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BOOK REVIEW

Mid-bridge in
the Middle East

Any two people from opposite sides of the Arab-Israel divide who succeed in agreeing on more than a vague outline of a resolution of the longest-running Middle East conflict deserve credit. For the attempt to be made jointly by an Israeli citizen and a Palestinian assures the project of greater credibility and, hopefully, wider circulation. And for the authors to have concluded their task by liking and respecting each other was a bonus that even they had not contemplated.

What they would now like is for the involved parties to study their efforts and to consider those areas where mutually acceptable solutions are shown to be possible.

It was none the less tempting to abandon No Trumpets, No Drums after the first few pages. The disappointment was provoked by the realisation that, although setting out on a marathon course, the two runners had started at the halfway mark.

Mr Heller, a Canadian-born Israeli, quickly admits to having supported for some time the concept of an independent Palestinian state on the territory occupied by Israel in the 1967 war. For his part, Mr Nusseibeh knew of Mr Heller's position from the outset, and says that he could not have worked with an Israeli who refused to accept the necessity of a two-state solution. For him and, he says, the Palestinian people, the bottom line must be a sovereign state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Contrast this with the starting point of the peace negotiations in Madrid last November and in the third session of talks in Washington this week. Not only does the Israeli government refuse to contemplate the emergence of a Palestinian state, it refuses to negotiate with a separate Palestinian delegation and will not concede the principle of returning any part of the occupied territories.

Mr Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's prime minister, has said repeatedly that all that is on offer is peace for peace. As if to reinforce that assertion, Israel is accelerating the pace of its housebuilding programme in the West Bank and Gaza, regardless of mounting American anger and the increasing probability that President George Bush will seek to deny Israel the \$10bn it is asking for in loan guarantees to help settle the wave of new immigrants from what was the Soviet Union.

Of course, Mr Shamir is taking his most extreme position at the outset, both as a negotiating stance and in the hope that he might persuade the Arab delegation to abandon the process. But it would be naïve to expect Mr Shamir, the Likud party he leads, or anyone else from the Israeli right to do what Mr Nusseibeh has required and received from Mr Heller: that is, to recognise the

NO TRUMPETS, NO DRUMS

By Sari Nusseibeh and
Mark Heller

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principle of what they describe as "equitability and mutuality" between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

If that were achieved, then Messrs Heller and Nusseibeh would be more likely to be observing and chronicling the progress of the official negotiations, rather than coming up with solutions of their own. Finding a way to cross the bridge from the reality of today to the point at which the authors have chosen to begin their own negotiations is what the present American-led peace process is about.

For Arab leaders, the past decade has brought a relentless narrowing of choice. The demise of pan-Arabism, the Gulf war defeat of Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the pre-eminence of the US in the Middle East have left no way forward for them, other than through negotiation. If Mr Nusseibeh was able to deliver to them in fact what he has negotiated in print, songs in his honour would be sung throughout the Arab world.

He may not have achieved everything that the Palestinians want, but he has progressed further with Mr Heller than did President Anwar Sadat in his attempt to win concessions from Mr Menachem Begin, the former Israeli prime minister, at the Camp David negotiations which brought the first breakthrough in Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

Mr Heller will have a harder task in selling the results of his labour to fellow citizens. He questions, as do they, whether the Palestinians and other Arabs will ever truly reconcile themselves to Israel's existence. But he is also convinced that Israel, faced by the choice between stalemate and a two-state solution, must choose the latter.

He and Mr Nusseibeh cannot agree on the precise borders between the two states, but they do not back away from solutions for scarcely less contentious issues, such as the return of Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements, security, water resources, and even the future of Jerusalem as the jointly administered capital of both nations.

They have done what intelligent, fair-minded people should always be capable of. Sadly, as the Middle East daily demonstrates, their voices remain faint, and the need to make such a fundamental choice is far from being actively debated by the majority of Israelis. If ever it is, No Trumpets, No Drums can make a reasoned contribution to what will be an emotional and divisive debate.

Roger Matthews