

The Future of Democracy

Al-Hilal, December 1941.

I am confident that human civilization faces no true danger from this war, however great its horror may grow; I am confident that democracy is the best system of government mankind has known; and for this reason I am content that if civilization emerges triumphant from this war, democracy will emerge triumphant alongside it.

How narrow life would be, were it not for hope's open horizon!

So said al-Tughra'i many long centuries ago, and he was altogether fortunate in hitting upon truth and rightness in what he said; nor do I think anyone living in these days could dispute this ancient yet ever-new wisdom, whether they are among those scorched by the fire of war close at hand, or among those who feel its heat from afar.

There is no doubt that the life humanity now lives is narrow in horizon, slight in worth, and poor in substance — were it not that within every living human soul burns a powerful lamp that cleaves through its darkened horizons, carrying the human soul through to another world beyond these horizons, where hopes can range freely, lightly, swiftly, able to rise as high as they wish into the sky's own air, and able to press onward before them without any limit.

And what is there to look forward to in this life we now live, which evil has seized from every side, so that a person can scarcely think of his yesterday without his soul filling with regret that it passed laden with so many good things we once made little of and even scorned, only to find ourselves now craving them in abundance, wishing that some small part of them might yet be granted us? And a person can scarcely attempt to think of his tomorrow without asking himself: will I live to see this tomorrow, or will I fall short of reaching it?

And the strange thing is that the nature of human life has not changed at all; it is, at every moment, exactly as it is now — exposed to danger that comes to it from where people expect it and from where they do not. But these tremendous events and repugnant catastrophes that war lays bare at every instant have made the true nature of this life plain to people, and made them feel their own vanity and self-deception, so that they have come to face the facts as they are, and to know that the

likeness of this worldly life is the likeness of dry stubble scattered by the winds, as God set it forth for them in the Noble Qur'an — they believe it when they recite the verse or hear the preachers, yet they soon forget what they recited, turn away from what they heard, and return to their pleasures and passions exactly as before they ever recited the verse or heard the preachers.

But now, every moment of their lives recites this same verse to them, and every piece of news that greets them in the morning or overtakes them at nightfall speaks to them as the preachers speak, reminding them that this worldly life is stubble scattered by the winds — and for this reason they stand exposed to despair, and despair does indeed overtake many of them, so that they are consumed either in a ruinous pessimism, or driven headlong into an equally ruinous optimism. Yet the human soul is stronger than despair, and stronger than the accidents of time; it is always able to hope, always able to remember yesterday and think of tomorrow, always able to take pleasure in the memories of the past and to dream of the good things of the future.

Absolute evil has no existence, just as absolute good has no existence — or say, if you will, that the ordinary man cannot conceive of absolute evil any more than he can conceive of absolute good; he is happy only by degree, nor does vanity ever wholly ruin his affairs while he is happy by that same degree, any more than despair wholly ruins his affairs while he is unhappy by some degree of his own.

And for this reason he profits even from catastrophes, since they restrain him and turn him back from his own error, and make him feel that life ought to be taken neither as pure jest nor as pure earnestness, but rather as a mixture of both, containing both contentment and discontent, both joy and sorrow, both smiling and frowning.

I do not know what drives me to this somber train of thought — indeed, I do not know what drives me even to put into words this somber thinking that has accompanied me, or that has overtaken me, ever since the horrors of war began following one upon another; I had kept it to myself, withholding it from others, or withholding others from it.

I do not know what drives me to this somber discourse, for I was not asked to preach to people, nor to open their eyes to life's earnestness and its jest; I was asked only to speak of what I expect for democracy once this war is over.

Would that I knew whether these very words could even cohere once this war is over — for this war has grown long and heavy, its horrors following one upon another, its catastrophes succeeding one another, its effects sinking ever deeper into the lives of those who feel, who think, and who sense the bonds of social solidarity.

This war has grown so long and so heavy that it has made us forget the past, turned us away from the future, and occupied us wholly with the moments we are living, or that we are granted leave to live — so that, left entirely to its own impression, we might well imagine this war to have neither a before nor an after. And yet we still remember that this war did indeed have a before, that we once spent years upon years in which days and nights, weeks and months, passed over us while we were free for our own private lives, intent upon whatever was useful to ourselves and to others, turned aside by nothing from among these catastrophes the mind can scarcely conceive, which seize civilization from every quarter and press in upon it from every direction.

Yes — we still remember that this war had a before, in which people enjoyed the pleasures of peace and savored well-being, and our remembrance of that near-yet-distant age still makes us long to return to it, or to something resembling it, and still stirs in our souls the hope that this war too will have an after, in which people will again enjoy peace and savor well-being.

Nor does it occur to me to picture that age which this war will eventually yield, nor to build in it castles in Spain; I see this war rather as our ancient poets used to see the night when they complained of its length, imagining its stars bound by ropes to the mountains, scarcely able to move — and yet, despite this, people go on remembering, and take pleasure in the remembering; and people go on dreaming, and take pleasure in the dreaming.

Let us, then, speak to our sons and our youth of those days when there was no war at all, but only peace, security, pleasure, and bounty; and let us speak to our sons and our youth of days yet to come in which there will be no war and no striking, no fighting and no strife, but only peace, security, pleasure, and bounty, and vast hopes, and smiling wishes, and far-reaching ambitions, and aspiration without limit, and the pursuit of the highest ideals, and the winning of much that souls desire and hearts aspire to, and the confidence that what proves difficult for one generation may be made easy for another, that sons may attain what their

fathers fell short of, and that tomorrow may yet accomplish what yesterday was powerless to accomplish.

And when I speak to myself of democracy's future once this war has ended, I find myself speaking in two different languages: one the language of pessimism and doubt — for we have witnessed a war now past, and seen after it a peace that embraced all peoples, and we chafed under that past war exactly as we now suffer under this present one, and we pinned upon that peace, once it had passed, vast hopes, and attached to it wishes without end; yet when peace did come, it fulfilled only a small part of our vast hopes, and granted us, of our far-reaching wishes, only the humblest and the least significant of them.

And we had imagined that the past war had killed itself outright, that peace had erased every trace of what we had suffered, that the affairs of men would settle forever into well-being, and that their problems would be resolved among themselves through mutual contentment and mutual trust.

We imagined a great many things, and hoped for even more than we imagined. Yet scarcely had the days of that peace advanced before it became clear that our imaginings had been mere idle talk, that our hopes had gone up in smoke, that the war had not killed itself, and that the peace had not erased the traces of the war — so it is no wonder if, thinking now of tomorrow, we do so with a great deal of reserve, caution, and apprehension lest the outcome of this present war resemble the outcome of the war now past, and lest the peace we now await prove as barren and sterile as the peace that lapsed in September of 1939. This, then, is one of the two languages in which I speak to myself when I think of democracy's future.

As for the second language, it is one of hope, expectation, and trust — for man was not taught, as the ancient poet said, except that he might learn; and it is in his very nature to profit from events and draw benefit from experience. He had, during the past war, indulged himself to excess in hope, and so despair indulged itself to excess upon him once that war had ended; the better course, then, is that he be sparing in his hope, that his expectation be moderate, and that his wishes be reasonable, bounded by what people are actually capable of achieving and reforming.

The Europeans believed, in the aftermath of the past war, that they had subdued tyranny for a very long age indeed, and that upon its ruins they had built a world resting on justice, equity, and fairness; but in

believing this, they deceived not themselves but rather the great mass of people — for among themselves, in their own private hearts, they were not truly confident that they had killed tyranny outright. And German tyranny is not killed by a defeat Germany suffers beyond her own borders; it is killed only on its home ground, when German frontiers themselves are breached, when German dominion itself collapses, and when Germany herself tastes, for a time long or short, the bitterness of invasion she once made others taste, and the bitterness of foreign domination she has long been a stranger to.

Only then can it be expected that something of good sense and purpose will return to the German people, that the German people will be cured of some part of their own vanity, and come to believe that they, like other peoples, may be granted victory or overtaken by defeat; only then will the German people moderate their ambitions, curb their unruliness, and come to trust that they can be content with equality between themselves and other peoples — and only on that day might they come forward in sincere cooperation with others to build the new order upon a foundation of justice and purpose, and upon a genuine desire for equality and fairness.

As for the German people being defeated beyond their own borders, as they were defeated in the past war, this would spare people the burden of German tyranny for some while, but the German people themselves would not long delay in questioning this defeat they never witnessed with their own eyes, nor tasted its effects upon their own soil — and would not long delay in denying it, and would not long delay in seeing themselves as wronged, and would not long delay in attempting to right that wrong for themselves.

And he who has been wronged is liable, whenever he gains the power to do so, to become himself a wrongdoer who exceeds all bounds in his wrongdoing; for the limits of fairness are not clearly marked, and the differences between fairness and vengeance are not plainly visible.

And just as those who organized the world after the past war were not confident of their own victory, so too were they not confident in themselves — or, to put it more precisely, they were not sincere with themselves in that confidence they displayed outwardly; for the peace treaty had scarcely come into force before the United States of America repudiated it, and the League of Nations had scarcely come into being before the United States of America repudiated it too, leaving Europe to

its own devices — and Europe accomplished nothing, because Europe was not sincere with itself, but built the foundation of its own relations instead upon mutual suspicion: Germany, defeated, suspected her victors, and they in turn suspected her; Italy felt she had won, of the spoils, less than she had hoped for; and England and France competed with one another for mastery of land and sea. Russia, meanwhile, withdrew into herself, absorbed in her own revolution, giving herself over entirely to a hatred of victor and vanquished alike — and so the Great War passed without people reaping from it anything but its evil, and there came a lame peace from which only the skillful profited, those adept at fishing in troubled waters, and at filling their own bags and pockets once night had fallen.

And so Europe finished with its war between peoples, but did not arrive at peace — it arrived only at a truce, and an impure truce at that: a truce in foreign policy, and a war between classes that corrupted the internal politics of nations most grievously.

And only a few years had passed in that peace before clear-sighted men became certain that war was coming without fail, that the peoples were returning to something worse than what they had known before, and that the political and social systems upon which Europe's affairs had rested were not fit to endure, but were merely living on borrowed time, awaiting whoever would be first to tear them down.

And the revolutionaries in Russia were first, tearing down on their own side and attempting to build anew. Then Italy followed, then Germany followed her in turn, and Europe split into two camps as far apart from one another as camps could be: one resting on a dictatorship ruinous to the liberty of the individual and the community alike, and to human dignity itself; the other resting on a democracy shaken and excessive in its devotion to individual liberty.

And the community, for all that, fell short in rendering fairness to the individual within it, and in rendering fairness to the weak against the strong, to the poor against the rich, and to those who labor against those who do not.

Nor did it require a great deal of intelligence to understand that such a state of affairs could not possibly endure, and events were not slow to prove that European life had been neither reasonable nor capable of lasting.

All of this mankind has learned in this age that has passed between two wars — so one of two things must be true: either the poet spoke truly when he said:

And man was taught only that he might learn.

— or else history spoke truly in telling us that man always profits from events, always draws benefit from experience, and always presses onward.

And so it is our right to hope, to expect, and to trust that democracy has, after this war, a future both splendid and flourishing — unless our confidence in the wisdom of the wise, the philosophy of the philosophers, the lessons of history, human nature's own capacity for advancement, and the human mind's power to overcome hardship and emerge victorious over its own trials, should all prove false together. And if that should be so, then it is despair not of democracy alone, but of the whole of human civilization.

And praise be to God that I am not among the despairing, and that I find no meaning in despair alongside life, as Mustafa Kamil — God rest his soul — used to say; for this tremendous catastrophe to which humanity is now subject is not the first catastrophe, and will not, alas, be the last; human civilization has already faced other crushing, devastating catastrophes, and has risen above them and profited from them, emerging from them more radiant and more luminous than it had been before the catastrophes befell it.

And I do not know why civilization should not emerge triumphant from this catastrophe just as it emerged from catastrophes past, when it is now stronger of arm, harder of sinew, sharper of edge, more capable of resistance, and more capable too of influence.

I am, then, confident that human civilization faces no true danger from this war, however great its horror may grow; I am, then, confident that democracy is the best system of government mankind has known, from both the political and the social point of view; and for all of this I am content that if civilization emerges triumphant from this war, democracy will emerge triumphant alongside it — for true civilization in this age cannot be built on anything but liberty... that liberty broad enough to encompass individuals, communities, and peoples; that liberty which prevents individuals from wronging one another, and prevents peoples from wronging one another.

And I am almost inclined to believe that these wars to which humanity has been subjected, which have exposed civilization to such great evil, are themselves but one form of the struggle humanity wages to win this very liberty — a struggle through which humanity suffers greatly, time after time, in order to enjoy, time after time, the great liberty that struggle yields it in turn.

And the one thing I cannot bring myself to doubt is that the human mind has reached a degree of advancement at which it can no longer accept oppression, nor endure abasement, nor live except in the shadow of dignity.

And I know that systems of tyranny have arisen in Europe, and that they impose upon people, in these days, grave hardship — but I know too that these are crises to which human life is subject from time to time, and that these crises are hostage to the particular persons who stir them up, or to the passing circumstances that give rise to them. Whenever these persons pass — and pass they must — and whenever these circumstances change — and change they must, for life is itself constant change — the human mind resumes its onward path toward advancement.

And this is a beautiful, splendid path, on which obstacles and hardships arise from time to time, but which always presses forward beneath the shade of liberty, dignity, hope, and the highest ideals.

So if you wish to know my opinion of democracy's future once this war has ended, I cannot offer you any single, fixed opinion, nor sketch for you any single, fixed picture — but I can offer you a firm confidence and a smiling hope.

As for the confidence, it is confidence in the triumph of civilization and light over ignorance and darkness; and as for the hope, it lies in people's drawing benefit from the lessons of the past war, and of the past peace as well, and in their remembering that they built that past peace upon suspicion, upon ill will, upon poor judgment, upon rivalry and envy, upon deceit and cunning — and so reaped from all of this a very great evil. They are now in a position to avoid falling into what they fell into yesterday, and to build their coming peace instead upon sound judgment of affairs, upon firmness and resolve in handling them, upon sincere trust, and upon cooperation founded in good faith.

And it seems to me that avoiding the errors committed in the drafting and the execution of the Treaty of Versailles would be enough to

secure for people a democracy — not, I should say, a perfect one, for there is no path to perfection — but a democracy close to justice, in which the individual enjoys his liberty and his dignity, and savors life's good things, unwronged by the strong and unexploited by the rich, and in which peoples receive their rightful share of free life — in which the strong peoples do not monopolize dominion and wealth to the exclusion of the small, but in which the life of individuals, communities, and nations rests instead on something of love, gentleness, justice, and fairness.

A wish, if it should prove true, is the best of wishes; and if not, we shall at least have lived by it a while in comfort.