

A Reason Not to Despair

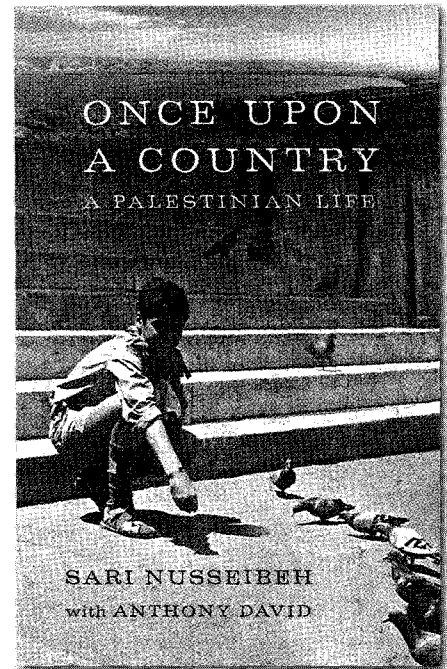
Few players have navigated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with more integrity than Sari Nusseibeh.

By Joshua Hammer

At the height of the second Palestinian intifada five years ago, Sari Nusseibeh was a welcome—and lonely—voice of moderation. As the president of Al-Quds University and Yasser Arafat's administrator in East Jerusalem, Nusseibeh used his influential position as a bully pulpit to denounce the wave of suicide bombings that Palestinian militants were carrying out with quotidian regularity across the Green Line. Nusseibeh didn't exonerate the Israelis in the conflict; he sharply criticized Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and blamed Israeli revanchists for pushing Palestinians to despair through the relentless colonization of the West Bank. But his articulate denunciations of Palestinian nihilism were what most defined him—and what drew the ire of the "fanatics" who were setting the agenda. In a memorable interview with *New Yorker* editor David Remnick in 2002, Nusseibeh talked of the Palestinians' need to "resurrect the spirit of Christ" and restrain the impulse to respond to Israeli attacks and humiliation with more bloodshed. "They have to realize that an act of violence does not serve their interest," he said—an opinion that was, to say the least, not widely shared among Palestinians at the time.

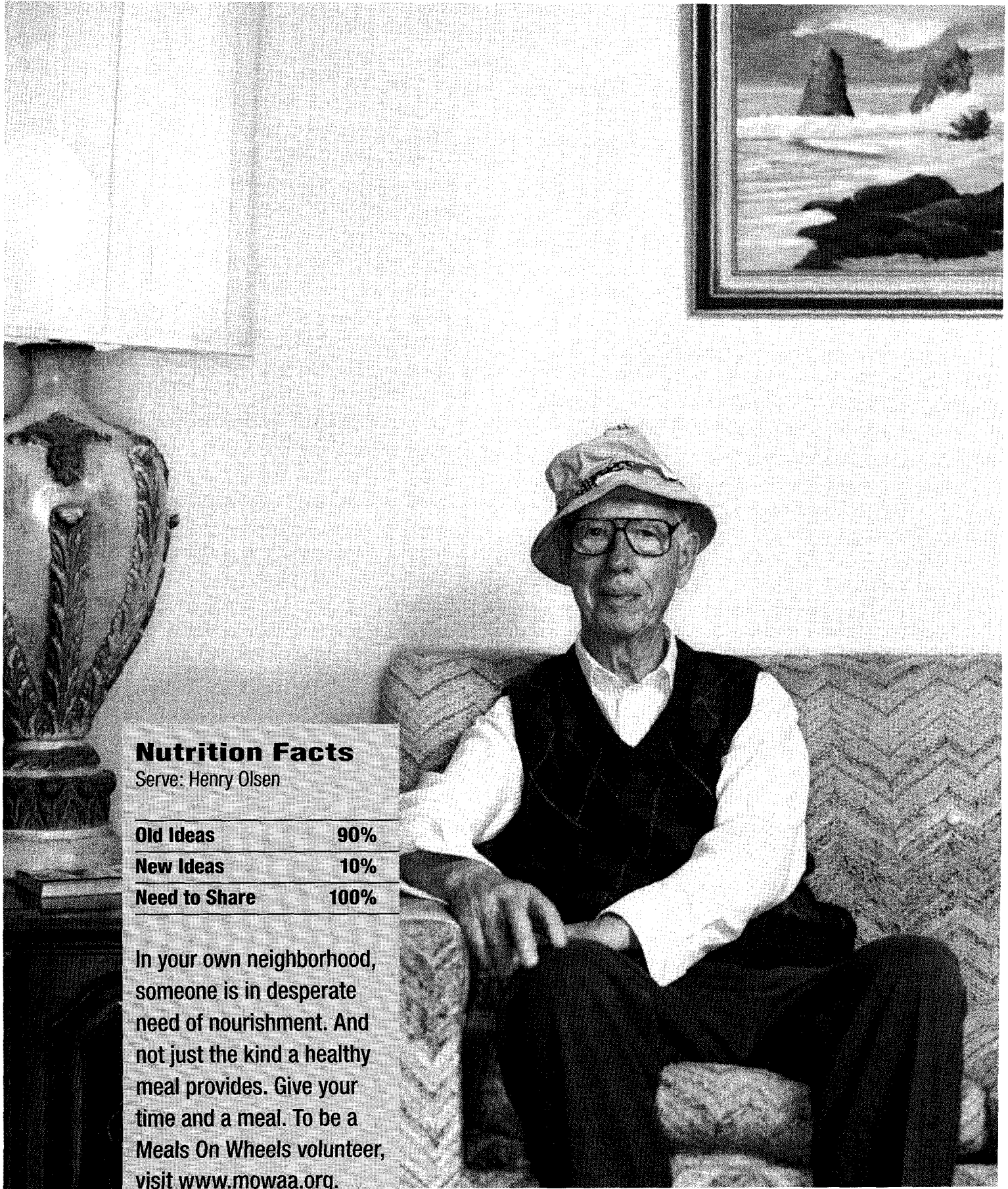
Nusseibeh has been trying to find a way out of the Middle Eastern wilderness for decades, and that often frustrating, sometimes hopeful journey is chronicled in this absorbing new memoir. At one level *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* serves as a useful primer on the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations—a tale of wars, uprisings, progress, and dashed hopes—told with the immediacy and sometimes gossipy tone of an insider. But it's also the story of an Arab intellectual drawn against his better nature into the combative world of political activism. Nusseibeh was present, in body or in spirit, at every step of the conflict (he was studying at Oxford when the Six-Day War broke out, but returned days later to find Jerusalem transformed), and he came to play a critical role as a negotiator for a two-state solution. How Nusseibeh got there, and how he continued the search for common ground in the face of repeated setbacks and appalling violence, is at the heart of this inspiring book.

Nusseibeh was destined to play a key role in shaping the future of his people. The scion of one of the most venerable clans in Jerusalem, Nusseibeh was conceived in 1948, the year of the Nakba, or Palestinian catastrophe. His father was a patrician attorney who organized the Arab defense of the Old City during the Arab-Israeli war and lost a leg in an ambush outside Jerusalem. (After the war, King Hussein of Jordan appointed him the governor of the Jerusalem region.) Strongly anti-Zionist, the elder Nusseibeh was also a relative moderate who scorned Jerusalem's mufti for his support of Adolf Hitler, and regarded the Egyptian leader Gamal Nasser as a dangerous demagogue. Young Sari fell in love with literature and first studied philosophy at Oxford (where he met his wife, the daughter of an English philosopher) and



Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life

by Sari Nusseibeh, with Anthony David
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 560 pp.



Nutrition Facts

Serve: Henry Olsen

Old Ideas	90%
New Ideas	10%
Need to Share	100%

In your own neighborhood, someone is in desperate need of nourishment. And not just the kind a healthy meal provides. Give your time and a meal. To be a Meals On Wheels volunteer, visit www.mowaa.org.



then attended Harvard. Drawn back to the Holy Land, he found a teaching job at Birzeit University and found himself dragged inexorably into Palestinian political life.

Nusseibeh began his engagement advocating a single, democratic Arab-Jewish state, but the harsh realities of occupation convinced him of the impossibility of that dream. By the late 1970s, he writes, “far from bringing the sides closer together, occupation was turning Palestinians into a permanent underclass of workers whose land, resources, and basic rights were being systematically violated and stripped away.” He saw that “a separatist Palestinian nationalist identity was growing stronger,” and eventually he became swept up in the struggle. As an Arab Jerusalemite, with one foot planted in Israel and one in Palestine, he was in a key position to serve as a mediator between two increasingly implacable enemies. Ironically, Israel came to regard him as both a nuisance and a threat—and in 1991, at the outbreak of the first Gulf War, the Israeli government locked him up on flimsy charges of being an agent of Saddam Hussein. Nusseibeh’s story is most gripping as it charts the urbane professor’s improbable transformation into an activist, an undercover operative, and, during the first Palestinian uprising, a prisoner.

Nusseibeh’s take on the collapse of the Camp David talks in July 2000 and the subsequent outbreak of the second intifada is provocative. Nusseibeh rejects the conventional wisdom that Arafat bears the brunt of the blame by refusing to accept Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s ostensibly generous offer. There’s no question that Barak’s concessions—the division of Jerusalem, the withdrawal of most West Bank settlements—went far beyond what any previous Israeli government had been willing to offer, but Nusseibeh makes a plausible case that his brinkmanship set the stage for disaster. After years of mutual distrust, neither side, he argues, was ready to commit to the final settlement that Barak, with

Clinton’s backing, was pushing. Nusseibeh accuses Barak of playing a “high-stakes game” that offered either “total agreement or apocalypse.” The route to the apocalypse was greased, of course, by men with guns, such as the charismatic Fatah leader turned terrorist Marwan Barghouti. In a memorable encounter, Barghouti tells Nusseibeh that, in effect, “the Israeli political elite had to be shocked out of its political complacency through pain. Blood had to be drawn.”

For me, as a former Middle East correspondent who lived through the most violent period in recent Israeli-Palestinian history, Nusseibeh’s insights into the unfolding of the Al Aqsa intifada are particularly acute.

We get fascinating thumbnail sketches of key actors in the drama, including Jibril Rajoub, the head of West Bank preventative security during the last years of Arafat.

The burly, brusque Rajoub formed an unlikely kinship with the erudite Nusseibeh, borne of their shared familiarity with the Israeli mindset, belief in the possibility of finding common ground, and rejection of the campaign of suicide bombings. (Inexplicably, the Israeli military targeted Rajoub for assassination in May 2001, which led Nusseibeh—and other observers—to wonder whether Sharon and his hawkish circle, including his virulently anti-Arab minister of internal security, Uzi Landau, weren’t deliberately trying to eliminate moderate voices.) The Palestinian figure at the center of the ongoing conflict, however, remains an enigma: Yasser Arafat comes off as a murky, maddeningly elusive character whose runic comments and general air of detachment seemed designed to give him plausible deniability on the darker aspects of Palestinian governance. Nusseibeh refuses to let him off the hook, however, holding him accountable for massive corruption within the Palestinian Authority as well as the incitement of violence.

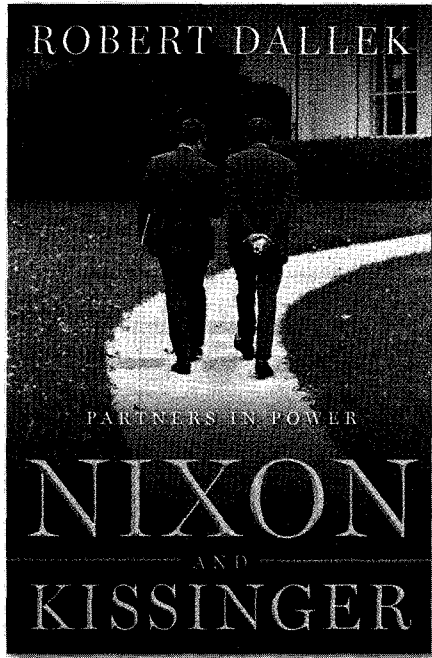
This is a book that is bound to enrage people on both sides, which is a measure of its potency. Many Israelis will reject Nusseibeh’s arguments that the Oslo Accords were bound to fail because they were essentially a fool’s game, coupling, as they did, vague promises of a future Palestinian state with unrelenting settlement expansion across the West Bank. They will be angered by his contentions that the Al Aqsa intifada was not an orchestrated uprising but a spontaneous expression of frustration and rage, and that Israel long pursued a policy of targeting moderates while allowing extremists to flourish. Many Palestinians will

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resent his characterization of the second uprising as a “catastrophic slapdash brawl without leadership, strategy or ideas ... a ruinous and sanguinary fit of madness.” This balanced account of one man’s commitment to peace in the face of long odds lets neither side off the hook. Its long chronicle of missteps, misunderstandings, and failures is steeped in regret. But even in the face of Hamas and Sharon’s Wall, Nusseibeh is unwilling to surrender hope. “At the deepest metaphysical levels,” he writes, “Jews and Arabs are ‘allies.’” The fact that Nusseibeh can offer that judgment after all that has happened over the last half century is reason enough not to despair.^{WM}

Joshua Hammer is a writer living in Berlin. His most recent book was *Yokohama Burning: The Deadly 1923 Earthquake and Fire That Helped Forge the Path to World War II*. He is currently working on a book about German colonial Africa and the twentieth century’s first genocide, due out from Simon & Schuster next year.

Those Weren't the Days



Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power

by Robert Dallek
HarperCollins, 752 pp.

Nixon has been looking better lately compared to George W. Bush. But in fact he's as bad as we remember.

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Liberal historians have begun waxing nostalgic about past Republican presidents, extolling them as presenting a stark contrast to the current occupant of the White House. Consider Ronald Reagan. Deemed a heartless and dangerous conservative in the 1980s, he is now being lionized by progressive scholars like John Patrick Diggins, who depicts him as a worthy successor to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Perhaps the most interesting rehabilitation has been that of Richard Nixon. His image has gotten periodic makeovers since his resignation from the presidency in 1974 until his death in 1994, when he was hailed as an *éminence gris* of American politics. Nixon was a wise realist in foreign affairs, we are often told, who reached out to the Soviet Union and China. At the same time he instituted environmental reforms and pushed affirmative action on the domestic front. The moral seems simple enough: Bush represents a dangerous deviation from the sensible Republican presidents of yesteryear.

But as Robert Dallek's marvelous new book, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*, demonstrates, the reality is much more complicated. Dallek, who has previously written critically acclaimed biographies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, is a seasoned historian who follows the Plutarchian model of letting the evidence speak for itself. From the tens of thousands of pages of newly available documents—including Nixon tapes, Kissinger telephone transcripts, and national security files—Dallek offers a potent reminder of the widespread and oft-deserved loathing that Nixon and Kissinger inspired. Many stories of Nixon's perfidiousness are fairly well known, but Dallek does a commendable job of amplifying previous judgments with new material he has unearthed. What emerges is a portrayal of Nixon that can hardly compare favorably to George W. Bush for the simple reason that Nixon comes off as so much like George W. Bush.

Nixon in particular broke new ground as a polarizer. He wanted to turn his domestic critics into the functional equivalent of traitors; the antiwar college kids, whom he loathed, were supposed to serve as a kind of domestic Fifth Column, like the communists of the early 1950s, that could shore up the Republican base and stigmatize the Democrats in the eyes of the Silent Majority he felt he represented. In 1970, for example, Nixon's press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler read a statement of Nixon's after the shooting of students at Kent State which declared that it "should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy." It almost seemed that the president of the United States was blaming the students for their own deaths. According to Dallek, nothing shook Nixon's conviction that he needed to wage warfare on his opponents. Despite his landslide election victory in 1972, Nixon was, Dallek writes, "almost morbid," convinced that his adversaries in the Georgetown salons and elsewhere were already plotting to undo him. Indeed, "he saw the price of reelection