



Will the Real Antun Sa'adeh Please Step forward?

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In 1930, at still an unidentifiable date, a steam ship sailed into Beirut with immigrants returning to catch up with friends and relatives. Among them was a young man in his mid-twenties. He was no different from anyone else on the ship except in his outward appearance. His travel documents indentified him as Antun Khalil Sa'adeh, a former resident of Mount Lebanon, and an émigré of almost ten years. He was relatively short but solidly built. His manner was straightforward and completely lacking in pomposity- literary or academic. Yet, he was an avid

reader with a good memory and the necessary self-discipline unlike most autodidacts.

Unbeknown to anyone on that ship, this young man was in fact on a personal crusade, literally to 'liberate his people.' His diary entry on the 1st of March, 1929, is instructive:

This is the start of a new day for me. O March, on this day your month starts. And on this day, I turn twenty five. With the commencement of this year, I will start to reflect on the life that is responsible for me and you. In these split seconds, on this dark-pitch night in which you and I start life anew, I hear from my home country a melodious and rather pleasant voice calling me: "O son. Where are you?" I lift my head and stare at the sky, whose face is veiled like Isis, and call back: "O mother, where are you?" I hear the same voice calling me again: "O son. Where are you?" I stare into the horizons and call back: "O motherland, where are you?" My mother and my motherland were the starting-point of my life and they shall remain by my side forever. O Lord, please look after me so that I can be righteous to them...

The entry for the 19th of March of the same year is even more revealing:

I must carry out a basic duty regardless of the pain that my soul must endure. For life is short and there is very little time for crying of pain.

There is life in pain for those who are intelligent enough. It is a philosophy I discovered through experience. Therefore, I refuse to be an egocentric who is interested only in self-pleasure and laments every time he loses it.

No. No. I must not be selfish. I must think first of the suffering of the millions of my countrymen and then of myself...

I must forget my personal light injuries so that I can help bandage the serious wounds of my nation.

An émigré like no other, and an affection for Motherland that cannot be matched. Nothing mystique about this traveler; just an ordinary 'chap' on a messianic path: "Where is the Motherland ... It is to there that my spirit yearns and my affection increases ... The Motherland is where my mother brought me up, where I came into the prime of my life..."

That much is obvious. What is not obvious, however, is whether Sa'adeh had any idea what he was up against. The situation in the country was so irreparable that it defied all reasonable logic: social discord, religious sectarianism, backwardness, corruption, exploitation, to name a few. More than that, the country was carved up

and under foreign rule, freedom of expression and freedom of association were proscribed, and political dissent was punishable. But all these problems fade in significance before the psychological hurdles:

The situation was one of desperation and fear. Espionage was widespread in all places and treachery concealed in every corner. Foreign armies were occupying the strategic positions, and the intelligence bureau was sending its agents into all milieus of the populace. People's thoughts were uneasy for they found themselves in a chaotic condition, which prevented mutual understanding. Everyone's spirits were in darkness and the future looked gloomy. The ordinary citizen had been reduced to sub-human level: he was unacquainted with the past, unable to comprehend the present, or perceive the future, and unwilling to share with others his true opinion, if he dared to think at all.

It sounds far-fetched, even bazaar, but it is true. However, it does beg the question: what type of person would be gain - or foolish - enough to leave behind him a life of comfort, security and potential enrichment to take on a nightmare scenario of such proportion?

Practically penniless and unknown, Sa'adeh had only one credential – a penetrating intellect and an indomitable will that would not be deviated by an inch from the appointed path. But in a world in which power and politics reigned supreme and personal gifts were an afterthought, this credential counted almost for nothing. Pessimism and sarcasm in the country was such that on announcing his 'intentions' the ridicule rained down on Sa'adeh like hailstones: 'Fine! Then set out right away to the local cemetery, dig up some corpses and blow life back into them because it is easier to bring the dead back to life than to work with this people who are more dead than alive. If this is the purpose for which you have come back, my advice to you is return from where you came from.' Others added to the gloom by posting one grumble after another.

No one wanted to have anything to do with Sa'adeh. He was stepping into totally unfamiliar territory and raising the stakes far too high and too quickly. He was acting in opposition to the duly determined majority will. Nobody knew what to make of his plan: was it motivated by a lust for power and prestige? Was it an expression of a hidden agenda? Was it induced by despair or pathological hatred? Was it the product of such narrowness of mind that it could almost be called insanity? Everyone around Sa'adeh seemed to think so. He appeared to them like a

fictional character out of this world, yet he was right there in flesh and blood. Nothing seemed to make sense. He felt at home in their presence; they felt strangers in his. That was a good part of what put them off.

Anyone else would have packed his bag then and there and left on the first ship out of the country. But Sa'adeh was too proud to let go. He was organically made to lead and simply could not allow such talk affect him. Nothing to him was worse than sentimentality. With unflinching logic he declared: "There is a latent power inside you which, if unleashed, could change the course of history." No one took him seriously. The language was out of character. It was sheer heresy. No one was in the mood for big talk. Sa'adeh did not crack up. His capacity for leadership lay as much in his ability to listen as in his ability to speak. He listened and listened until the right opportunity came along. His perseverance paid off: a handful of people agreed to come along with him on the most perilous adventure of their life. The plan was simple enough: to take on the might of the existing order through a 'Party' of devoted, dedicated, selfless, even puritan men and women, united in a common cause. It was no easy task by any stretch of the imagination, but the power of Sa'adeh's thought, his single mindedness of purpose, and the trenchancy of his analyses carried the day through. The idea grew into a vision, the vision into a

party, and the party into a living organ. Not a lifeless dogma, but a vision for action. After that there was no turning back. Everything else was now trifles, hypocrisy, “parson's talk.” Victory was the only commandment to observe.

As the ‘vision’ bound for the rough and tumble of realpolitik, success, at least for the interim period, now depended largely on the person in charge – Sa'adeh. After all, he was the independent creative spirit behind the enterprise. He did not disappoint, just as well. A brilliant orator, Sa'adeh turned out to be a hardy leader of the kind that inspire courage and forestall panic. Through personal examples he led the group to a safer spot, across a territory dotted with landmines, bringing it to its senses in periods of high exaltation and keeping it focused when it is extremely easy to become conceited. At this point, Sa'adeh ceased to be the *uthhtaz* (the Professor). He became *al-qa'id al-umm* (General Commander), and, then, *az-zaim* (The Leader), a title that did not intend the subjugation of the people to a tyranny, as most people wrongly and unfairly suspected. Nor was it divinely anointed.

Through a long series of years, Sa'adeh was able to build something out of nothing. It was achieved without the power of money or politics. A matchless affection for the moral truth was crucial, though:

Every political or military plan, no matter how complete it is, cannot be realized except through morals that can support it. By this I mean resilient morals that incorporate such things as intense belief, will power, perseverance, and the realization that principles are more important than life itself. This is because human life without human principles that man can hold on to and built his personality and sense of existence, is worthless: it is equivalent to barbaric life. At all levels of national and political activity in our country, every group and milieu that failed to develop a moral system with which to coordinate their actions and policies have ended in failure, disappointment, and confusion.

Amiable, good-natured, cheerful, and polite, as a good leader should be, Sa'adeh was a moralist of the highest caliber. He declared: "Every system needs morals. In fact, morals are at the core of every system if it is to succeed." That was a good part of the reason why he could not 'fit in.'

Secrecy was his other main weapon. It was not eternal, nor was it intended to be. In politics, secrets are hard to keep. Sa'adeh knew all along that his secret was destined to come out. He even planned for the 'when' and 'how'. But things don't always turn out as planned. Someone let the cat out of the bag before the big day. No one knew

who it was. No one really cared to know. The secret was out; the rules of the game changed. This was more urgent than attempting to settle scores. Logic prevailed. It had to. The enemies were at the door. They were as plentiful as the stars in the sky.

Nothing could prepare Sa'adeh for what lay ahead. His enemies proved to be as relentless as he was. They were understandably outraged by his feat and equally shocked by his courage to venture where others had always feared to tread. He was given a simple ultimatum - recant or face the consequences. The answer came back just as swiftly: recant, never. The wolves closed in for the kill. Heads began to roll. Sa'adeh stood his ground. He had done nothing wrong. He had none of the usual qualities or appearances normally taken to mark a dangerous radical. Argumentative, yes; testy, yes; uncompromising, yes; but these were hardly grounds for shoving him out of the way.

When all else failed, the wolves turned to the 'oldest form of mass media' - rumor mongering. They invoked the perennial maxim "if you want to destroy somebody, spread rumors about them." No stone was left unturned. Sa'adeh ceased to be a human being, a citizen of the state, a member of the population. He was made inherently heinous and evil. The rumors spread like wildfire. They

were nasty but preposterous all the same. Some of them were repeated almost verbatim reminiscent of Goebbels' famous words: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." Sa'adeh was reduced to a 'madman' - a pejorative diagnosis but, nonetheless, true. It takes a 'madman' to take on such a mammoth project and stand up to ruthless politicians who will go to whatever lengths necessary to stay in power.

To deceive him intentionally, to calumniate him, to blacken his name, all this Sa'adeh considered as normal. In fact, it would be hard to exceed the cynical brutality with which he faced all this. He came out fighting like a lion as if there was no tomorrow. No gossipry or nasty innuendos, just words of gentle admonition used to great effect. One example would suffice:

The problems of heaven are solved in heaven. They are problems between the individual and God, not between one group and another. Therefore, it is useless for the groups to fight each other over Heaven since it is God who will pass the final judgment on the Day of Resurrection, and it is Him that the people believe in.

We cannot win the earth if we are fighting among each other for Heaven. History is replete with examples that support this observation. If we want to win the earth we

must fight for it as united ranks. When we win earth we will win the Heavens.

There can be no goodness or progress except on earth. The contemptible will languish before the dignified and those who win the land will wear out those who failed to look after it. The path to the Heavens requires progress not decadence. It should be entered in honor, not in disgrace.

So look after your country and protect your land because heaven and earth are on it.

Nevertheless, the populace was spellbound by the rumors, and understandably so. Rumors make more fascinating reading than ideas and programs. They require neither intellectual exertion nor creative brainstorming. In the end the truth prevailed. Sa'adeh proved too elusive and too indefatigable for the head-hunters. He evoked even stronger feelings when he announced that he would never surrender and would fight on to victory:

Even if they succeed in eliminating hundreds of us they can never eliminate the immortal truth that lives in our souls. They can never eliminate the rest of us who want to establish truth and crush falsehood. Victory will inevitably be on our side whether in our lifetime or after we have died. We are neither afraid nor fearful of death.

With the same corresponding affection he told his supporters: "Your age is the age of heroism. Do not abandon the path of heroism and succumb to the illusive path of compromise."

However, it is one of the iron laws of nature that when charismatic leaders elicit strong positive feelings among their supporters, they also elicit strong negative feelings among their opponents. Sa'adeh found that out quickly. In next to no time his opponents snapped back at him with greater vengeance and ferocity. The attack assumed a more subtle form; yet, the basic intention remained the same: to silence Sa'adeh or to drive him out. Dialogue was ruled out. Sword and words don't cross. When the only language you know and believe in is the language of the sword, words take backseat. Sa'adeh was driven out: not for nine weeks, not for nine months, but for a whole nine years. An exile without return was the intended purpose, but the plan backfired.

Nine years later and Sa'adeh was back, stronger, wiser and more farsighted than before. To this day, people still talk about the monster welcome he received on the day of his homecoming. They came in hordes from far and wide - Jordan, Palestine, al-Sham, and from every corner of Lebanon - to catch a glimpse of him. He reciprocated, as only great leaders do, with a resounding speech. "I am

instructing you to return to the field of battle," he told the crowd. A massive bombshell of an announcement! But it was not exactly music to his opponents' ears. It stung them hard and deep. They thought that after all these years his tone would have mellowed and become less rasping, pugnacious, and brutal. He proved them wrong.

Trouble was not long in arriving. A warrant for his arrest was issued; a substantial reward for his capture, dead or alive, was posted; the armed forces were put on alert; the loyal press was armed with smutty innuendos; the whole country was brought to a standstill – all because the man had dared to speak out, to question, to challenge, to defy, to swim against the tide. It was more than a sheer display of force. It was a declaration of war. They turned on him like vengeful demons. But Sa'adeh was unrepentant. His consecration to the cause was deep. Absolutely nothing, not even a death threat, would deflect him from the path of his objective duty.

Before long a truce was arranged. Sa'adeh returned to the things he knew best and his opponents marked time until they could take strike again. The tit-for-tat went on for almost two years. It turned into a marathon feud. Neither side was prepared to budge, to capitulate, to give an inch. But as with all feuds, it had to end somewhere, somehow. As soon as a catalyst came along the feud shifted into

overdrive. Both sides decided to take their mutual antipathy with them into the street. A battle ensued. Sa'adeh stood his ground, but the onslaught continued. His enemies were on a mission to win, but not only that win convincingly. Events moved too quickly to the fall. Sa'adeh was besieged. Heavy guns turned on him. Some barrages aimed at his public record while others raked his personal history. Nothing turned up. The record was clean as a whistle. The bar was raised higher and higher with each sequel, but to no avail. Sa'adeh again proved invincible, but the never-ending rounds of intimidation, demotion, rejection, exile, and sneering took their toll. It pushed him to the brink of exhaustion.

Undeterred, Sa'adeh went on the offensive. This is where he had always belonged and always liked so much to be. He did not dread the prospect of defeat as long as it came after a fight. His own words attest to that:

If we have to fall, we must do so in a way that befits free men, not in ways that befit slaves...

Those who cannot bear any demands on them, they sink down, succumb and collapse. Few will cry for them.

They fall as the butt of all men's contempt and ridicule.

They fall in surrender to the degradation they earned.

They fall having destroyed themselves before they are destroyed by others.

We are in our attitudes very negative in life, that is, we do not accept any accomplished fact imposed on us or any condition determined for us from outside.

We are not weak except if we choose to be weak, if we choose to accept the circumstances that others have contrived or the events that have been imposed on us, and if we choose to resignedly accept the material and ethical decline, which cannot be avoided so long as we have capitulated.

Those who fall in battle without surrender may have been beaten but not conquered.

The ones who are truly conquered are those who surrender and accept lives of degradation.

Woe to the capitulators who reject struggle and thereby reject freedom gaining only the slavery they deserve.

Sa'adeh took the fight right up to his enemies. He challenged them on their own turf, even offered them a one on one fight. The offer was turned down. It was too little too late. His fate had been sealed long before then. What transpired next was the stuff of a Greek tragedy: in a most despicable act of treachery, Sa'adeh was betrayed by his own ally, bundled and surrendered to his enemies, incarcerated, interrogated, tried, and executed in no less than forty eight hours. A world record that stands uncontested to this day!

Thus ended the life of Antun Sa'adeh, a life lived in struggle and honor. He suffered beyond description but he never relaxed his monumental self discipline. He never lost his grip for one visible second, never permitted any blow to blunt the edge of his faith, his logic or his vision. With Sa'adeh, wrote the Lebanese literati Kamel al-Haj, "politics became a stepladder for the greater and loftier things in life ... It ceased to be a distraction pursued for its own sake, and became an inspiration and an experience." Indeed, the objects of petty politics never did interest Sa'adeh. He was more into the significant and the beneficial. That is why he has gone down to posterity as a great man, one of the few men who ever wrote history as brilliantly as he made it.