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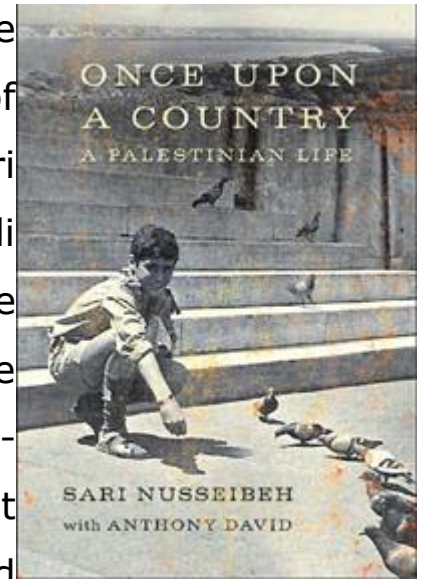
A life on the road to peace

Moris Farhi

Once Upon a Country

by Sari Nusseibeh, with Anthony David.

"THE single most dangerous enemy of Israel", "The most dangerous Palestinian alive", "The pretty face of terrorism", are some of the epithets fired at Dr Sari Nusseibeh, the Palestinian peace activist, by Israeli politicians. These defamations give credence to the adage that "Israeli authorities fear men of peace more than they fear terrorists". This autobiography-cum-memoir, co-authored with Anthony David, should put matters right, particularly for that majority of Israeli and



diaspora Jews who either maintain silence or choose to swallow the deceit disseminated by Israeli governments that creating settlements on Palestinian land is to ensure security for the Jewish state and not part of an expansionist policy.

Equally, it should enlighten organisations like Hamas, Hezbollah, and some Arab governments, that Nusseibeh's uncompromising platform whereby "Palestinians and Israelis share common interests in a two-state solution and

as such are more allies than enemies" is the only solution to the conflict; and that, for its achievement, they must reject fanaticism and embrace, in the tradition of early Islamic thinking, love for all humankind.

Nusseibeh's long and often dangerous undertaking to build bridges of understanding between Israelis and Palestinians, as opposed to walls of separation, can be summed up thus: "Our fight is not to cause pain to others, but to deliver ourselves from pain. It is not to destroy another state, but to create our own. It is not to bring death to others, but to give life and hope to ourselves and to our children."

A scion of Palestinian aristocracy, whose ancestry goes back to the Nusaybah tribe that pledged allegiance to the Prophet Mohammed, Nusseibeh has a vision of a Holy Land where it would be possible for Arabs, Jews and Christians to live in harmony. Returning from studies in Oxford and Harvard to teach at Birzeit University, after the creation of Israel, he nurtured the dream of a single state for Arabs and Jews.

Much as he resisted following in his father's footsteps—a politician of rare integrity—he was soon enmeshed in politics. He played a major role in disputing the Palestinian demand for Israel's annihilation while pursuing the rights of his people. In time, he championed the need for two separate states. When asked to resurrect Al-Quds University—the only Arab university in Jerusalem—he transformed the Hamas-dominated student body, and made it a centre of philosophy, rationalism and the humanities.

Nusseibeh's conviction that enlightenment is dependent on knowledge made him a unique activist. Imbued with Western philosophy, he went on to immerse himself in the philosophies of Islam's golden age. Al-Farabi taught him that every individual must do his best to humanise an "imperfect society". Ibn Sina (Avicenna) inspired him to conceive that human will can conjoin inner and outer worlds. Abd el-Jabbar Ibn Ahmad impressed on him that human beings have free will and that, therefore, they are responsible for their actions. Ibn Rushd (Averroes), the "father of secular thought", advocating the imperative of separating the state from religious doctrines, confirmed that the region's political divisions were rooted in the "religious imagination" of both communities. That, consequently, was the first challenge.

Perhaps Nusseibeh's most important insight is his realisation that since many politicians, on both sides, have been corrupt and self-serving, peace can only be achieved by mobilising grassroots Palestinians and Israelis. This strategy, reflecting their own patriotic concerns, did not go unheeded by the Israeli moderates. One sane politician, Ami Ayalon, the former Israeli navy and secret service chief, has now joined forces with Nusseibeh. Together they have founded the initiative known as "The People's Voice" and formulated a "Destination Map" which, requiring serious compromises from both sides, offers the strongest possibility of a lasting peace.

Nusseibeh's autobiography is, perhaps, the most important to emerge from the Middle East for decades. And its publication now is propitious. The recent Annapolis meeting has declared that the Israel-Palestine conflict will be resolved by December 2008. But few, if any, Israelis or Palestinians can

conceive that this long-awaited resolution will materialise. They suspect that, as ever, the politicians on both sides will renege with time-worn arguments. This autobiography, with its presentation of the "Destination Map", carries the passion that might embolden ordinary Israelis and Palestinians to bypass the politicians and establish the peace that all but the armoured men desperately want.