

BOOK REVIEW

‘Once Upon a Country’ by Sari Nusseibeh, with Anthony David

A Palestinian optimist in a pessimistic time

By Jeffrey Goldberg

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DURING the first Palestinian intifada, which began in 1987 and ended with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the Israeli occupation authorities committed any number of deeply stupid acts. Perhaps the stupidest was the arrest by the Shabak, the internal security police, of a Palestinian man named Attalah Mahmud Najjar, who was charged in early 1991 with the crime of “distributing inflammatory poems” in the Golan Heights. Najjar was editor of a monthly magazine published in East Jerusalem. His poems, to my recollection, weren’t very good: What they possessed in nationalist ardor they lacked in literary merit. But that wasn’t the point. Najjar was not a terrorist poet or a suicide-bomber poet. He was simply a poet. And yet the state of Israel, which has given the world Amoz Oz and A.B. Yehoshua and Yehuda Amichai and Aharon Appelfeld, declared a poet to be an enemy of the state. It struck me at the time that Theodor Herzl, the journalist (and novelist) who founded modern Zionism, would not have been made proud by Najjar’s arrest.

A second deeply stupid act was the arrest of another writer, this one a figure of great consequence named Sari Nusseibeh, an aristocratic, enlightened nationalist who believed, then and now, that there is room enough between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea for two peoples to coexist peacefully, each in their own state, one Jewish, one Arab.

If the Israeli authorities at the time — among them Yitzhak Rabin — had been using their Jewish brains rather than their Jewish muscles, they would have seen that Nusseibeh was not their enemy but their salvation. Here was Palestinian nobility, the scion of an ancient Muslim family (the Nusseibehs came to Palestine in the 7th century with the Caliph Omar, a successor to the prophet Muhammad), who was committed to reaching a just arrangement with Israel and who believed — unlike, regrettably, most Palestinian leaders — in the moral value and practical effectiveness of nonviolent resistance.

But at the time, the Israelis believed they could arrest their way out of the problem. And so, on the night of Jan. 29, 1991, Nusseibeh, who was watching the film “A Fish Called Wanda” with his family, heard a knock on his door. An officer handed him an arrest order signed by the defense minister, Moshe Arens, who, with his prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, overemphasized the value of military force. Nusseibeh had been accused, without supporting evidence, of spying on behalf of Saddam Hussein, and he was placed in “administrative detention,” which was once used by the British occupiers of Palestine to imprison members of the Jewish underground. Nusseibeh was carted away, but not before one of his children handed him a copy of “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.”

“I couldn’t figure out why they had arrested me,” Nusseibeh writes in his new memoir, “Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life.” “All I could come up with was that Shamir and his cronies in the security establishment believed that someone who still believes in peace should be put behind bars. Did they want to crush my morale? My sense of hope?”

If that was the goal, Shamir did not succeed. Nusseibeh, now the president of Al Quds University in Jerusalem and an erstwhile Palestine Liberation Organization official, may be the last optimist in the Middle East. “Once Upon a Country” is a big-hearted, admirable and exceptionally interesting account of Nusseibeh’s struggle for an equitable peace in a conflict in which compromise is often interpreted as treason. This is a rare book, one written by a partisan in the struggle over Palestine who nevertheless recognizes — and bravely records — the moral and political failures of his own people.

This is not to say that Nusseibeh is a Zionist. For one thing, Zionists aren’t

in the habit of quoting — approvingly — Noam Chomsky, and Nusseibeh catalogs, sometimes at unwarranted length and in exaggerated form, the sins of Israel, particularly the sins of occupation and settlement. And the narrative he presents in this book is undeniably the one devised by Arab, and pro-Arab, historians. There is no doubt that the 1948 war, which erupted upon the establishment of the state of Israel, did not end the way his family hoped it would, and Nusseibeh unpersuasively argues that the Jews were the Goliath in the fight, rather than the David. But Nusseibeh seldom demonizes Israel, or Israelis, and states plainly a complicated truth about the conflict, one that has escaped another prominent commentator on Middle East affairs, former President Carter. A “Manichean view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” Nusseibeh writes, “with one side all light, the other all darkness, is impossible to take.”

We are in a bleak time, of course, and so it is particularly stirring to read of Nusseibeh’s first visit to Israel proper after the Six-Day War in 1967 erased the border on the West Bank. (He grew up in East Jerusalem, a few hundred yards across no-man’s-land from Oz’s childhood home.) He lived for a time on an Israeli kibbutz and found fine people there, not monsters at all. “At the deepest metaphysical levels, Jews and Arabs are ‘allies,’ “ he writes.

Nusseibeh came to think this way in part because of his father, a onetime Jordanian-appointed governor of Jerusalem, who was a fierce opponent of Zionism but not of Judaism. The father, like the son, was also a realist about the permanency of Israel, and Nusseibeh recounts a conversation between his father and a PLO official named Yasser Amer that took place after the Israeli victory in 1967.

“ ‘Tell them,’ Father told Amer, referring to the leaders of the PLO, ‘to go straight for negotiations with Israel for a two-state solution.’ Father assumed, perhaps correctly, that in the wake of Israel’s victory over the Arab states, a peace offer from the PLO might just bear some fruit. ‘And do it now. If you wait, the Israeli position will harden.’ “

Nusseibeh reports laconically: “The PLO ignored the advice.” As his story unfolds, we learn that it is something of a family tradition, to have its sound advice ignored by the PLO. “Once Upon a Country” is not, strictly speaking, a political memoir, because Nusseibeh is at best an unenthusiastic and imperfect politician, too idealistic (he is quite taken by

Thomas Jefferson) and too high-born to fight it out in the muck of Palestinian politics. Early in his political career, shortly before the first uprising, Nusseibeh was set upon by a gang of Palestinian “activists” who attacked him outside his classroom at Birzeit University in the West Bank — he had just finished teaching a philosophy class — for the crime of meeting with an Israeli politician. “Five kaffiah-wearing attackers came right at me,” he writes. “As they attacked me with fists, clubs, a broken bottle, and penknives, I tore myself away from them and ran into an open elevator.” His students helped him escape but not before his attackers broke his arm.

The attack did not scare him away from engagement of the hardest sort — he made it his job to build a civil society in a hostile place, to carry the idea of democracy to his people. Even after his three-month imprisonment, he kept at his work, counseling Palestinians against hate and mythmaking.

Like many Palestinians and Israelis of goodwill, he saw the Oslo Accords — which grew in part from the Israeli acknowledgment that Palestinian desires were neither ephemeral nor extinguishable — as a kind of miracle, and he captures, beautifully and melancholically, the exaltation their announcement brought. “I stared down from my perch” — at Orient House, the PLO building in East Jerusalem — “at the singing throng with their nationalist songs, hardly believing that we had really done it. Peace. Liberation. No more politics! America! *Monticello!*”

It was not to be, of course. Israeli and Palestinian politicians and clerics conspired against the success of the accords, and Nusseibeh spares neither side, although he argues that Israel’s decision to allow the continued expansion of West Bank settlements sealed the fate of the peace process. He is not entirely incorrect here: Rabin, the prime minister who famously learned from the stupidities of the first uprising, loathed the settlers, but he knew that his partnership with the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat placed his governing coalition on unstable ground, and politics demanded he acquiesce to at least some of the demands of the right. It was not enough for the settlers and their supporters, one of whom assassinated Rabin in 1995.

Nusseibeh writes about the peace process, its petty conflicts and many failures, at a level of detail that could prove wearisome to the general reader. But even in this overlong section, indispensable themes emerge.

Because he is not an enemy of Jewish nationhood, his criticism of Israel's excesses has genuine credibility, and I hope it is heard in Jerusalem. And because he is a Palestinian whose sacrifices for the cause of his people are real, his criticism of Palestinian extremism — he courageously calls Hamas what it is, an anti-Semitic hate group — and of Arafat, whom, he argues, “blew” a chance for a deal at the Camp David peace talks in 2000, should be heard in Ramallah and Gaza.

Nusseibeh is at his most elegiac when he writes of Jerusalem. He has famously and controversially endorsed the Jewish historic claim to Jerusalem, even as he defends the Muslim claim. (It is awful, of course, to realize how newsworthy it is when a Palestinian leader states the obvious — that Jerusalem was a Jewish city before it was a Muslim one.) Nusseibeh yearns for the day when Islam and Judaism will again coexist easily in the holy city. He writes of a cousin who researched the history of Jerusalem and, to his surprise, discovered hope where he hadn't suspected any existed: “According to some of the Geniza records unearthed in an old Cairo synagogue, Jews had in fact welcomed Caliph Omar's entry into Jerusalem, because it brought an end to the centuries-old Byzantine ban on Jews entering the city.”

There was no perfection in the ancient relationship between Muslims and Jews; it was not a relationship between equals, but between a ruler and an indulged minority. Still, Nusseibeh's message — that true Islam need not be hostile to the Jewish nation — is of extraordinary importance today. As is this sometimes maddening but often profound book. •