

And So

Kawkab al-Sharq, 6 July 1933

A questioner in the British House of Commons asked yesterday about the matter of the missionaries, and the Foreign Secretary answered him with a reply whose closing words we wish to pause over — for those closing words are worth pondering, and deserve to dispel some of the obscurity surrounding the Egyptian Ministry's position on the question of missionary activity. People will recall that the missionaries provoked public anger last year, and that this anger managed to reach Parliament and make itself heard in the House of Representatives. People will recall that the Prime Minister sought to respond to this echo and announced that the government was considering issuing a law that would enable the state to supervise education, and thereby ward off missionary activity.

People waited for this law to be issued in the previous session — it was not issued. People waited for this law to be mentioned in the Speech from the Throne for this parliamentary year — it was not mentioned. People waited for this law to be placed before Parliament in its most recent session — it was not placed before it.

The missionaries provoked the anger of the Egyptians once again, and this time the anger of the Egyptians was fierce and unanimous. It was inevitable that it should reach Parliament and make itself heard in both chambers, and inevitable that the Ministry should speak and act to silence Egyptian anger and answer its echo in Parliament. People waited for the Ministry to speak about the law it had promised a year earlier — it did not speak. We ourselves wrote, and other newspapers wrote, calling on the government to issue this law — the government said nothing. But its own newspaper censured us most severely for doing so, rebuked us most harshly, and claimed that we were demanding of the government what it was not capable of, that we were challenging it and deliberately seeking to paralyse and embarrass it. It forgot that the Prime Minister himself was the one who had promised to issue this law. The Egyptians then pressed insistently for this law, and the ministers plugged their ears and turned away from the matter entirely. Now it seems to us that the British Foreign Secretary, with his answer yesterday, has solved this riddle and dispelled this obscurity. He announces to his questioner in the British House of Commons that he has given the High Commissioner permission to speak with the Egyptian authorities about the possibility of establishing a system of central oversight over certain aspects of the missionaries' activities. This means — if we understand the language of British politics — that the High Commissioner is authorised by his government to study with our government the matter of this legislation that the Prime Minister promised more than a year ago, that the people have been awaiting ever since, that they have not yet obtained, and that the Ministry's newspaper considered it an imposition and

an act of deliberate sabotage to demand of the government.

So the British Foreign Office has deigned to grant permission for discussion of this subject — though of course it has not granted permission to the Egyptian Ministry. The Egyptian Ministry is too great, too dignified, too proud, and too jealous of its independence to need such permission, or to receive such permission from a foreign government of any kind, and from the British government in particular. You will recall that immortal historic rejoinder with which our Prime Minister Sidqi Pasha silenced the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald.

The Foreign Office's permission, then, was not issued to our government — it was issued to the High Commissioner. We wish here to clarify the Ministry's position vis-à-vis the High Commissioner following this permission. What is that position? How should it take shape? And which of the two parties is to make the first move and speak to the other about establishing the system that would enable the state to oversee missionary activity? Is it the High Commissioner who will approach — or has already approached — the Ministry, saying to it that the missionaries' affair has grown grave, their harm has intensified, and they have become a threat to Egyptian sovereignty, exposing its security to disorder and its order to corruption; and that the view is that the Egyptian state should be able to monitor the missionaries in certain aspects of their conduct — so let us discuss what form this oversight should take, how far its authority should extend, and what price Egypt can pay for it to be established? Or is it the Egyptian government that has approached the High Commissioner and said to him: the missionaries' affair has grown serious, their harm has spread, the Egyptians are all distressed by it, and the opposition — which is, as you know, the nation in its entirety — is pressing insistently for a law that would enable the state to oversee missionary activity and missionaries?

It appears that the opposition is right in what it demands, and that the government will face severe embarrassment if it does not accept this challenge and issue this law. So would you be willing to seek the British government's permission — in the hope that it might not object to our beginning discussions on this subject? Or did the High Commissioner fall silent and the Egyptian government fall silent, until this idea occurred to the British Foreign Office after it witnessed the anger and insistence of the Egyptians, whereupon it instructed its High Commissioner to contact the Egyptian government and discuss the matter of this law with it? We would also like to know: has the High Commissioner actually begun this discussion, or is he still silent, watching the missionaries closely and waiting? Now that the Foreign Secretary's statement has appeared in the newspapers, one might say to the Ministry: the newspapers have published the Foreign Secretary's announcement in the House of Commons that he has given you permission for such and such. This news has been received favourably,

because it will enable us to say to the opposition: here we are, accepting the challenge and finding in the issuance of the law — which you used to call an impossible demand designed to paralyse and embarrass us — something we are now willing to pursue. Will you permit us to begin discussions about what form this oversight should take, how far it should extend, and how far it should be limited? All these matters must be examined and the correct position on them established. We want to believe that it was the Egyptian government that initiated discussion of this law, and that the Foreign Secretary's permission was issued to the High Commissioner only in response to the Egyptian government's request. We want to believe this — but we genuinely regret that the Egyptian government chose this deep silence, allowed its newspapers to speak of paralysis and embarrassment, and presented this law as something unattainable and hopeless, until suspicion grew and people felt that the government was incapable of honouring the Prime Minister's promise to Parliament. It is truly painful that the Egyptians should demand something to which they have every right, and press their demand insistently, without the government so much as informing them that it is working toward fulfilling what they hope for and answering what they ask — until, when the Egyptians have almost surrendered to despair, the British Foreign Secretary informs them that the matter is not impossible, and that he has given the High Commissioner permission to speak with the Egyptian government about it.

There is one further matter we wish to know: on whose behalf does the High Commissioner speak? On behalf of the British government alone? In that case, has our government begun speaking directly with foreign governments on this subject? Or on behalf of all foreigners? In that case, has our government accepted the British doctrine that the British are the ones who should speak on behalf of foreigners and represent them in whatever discussions we might have with them? In that case, our Foreign Ministry was established only to speak to the British and to no one else — and what then are all these negotiations here and there? What are the innumerable protocols? What are the intolerable expenses? Or does the British government take the same position on this question as it takes on the question of the debt — supporting the Egyptian point of view and backing a weak Egypt when it wishes to speak to other states on this subject?

We would have wished the Egyptian government to follow, in this matter, the approach it follows in other matters touching on foreigners: to prepare its law, then present it to the relevant foreign parties, and negotiate over it as an ordinary subject that need not be entangled in the politics existing between us and the British. The most remarkable and curious thing is that the matter does not end there — the British Foreign Secretary informs us that negotiations are currently under way with the Council of the Missionary Union on this subject. Who is conducting these negotiations with the Council of the Missionary Union? Is it the Egyptian government — and if so, on what basis? Since when has the Missionary Union

been a political body to be negotiated with by a sovereign independent government over the legislation it wishes to enact?

Is it the British government? And if so, who brought them in as intermediaries? Has the danger posed by the missionaries in Egypt reached such a point that we cannot monitor them to repel their aggression except after negotiations in which the British serve as intermediaries?

This situation is deeply obscure and in need of clarification. Can the government issue a statement that dispels this confusion and removes this obscurity — one that assures the people that the Ministry which silenced the British Prime Minister is not incapable of persuading foreign states of its right to oversee education and whatever else occurs on its own soil, since this right is a natural consequence of sovereignty and independence?