the negotiations they were engaged in that way: as a game, and one to be played as long as possible, rather than as a step toward getting a job done. I do not claim that people are naturally divided into job-doers and game-players, and I have no problem accepting the argument that one only becomes obsessive about playing games after first becoming disillusioned with the real-life effects of one's efforts. What I do wish to emphasize is that in our quest to achieve something of value, we often find ourselves lost, having been enchanted and hence distracted along the way by the sweet-sounding Sirens encountered in our path's endless labyrinths—and that some of those Sirens may be singing about the trappings of a Palestinian state.

In 1974, during my first year as a graduate student at Harvard, Walid Khalidi, a veteran diaspora Palestinian academic and political analyst (and a family friend belonging to one of the most intellectually distinguished Jerusalem families), met with

some students to discuss his then-explosive article “Thinking the Unthinkable,” in which he argued in favor of the establishment of a “mini-Palestinian state” in return for Palestinian recognition of Israel—what later came to be known as the two-state solution. His argument was that, of all possible solutions, such a state would best serve Palestinian national interests (that is, he did not consider the state an end in itself, but a means to achieving something more important, something with more worth). At the time, I did not see the value of his proposal. The idea of a state, in itself, had no appeal for me. Perhaps naively, I protested to Professor Khalidi that there was no need for *us* to create a new state: that all we really needed to do was to demand equal rights as citizens within Israel.

In retrospect, I now realize, or at least suspect, that while Khalidi made his proposal from the perspective of the Palestinian diaspora, my own perspective was, unconsciously, totally “home-bound.” He primarily had in mind the entire population of Palestinians displaced from their homeland (including himself and his family), for whom he thought the optimum practical solution was one that offered them a state on parts of their homeland in compensation for not allowing them to return to their orig-

inal homes. I primarily had in mind a different population of Palestinians, those (including myself) who still lived in the homeland but were to one degree or another disenfranchised by the state that controlled it. His was primarily a population dispossessed of its country; mine was primarily a population dispossessed of its rights in its own country. For Khalidi, *us* meant the Palestinian diaspora. For me, it meant my relatives and school friends in East Jerusalem, as well as the other Palestinians in Nazareth and Haifa and West Jerusalem and elsewhere whose acquaintance I had begun to make after Israel's conquests of 1967 made it possible to reestablish ties among Palestinians living on opposite sides of the so-called Green Line.

But whatever *us* meant to me, I think peace mattered more. In 1977, my final year at Harvard, I was bedazzled by Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, never mind the nitty-gritty details of his peace deal. I saw the Egyptian president exactly as he portrayed himself in his speech to Israel's Knesset: as having walked, like a magician, right through a barrier or a wall. Although the stunning effect of Sadat's visit later subsided as it became apparent that he had left us (now meaning everyone: the Palestinians, the larger Arab world, as well as all those, near and far,

who wished to see a real end to the state of war in the region) in the lurch, yet the political dynamic created by the 1978 Camp David talks sponsored by President Jimmy Carter slowly edged toward an ideological spot where peace could *only* mean some kind of two-state solution. At one point, after I returned home from Harvard and began my career as a teacher, I too came to believe that a Palestinian state embodying our national identity on a part of our homeland would be an optimum solution, or a maximum denominator, for all of *us*—enabling those in the diaspora to return to the homeland, those under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza to become free, and those within Israel to gain full equality with their Jewish fellow citizens. However, that belief did not last. Although I have participated with my compatriots in the struggle for a Palestinian state for much of my adult life, with the apparent breakdown of that project I have come back to feeling, as I did right at the beginning of my political self-awareness (and perhaps still as naively), that there is no absolute need for *us* to have a separate or so-called independent state.

What would a state be for, anyway? For a time I did think that our own state was the only means to achieving what was possible of our rights, both col-

lectively and as individuals. Seeing how restrictive of our growth Israel's military rule was, I came to believe that the only way for us to flourish and fulfill our natural potential was to eliminate that restriction—so that farmers could tend their fields without being harassed by settlers and without fear of their land being confiscated and their trees and crops destroyed; so that teachers and professors could be employed on the basis of their academic qualifications and not their security files; so that people could move and travel freely; so that companies could be established, services and institutions set up, houses and office buildings constructed, and so on, guided only by rules set by the Palestinians themselves, to serve Palestinian interests. And I came to believe, likewise, that the only realistic way for the Palestinian refugees to start living normal, dignified lives was for them to come back to this state and to participate in building it up. Finally, I believed that Palestinian citizens of Israel could only come to be regarded without suspicion as full partners by their Jewish counterparts if and when the national aspirations of the Palestinians were realized in a state *other* than Israel.

Was there anything more to my desire for a state? I think not. Deep down, I didn't yearn to wrap the

state that would provide me with all these freedoms in an Arab Palestinian flag! True, I sought the flag as well as the passport; but only as a symbol of my freedom and that of my people, as a symbol of our salvation, not as something valuable in itself. To me, what had, and continues to have, value in itself was the people's salvation from the nightmarish situation they had been living in ever since the 1948 *Nakba*—the forced displacement of seven to eight hundred thousand Palestinians from their homes and from their homeland—when, it is felt, our natural course of history was derailed and sent hurtling down into a dark and deadly ravine. Such salvation would be a precondition for achieving individual and collective well-being, and therefore for achieving peace.

Years later, when the retired Israeli colonel Ami Ayalon and I initiated the grassroots petition we called the People's Voice—an “end-game vision” outlining a two-state settlement—one of the principles in the document was that a Palestinian state would be demilitarized. This clause bothered some of my compatriots: not that they wanted a full-fledged army, but they did want a military show-piece, a brass band. I remember Yasser Arafat also considering an army a necessary constituent of a

state. The reason was not that people believed a Palestinian army would, or could, have served any real military purpose. But a military establishment is one of the trappings of nationhood that somehow take on value in people's eyes. Another might be a national airline, whose planes would fly all over the world with the Palestinian flag painted on their tails. Or a Palestinian currency, which would have no independent economic means supporting it, but which *would* have a picture of some national symbol printed on its face.

Such trappings may be thought necessary or important, and being thought so may indeed become so. I am not denying that. But I myself have never considered them to be of value, except perhaps as dispensable accessories. They may also be in the nature of distractions (as may the very political structures of which they could be parts) from the basic vision of what a state is for. To me, given what I wanted from a state, and given the region's existing military (im)balances, a Palestinian army, however many tanks and guns it might possess, seemed likely to be totally useless, whether as an instrument of defense against neighboring states or as an instrument of attack against those states, and thus to be a waste of money and effort. Why, then, have an army

at all? Why not spend the money on something more directly addressing what a state is really needed for, such as health and education or the more general well-being and dignified living of the people? For me, therefore, the clause in the People's Voice that defined the Palestinian state as demilitarized expressed a Palestinian interest much more than an Israeli "security requirement."

But if, back then, I had come around to the idea of a state because it seemed the only practical means for my people to achieve peace and salvation, since that time the diminishment, through Israeli confiscations and settlements, of the land on which that state could have been established has slowly pulled me back to my original position. After nearly half a century of Israeli rule, the term "occupation," with its implication of an imminent reversion to the status quo ante, has ceased to have real political or legal significance. Since the state, as we had conceived it, is no longer practical or realistic, why keep clinging to it, or to the concept of occupation—especially given that I have not fallen victim to the enchantment of red-carpet trappings or Sirens along the way? Again, what would the state be for?

The natural rejoinder to that last question is an-

other question: What else is there? For self-evident reasons that I will not repeat here, surrendering completely—packing up and leaving the country en masse—is not an option. Staying put, on the other hand, may or may not lead quickly or directly to a one-state solution with Jews and Arabs being equals under a democratic and secular law. So what can we do, or rather what should we brace ourselves for, in the meantime? In asking this question I am seeking an answer which will address the existing reality—a reality defined by Israel. Of course, we can imagine a different reality, in which we could propose other mathematically conceivable solutions, such as a binational democratic state or a federation or confederation of city- or region-states. But if we are facing an obstinate occupying power which is impervious to any such solution, perhaps we need to think of proposals that may work as shock therapy to awaken Israelis to the inhumanity of continued occupation, or that may provide halfway measures to reduce, as much as possible, the occupation's deleterious effects on our daily lives.

In recent months Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have declared that Israel is and should continue to be a *Jewish* state, and

that it wants to be recognized as such by the Arab world. To safeguard that Jewishness, some officials, including the foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, have gone so far as to suggest redrawing Israel's borders to exclude areas with concentrated Arab populations. Much of the Israeli public also wants Israel to be Jewish. However, differences of opinion arise when the question of democracy comes up: many right-wing politicians argue that democracy can and should be ditched if and when it is perceived to endanger the Jewish nature of the state. Others, notably former defense minister Moshe Arens, have proposed that, discounting Gaza and its population, Israel could still maintain its Jewishness even if it were to extend citizenship to the Palestinians living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. (As an aside, I must say I find this particular proposal amusing coming from Arens, the man who back in 1991, in his capacity as Israel's minister of defense, signed the order for my arrest as a supposed Iraqi spy and a danger to the "security of the state and the physical and spiritual well-being of its citizens.")

This may turn out to be the single most controversial issue Israel will face in the near future. But given that in 2009 Israeli voters elected a right-wing

government, and that Arens's suggestion has attracted neither Israel's right wing nor its left wing—which insists on two states and dismisses the “right-wing one-state solution” as apartheid whitewash—it appears very likely that the current grim reality will continue, with Israelis and Palestinians living as sworn enemies under the same “roof,” in an extremely tight geographic space with limited natural resources, the oppressor always in fear, the oppressed constantly squirming to be free.

What scenario can Palestinians, or the otherwise feeble international community for that matter, propose under these circumstances? If neither two states nor a secular and democratic single state is a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, can we devise some other measure to break the current deadlock while keeping those two options open? As a thought experiment, I will now propose a measure that is so objectionable that it might well generate its own annulment, either by making all parties see the need to find a tenable alternative or, if indeed adopted, by serving as a natural step toward a single democratic state.

In this spirit, then, and as a way to move beyond the seemingly interminable status quo, let me pro-

pose that Israel officially annex the occupied territories, and that Palestinians in the enlarged Israel agree that the state remain Jewish in return for being granted all the civil, though not the political, rights of citizenship. Thus the state would be Jewish, but the *country* would be fully binational, all the Arabs within it having their well-being tended to and sustained. Given Israel's demand to be recognized as a Jewish state, and as long as it refuses to grant those Palestinians full citizenship, their next best option is to have full civil rights even without the right to hold elective office—so that they can enjoy the civil benefits of the *de facto* single state without being accused of diluting or “defiling” its Jewishness. In any case such a scenario would provide them with a far better life than they have had in more than forty years under occupation or would have under another projected scenario: Israeli hegemony over scattered, “autonomous” Palestinian enclaves. (Incidentally, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have recently, after so many years there, taken to demanding civil, as opposed to political, rights in that country. But their situation is not parallel to that of Palestinians in Israel. While the Lebanese are reluctant to grant Palestinians political rights,

the Palestinians do not want those rights in Lebanon anyway, believing that the proper place for them to have such rights is in their homeland, Palestine itself.)

There is another angle to this: Palestinians, just as much as Israelis, need to think deeply about what states are for. The utilitarian function of states—as means to enhance human well-being rather than to fulfill jingoist or religious imperatives—needs to be brought to the forefront of their political consciousness. Reflecting on that function, which underlies my proposal, may make them less likely to reject such proposals out of hand. At the end of the day, states must exist to serve the people, not to rule over them. If the international community remains unwilling to challenge Israel's continued rule over Palestinians and possession of the lands that once were designated as a future Palestinian state, surely the least it can do is to insist that Israel provide those Palestinians with full civil and human rights throughout "its" territories, however it has come to possess them. To Palestinians for whom a state of their own has an intrinsic value, the idea of accepting certain rights without full citizenship will be repugnant, even if proposed as an interim arrange-

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