

Sari Nusseibeh's Lecture in Hohenems

by Reiner Bernstein, Munich¹

It was a remarkable performance: Sari Nusseibeh presented his political concept at the Jewish Museum Hohenems (Vorarlberg / Austria) on July 2, 2013. With the label "A State of Palestine? Plea for a Civil Society in the Middle East" the professor of philosophy and rector of the "Al-Quds University" in Abu Dis on the outskirts of Jerusalem illustrated his political career from a deliberate Jordanian citizen – his father Anwar was several times a minister in King Hussein cabinets –, about his sympathies for a shared entity with Arabs and Jews in historic Palestine until his commitment to the two-state solution – and finally its alternative which he explained in his thought-provoking book "What Is a Palestinian State Worth?". Thereby Nusseibeh continued with his autobiographical book which appeared in 2007 "Once upon a Country".

The son of a leading Palestinian family, born in 1949 in Damascus, has been a member of the National leadership of the PLO during the first "Intifada," participated with the legendary Haydr Abd Al-Shafi in the preparation of the international peace conference in Madrid in autumn 1991, viewed skeptically the Oslo Agreements of 1993 and 1995, was in charge of Jerusalem since November 2001 as representative of Yasser Arafat following in the footsteps of the memorable Faisal Husseini who had died in May on a medical examination in Kuwait, and presented in July 2002 together with the former Israeli intelligence chief Ami Ayalon the "Principles on a Peaceful Solution" which faded away within a short time due to the negligence among the Israeli public. Intermediately he was involved

¹ Translated from German on July 5, 2013.

in several attempts to promote Palestinian contacts to Israelis from the Zionist and non-Zionist peace camp.

"The problem identified as a problem"

If one looks to summarize Nusseibeh's introductions in Hohenems in one sentence, it is his credo "identify the problem as a problem." This refers to the necessity to give a farewell to the endless and futile loops of the governments in close range (the "Arab Peace Initiative") and far away (the "Road Map" of the Middle East Quartet) which tried to push for the end of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. In this respect it appeared logical that the lecturer mentioned the names Netanyahu, Abbas and Obama only incidentally, after he had repeatedly consented with Meron Benvenisti's "West Bank Data Project": The Jerusalem sociologist had already in 1985/86 suggested that the Israeli occupation is "irreversible."

Therefore, Nusseibeh's acknowledgement of the recent shuttle service mission of John Kerry and of the incessant engagement of Europe remained meager. As James Baker in the early 1990s and Joe Biden in 2010 Kerry, too, left Amman, Ramallah, and Jerusalem at the end of June with the "gift" of another Israeli announcement to build nearly one thousand new housing units in "Har Homa" north of Bethlehem. The start of this "neighborhood" goes back to March 1997 during the first premiership of Netanyahu.

Egypt and Lebanon as most recent examples of a disaster

To requests from the audience about the political importance of foreign peace efforts Nusseibeh reacted with a faint smile. That the German Government under the auspices of Guido Westerwelle marked the overthrow of Mohamed Mursi in Egypt as a "setback for

democracy" without considering that in his one-year lasting control of power thousands of compatriots were imprisoned and tortured according to "amnesty international" – not to mention the awful violence against women – and Mursi's damage to the separation of powers, and observing the total incapability of the foreign diplomacy to end the bloodshed in Syria, Nusseibeh was absolutely right with his noticeable restraint to the international political involvement which is too often compensated by military aid deliverances as in case of the \$ 1.3 billion for Egypt – which flow back in high quantities to the U:S. industry. The Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan went so far as to protest vehemently against the "military coup" in Cairo – under the pressure of the demonstrations in Istanbul and across the country he could be indeed the victim at home.

Have Mursi and his Muslim brothers all of the sudden ascended to natural allies? How long can the West justify the blockade of Gaza then? Have millions of cheering Egyptians who in 2011 provided their trust to the former President not the right to think their decisions over again? Is the victory in elections the only waterproof for democracy?

At the conclusion of his visit to Beirut on July 1 John Kerry underlined the "strong and lasting commitment" of the United States for the stability, sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. It is not known whether the head of the State Department is aware of the "historical undercurrents" Nusseibeh offered in Hohemens that could obliterate Washington's commitment completely.

"Historical undercurrents"

For Nusseibeh the "historical undercurrents" are responsible for the failure of international diplomacy efforts which were undermined again and again in the Middle East. Since the majority of the Palestinian population must watchfully take care of their daily

livelihood (including the assurance of relatively well-paid income sources in and from the Jewish settlements), their political engagement remains marginal – and if it comes to the fore, it is often marginalized or even suppressed. Since more than two thirds view the chances for an independent Palestinian state in the next five years low or even non-existent, opinion polls suggest the growing number who therefore relies on the time factor for the realization of their individual and collective dignity, with the end of a shared Arab-Jewish community between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. (As I wrote elsewhere the recourse to the “demographic factor” in this respect has a racial underpinning since it suggests that Jews and Arabs cannot live together. If this is true the “mixed” cities in Israel are doomed to failure.)

The approach of a shared community is the major conclusion of the argument Nusseibeh presented. But he goes back one step and recommends that the Palestinians for now insist on all civil rights at the state level, but at the same time abstain from the realization of their political ambitions, as for example to participate in elections. Again, someday the change would provide full recognition of their aims following the "historical undercurrents".

If the support of the majority of Palestinians can be safeguarded for such a dual vision Nusseibeh's notions raise at least three key problems:

- What relevance has the one-state solution under the influence of the developments in the neighborhood? Neither Israelis nor Palestinians are likely to warm up to join them, when Arab states are under the continuous threat of collapse and such a new Middle East emerges. Interesting enough, the Palestinian society did not disintegrate, while the PLO seems to have no chance to be revived.

- Nusseibeh seems to underestimate the influence of radical religious straights. While on the Palestinian side the rise of Islamism (its commitment to democracy is far from being established) may be interpreted as an outcome of the permanent foreign occupation, the sociologist Menachem Friedman has noted for Israel a "lethal cocktail of religion and politics" two decades ago. Friedman's testimony of "the precision without compromise" attributed to ultraorthodox circles and reinforced and strengthened by nationalistic hazards makes it unlikely to arrange a deal for an entity of both peoples, unless constitutional standards ripen that fulfill precise sovereignty claims of either side – by which the political responsibility of a shared central power would heavily be challenged from the outset.

- A dual state cannot for a long time wipe out the imbalances between the Jewish and Arab populations in the fields of economic and social policy growth and accomplishments. Massive adjustments would be the prerequisite for a life in coexistence.

What is needed much more than ever is to emphasize the support to develop democratic and liberal forces in both civil societies in order to promote local self-responsibility, adherence to the human rights, and the devotion to the rule of law. This is hopefully in accordance with Sari Nusseibeh's outstanding merit to appeal to a reevaluation of the so far disappointing results of political diplomacy.
