



HASIB SABBAGH

FROM PALESTINIAN REFUGEE
TO CITIZEN OF THE WORLD



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Adversity Can Be Removed

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Although he can be accurately described as an elder statesman on the Arab political scene, Hasib Sabbagh can also be portrayed as a trusting and honest politician. In a paradoxical twist, one can attribute his stature as a statesman to the transparency of his youthful innocence.

As a statesman, Hasib has pursued the role of mediator among contending parties. During the period of his active involvement in the quest for a free Palestinian patrimony, he was, and still continues to be, a conciliator among the Palestinians themselves and between Palestinians and the rest of the Arab nation. Many who mistook his propensity to reconcile for a willingness to compromise eventually realized that their assessment needed urgent revision in light of the developments of 1993 and 1994. While he persists in calling upon his constituency to admit hard and unpleasant facts, he is deferential to and supportive of those who refrain from submission to these realities.

Hasib is among the few of his generation who responds to his first name alone when it is pronounced by his friends, who do so easily but with immense reverence. Another such person is Constantine Zureik, who, at eighty-five years of age, is still being called "Costy" by his students and friends. My late teacher Albert Hourani was always referred to as "Albert." For such persons, names are pronounced with reverence and an expression of endearment. "Hasib" in current political discourse is recognized as Hasib

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Sabbagh, in much the same manner that “Costy” and “Albert” are identified within their own Arab academic and intellectual circles.

Hasib—the successful entrepreneur, contractor, and engineer—sought to transform his business success into a demonstration of what his people could do if given the chance. Throughout his years in the diaspora, he was an example of what might have been had the untapped potential of the Palestinian people been released. Confidence in his people is reciprocated by the affection that the Palestinian people hold for him. For them, he was always there when needed, helping the leadership when his consensus was required and admonishing when necessary. Fearless, courageous, and dedicated, he was also generous, compassionate to a fault, and decent. I refer to decency—which in the vortex of contemporary Arab politics can be risky—to emphasize that Hasib successfully shattered a widespread impression that decency is synonymous with naïveté. He was thus both an example and a catalyst for motivating many principled individuals to become involved and active in the plight of the Palestinians; he has been instrumental in building some of the most successful Palestinian institutions.

When an economic delegation from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) met in Washington, Hasib, as was his custom, invited them to his home. That night, Hasib was so encouraged by their dedication and knowledge that he prodded them to act in accordance with their ethical standards and commitments, irrespective of the adverse political circumstances of the moment. He announced that *they* were the future. Knowing that I was a critic of the PLO–Israeli agreement, he gazed at me and said, “Look at these builders of our new society and not at those you so criticize.” At that, his eyes brightened and his smile gave him radiance. In retrospect I can see that Hasib was surreptitiously seeking a new coalition.

Hasib remains forward looking. One can disagree with him—and how often we did—but it is nearly impossible to oppose him. I believe he prefers argumentation as a means of achieving consensus rather than gaining instant consent without any discussion. It is this attitude of his that renders “opposing” him a draining experience.

Palestine—the memory, the legacy, and the identity—is at the core of Hasib’s commitment. He believes that every opportunity should be explored, every record preserved, every viable institution assisted, and every door knocked upon. Prejudice should not deter persuasion; adversity can



Hasib Sabbagh and Lebanese president Elias Hrawi exchange greetings, 1995

be removed; every resource should be tapped. This is his creed. Aware as he is of his people’s potential—hence his generous contributions and institutional initiatives—he is equally conscious of his people’s vulnerability and that of their cause. Knowledge of both the strength and weakness of the Palestinian condition defines Hasib’s principled pragmatism.

My relationship with Hasib Sabbagh is as close and friendly as our association is intermittent. He is appreciative of my commitment to the causes he supports, although he seems to feel that my judgment on certain issues is ill-timed as a consequence of a “rejectionist” streak that I sometimes nurture. This has led him to be skeptical of me but never suspicious. That is why our friendship has grown and remained constant. Politically, there is a healthy tension between us and a personal equation that is both comfortable and built on mutual confidence.

My affinity for him originates from familiarity with his core interests, concerns, and beliefs, which are the products of his rich experience. His formative years were spent in Palestine—while his people were being suppressed and their land confiscated—and, later, in Lebanon, at the American University of Beirut (AUB), where a liberal and democratic culture flourished that enabled Hasib to articulate and promulgate his concerns and beliefs. AUB was, and continues to be, for him, a pivotal experience and

platform leading to intricate networking and long-lasting partnerships and affiliations. This illustrates the loyalty that AUB inspires among its alumni and also explains the firm support that it elicits from its benefactor and trustee, Hasib Sabbagh.

When we first met, I found Hasib greatly disturbed about the Lebanese civil strife and deeply hurt by the Palestinian–Lebanese conflict that had arisen. He believed that such struggle was unnecessary and damaging to both peoples with whom he felt a genuine sense of belonging. With a coterie of his colleagues, he shuttled back and forth among the various warring factions, all the while prodding, pleading, and persuading in order to terminate the bloodbath and the recklessness; Hasib also attempted to reconcile with both sides a PLO propensity to interfere and an excessive Lebanese sensitivity toward its own sovereignty. Understanding the Palestinian quest for remaining relevant through armed struggle during the 1970s and the fragility of a Lebanese polity based on a precarious communal balance, Hasib was often able to transmit each party's anxieties and legitimate concerns from one to the other. This was a daunting task, yet he shouldered it willingly because he realized that a Palestinian–Lebanese breach could only increase their joint vulnerability. What might follow (and did follow) was in effect such a fissure, deepened by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Palestinian dispersal that ensued.

In the early 1980s I came to know Hasib more closely because of my position as the ambassador of the Arab League to both the United Nations and the United States. At that time, I knew *of* him more than I actually knew him. I recall his philanthropic endeavors, his construction firm, the professionalism of his enterprises, his love for and devotion to his wife, whose untimely death affected him so profoundly, his services to his extended family, his stature among various Arab and international leaders, and the esteem in which he was widely held. These dimensions of the man were common knowledge when I started seeing him more frequently.

He thought I was a bad bridge player; perhaps he had a better impression of me as a political bridge builder. Once, with the late ambassador of Jordan, Mohammed Kamal, I was asked to cut the ribbon at the opening of a branch of the Arab Bank Limited in New York. Hasib was a member of the bank's board of directors and attended the ceremony. He suggested that the Arab League open a bank account; I responded both to him and to

the bank's chairman, Abdul Majid Shoman, that if all accounts being solicited were like the Arab League's—given its dire financial straits—there would be no need to cut the ribbon.

Taking this hint, Hasib asked me a few days later how he could assist the myriad Arab–American organizations that were defending Palestinian rights and Arab aspirations in the United States. Hasib was cognizant of the growing importance of the role of the United States in the Middle East, and he was eager in particular for Palestinians to have credible access to U.S. policymakers and decisionmakers. The network of contacts he established was equipped to introduce the question of Palestine to the public at a time when the PLO was shunned and its presence illegal.

Recognizing the unfairness of the PLO's exclusion, Hasib and his political friends persisted in pressing their cause through active intellectual and scholarly avenues. He was instrumental in opening a branch of the Beirut-based Institute of Palestine Studies in the United States, contributing to fellowships at major universities, and promoting cultural events. Official Washington was impressed, although the impact for which Hasib and his friends had hoped would continue to elude them. While Hasib resists the temptations of grandiose theater, such as that which took place on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, there are other ways in which Hasib has worked for a Palestinian–American rapprochement; he has worked equally hard to sustain Palestinian dignity.

For Hasib, the Oslo agreement represented a new opening, but transparency and political accountability among the Palestinian leadership was the more crucial priority. Even as this volume was being compiled, Hasib was troubled but motivated, anxious yet hopeful, helpful while restrained, and generous although with conditions. He and many of his business associates are keen to invest in their patrimony, both to prove their mettle and rebuild their society in the occupied Palestinian lands. This is being instituted slowly, notwithstanding the fact that lingering skepticism regarding the PLO leadership delays their thrust and a continuing suspicion of Israeli occupation policies persists.

Hasib's experience with the Geneva-based Welfare Association demonstrates his keenness to build and to explore opportunities for both social and business investment. In pursuing his many objectives and in authenticating a credible Palestinian presence, Hasib has worked with the Carter

Center, Harvard University, and, most recently, with Georgetown University, where he founded and funded the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. What prompted him in the Georgetown endeavor was a perception that Islam was under attack and that, for some in the United States, Muslim extremism had become synonymous with Islam; the image of Islam was becoming distorted, and many rights of Muslims were being denied. The historic reality of Islam as both a faith and a civilization was unrecognizable in the prevailing discourse. Hasib Sabbagh felt that this development represented an impending threat to Arab-American understanding that, if allowed to continue, would poison the relations of the United States with its own growing Muslim population and the rest of the Muslim world. Rectification was overdue, he felt. One of the best Islamic scholars was entrusted with the new center's direction, John Esposito. I was present at the establishment of the institution, but when Hasib had sought my advice I had expressed reservations because I feared that the very presumption of misunderstanding might worsen the situation. I also believed that when such a presumption exists, one's conviction must be that it is temporary. I realize now that the intensity of what appears in retrospect to have been a campaign against Islam gives credence to Hasib's theory, yet I am still not convinced. While I maintain reservations about presuming that misunderstanding abounds, I support the center's programs for their intrinsic worth, and Yvonne Haddad's association with the institution reinforces my faith in its usefulness.

In Hasib Sabbagh, one discovers characteristics that make us hopeful and optimistic that the Arabs, too, in the words of the American civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr., "shall overcome." The pain that Hasib felt during the 1991 Gulf War and during the latest civil strife in Yemen was both visible and touching. His eagerness and efforts to mobilize people to avoid conflicts, or stop them, have brought me even closer to him. On issues that wound our collective conscience, as on others, Hasib the humanist is at his best. In one sense, his continuous quest for avoidance of conflict, or resolution when they occur, are akin to the very qualities that make Hasib's friend Jimmy Carter a great former president—as the events of 1994 in both North Korea and Haiti have proven him to be.

Although our opinions have differed at times, Hasib's and my purposes and commitments have remained the same throughout our

relationship. This mutual trust has sealed our ties and made of them the underpinnings of an ever-growing friendship. Hasib's misgivings with regard to some of my opinions continue to be an incentive for me to sharpen my wits in hopes that someday, twenty-five years from now, he might telephone a ninety-year-old Clovis and say, "You were right."