

Sari Nusseibeh:

'The Pursuit of a Two-State Solution Is a Fantasy'

Der prominente palästinensische Philosoph Sari Nusseibeh, Präsident der „Al-Quds University“, glaubt, dass sich die Zwei-Staaten-Lösung erledigt hat. Im SPIEGEL-online-Interview vom 21. Februar 2012 beschreibt er seine Vision von einer israelisch-palästinensischen Konföderation und begründet, warum er der neuen moderaten Positionierung von „ Hamas“ misstraut. Bei dem von Nusseibeh erwähnten Khaled Meshaal [Meshal] ist der bisherige Chef des Politischen Büros von „ Hamas“ gemeint, der sich mehrfach zugunsten der Zwei-Staaten-Lösung in den Grenzen vor dem Junikrieg 1967 ausgesprochen hat.

Bei dem angesprochenen Buch Nusseibehs handelt es sich um seine Schrift „What Is a Palestinian State Worth?“ (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2011).

Prominent Palestinian philosopher Sari Nusseibeh believes it is too late for a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict. In a SPIEGEL interview, he outlines his vision for an Israeli-Palestinian confederation and why he mistrusts the new moderate stance taken by the Islamic militant group Hamas.

SPIEGEL: Mr Nusseibeh, in your new book you claim that it is too late for a Palestinian state. Why?

Nusseibeh: You are sitting in my office in Beit Hanina in a place called East Jerusalem. Now, you look to the west from here and you see parts of this Arab neighborhood that are severed from us. If you look to the east over there, you find Pisgat Zeev, an enormous Israeli settlement which is part of Jerusalem. Further east there is Maale Adumim, an even larger settlement of Israelis in what is called East Jerusalem. There is no East Jerusalem any more. East Jerusalem has already become a misnomer. But a Palestinian state without East Jerusalem as its capital is a no-no.

SPIEGEL: Do you want to give up the 1967 borders which have been the basis of all the peace plans?

Nusseibeh: It is extremely hard for the most imaginative of us to see how to work out a redrawing of the map in order to give us, the Palestinians, East Jerusalem as capital. But secondly, there are the Israeli settlers. Can you take away half a million people? No, you cannot. Nothing is impossible, mathematically speaking. But we are talking about politics, and in politics not everything is always possible.

SPIEGEL: So we should admit to ourselves that the two-state solution is dead?

Nusseibeh: Mathematically speaking, a two-state solution is an excellent solution. It causes minimum pain and it is accepted by a majority on both sides. Because of this, we should have brought it into existence a long time ago. But we did not manage to do so.

SPIEGEL: Who is to blame for that?

Nusseibeh: First of all, it took Israel a long time to accept that there is a Palestinian people. It took us, the Palestinians, a long time to accept that we should recognize Israel as a state. The problem is that history runs faster than ideas. By the time the world woke up to the fact that the two-state solution is the best solution, we had hundreds of thousands Israelis living beyond the Green Line (*ed's note: the 1949 Armistice Line that forms the boundary between Israel and the West Bank*). There is a growing fanaticism on both sides. Today, the pursuit of a two-state solution looks like the pursuit of something inside a fantasy bubble.

SPIEGEL: What are the alternatives?

Nusseibeh: The final political form doesn't matter that much. The important thing is that both sides can agree on it and that the basic principles of equality and freedom are upheld. They can be upheld in the context of one state, of two states, of three states, or in the context of a federation or a confederation of states.

SPIEGEL: In your book you propose that, in a joint single state, Palestinians should be given civil rights, but no political rights. "The Jews could run the country while the Arabs could at last enjoy living in it," you write. Could that work?

Nusseibeh: Yes, as a transition. Ever since the occupation began, we have been denied basic civic rights, on the promise that a solution or a state is around the corner. For 20 years, we have been promised that. But they should not keep the Palestinians living in the basement until a solution is found. I suggested we be allowed to have basic rights. Allow us freedom of movement, allow us to live and work wherever we want. Allow us to breathe.

SPIEGEL: Where do you want to draw the borders? Along ethnic lines?

Nusseibeh: Yes, I am proposing a federation between Israel and a Palestinian state based upon the demographic placement of populations in the country.

SPIEGEL: And you think Israelis would accept that?

Nusseibeh: Oh yes, they would love that. Israelis who wish for a predominantly Jewish state may well find this a reasonable solution, because even if they somehow manage to get rid of the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza, which they regard as a demographic burden, they will still feel in the long term that they have a problem with the Arabs in Israel. What I am suggesting is not totally crazy. This idea has always been there. If you go back in Jewish history, you will find

Israelis suggesting it right from the beginning, like (the prominent intellectual and cultural Zionist) Martin Buber.

SPIEGEL: What would be the benefit for Palestinians in such a federation with Israel?

Nusseibeh: They would have freedom of movement -- they could settle and work wherever they want. That's a huge benefit. And more than that: According to the classical two-state solution, there is no return of (Palestinian) refugees to Israel, only to the West Bank or Gaza. But in a future map which is solely drawn the way I am proposing it, chunks of what is now Israel could become part of a Palestinian state. And therefore, many refugees might actually be able to go back exactly to their hometowns.

SPIEGEL: In your book, you describe your proposal as "shock therapy to awaken Israelis" and push them to find a solution. Does that mean you ultimately don't really believe in what you are saying?

Nusseibeh: It can be both. It can be an alert, a wake-up call. I want Israelis to see that they have a problem and to think: Maybe we should go for the two-state solution. But it can also be a sign of things to come. If we don't do anything, eventually people will wake up and find out they are living in a kind of confederation.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe that things are moving in that direction by themselves?

Nusseibeh: Exactly. We are constantly sliding towards that direction. Look at the negotiations. It has just been going around in circles.

SPIEGEL: In your book, you describe the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians as more or less just a game, "one to be

played as long as possible." Do you think negotiations should be stopped?

Nusseibeh: I do not really mind if negotiators from both sides go on talking with each other in (the Jordanian capital) Amman as they recently did. They can spend 48 hours talking. But I believe that they will not get anywhere. They will only get somewhere if they pull back from just trying to be clever with one another. (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu is good as a salesman, but he does not strike me as being a wise person.

SPIEGEL: What about Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas?

Nusseibeh: Well, let me say: I think you need to be farsighted and you need to be caring enough.

SPIEGEL: Should the Palestinian Authority (PA) dissolve itself instead of continuing to administer the occupation?

Nusseibeh: No, that would be too risky. On the contrary, the PA should be strengthened, given more territory and more authority. And I think the international community should continue to support it.

SPIEGEL: That could change quickly if Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls the Gaza Strip, and Abbas's rival Fatah movement, which governs in the West Bank, were to form a joint government. Do you believe their reconciliation will work?

Nusseibeh: It is only natural for Hamas and Fatah not to fight with each other. But this does not mean that not to fight means automatically to agree. At the moment it looks like they are trying to conceal the disagreements. And I do not like this. I think people should be clear about their positions. And I am not really sure what Khaled Mashaal (*ed's note: Hamas' top leader in exile*) wants, to tell you the truth.

SPIEGEL: Khaled Mashaal recently said that Hamas should focus on non-violent resistance. Do you believe him?

Nusseibeh: I remember a situation with him, maybe 10 years ago. It was at the height of the second intifada, and it was the first time I was invited for a comment on Al-Jazeera. I tried to explain why suicide attacks were not good, that they would not achieve anything. I did not initially realize that Mashaal was on the other side. He replied that I was talking rubbish and that suicide attacks are great and shooting and killing is great. That is why I got so fed up when I heard him now saying he wants civil resistance. Why is he coming up with this now, after 10 years of having ruined us? The entire wall (*ed's note: the West Bank barrier*) would not have been built. Things would be so different today.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe there will be elections in the West Bank and Gaza any time soon?

Nusseibeh: I do not think that elections could happen any time soon. And to tell you the truth: I am not so sure myself that I am very much in favor of elections in the present context. Elections are a good thing in certain circumstances, for instance when your country is free, and people that you elect can take decisions on your behalf. But in our case this is fantasy. What have the people that we elected done for us? Nothing. If Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) himself, the president of this country, wants to go from one place to another, he has to get a permit.

SPIEGEL: How can the kind of federation you are proposing work, if at the same time a majority of Palestinians voted for Hamas, whose declared goal is a religious state?

Nusseibeh: If you look at Gaza from the top down, you see Hamas. I do not see Hamas in Gaza, personally. I see normal human beings:

my relatives, my friends and my students. They did not vote for Hamas because they suddenly woke up and they became extremist Muslims. No, they voted for Hamas because the peace process failed. If the Israeli government today were to open up the borders, will Hamas stand in their way, and if they did stand in the way will the people listen to Hamas? No, I don't believe so. People want normal lives.

SPIEGEL: We are sitting here on the campus of Al-Quds University. What do your students think about politics -- do they tend to support Hamas or Fatah?

Nusseibeh: Students on campus are individual human beings; they are not walking ideologies. Let me tell you a story. It was in 2003, when the Israelis wanted to build the separation wall, right in the middle of our campus. The immediate thing that occurred to the students was -- and this was unrelated to whether they were from Hamas, Fatah or Islamic Jihad -- we will go out and throw rocks at the Israeli soldiers. But I told them: Listen, if you do that, then one of you will be killed. The university will have a martyr, but the next day, it would be closed. And so they stayed non-violent. In the end, we won. Israel didn't build the wall on the campus. What do I want to say with this story? Regardless of how you see them from above, regardless of their ideology, human beings are reasonable people.

SPIEGEL: Do your students still believe that this conflict is solvable? And what do they think about a federal state of Israel and Palestine?

Nusseibeh: First of all, they think that it does not look solvable. But what I can say is that people are no longer sold on the idea of two states. Only very few are still stuck to the national identity idea, but they do not actually believe that they can get the state that we wanted to get. Others are turning to religion. Religious ideas are what is important now.

SPIEGEL: You are a professor for Islamic philosophy. What do you think about the role of religion in this conflict?

Nusseibeh: I grew up with the idea of a very tolerant Islam. My family has had the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (in the Old City of Jerusalem) for hundreds of years, and we are proud of it. This is our connection to Christianity. Our reverence for Jesus is something inborn in me as a Muslim. My reverence to the Jewish prophets is inborn in me as a Muslim.

SPIEGEL: But that is not the Islam revered by all Muslims.

Nusseibeh: In the true sense, religions in theory are ways to support human values. In so far as religions interfere with human values, then they go in the wrong direction. And this is what is happening unfortunately in many religions, including Islam. There are some Muslim clerics I like, but I distrust people who regard themselves as guardians of religion.

SPIEGEL: Do you attend mosque regularly?

Nusseibeh: No, I almost never go. Once I took my sons to the mosque, but the man who held the prayer put me off. He talked about things that are totally crazy. Even ignoring what the content is, it's the way they scream. You feel like they are holding a whip and scaring the people into the truth of Islam. That is not Islam. That is a kind of terrorism. In my understanding, Islam is a gentle religion. And the message of Islam is a gentle message.

SPIEGEL: The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians does actually look minor in comparison to a possible war with Iran. What will happen if Israel attacks Iran?

Nusseibeh: That would be a major mistake. Everything that Israel does to (assert) itself through the use of more force is a step towards

its own destruction. There is the saying: "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

SPIEGEL: Could a military escalation with Iran put pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to finally come to a solution?

Nusseibeh: Israel is not taking us too seriously at the moment. They will keep us under the lid for a longer period of time. If they attack Iran, I do not think this will make them more open towards us. I certainly think it would not make us more open towards them. And without doubt I do not think the Arab world would be more open towards them.

SPIEGEL: That sounds like a very dark scenario.

Nusseibeh: This is why I am proposing this plan. How many people are living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean?

SPIEGEL: Around 11 million people.

Nusseibeh: There are about 4 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and 1 million in Israel, and there are about 6 million Jewish Israelis. But this is a small place. We are inside each other. Sooner or later, we will have to somehow find a way to live with each other. My son lives in a Jewish suburb of Jerusalem. My daughter-in-law told the Jewish music teacher that she does not want her son to sing religious Jewish songs. And the Jewish teacher said fine -- when we are going to do this, he doesn't need to take part. But otherwise he can join the party.

SPIEGEL: Is that how your proposed state could work as well? When it's a Jewish issue, then the Palestinians would stand aside, but otherwise they join in?

Nusseibeh: And vice versa, because you cannot expect Jews to enjoy Palestinian songs. But come on, Muslims and Jews have lived amiably for long periods of time. It was not full of roses, but actually it was better than in Europe for most of the time. We have friendships between Jews and Arabs that are very strong and sometimes go back generations. It is not impossible.

SPIEGEL: Mr Nusseibeh, thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Martin Doerry and Juliane von Mittelstaedt.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,816491,00.html>
