



“NAKBA”

CATASTROPHE & MODERATION IN PALESTINE

ROBERT NICHOLSON

Palestinian woman, 1948. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The Dajani clan is one of the oldest and most respected Arab clans in Jerusalem with roots that go back to the first Muslim conquerors who came to the Holy Land from Arabia. These days, on top of their ancient identity, the Dajanis see themselves as Palestinians. Their memories are rooted in the *Nakba*, a failed attempt by Arab states to uproot the new Jewish state in 1948, which caused a massive exile of 750,000 Palestinians into surrounding countries. “Nakba” is an Arabic word that means catastrophe.

I recently sought out Dr. Mohammed Dajani, one of the more well-known members of his clan, to discuss the future of the Palestinian national movement on the seventieth anniversary of the catastrophe. Dajani believes the best response to the Nakba is acceptance of, and coexistence with, the Jewish state.

Moderation is the only path to a viable Palestinian future and the best launching

pad for the United States to engage with the conflict. But the history of moderation movements is spotty at best. Extremists tend to be better armed to win the day. I came to Dajani because I wanted to better understand the challenges that moderate leaders like him face inside Palestinian society. Do they have an audience? Do they have the vision and courage to lead the Palestinian people into the future? And how can US policy be redirected to assist them?

I caught up with Mohammed Dajani at an outdoor café in the trendy Mamilla Mall just a few hundred meters west of the Old City of Jerusalem. Dajani has authored many books and given thousands of speeches, but he is best known these days for a single study abroad trip that he led in 2014. The trip was unremarkable apart from the fact that the students were Palestinian and the destination was Auschwitz.



Mohammed S. Dajani. Source: The Washington Institute.

The trip sparked outrage far and wide. Faculty members, politicians, and concerned citizens all unleashed their rage on this mild mannered academic. How dare a Palestinian professor encourage his students to study the Holocaust. Dajani had a few supporters—his students and the university president among others—but his enemies were relentless. They called him a “normalizer” (a Palestinian slur for anyone who works with Israel), and some even threatened his life.

“They told me I was a traitor and that punishment for traitors is death,” Dajani told me while sipping an Americano. “It was a personal vendetta. People said I was a CIA spy who was getting paid \$42 million to impose ‘American Islam’ on the Palestinians.” He guffawed. “I told them don’t worry. Once the money comes in, you’ll get your check.”

Dajani no longer works at Al-Quds University. The pressure was too great. He submitted his

resignation and now focuses his time on promoting *wasatia*, or moderation, as a path to peace with Israel.

“Doesn’t this episode tell us something about where Palestinians are at?” I asked. “It’s not like you visited the grave of Theodor Herzl. You went to Auschwitz.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think it reflects the Palestinian culture or mentality at all,” he said matter-of-factly. “It was just a few bad apples promoting incitement and misinformation.”

“Really,” I said, raising my eyebrows, “you think a minority of Palestinians are still moderate?”

“A majority!” he answered. “Moderation has always been the main feature of Palestinian politics. In the 1950s and ’60s, there were two powerful trends pulling at Arab societies, communism and the Muslim Brotherhood, but Palestinians never aligned themselves with either.” The problem, he explained, was the extremist minority. He cited the 1938 assassination of a well-known ancestor, journalist Hassan Sidqi Omar al-Dajani, who was killed for his even-handed stance toward the 1937 British plan to partition Palestine between Jews and Arabs. “Others were assassinated for the same reason,” he said, “causing many of the moderates to remain silent. But they have always been there.”

“And you think moderates are still the majority?”

“Here in Palestine we have three groups,” Dajani said. “There are around 10 to 12 Islamic parties who have around 8-10 percent of the people. On the other side, you have the secular parties who have around 25-30 percent. Neither [has] even half the vote. In the middle you have about 60 percent who are moderates. My goal is to engage these people and make sure they have representation. That’s the idea of *wasatia*.”

He looked out across the café, suddenly sober. “Palestinians are moderate,” he said. “They just don’t have an address.”

“What *is* moderation?” I asked.

“I’m not a religious man,” Dajani replied. “I think of myself as a reformist. But I believe there are two Islams: radical Islam and moderate Islam. Both have the Qur’an as a reference point. Extremist Islam fights the other and denies the other’s religion and belief. Moderate Islam accepts the other and tries to live with him.

“But I don’t mean moderation only in terms of religion. I consider collecting garbage from the street to be moderation. Standing up to an evildoer, this is moderation too. It is about taking responsibility for living together in peace. That is why I’m trying to establish a peace university here in the land. To teach reconciliation as a profession, an art, a science. To build trust among people. To bring reform, not to Islam but to Muslims. To bring hope.”

“Are Palestinians responding?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “mainly on Facebook. But many are too scared to say anything, even if they believe in my work.”

“How do you get around that fear?”

Dajani finished his coffee and sat back, wiping his hands with a napkin. It was the only time during our conversation that he seemed



United Nations Palestine map showing armistice agreements, 1955. Source: United Nations.

unsure how to answer. “It has to start with someone,” he finally said, “someone who has the courage to stand up and take the heat so that others can follow behind him.” He paused. “When I came back from the Auschwitz trip, I knew that I had to take the heat for my students. If I didn’t, it would all fall on them. But when I stood up, they felt the courage to stand up too.”



Sari Nusseibeh in 2012. Source: *Blaues Sofa*, via Flickr.

“And what about your safety?” I asked.

“I’m careful,” Dajani said with a smile. “I don’t go too deep into the West Bank. If I do, it’s only for a short time.” Laughing, he added, “In Arabic we have a proverb: If you don’t want nightmares, don’t sleep in graveyards.”

A few days later, I went to visit Sari Nusseibeh at his East Jerusalem home not far from the Mount of Olives. He greeted me at the door in a brown blazer and jeans, looking a bit drowsy in the mid-afternoon heat under his mop of white hair. “Sorry I’m late,” I said, pointing to my phone, “Google Maps.”

He waved away the apology and welcomed me out of the sun into the cool interior of his home. The stone floor beneath my feet was worn smooth by generations of Nusseibehs who had come before me. Their faces looked down at me from their black-and-white portraits on the walls.

Like his old colleague Dajani, Nusseibeh is a distinguished Palestinian academic who belongs to a venerable Jerusalem dynasty. Historically, the Dajanis were custodians of King David’s tomb; the Nusseibehs were custodians of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Nusseibeh himself recently retired as a professor of philosophy and president of Al-Quds University (the same university president who quietly supported Dajani against his detractors), and also served as the Palestinian Authority representative in Jerusalem until 2002. His most recent book, *The Story of*

Reason in Islam, is a magisterial intellectual history of rationalism in Islamic thought from the seventh century until today. Like Dajani, Nusseibeh is a well-known Palestinian moderate.

He led me to his parlor where we both sank into plush chairs across from each other. I explained that I was writing an article on the Nakba and wanted to hear his perspective.

“I’m not sure what I can tell you,” he said, sighing. His face looked weary and inscrutable.

“Let’s start with something simple,” I said. “Who are the Palestinians?”

Actually, the question wasn’t that simple. Europeans have been using the word “Palestine” since the Bronze Age to describe the southeastern Mediterranean coast after an Indo-European people called the Philistines set up a colony there in the first or second millennium BC. Over time, “Philistine” became “Palestine”—a word used to describe a place, not a people. That Palestine carries a geographic meaning and not a national one has naturally presented some difficulties for the Palestinian national movement.

“Palestinians are a salad,” Nusseibeh said, “a mixed salad, even. People coming from different places, some with Christian ancestry, some pre-Islamic, some post-Islamic, some more recently during the Crusades, some even more recently during the British Mandate. If you asked me did my ancestors consider themselves to be Palestinian, I would say most likely not. They saw themselves as Arabs, or Muslims who just happened to be living here.”

Modern Palestinian identity, Nusseibeh explained, developed in reaction to Zionism. “Only recently,” he said, “in reaction to the birth of the Jewish national idea, did they need to develop a Palestinian national idea in



Silhouette of Jerusalem's Old City, March 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

order to secure their own space in the same country.” And not all Palestinians reacted the same way. “Some of them managed to stay here and try to exist within the growing system that is Israel,” he said. “Some of them were either expelled or fled or left, first here and then later elsewhere, and tried to find ways to live in those different contexts including, for instance, thinking about returning to what they consider to be their homeland.”

Nusseibeh leaned back in his chair. “The Palestinian struggle is just a reaction to the Zionist takeover of the country,” he said. “If you think about it, that’s all there is to it.”

I asked whether the reactionary nature of Palestinian identity—that it emerged in direct opposition to another identity—in any way inhibits peace. That is, if being Palestinian means opposing Israel wouldn’t peace with Israel threaten the very foundations of Palestinian identity?

“You take this too far in the wrong direction,” Nusseibeh replied. “People today identify as Palestinian. My great-great-grandfather did not, but my grandchildren do. It’s quite strong now.”

“But is there something to it?”

“Peace doesn’t threaten our identity. Not real peace. Think about a neutral state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean

Sea—a state that isn’t Jewish or Arab, Israeli or Palestinian, but a state of all of its citizens. Palestinians would welcome such a state.” He looked for a reaction from me, knowing that he was proposing something outside the accepted orthodoxy of the conflict. “Identity is important in maintaining some kind of sense of history, self-recognition, and so on. But at the end of the day what you really need to do is address your daily concerns.”

Nusseibeh is well-known for having Jewish friends and interlocutors, but he’s also angered many Jews by opposing the idea of a Jewish state.

“What about Palestinian self-determination?” I asked. “What about a Palestinian state?”

“It’s a recent thing,” Nusseibeh answered quickly, “this business about the Palestinian state. It’s not really something built in. It was one way to think about how to address the concerns.” At first the Palestinians rejected any compromise with Israel, demanding the destruction of the Jewish state and a restoration of Arab Palestine. Only in the 1990s, after decades of armed struggle failed to produce results, did Palestinian leaders agree to recognize Israel in exchange for a shot at self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza. But the collapse of the peace process and outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 sent everything back to zero. “Now they see themselves as having failed,” Nusseibeh said.



“They are going back to the idea of having one state, but very slowly.”

“One Arab state?”

“No,” he replied, “but not one Jewish state either. A state where Palestinians are given equal rights—not to be part of the Israeli state, but not to create a Palestinian state.”

“So something in between?”

“Yes,” he said, “at least for now, as a step for later on. Palestinians need certain things, communal things that stand for what they consider important components of their cultural history. At that level, there is a need to have some kind of identity with which you’re associated, but it needn’t go beyond that to become embodied in a political organization—unless it’s necessary. You can have another kind of system.”

“But isn’t that what the Palestinian Authority is?” I asked. “Something in between?”

Nusseibeh measured his words carefully. “Not exactly,” he said. “A lot of people look at the PA today and feel that it’s not giving us what we need. People are no longer very enthusiastic about the state. They are beginning to see that states are not magical means of satisfying one’s needs.”

I had heard these sentiments before. Polling numbers bear out the disillusionment of many Palestinians, especially younger ones, with the Palestinian Authority and the growing support for a “one-state solution.”

“But isn’t the hope that the PA will become a real state soon?”

“The PA has been living, and making everyone else live, in the hope that a state is in the offing. But if the idea of a state just disappears,” Nusseibeh paused, “maybe that would make for a better situation all around.”

“That’s a radical idea. Are Palestinians ready for that?”

“It’s hard to say,” Nusseibeh said. “Our public discourse is very self-righteous and enclosed. There isn’t enough leeway for people to just throw ideas out and play around with them. The situation is so intellectually tense that ideas like these are immediately looked at with suspicion. It’s very hard.”

He told me about a time in the early 1980s when he was attacked for publicly suggesting that Israel annex the West Bank and Gaza and give the Palestinians equal rights. “It was a brilliant idea,” he told me, “but it was looked upon as something that was totally outside the line.”

“What do you see as the qualities of an ideal Palestinian leader?”

Nusseibeh was taken aback—perhaps it was a question he had never been asked. He cocked his head, thinking. “Someone with self-respect and dignity that I could be proud of,” he said, “even if I don’t always agree. Someone who is thoughtful enough, reasonable enough, dignified enough for me to feel good about. His top priority must be the betterment of his people, providing his people with freedom, their rights, and their dignity. He must be devoid of things like kleptocracy, corruption, and so on, and very willing to pass on the flame to the next in line through elections. Not pompous but humble. Imaginative, creative,

having a vision that he can translate to the rest of the people, convince them, lead them along to the fulfillment of that vision—gently, using the art of persuasion. Certainly not by force or by fear or by coercion.”

He paused for a long time. “What is a leader anyway?” he said, almost talking out loud. “Not necessarily someone who leads, but someone who has the *capacity* to lead. Very often, if things don’t need you...” His voice trailed off, his face melancholy.

“Well,” he said after a long pause, “I think we should end here.”

Palestinian moderates aren’t a theoretical category; they exist. An April 2018 survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that half of Palestinians still support the peace process and the two-state solution. A solid 30 percent believe in negotiations as the best path to peace. A further 30 percent accept the idea of Israeli Jews living as equals in the future State of Palestine. This group—what I call the friendly third—is ready to move beyond conflict and coexist alongside the Jewish people.

But the problem isn’t the friendly—it’s the fierce. A full 35 percent of Palestinians reject negotiations and see armed action as the best way to achieve their national goals; 30 percent believe that the most important goal is obtaining the right for millions of Palestinian refugees to return to their forefathers’ 1948 towns and villages inside Israel proper; about 35 percent want Marwan Barghouti, a convicted murderer and terrorist, to be the next president of the PA; and a staggering 50 percent support violent attacks against Jewish civilians inside Israel.

There is no doubt that men like Dajani and Nusseibeh have a constituency in the friendly

third. But whether they can overpower the fierce remains to be seen. Their only shot is to win over a third group of Palestinians—the fickle and frustrated who swing between the fierce and the friendly—and create a solid majority that is ready for change. To do that requires a clear vision, moral courage, and a demonstrated ability to improve Palestinian lives in tangible ways.

This social analysis should affect US policy. If Palestinian moderates are indeed the key to peace, American policymakers should be searching for ways to better identify and empower them. Most importantly, we must help them acquire the financial tools needed to hold back the fierce. Unfortunately, most of our attention has been spent on the political landscape—borders, settlements, and capitals—at the expense of the human one. Real peacemaking must begin on the street, and real Palestinians need leaders who will offer solutions to everyday problems. Maps mean nothing if no one accepts them.

It is an open question whether the current leadership of the PA is truly moderate. While formally committed to the two-state solution, few of its leaders seem eager to actually achieve it. Palestinian negotiators have



Jerusalem, 2009. Source: Alistair, via Flickr.

rejected at least two major Israeli peace offers since 2000, and the PA still subsidizes the families of terrorists who have committed attacks against Israeli Jews. These leaders may be moderate compared to Hamas, but perhaps they aren't moderate enough.

That's the argument of the Trump administration, which has blamed PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) negotiator Saeb Erekat for ignoring the best interests of their people in the name of politics and payola. Trump's much-discussed, still-unreleased "Deal of the Century" peace plan seems likely to contain measures that bypass Palestinian leaders through a bottom-up, economic approach to peace. Abbas and Erekat have responded preemptively by boycotting Trump's plan before they even see it.

Trump is right to push them. For too long the Palestinian governing class has gotten rich on the backs of its people, prolonging the conflict while reaping the rewards of international assistance. Trump is also right to focus on economic development that is aimed at the street level. Only visible improvements in daily life will convince the fickle and frustrated that the path to peace is worth pursuing.

But there is a danger in undermining the establishment too quickly. Right now, there is no alternative network of moderate leaders ready to take its place. And Hamas, despite its own internal weaknesses, stands waiting in the wings while moderate leaders like Dajani and Nusseibeh remain scattered and powerless beyond the persuasiveness of their own rhetoric.

Many of these moderates also embrace, like Nusseibeh, the idea of a one-state solution—the call to destroy the PA, erase the Green Line that separates Israel from the West Bank and Gaza, and pile all the Jews and Arabs between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea into one big state. On paper the idea sounds attractive; in practice, it is alarming. For those Palestinians who still crave some kind of national self-determination, it threatens the foundations of their identity. For Israeli Jews who still believe in the necessity of a Jewish state—and that is the vast majority—the demographic implications of the one-state solution will sound the death knell of the entire Zionist project. Hasty moves in this direction, without proper planning, are likely to spark chaos rather than contain it.

Trump should ramp up economic assistance to the Palestinian people. He should find innovative ways to channel money past bloated bureaucracies and big NGOs to apolitical projects that help real people. Trump should also invest in building a network of Palestinian moderates—real moderates, especially in the middle and younger generations—that will serve as an incubator for talent, a bulwark against the anti-peace opposition, and an alternative leadership community ready to fill future positions in the PA or, worst case, step up to lead in the event of PA collapse.

Reformers like Dajani have boldly stepped out to take the heat in the name of peace. But as it stands today, they are financially unable to empower the young leaders who would take up their mantle. The US can do something meaningful by identifying real moderates and linking them together with the assistance needed to ensure lasting change. Both economic and leadership development initiatives should be paired for maximum effect.

We cannot change Palestinian society, but Palestinians who embrace pluralism and peace most certainly can. Our main task is to help them. ■

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