

From Afar: Bewilderment ...

Al-Gumhuriya, 5 September 1956

And they hate peace — since peace would squander their own prestige in the Arab East, and embolden nations that, only a few years ago, listened to them, and obeyed them. Nor, beyond that, do they genuinely understand the Arab East as it ought to be understood, nor genuinely know modern Egypt as she ought to be known. They still think, in these very days, exactly as they once thought in the century past, reckoning Egypt will still cower before them today, exactly as she once cowered before them before — as though they had seen nothing at all, drawn no real lesson whatsoever from all these trials and events.

Egypt's own delay in replying to the chairman of the committee formed to negotiate the Canal question kept British and French statesmen genuinely awake at night — both alike straining their own minds, taxing their own intelligence far beyond what it could bear, to determine, first, whether the Egyptian President would even reply to the committee's own letter at all; second, exactly what the Egyptian President might reply, whether accepting a meeting with the committee, or refusing it; and third, exactly what they themselves would do, should the Egyptian President refuse this same meeting.

Over all of this, they remained in a genuinely dark state of bewilderment, and the British and French press depicted this same bewilderment with the utmost fidelity, endlessly rehearsing, and re-rehearsing, one hypothesis after another, scarcely ever exhausting them, each contradicting the other, in whatever divergent predictions were published — predictions indicating nothing whatsoever, except that British and French writers themselves suffered from exactly the same bewilderment, and doubt, as the statesmen of Great Britain and France altogether. But then, one morning, Egypt's own reply arrived in London, and one bewilderment lifted from statesmen and journalists alike, only to be replaced by another.

Egypt's own reply proved genuinely bewildering indeed: genuinely, extremely brief, genuinely, supremely clear, admitting neither interpretation nor analysis. The committee had requested to meet the Egyptian President; he answered that he stood ready to meet it. Yet this same brief, clear answer led journalists and statesmen entirely astray, driving them from one doubt straight into another — Egypt's own reply

never once alluded, near or far, to the subject of this same meeting, nor to whatever discussion might actually take place within it.

For this same reason, statesmen and writers pursued genuinely, wildly divergent interpretations of this same reply: the optimists among them believed Egypt had genuinely inclined toward peace, preferring to reach common ground with the West; the pessimists believed there was far more to it than met the eye, that this same brevity concealed conditions Egypt would impose before negotiation, and problems Egypt would raise during it; while others still, occupying some middle ground between the two, went round and round in genuinely endless speculation, reckoning the Egyptian President was simply playing for time, hoping to win himself enough of it to turn certain European states away from France and Great Britain, and force these same two powers into genuine isolation, bearing whatever consequences their own intransigence might produce.

Statesmen and writers alike continue floundering in this same dark bewilderment, posing countless questions to themselves, and to others, without finding any real answer to them — and they will remain exactly so, until the first meeting takes place in Cairo, three days from now, days we ourselves count as short, but which they themselves count as long years, given the sheer effort they cost them, and the sheer weight of the burden they bear. Nor is any of this the only manifestation of this same British-French bewilderment — there remains another manifestation of it besides.

This same manifestation, though, is a genuinely significant one, of genuinely far-reaching consequence for whatever future relations may unfold between the Arab East and Western Europe: the British and French want negotiation, and, to this same end, have already taken part in establishing this same committee, meant to conduct exactly that negotiation — yet, at the very same time, they impose upon this same negotiation a foundation they claim they will never depart from, whatever the circumstances, wishing to compel Egypt into accepting it outright. And so, to this same end, they send a committee bearing olive branches, calling for peace, well-being, and cooperation — while placing ahead of this same committee soldiers, and terms, and ships, and aircraft. France, in particular, chose the very day Egypt's own reply arrived to request Great Britain's own permission to send her own troops to Cyprus, in preparation for emergencies, and readiness to protect the French in Egypt, should their own persons, or their own interests, ever be

threatened. Great Britain, meanwhile, presses on with mobilization, sending troops in the wake of troops, in preparation against whatever danger might arise.

These same people, then, stand genuinely bewildered, not knowing whether to negotiate, or to make war — or, if you prefer, they never truly wanted negotiation at all, wanting, rather, to impose their own policy upon Egypt outright, to dictate this same policy to her, offering her only two genuine choices: either accept whatever is dictated to her — finding rest, and reassurance, however much her own dignity is insulted, her own sons humiliated, forced to accept genuine indignity, and submit to it, abased — or refuse whatever is dictated to her, in which case war would be poured down upon her, exposing her, and world security along with her, to an evil whose own beginning is known, but whose own end remains entirely unknown.

These same people declare, nonetheless, and insist upon declaring, that they want nothing but peace, and that their own committee brings Egypt no ultimatum whatsoever, nor anything resembling one — they issue no ultimatum, they merely mass troops in Cyprus and Malta, and prepare themselves for war. Sound minds can, of course, extract themselves from all of this confusion as they see fit. But the plain truth, in the British and French case, is that they stand genuinely bewildered, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say — they went to genuine excess, on the very day the Canal's nationalization was announced, in their own threats and warnings, and that same excess has been duly recorded against them. They hate to retreat now, fearing the loss of trust, and confidence, in themselves, and reassurance in whatever they promise, or threaten.

The Americans have warned them, and the Russians have frightened them, against stirring up war — they cannot possibly go through with it, for fear their own supporters would abandon them entirely, leaving them entangled in a genuinely great evil, with no idea how to extract themselves from it, nor how to navigate its own countless problems. And so, to this same end, they send their own committee, an olive branch in one hand, and the warning of war in the other, without themselves knowing, when they are honest with themselves, whether they truly want war, or peace. They do not want war, since they cannot genuinely gauge its own consequences; nor do they want peace, since peace would squander their own prestige in the Arab East, and embolden nations that, only a few years ago, listened to them, and obeyed them. Nor, beyond

that, do they genuinely understand the Arab East as it ought to be understood, nor genuinely know modern Egypt as she ought to be known.

They still think, in these very days, exactly as they once thought in the century past, still believing themselves capable of issuing threats that would fill people's own hearts with terror and dread — sending their own troops to intimidate, and to terrorize, reckoning Egypt will still cower before them today, exactly as she once cowered before them before, as though they had seen nothing, heard nothing, drawn no real lesson whatsoever from all these trials and events. France drew no real lesson from what befell her in Indochina, nor from what befell her before that in the Near East, nor from what is befalling her now in North Africa. Britain drew no real lesson from the setbacks she suffered in India, and in other countries of the earth, nor from the very trouble she now faces in Cyprus itself — that same Cyprus where troops are being massed to intimidate Egypt and the Arab East, even though she cannot even intimidate Cyprus herself, indeed cannot even secure her own troops from the Cypriots themselves.

But these same people have committed themselves to a promise, to preserve for the old shareholders in the old Canal Company exactly the profit the Canal once yielded them, and they simply do not know how to honour this same promise. They remain genuinely confident that conservatives in France and Great Britain will never forgive them any failure in serving capital, whatever the reasons behind that same failure — and so, to this same end, they fill the world with clamour, and uproar, and bluster, genuinely certain, deep within themselves, that they will secure nothing whatsoever of what they desire, and that Egypt will stand firm against their own threats, should they content themselves with mere threats, and will fight their own war, should they impose war upon her.

I have already said, when the Americans and the English withdrew their own hands from financing the High Dam, that Egypt was facing a genuinely serious test: either she stands firm against the West's own scheming, and cunning, convincing the entire world she genuinely deserves the independence she has secured for herself, or weakness, and frailty, overtake her, failure and division appearing within her own ranks, convincing the entire world instead that she has not yet matured, has not yet become worthy of that same dignified life which knows how to refuse indignity.

I said that before the Canal's own nationalization. After that same nationalization, though, after this same defiance, surpassing every familiar bound, after the English and French grew so eager to fill Egyptian hearts with dread and terror, after both alike set about mobilizing troops, sending them to the eastern Mediterranean, while the United Nations body and the Security Council remain sunk in the deepest sleep, as though peace itself had never once been threatened, in this particular part of the world — after all of this, the test Egyptians now face, in these very days, has grown far harsher, far more violent still, and Egypt now finds herself facing a genuine choice: between independence, dignity, and honour, whatever their own price, whatever sacrifice they may cost her, or a return to British-French occupation, or something even worse than British-French occupation — international trusteeship over the Canal's own management. And I remain entirely, genuinely confident that Egypt will choose, and will choose well.