

Reflections on What a Palestinian State Is Worth¹

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The state, as an idea, has been at the center of moral and political philosophy even before Plato tackled it in his *Republic*. Philosophers have theorized about it in various ways, and have reached a variety of conclusions. While G. W. F. Hegel considered the nation-state to be the end of history, Karl Marx theorized that its abolition is what constituted an end to history—the history of class struggle in this case.² The state as an idea took its legitimacy historically from various sources including, but not limited to, religion. Empires were formed in the name of progress, dynasty, God, colonial interests, justice, and natural order, to mention a few, and in our current times constitute themselves in the name of international law and national rights.

Still, the question of whose national rights states represent, and what groups in fact deserve to be called “nations” remains an issue of contention to this day. Although the right to statehood appears to be universal in our times, there is nothing to suggest that it is eternal. Constructed over time and in specific historical contexts, nations could disappear in time with the changing contexts that led to their emergence. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that in today’s world, states are the source of political, social, cultural, civil, and human rights. Exercising certain political rights for both groups and individuals is today highly connected with the nature of the state under which they live.

However, this fact alone does not mean that states are necessarily the best possible options for organizing societies. Therefore, a discussion of their

¹ This essay is intended neither as a direct response to Sari Nusseibeh’s *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), nor strictly speaking as a review of it. Rather, I would call it a meditation on the idea of a Palestinian state inspired by the discussion that Nusseibeh has initiated in his book. For this, among other things, I thank him both for writing the book and for initiating what amounts, among Palestinians, to an unprecedented opportunity for discussion.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), III.3, pp. 155-223; Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 84; Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, pp. 163-75; and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, pp. 483-91.

significance and worth is fully legitimate as far as I am concerned, although such a discussion ought not to ignore the fact that states *do* exist and exercise significant power over our lives.

At the simplest level, states are essentially agents that organize violence by exerting their authority to be the only legitimate instruments of power. A state at the end of the day is nothing more, and nothing less, than a police force, army, prison, and the legal systems and institutions of power that claim a monopoly over violence. A people without a state are, at least in theory, free from restrictions traditionally imposed by the state, but at the same time, are without the rights enabled only through the apparatus of the state. A case in question is the Palestinians as a people. While they are free from the restrictions of a state that enacts laws in their name, they are also denied basic rights available to those who do have a state. Sari Nusseibeh's question "what is a Palestinian state worth?"—as stated in the title of his book—is, in light of this fact, an important one with ramifications that have the potential to affect millions of lives. It is a question that has a universal and an epistemological side, but also one that tackles histories connected with the idea of statehood in the territory known as Palestine. It is a question that one could claim has been internalized at the core of the psyche of every Palestinian. Do we really need a state? Or do we just want certain rights that we have been excluded from?

To tackle such questions, we must place them within the historical context that both led to the creation of the Palestinians as people as well as to the fact that they have been deprived of certain rights possible only within the context of a state. When Palestine emerged as a separate geopolitical entity from the larger Ottoman Empire, the people who lived in it and whose ancestors inhabited the region since antiquity were denied the right to have their own state, as was the case with the other regions of the former Ottoman sultanate. Instead, another group, that was not as yet a unified group, was promised a sort of state in their own homeland. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which formed the basis on which a state was to be established in Palestine, did not even acknowledge them to be a group, but reduced them to "the existing non-Jewish communities," to use the language of the above-mentioned document.³ Being designated as *not* something—rather than as an entity of its own—has become the norm in dealing with the Palestinian people within the context of their homeland and the nearby countries in the period after 1948. In this sense, the issue early on became whether those who are *not* something deserve a state. Do those who are in a sense the antithesis of a "real" people deserve what a recognized people is thought to deserve merely by virtue of being a people?

Dealing with this question, in theory at least, is as absurd as debating whether angels deserve rights reserved to humans. The creation of the state of

³ "Balfour Declaration of 1917," accessed online at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp.

Israel could be argued to be a result of various elements, including the nineteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment, European anti-Semitism, and the diligent work of people like Theodore Herzl. On the other hand, the just-discussed principle concerning the non-Jewish population of Palestine was no doubt the brainchild of the authors of the Balfour Declaration. Just imagine, for the sake of argument, that the text of the Declaration spoke of them not as “non-Jewish communities,” but as the people of Palestine who would live together in a state to which Jews were allowed to immigrate. Arguably, the course of events—including British colonial policy in Palestine, the League of Nations’ approval of the Mandate system, and possibly the very language used by Israel’s 1948 Declaration of Independence—might have looked different. At the same time, my assumption above that things might have looked different does not mean that a conflict would not have existed or that Zionism as an exclusivist ideology would have functioned differently from the way it did in 1948 and after. A conflict might have arisen in any case, but the parameters of the discussion would have looked different from what we have today. If nothing else, at least recognizing the peoplehood of the Palestinians might not have been an issue of contention. However, as far as Zionism is concerned, that is where the problem lies today.

Still, going back to real history, the people of Palestine ended up paying a heavy price for the establishment of a state in their homeland which they were not expected to be part of, nor allowed, for the most part, to live in. Instead, the Palestinians became refugees, minority groups, and displaced people in their homeland and in the neighboring countries. To this day, despite having a recognized non-state entity that rules over a portion of them, they lack many rights and freedoms. They lack freedom of movement, residency, the rule of law, and the right to their own property within the borders of 1948 Israel.⁴ Furthermore, because they live inside different states in the region, they are subjected to various laws that in most cases restrict their basic rights in the current country of residence. There are no real indications to suggest that solutions to these problems are possible without a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The basic fact remains that the people of Palestine are largely deprived of what international humanitarian law considers basic rights. Unless a drastic event like the collapse of the state system worldwide were to happen—and obviously nothing of the sort is imminent—granting the Palestinians such basic rights requires them to have a state that can regulate and protect the rights just named. In this sense, and for this reason, a Palestinian state *is* worth seeking. The only alternative, and one that might be more just, would be for Israel to open its borders for Palestinians to return to claim their property and

⁴ See Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); and Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

right of residence (indeed, to change those borders altogether). Additionally, Israel would have to become a state for all of the people who reside within its borders. This could happen in various ways. Israel could become a binational state, a state of its citizens. Or else it could remain a state in which one national group dominates the other, as is now the case. The fundamental problem lies with foundational principles of the Israeli state, principles many people today would like to evade. But without the desire to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, no Arab-Israeli conflict would have existed. It is thus feasible to imagine that minus the founding of Israel, the region could have avoided decades of war, oppression, refugees, exile, detention, killing, and bombing.

However, the undeniable fact is that all of those things happened. In 1948, Palestine disappeared and a self-declared Jewish state emerged in its stead. Anyone who thinks that they can erase the weight of that history is thus mistaken. We must deal with what now exists, and how we ended up with what we have. We cannot reverse history. Therefore, we must look to the future for the best solutions without ignoring the weight of historical collective imagination. In other words, we live at a time when imagining the re-establishment of the British Mandate is not feasible. But what is feasible is to correct, change, and tackle what exists in order to see how it can be part of the solution. What we have now is a state of Israel in control of all of historic Palestine, ruling over two populations, but using different standards for each. We have a Palestinian Authority that can articulate Palestinian demands, but lacks real control over the Palestinian population and lacks the ability to protect them. We have millions of Jews who are now Israelis, many of whom were born in Israel, and millions of Palestinians under one form or another of Israeli rule. We have refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere who are in need of basic rights. A Palestinian state is one possible solution, but is not the only possible one, nor even the best one. Was it worth all of the struggles, the suffering, and the lives that were lost or damaged forever? I cannot say for sure, but what I do know is that we have a situation resulting from what happened in 1947-1949 and after, which requires a solution.

A state will solve perhaps as many problems as it will create. One needs only to look at the creation of Israel itself to see that fact clearly illustrated. Similarly, a state, at least as envisioned nowadays, will provide many Palestinians with some basic rights, but at the price of abandoning their dreams. Furthermore, we neither know what kind of state it will be, nor how Israel will deal with it. In any case, the sheer establishment of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 will not mean the solution of the problem of the exclusively Jewish character of Israel. The Palestinians in Israel will remain, in a fundamental way, disadvantaged residents.

In essence, I think there is a primary cause for events that unfolded later on. The cause is the act of having created a state in Palestine in 1948, a specific kind of state. Israel's supporters might respond that there might not have been a problem if only the Arabs had accepted Israel, and accepted the partition of Palestine. But such claims do not even begin to challenge the

problem posed by the establishment of Israel as an exclusively Jewish state. Was the price that the world and the region had to pay—that both Jews and Arabs have had to pay—really worth the price of the creation of Israel? In my view, *this* ought to be the central question of our discussion. The basic question is not what a *Palestinian* state is worth, but whether it was worth creating a *Jewish* one in Palestine, if at all.

