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Review

What is a Palestinian State Worth?

Sari Nusseibeh. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
256pp.

Paul Kriese *

Sari Nusseibeh begins his study of the “Palestinian problem” with the comment “this is not an academic study” (18). Maybe that is why this particular study is so good. When asked to write this review my first response was not very positive. Most studies of this region lack clarity or are so ideological as to not be very useful. Many of these studies often also claim to be “academic.” Nusseibeh’s study is, unlike many reviews, a masterful academic study. His study succinctly and accurately portrays the tangled and tortured history of the region from a view that is both sympathetic to the Palestinian (Arab) position but at the same time is an accurate and revealing presentation which recounts history that answers basic issues instead of clouding them. In his discussion of Balfour he illustrates why Balfour was not helpful in settling regional disputes between its inhabitants and how Balfour actually creates more problems that it resolves.

Nusseibeh’s account includes both Arab and Jewish Palestinian perspectives. His even handed approach to all sides is a welcome addition to this discussion. Nusseibeh is clearly an advocate for Palestinian concerns but develops this concern within a context which acknowledges Arab mistakes and then proposes how to move beyond these problems while at the same time proposing alternatives some of which have been on the table for a long time but which have been ignored because these alternatives expect all sides to recognize the legitimate claims of all parties. One example he reveals is an early British proposal which would create a tripartite recommendation which brought Muslims,

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Jews and Christians into a shared governance structure. Another example is his admission that Jewish military maneuvers have consistently been more effective because Arab/Palestinian military actives have consistently been woefully inadequate. And Yes a third example is a realization that Jewish inhabitants carry a deep seated fear of their neighbors that non-Jews simply have to recognize and accommodate if there is to be any reconciliation and peaceful relations among participants. But Nusseibeh is also clear that Israel Jews have completed several land grab from the original UN Mandate which illegally displaced over 700,000 Arab Palestinians and has illegally more than tripled land occupied by Israeli's (38).

Nusseibeh's work illustrates that when actions on all sides do nothing positive and productive "both societies, Arab and Jewish, simply etched themselves into a frieze, [where] neither [are] able to move forward toward..." (43). He points out that "a moral order based on human values would have a much more solid basis than one bound to a context-specific (such as national or religious) narrative" (58). He raises the question of which is more important human life or the nation state and argues that if we focus on humanity then the state will come as a natural outcome of this action. As Palestinian birth rate continue to raise the question of whose state it really is (Arab/Palestinian or Israeli) may become moot. And thus maybe Jews should consider this issue as they contemplate what type of a state they will have.

Nusseibeh, however, is not blind to Israeli needs. One such proposal would give Palestinian Arabs civil and human rights in Gaza and the West Bank but continue political and economic power in Jewish hands. Arabs would not have a vote in the Knesset but would have a home of their own in the territory (145). Such a compromise would be an interim step forward but would be a step forward. There is mistrust on all sides which must be addressed. Palestinians need to refrain from shooting into Jewish settlements. Jews must refrain from creating more settlements in Gaza and the West Bank.

In the end Palestinians must solve their own issues without waiting for international pressure on Israel which will not happen. "In politics," Nusseibeh reminds us, "there are only compromises" (219). Faith in their ability, vision to make that faith work, and the will to realize that compromise and cooperation are the real way forward; Palestinians can achieve a realistic plan for their dream of a home.