## Complexity

It is this — this very thing — that has afflicted the colonizing nations ever since the First World War awakened the subjugated peoples to their right to live in freedom and dignity, and stirred them to demand that right and to pursue it by every means.

The colonial powers saw in this awakening a kind of challenge to their might and their pride. They had only just triumphed over a great power which had exposed them to grave peril, and they could not bring themselves to yield willingly to the claims of weaker nations. For such submission would mean the loss of many advantages. Yet they could not easily trust the new forces that had begun to appear in the subdued nations of the East. It is not easy — nor pleasant — for those who have conquered the strong to imagine that they themselves might one day be overcome by the weak. Thus was born this strange *complexity* — a tangle of pride, arrogance, and a sense of superiority that took root in the hearts of those powerful victors, just as the peoples they had subdued began to demand independence.

From this arose all the turmoil that befell the awakening nations of the East in the years between the two wars. And the complexity only grew more severe, more intractable, during the Second World War — when Germany swept across Western Europe, forcing the British Empire into desperate straits. Britain was compelled to conciliate the Eastern peoples under its dominion: partly to ensure their loyalty, and partly to enlist their help in dispelling the darkness, lifting the calamity, and repelling the enemy.

At that time, promises abounded. Fine words and bright hopes followed one another in endless procession. The peoples of the East — subject wholly or partly to British rule — came to believe that they would win full independence once the storm of war had passed.

Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of Britain, was gracious in speech, gentle in tone, and urbane in manner when he spoke to these peoples or of them. To the Eastern world, his change of mood — this man of imperial hardness speaking with such gentleness and generosity — seemed a sign of the times, a proof that humanity itself was entering a new and hopeful stage after its long ordeal of calamities and pain.

Even the most pessimistic among the Easterners did not doubt that the world was moving towards good, and that it would at last reach a just peace built on fair dealing between strong and weak, on mutual recognition of rights, and on cooperation to raise the level of civilization under the broad canopy of health, security, and peace.

France, humbled and broken though she was, was no less eager than Britain to draw near to the peoples under her authority — no less lavish in promises, no less poetic in hope. To the Syrians and Lebanese, General Catroux proclaimed that the mandate was over. To the Tunisians and Moroccans it was said, day after day, that their independence would surely come after the war. International charters were published, filling human hearts with faith that justice would reign where oppression had been, that peoples would choose their destinies as they wished, and that liberty — true liberty — would be the foundation of the new world.

But the war had scarcely ended when the truth was laid bare. The weak discovered that they had lived for a time on illusion and dream. Those who had made them promises had merely deceived them. Almost overnight, the old Churchill returned — stern, proud, unbending as before. One day, in the House of Commons, he declared that the freedom and independence of small nations, and their

right to self-determination, were among the *highest ideals* of humanity — ideals that men may aspire to, but seldom attain, except after long patience and waiting. Mankind, he said, strives toward these lofty goals, and perhaps one day will reach them.

Nor had France learned much from her own ordeal. She quickly forgot the bitterness of occupation and the humiliation it brought. She forgot, utterly, the charming promises and splendid dreams she had spun for North Africa and for Syria and Lebanon. The latter two, after long and harsh struggles, managed at last to secure their independence. But North Africa remained as it had been before the war: a precious military asset to the French army, and a fertile field for a class of settlers who had planted themselves there, exploiting the land and degrading its people — believing, quite sincerely, that this was their right, not to be questioned.

Thus the relationship between the Arab East and the European West, after the war, returned to what it had been before: the dominated still claiming their rights, and the dominators twisting and evading them; plots and deceits, manoeuvres and intrigues, abundant words in which truth was scarce and lies deliberate and abundant.

To look at the Arab lands today is to see a spectacle at once strange and tragic. Egypt remains where she was before the war. When the war ended, nothing in her condition changed. She still turns in that same vicious circle called “negotiations” — a circle in which the English turn with her. Negotiations begin only to end, and end only to begin again. They move forward to stop, and stop only to move again. The world looks on in wonder — and does nothing.

North Africa, too, remains as it was before and after the war. France approaches only to retreat, retreats only to return. She gives no rest and finds none herself. She speaks endlessly and seldom keeps her word. She promises lavishly and fulfils nothing. Her representatives in North Africa play a grim game that destroys souls, spills blood, and fills the land with deceit, intrigue, and hypocrisy. And “civilized humanity” watches all this in silence — saying nothing, doing nothing, feeling no shame for these abominations that should make any honorable man blush.

The Bey of Tunis is forced to choose between submission and deposition. The Sultan of Morocco suffers the same fate. Bribes are offered to certain officials in his government to induce them to demand, from a foreign Christian power, the deposition of their own Muslim sovereign — on the pretext that he has strayed from Islam. Thus does money corrupt weak souls, until they ask non-Muslims to “protect” Islam from Muslims. The conscience of the world sees all this and scarcely stirs.

Strangest of all, perhaps, is that the United Nations meets from time to time, and speakers — British, French, and others — rise to talk of justice, and of the freedom that nations must enjoy, and of the equality that must prevail among peoples.

The source of all this confusion lies in that very *complexity* — that strange psychological tangle that has afflicted the colonizing powers and blinded their judgment. It has warped their sense of what is possible and what is right. It has trapped them in a world that no longer exists, compelling them to live in an age long gone.

Every demand for independence that comes from Egypt, Britain takes as an attack on its global authority — though that authority has been ebbing away for years, and is destined to vanish altogether. Every demand for independence that arises from Tunisia or Morocco the French interpret as an assault on French power, a challenge to French might, a slight to French pride — though

France's strength and pride were tested to their limits when she was occupied by foreign troops. Now, as she strives to regain some measure of her former vigor, the least she should do is conserve her blood and treasure, rather than squander them to maintain across the sea a dominion that cannot endure. The age of conquest and colonization has long since passed.

The French and the English alike reveal a strange paradox. Speak to their wise men, and you find them agreeing with you — convinced, as you are, that colonialism is an outdated policy, unfit for this modern age. The French are the more astonishing of the two. I have met many of their writers, scholars, and men of culture, as well as statesmen and economists — before the Second World War, during it, and after it ended. When I spoke with them about North Africa, I found none who did not denounce France's colonial policy as I do, and condemn imperialism with the same indignation.

In recent months, many French writers, of every party, have published essays attacking their country's policy in North Africa. Some have written valuable books; others have devoted entire issues of leading journals to the subject; others again have organized great public meetings in Paris to declare their disapproval of those who speak and act in France's name overseas. Yet all these men — despite their stature and influence — have achieved nothing. Their government hears nothing, reads nothing, counts them for nothing, and treats their listeners and readers as nothing.

France still has, after all, a parliament — one said to represent the people faithfully. Yet at least half of this parliament denounces France's policy in North Africa as it denounces her policy in Indochina. Still the French government persists, unchanging, obstinate, deaf to all protest.

Even more astonishing, former Foreign Minister Robert Schuman declared only weeks ago that France's representatives in North Africa had defied ministerial orders in their actions there.

Marvel, then, at a nation whose people reject their government's policy in their meetings and press, whose parliament largely rejects it too — and yet the policy continues unchanged, untouched, as though no dissent existed.

Whence comes all this? From none other than that same *complexity* — the moral and psychological knot that has gripped the minds of certain Frenchmen since their defeat in the last war. They imagine that to return to truth, to acknowledge that Tunisians and Moroccans are human beings like themselves — with full rights to freedom, to self-government, to the inviolability of their property and their lives — would somehow reduce them once again to the weakness they once endured under occupation.

Nothing astonishes me so much as this Western spectacle we now witness: Englishmen and Frenchmen returning to their Christianity, calling others to it, urging faith upon the world — and yet defying the most explicit command of the Gospels: that one should love for others what one loves for oneself. Instead they reserve for themselves power, violence, and domination, and feel no shame in then walking into their churches on Sunday mornings.

Thus have affairs between the Arab East and the European West come to rest upon this ugly *complexity* — a moral corruption that ruins civilization, wastes wealth, power, labor, and time, all of which might better have been spent advancing human progress, enabling men to live as brothers working together for righteousness and mercy, not for sin and aggression.

And who knows? Perhaps God will yet bestow His grace upon those who have been oppressed in the land — and make them leaders, and make them heirs, and establish them therein, and show Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts the very things they had feared.

**Ṭāhā Ḥusayn**
*al-Ahrām, 6 June 1953*