

From Afar...

By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

Egypt can rightly claim, without boast or exaggeration, that she now commands the attention of the world and occupies the minds of nations, much as an ancient Arab poet was once said to do. Virtually every government on earth follows her affairs closely—studying reports, analyzing developments in depth, and shaping their policies toward Egypt specifically, and the Near East more broadly, in response to what they learn.

No people anywhere is indifferent to Egypt. Newspapers from morning to evening carry news of her, radios repeat it every hour, and listeners are alternately amazed and inspired. Yet the coverage is rarely impartial. Desire, love, hatred, hope, and fear color the accounts. Few reporters are guided by truth or clear intent; most aim to intrigue, amuse, or shock their audiences more than to convey an accurate picture of events.

In these crucial days of Egypt's history, circumstances led me to follow European newspapers before my own, reading Italian papers in the morning, French ones at midday, and bundles of clippings from Rome and Paris by evening. I have never read newspapers with such intensity.

Like many Egyptians, I am proud that our country now fills the world's attention. I am proud that our revolution has set a shining example for the modern era: combining calm dignity and grandeur with decisive, righteous force that topples injustice, exiles a king without bloodshed, and never departs from prudence or patience. Yet, like many of my compatriots, I sometimes feel frustration at dishonest correspondents who let whimsy and imagination guide them, offering their readers words unworthy of innocent minds, sound hearts, or sincere intentions.

Many Parisian newspapers, for instance, cannot conceal their anxiety over the Egyptian revolution—not because they fear for the French living in Egypt, whose safety is assured, or for the stability of the country, which is well-maintained—but because they worry that Egypt's example may inspire revolutions elsewhere. Haunted by recent defeats in Indochina, burdened by unrest in Tunisia and Morocco, the French are acutely aware that Egypt occupies a model position in the Arab world. They view the nationalist movements there with suspicion—and with good reason.

Egypt's resistance to British occupation late last year soon inspired Tunisia to oppose French control, while Morocco's unrest speaks for itself. Many French newspapers display more concern for British influence than for the fate of the former Egyptian king; the king is irrelevant to them, but the balance of colonial power is critical. Like the English, the French remain uneasy about American activity in these regions. The Americans neither aim to occupy the Suez Canal nor to take Tunisia or Morocco under their protection; their goal is only to secure the

Near and Middle East from Russian influence and, at most, to extend benign economic influence.

One amusing observation appeared in a moderate but conservative French paper, which claimed that Americans admire the military competence of Arab soldiers, citing the courage of African soldiers who fought alongside the French. Yet, the newspaper notes, their bravery was inspired by French officers, not inherent. The writers and editors, though, are highly educated and well-versed in modern history. They know that in the first half of the past century, Egypt had a formidable army, admired across Europe—so much so that France once considered it a partner in the conquest of North Africa. They also recognize that the modern Egyptian army descends from the soldiers raised by Muḥammad ‘Alī and Ibrāhīm.

Another French paper declared that four-fifths of Egyptians were afflicted with ruinous weakness. Thus, the population is depicted as incapable and ineffective. Yet Europeans need not fear a nation whose people themselves recognize the need for deep social reform. Egypt’s revolution is a pursuit of reform long blocked by tyranny and foreign domination—a necessary endeavor, entirely distinct from the exaggeration of “illness” claimed by foreign writers. Remarkably, the author had visited Egypt, witnessed her cities and villages, and yet painted her people in such a distorted light. In Cairo, Alexandria, and provincial towns, one sees not weakness, but vitality: a strong, industrious, energetic population, striving to secure Egypt an esteemed place in the global economy. Were the French to work with the same dedication, they would not face the economic fragility they now endure. Yet prejudice and fear obscure reality, preventing fair judgment.

If the French could see Egypt without bias, they would recognize that she represents in the East in the twentieth century what France did in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century—with one crucial distinction: Egypt achieved transformation without bloodshed, without the killing of millions, sparing her people the horrors of France’s great revolution.

Egypt demanded independence and freedom after the First World War, inspiring the Arab East. She demanded constitutional governance after her national revolution, winning her constitution and influencing the region. After the Second World War, Egypt’s call for full independence inspired North African nations to demand freedom and representative government. What Egypt has achieved, and continues to achieve in the Arab world, mirrors what France accomplished in Europe in the previous century.

Were the French fair, they would regard Egypt with admiration, not suspicion or pity. They would look to Egyptian women and see reflections of themselves, recalling how they once exemplified supreme sacrifice for liberty, fraternity, and equality. Yet prejudice blinds hearts and minds, obscuring truth even in recent history.

We may rightly criticize the French and other Europeans for misjudging Egypt, but we must first look inward. We, more than anyone, have spread ill opinion about our own country. Official documents, newspapers, and journals have relayed both fact and fiction to foreign embassies and correspondents. If we bear witness against ourselves so thoroughly, we cannot expect others to be more lenient.

I hope that this blessed revolution, which restored Egypt's dignity and honor with calm and prudence and won the admiration of the world, has renewed Egyptians' faith in their homeland, restored confidence in their nation, and offered a vision of a country that is beautiful, noble, and worthy of love and respect—both from its sons and from the world beyond its borders.

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