

Between East and West (I)

al-Balagh, 1 February 1945

It is certain that world public opinion is, in these very days, giving its utmost and most intense attention to the meeting of the three leaders, which has either already begun, or is on the verge of beginning; for this meeting will attempt to work out solutions to the grave, great problems now occupying the world, problems on which the conduct of both war and peace alike depends, in the most complete manner possible, so that they might reach the best possible end.

But it is equally certain that, whatever grave importance these great problems may hold, that importance is a relative one — growing or shrinking according to how closely or distantly it touches those concerned. The Polish problem, for instance, is of the very greatest gravity for the Poles themselves, and for Russia and Germany, since it touches these states' interests directly. It is likewise grave for England, America, and France, since it touches the European peace order first, and the world order after that. You could say the same of the other matters, besides the Polish problem, the three assembled leaders will devote themselves to studying.

We Easterners, however, look upon these problems with two different views at once: the first, the view of a human being concerned with whatever civilized humanity is concerned with, in matters of peace and war; the second, the view of a human being who simply wants to secure his own good and his own justice, without harming anyone, without anyone harming him, and without his own interests being exposed to any danger, great or small, whenever some dispute or agreement arises among nations elsewhere in the world. I do not know whether the three assembled leaders will find time now for the problems of the Arab East, or will be too occupied with the problems of the European West to attend to them. But one thing admits of no doubt: the Arab East has problems of its own that must be solved, and must be solved at the very same time the problems of the European West are solved — for the Arab East is a fundamental, constituent part of the civilized world on the one hand, and because this Arab East has come to know itself, and to know its own place within the civilized world, and has weighed, with the finest and truest precision, both its own need for solidarity with this civilized world, and that civilized world's own need for

it.

It is for this reason genuinely determined to see its own problems solved, entirely resolved that this solution should accord with right, justice, and the very ideals the world is said to have fought this war for — ideals some Europeans and Americans may view with a certain amount of levity and humour, but which Easterners now regard with a bitter seriousness that knows neither jest, nor levity, nor idle banter. When the Arab Easterner speaks of independence, he does not speak of it lightly, nor with any readiness to compromise it, nor in that sweet, bantering tone; he speaks of it, rather, in a firm, insistent tone that, if it depicts anything at all, depicts a faith bordering on mysticism.

Nor is the Arab East alone in concerning itself with solving these Arab Eastern problems; the great powers themselves concern themselves with them too, with an attention that grows only stronger as the days pass. Great Britain continues to repeat its familiar refrain — the refrain of Britain's own established interests, of the British Empire whose land, sea, and air routes must be kept secure, of the cooperation that must serve as the foundation for that security. France continues to repeat her own familiar refrain, of her inherited traditions of protecting Christianity in certain lands of the East, of spreading culture through the Arab East, indeed through the whole of the East, and of preserving her own privileged standing in the eastern Mediterranean.

America concerns herself with trade and economics with an attention that appears to be reaching for a scope it never attained before this war; she is thinking about this Arab East's economic future, given its own sources of wealth, and about whatever effect that future might have on her own trade and economy. Russia watches all of this and says nothing — but silence is no sign of forgetting, nor of neglect; if it signifies anything at all, it signifies close attention and strong memory, and the patient waiting for the right occasion to speak, when speech will actually be of use and benefit.

And if this is the Western nations' own share of attention to their interests in the Arab East, then the Arab East's own share of attention to its interests, in its own lands, must be still greater and stronger. And the Arab East's own eagerness to see its problems solved in a manner consistent with right, justice, and genuine benefit must be still greater and stronger than the West's own eagerness to solve them.

It is no wonder, then, that the Arab East, this past summer, was preoccupied with the call to convene a meeting of the Arab states, to organize their own affairs, and to establish a solid foundation for cooperation among them, one capable of securing their own interests, and guaranteeing them a free and dignified life in the new world that wishes itself to be free and dignified.

Nor is it any wonder that the affairs of the Arab League, established by the Alexandria Conference and given precise shape by the Alexandria Protocol, should so thoroughly captivate the minds of all Arabs that they very nearly crowd out every other concern of the world. Nor is it any wonder that Arab minds should turn so intensely toward the steps that must now be taken, once the Alexandria Protocol has been signed, so that the relevant committees might take up the tasks assigned to them, and results might appear proving to the Arab peoples that their own governments are genuinely eager to act, not merely content with words. Nor, finally, is it any wonder that the Arab peoples should take the very keenest and greatest interest in this gracious royal endeavour undertaken, in these very days, by His Majesty the exalted King of Egypt toward His Majesty the exalted King of the Saudi Arab Kingdom — for these Arab peoples know full well that this gracious royal endeavour, and this great historic meeting, must be bound up, as closely and firmly as possible, with what the Arab peoples themselves are so eager to achieve: their hopes for cooperation toward attaining the free and dignified life they aspire to in the new world, which itself wishes to be free and dignified.

Nor is it any wonder that the Arab East should be more preoccupied with the meeting of the two great kings than with the meeting of the three leaders; for the meeting at Radwa touches its own immediate, pressing interests, touches the hopes it aspires to and the aims it holds dear, far more closely than does the meeting of the three leaders, in a place we do not know today, but will come to know tomorrow.

Nothing proves this more clearly than the fact that the Arab states which had signed the Alexandria Protocol were eager to resume their meeting; some of their own foreign ministers came to Egypt for this purpose, but returned home without the meeting having taken place. No sooner, though, had the gracious royal endeavour occurred, and the meeting at Radwa taken place, than we learned this very morning that our own Foreign Minister will call for this long-awaited meeting to be convened — a meeting that had, it must be said, been waited for rather

longer than it should have been.

The Arab peoples have every right to take heart at the results of this gracious royal endeavour, and to expect firm, decisive steps toward their own great hopes. But what, one might ask, are these hopes? I believe the time has come for the hopes of the Arab peoples to be made clear and plain, and for complete candour to take the place, between the peoples of East and West, of tortuous evasions and murky manoeuvring. And I believe the time has come, too, for the Easterner to know, clearly and plainly, what he wants, and what he ought to want — so that he does not proceed without guidance, and does not expose himself to disappointment.

I believe, too, that the time has come for Europe to be able to face the facts on the ground. She has tasted what she has tasted of the horrors of war, and known what she has known of the bitterness of foreign occupation. There is no country in Europe, however great, that has not tasted the bitterness of foreign occupation, or the fear of that occupation, which so very recently seemed entirely possible.

Great Britain did not taste the bitterness of occupation, but she was exposed to its dangers; every great European power tasted it, and Germany is draining its bitter cup right now. There is no doubt that Europe has come to detest this occupation, and to see freeing herself from it as a genuine triumph — Europe must, then, learn from this lesson, and detest occupation for others just as she detested it for herself. Europe must know, in any case, that the Arab East has grown weary of the bitterness of occupation, aspires to free itself of it, and is confident it will free itself of it. Should Europe come to recognize this fact on the ground, she may well spare both herself and the East a great many dangers and horrors that do much harm and no good whatsoever; and it may well be that establishing this fact, and making it the foundation of the relationship between East and West, is precisely the correct and urgent foundation upon which relations between Europe and the lands of the Arab East ought now to be built.

There is another fact on the ground Europe must come to accept with certainty, since the Arab East has become thoroughly convinced of it: that human life itself has changed, whether statesmen wish it or not, and it is no longer possible for civilized nations to submit to other civilized nations the way a slave submits to his master, or a freedman submits to his former master. This means that the Arab East utterly

refuses to have its relations with the West built on servitude, or on clientage. It is, rather, wholly determined to see these relations built on genuine, authentic freedom, and regards European domination as nothing more than a passing aberration, bound to vanish without leaving a trace. For this same reason, it neither understands, nor wishes to understand, being divided into spheres of influence, with one power holding sway over this part of it, and another power holding sway over that other part.

All of this is old talk, arising from old thinking; and this kind of thinking has itself changed, so its effects must change too. If Europe comes to recognize these two facts on the ground, and believes in them sincerely, turning away from the policy of occupation, and away from the policy of domination and spheres of influence, matters between her and the East might well become easy, smooth, and readily attainable — for they would then rest on genuine mutual benefit, and on a goodwill unmarred by fear, unspoiled by scheming, and untroubled by whatever it is that troubles the relationship between an aggressor and the one aggressed upon.

It is certain that the East will need the West, in trade, industry, economics, education, and many other fields besides — but as a free man needs the help of another free man. The East will indeed seek the West's help, but on the basis of mutual benefit, not on the basis of monopoly and domination.

These, I believe, are the near-term hopes stirring within every Arab heart, and believed in by every Arab soul, and which Europe must come to know, and face with a candour entirely free of any taint. Only then will peace and security settle in the Arab East; only then will the new world benefit from cooperation between East and West; only then will the European powers be free to devote themselves to what they truly need to devote themselves to — binding their own wounds, rebuilding their own ruins, and reforming whatever in their own affairs stands in need of reform, and there is a great deal of it.

But if Europe, after this war, follows the same course she followed after the last one, she will meet with real defiance from the East, her own internal strife will grow severe, and she will taste, of division, discord, and enmity, a bitterness we believe she has no need of at all.

It is quite clear that, in depicting these hopes filling Arab hearts, I have not gone into detail, nor pointed to their finer particulars, nor

named any specific country, nor any specific hope — for I know these matters are the concern of Eastern governments themselves, and that it would be a very great wrong for us to address the details before the governments themselves have addressed them, or to speak on these matters before they have spoken.