

The Circle

Kawkab al-Sharq, 28 August 1933

The Egyptian question has been trapped within it for ten years, as the al-Ahrām correspondent in London reports. The Wafd took up the burdens of government and then relinquished them; its opponents took them up and they returned to the Wafd; then they were returned to its opponents, and they returned to the Wafd again; then they were returned to its opponents, where they now remain on their weak shoulders that can bear no more. The British showed conciliation towards the Wafd then quarrelled with it, then returned to conciliation, then returned to quarrelling, then returned again to conciliation, then returned to quarrelling — and they are now submerged in it up to the chin or up to the ears. In the course of this revolving a High Commissioner went and another came, then dismissal overtook him and another came in his place, then transfer struck him and a new commissioner was appointed in his stead — who is now in China, preparing for the journey to the Nile Valley.

The hostility between Egypt and England remains as it was on the day the revolution flared after the Great War. The Egyptians want to be truly independent, and the British want to deceive them of this independence. They refused it to them at first; then it appeared that refusal was futile, so they acknowledged it. They yielded its form and appearance, and from that day to this they have gone on turning within the circle drawn by the al-Ahrām correspondent — drawn so well — finding no way to realise what lies beyond it.

The British are a people who love patience and perseverance, and make them the foundation of their policy in the East and elsewhere. Despair is very slow to approach them or to seek to influence their policy; but they have not been immune to it, and they have extracted no pledge from the days to sever its connections with them. They have occupied Egypt for more than half a century: they tried to bring their force to bear on the souls of the Egyptians to make them fear and submit to them — and they failed; they mixed severity with gentleness, frowning with smiling — and they failed; they declared the Protectorate and had it

ratified by the Powers, reinforced it with iron and fire, spilled abundant pure blood in its support, and extinguished many a noble soul in its service — and they failed; then they turned to peace, reclaimed their protectorate, and declared Egypt's independence; and from that day to this they have gone on turning — prevailing with force once and failing, yielding once more and failing again.

And the Egyptians observe all this smiling — the smile of one who believes in the truth, rests secure in it, and is confident of ultimate victory in a way that admits of no doubt. However long you examine this protracted hostility between us and the British, you will always reach a single conclusion: that even if the British have acquired many fleeting immediate gains, their position towards Egypt today is as their position towards Egypt half a century ago — not a single step forward, and perhaps several steps back. They occupied Egypt when it was still subject to Ottoman rule; events continued to work, and the Egyptians helped them along, until Egypt was freed from Ottoman authority. The British sought to succeed the Turks but failed; they were forced to acknowledge that their position remains unchanged from what it was before — the position of the occupying usurper who has been unable to make his usurpation legitimate.

If anyone has profited from this long struggle between this unarmed, weak Egyptian people upon whom adversities have fallen and against whom the Powers have conspired, and this great English people that has dominated the earth by its power, cunning, and wealth — there is no doubt that it is the Egyptians who are, to date, the victors. And they owe this victory to themselves and to nothing else: they owe it to this natural jealousy of their honour and dignity, and to this natural insistence upon their liberty and independence. For they have known themselves since the most ancient ages of history as a noble people, and the world has known them likewise as a noble people. They have been subjected to forms of tyranny and varieties of aggression that came to them from the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, and that came to them also from the Arabs, the Turks, and the French, and that come to them now from the British — and they have endured all of this and triumphed over all of it, repelling those aggressors they repelled and absorbing within

themselves those of these aggressors that were absorbed.

It is therefore not surprising that they should hold firm against the British for more than half a century, as they held firm against others; and it is not surprising that they should free themselves from the British after a long struggle, as they freed themselves from others. What is surprising is that the British do not take heed of events, draw lessons from history, or understand that they will not achieve now what they failed to achieve in the previous century.

Egypt today is more astute, more powerful, more cognisant of its rights, and more jealous of them than it was at the beginning of the occupation, and than it was after the war — and the passing days do nothing but increase its knowledge of these rights, its jealousy over them, its insistence upon them, and its earnestness in pursuing them. The strange thing is that the British still imagine to themselves that they are capable of humiliating this people and reaching the point of deceiving and trifling with it, after the days and events have furnished them with the clearest evidence that this is something beyond all hope. Stranger still is that these British are not deceiving themselves — rather they are deceived by a faction of profit-seekers and men of ulterior aims and interests, who lead them to imagine that the goods are available and their delivery a simple matter. The British listen to them, extend them strength and support, push them towards power, stand by them in their oppression and repression of the people, and await delivery of the goods — but receive from them nothing but disappointment and failure, nothing but betrayal and defeat. Had they not been deceived by this faction of the weak and the self-interested, they would not have gone on turning and prolonging the turning within this circle which the al-Ahrām correspondent drew ten years ago.

What is curious is that it occurred to the British at the start of this blessed era that they had come close to breaking out of this circle, thanks to the rare competence, dazzling brilliance, and enchanting capability that distinguished the Prime Minister. They waited a year in which he changed the order, and a year in which he implemented the new order, and another year in which implementation of the new order proceeded —

yet they have waited and are still waiting and have not achieved a thing.

It is very clear from the al-Ahrām correspondent's account — and from other accounts — that the British were of the opinion that they would prevail over Egypt this time through patience and perseverance, and through repression and persistent recourse to it. They thought that the Egyptian people's withdrawal to its tent, as Achilles had done, and its refusal to participate in elections were things that would not last long — that in the end the people would have to emerge from its tent and submit to the authority imposed upon it. But one year passed and was followed by another, and then another; the fourth year has begun its course while events shift and adversities press, and coercion plays havoc with morals and bodies, and poverty ravages the prosperous and the destitute alike — and the people remains encamped beneath its tent, refusing to budge, with no intention of emerging from it. Perhaps never in any of its days has it guarded its position and clung to its refusal more firmly than in these days; and perhaps tomorrow it will guard this right and cling to this refusal more firmly still than today.

The British have therefore despaired of the policy of this blessed era and been forced to resume the turning in which they had been engaged — transferring a commissioner, appointing a commissioner, and beginning to turn again. What obstacles they will encounter along the way or what difficulties will confront them is of no concern to us in any respect; for it was not we who drew this circle for them, and we did not compel them to turn within it — they are the ones who find pleasure and enjoyment in the turning and the trying. Let them turn then, and let them try; let them give firm or lax support to the present cabinet; let them grow weary of this cabinet and support another that resembles it closely or distantly; let them maintain their meticulous neutrality as they have maintained it until now, or let them maintain it in a new form that makes their intervention in Egypt's affairs more manifest

and more explicit. None of this is of any concern to us — except that we observe and smile, confident that they will turn and turn, try and try, and then always end up where they began, finding no exit from this circle unless they renounce the policy of circling in favour of the policy of

proceeding along the straight path and the honourable agreement — pure, clean of all treachery and cunning or any concealment of treachery and cunning towards the Egyptians.

How many scenarios, and how the British love them and covet them. Can the Prime Minister bear the burdens of his office for a long and extended period and remain — or will the Prime Minister be incapable of this and resign? And if he resigns, from where will his successor be chosen? From the far right or from the far left or from some middle group between the two? And when will this be? Before the return of the former High Commissioner, or during his brief stay, or after the arrival of the new commissioner?

Many scenarios, but they avail nothing against the established truth. And the established truth, which admits of neither doubt nor dispute, is that the British and their friends are bewildered, and that there is no escape for them from this bewilderment except by renouncing the circling and meeting this steadfast, forthright Egyptian people with a steadfast, forthright policy. Everything short of this is mere futility — like the futility in which we have been for ten years. And it is certain that this futility infuriates the British and injures them and their reputation in the world and their prestige in the East — to the same degree that it benefits us, increasing our confidence in the truth and presenting us to the eyes of the East as those who know how to meet adversities with a smile.