

Prelude

Al-Balagh, 31 January 1946.

At last the Egyptians have read the Egyptian government's memorandum to the British government requesting negotiations, and the British government's reply to that memorandum.

They read these two documents after having pressed, with the utmost insistence, for their government to take a decisive step — to write its memorandum so as to receive the British reply to it, and so that the Egyptians might know where they stood and what was intended for them.

And we must record — with a great deal of sorrow and bitterness — that the Egyptians truly exerted violent efforts to compel their government to take this step. Scarcely had the war laid down its burdens than the Wafd demanded Egypt's full rights in an explicit memorandum, free of any crookedness or distortion, clear and free of ambiguity or obscurity, strong and free of weakness or frailty. Then the people set about pressing the government to pursue, through official channels, the realization of the national demands. So the ministers put their fingers in their ears for a time, until, finding themselves cornered and seeing no escape from speech and action, they chose speech and deferred action; and so our Prime Minister declared in Parliament, in late August, that he would neglect no opportunity to enter into negotiations with the ally to realize the national demands. The ministers and Parliament slept on this declaration for a full month, saying nothing and doing nothing, while the people went on saying and saying, demanding and pressing their demand, the ministers sunk in a sleep that no voice of the people could reach — until they were awakened by a single voice they feared more than they feared the whole of the people: the voice of Sidqi Pasha, who denounced their policy of buying time, for a reason God knows, and Sidqi Pasha knows, and the ministers know, and which the Egyptians very nearly know too.

At that point the political committee, of such far-reaching voice and broad and ample fame, convened, and decided that the present moment, in September, was the most suitable of all moments for taking up negotiations, and the Council of Ministers endorsed this decision. Then the ministers slept, and the political committee slept, and Parliament continued its sleep, and the people went on saying and saying, demanding and pressing their demand, while the distinguished leaders

and seasoned statesmen lay sunk in a deep sleep that no voice of the people could reach. And the British newspapers were pleased with their sleep, praising their preference for ease and their concern for repose, mocking the people's wakefulness and its demand for evacuation and the unity of the Nile Valley — until the group was awakened by a voice they feared more than they feared the voice of the people, and more than they feared the voice of Sidqi Pasha: the voice of Mr. Bevin, who declared one day in the British Parliament that he had received no official request from Egypt to enter into negotiations. And Sidqi Pasha was the quickest of the group to wake, for he is, it would seem, the eldest among them, the lightest sleeper, the keenest of sense, and the most knowledgeable of them all as to which way the winds blow. Sidqi Pasha raged and stormed, gave warning, and then resigned. And matters proceeded between sleep and resumed wakefulness, until the great strugglers and the lesser strugglers rose up, and stirred a crisis — quite a crisis — and resigned, or threatened resignation, and the political committee endorsed what they wanted, and the Council of Ministers hesitated and then yielded, and approved what the great and lesser strugglers wanted, and what the political committee wanted, and wrote the memorandum and sent it to the English, and it went to them tarrying in its journey, slow in its course, just as its authors had tarried in conceiving it, and were slow in writing it, and hesitated in sending it. And the Egyptian government kept hesitating over this memorandum from the end of August until the twentieth of December. On that day the Egyptian memorandum arrived, resplendent in beauty, dazzling in loveliness, turning one cheek away and revealing the other, as Bashar puts it, at the British Foreign Office; and the British received it with a lukewarm reception and a calm welcome, and set about sleeping just as the Egyptians had slept. But the climate of Great Britain does not invite sleep as the climate of Egypt invites it, so the British slept only a month, whereas the Egyptians slept month after month after month. And at last the British awoke, sluggish from this brief sleep of theirs, and replied to the Egyptian memorandum. The strange thing is that they awoke at the very time when the Egyptian Foreign Minister on one hand, and the great and lesser strugglers on the other, stirred up that crisis of theirs over the Security Council and its competence to consider the Egyptian question. But their awakening at this particular time was mere coincidence, nothing more and nothing less, for the clamor was loud and the clamor was disturbing. The Iranians were presenting their case to the Security Council, the Syrians and Lebanese were threatening to present their case to the Security Council, the Russians were presenting the case of Greece and the case of Indonesia to

the Security Council, and the Egyptian Foreign Minister was announcing that Egypt would not present her case to the Security Council. And all these voices together made a great din and clamor and uproar and confusion, and the voice of the Egyptian Foreign Minister alone was the sweet, gentle, mild, graceful voice. And people differ as to what it was that woke the English: was it the harshness of those discordant voices presenting their cases to the Security Council or threatening to present them? Or was it the sweetness of this Egyptian voice announcing that it would present nothing to the Security Council at all? In any case, the English awoke — at the opportune moment — from their brief sleep.

And their awakening at this very time was likewise mere coincidence, nothing more and nothing less, but they awoke nonetheless, and sent their reply to Egypt at the most opportune of all moments for sending it — at the very time when a group of ministers resigned in protest against the Foreign Minister and his sweet, gentle voice; and the timing of this reply, at the moment of this crisis and at the most opportune of all moments for its arrival, was likewise mere coincidence, nothing more and nothing less. Nor was the British reply any less coy, any less diffident, any less given to coquetry and reluctance, than the Egyptian memorandum had been.

For the British reply arrived, and yet did not arrive; it reached the Prime Minister, and yet did not reach him. Some of its wording grew confused along the way, so that there was no escaping questions, inquiries, and corrections. What matters is that the reply arrived — at the opportune moment — and so the crisis dissolved and the murk cleared, and the resigned ministers returned to their posts. And this morning the Egyptians read the Egyptian government's memorandum, and the British government's reply — so what did they read? They read nothing; for the Egyptian memorandum is lukewarm in the extreme, everything in it betraying that it is the speech of a sleeping people, written before they had fully awakened. They wrote it while drowsiness had not yet left their eyelids, so that they, though they are the strong, were granted no strength, and they, though they are the men of resolve and determination, were granted neither resolve nor determination. They saw, as a sleeper sees in a dream, that they were writing a memorandum demanding the national rights; and when they woke they found the memorandum already written, and so they sent it. And so, in a great deal of lukewarmness and a great deal of softness and gentleness, they ask the British government to consider that the time has become suitable for

reconsidering the treaty — because this treaty was signed under the influence of circumstances and events that required restricting Egyptian independence, and the Egyptians accepted these restrictions under the influence of those circumstances and events, believing them to be temporary, destined to lapse once the circumstances and events themselves had lapsed. And those circumstances and events have indeed lapsed, with the victory of the Allies and the founding of the United Nations, and the war has exhausted the provisions of the treaty, and it has become natural that these provisions should be reconsidered.

And the memorandum made mention of Egypt's assistance to the Allies, in a general, vague mention, innocent of any clarity or specification. And whatever my opinion of this memorandum may be, I cannot overlook two things on which, I believe, all Egyptians will dwell at length.

The first: what the memorandum states, that Egypt knows her duty to defend her own soil, and that she will not hesitate to make whatever sacrifice is needed to strengthen her army, so that it may hold firm against any invader until the reinforcements of the Allies and of the United Nations reach her.

There is something truly curious in this notion — namely, that Egypt, in requesting negotiations, records her own inability to defend her soil independently. For the utmost of the enormous sacrifices she will make amounts only to holding firm against an invader until relief comes to her from her allies, and then from the United Nations. So Egypt determines, before entering into any negotiation at all, that she will remain in need of her allies' relief. And what more do the English require than this, when, so long as Egypt acknowledges that she will always need the relief of her British allies, what is there left to negotiate? And if this need is settled and acknowledged, the English may well say: why should the relief you need, by your own admission, not be stationed in the nearest possible place, so that it may reach you without your having long to wait for it? It would be best for it to be stationed on your own soil; and if it cannot be stationed outside your soil, then it is best that bases be prepared from which it may come to your relief the moment it arrives. There must, then, be airfields on your soil, and naval bases in your ports, and bases on your soil too in which the relieving army may take shelter. And we must be able to make use of these bases in the shortest time possible, for war does not love delay, nor does it know how to wait.

And in this way the Egyptian negotiator himself paves the way for his British adversary to cling to occupation, or to something resembling occupation. Had those who wrote this memorandum been fully awake when they wrote it, the slightest alertness would have allowed them to free themselves of this sentence, which I want to believe was written by error and not by design.

As for the second thing, it is this sentence that was added to the memorandum as though it had not originally belonged to it, added rather as a precaution, and appended to its end without any reservation, as though those who wrote the memorandum had forgotten something, and then remembered it, and so, caught unawares, hastily added it on. And this obscure, vague, inserted sentence, joined to the memorandum at the very last moment, is the one concerning the Sudan.

As for the British memorandum, it is masterly in political cunning and in a candor that discloses nothing at all. It informs the Egyptian government that it has received its memorandum, apologizes for the delay in replying on account of international circumstances and its need for study, and concedes the Egyptian point of view, so that it has no objection to the negotiations beginning before the date fixed by the treaty.

The Egyptian government had requested that an Egyptian delegation proceed to London to take up these negotiations; the British government replied that it would shortly send instructions to its ambassador in Cairo to begin preliminary conversations. And so the delegation will not proceed to London except after the preliminary conversations with the ambassador have gone a long way, so that the two sides may discern what benefit there is in the delegation's proceeding to London at all.

And this is the first sign of trouble — or, if you prefer, the first sign of refusal. For it would appear that the British government does not regard the delegation's travel to London as being as easy and simple as the Egyptian government supposes. Let us talk in Egypt, then; and if we find the talk useful, it can be continued across the seas; otherwise we shall stop where we are, and the Egyptian delegation will have spared itself any effort or hardship. And what, after all, is there to talk about in Cairo?! The British reply has already outlined the subject of these forthcoming conversations, for the British government holds, above all else, that the fundamental principles of the treaty remain sound in their

essence, whereas the Egyptians hold that these principles have lost all meaning now that the war has ended and the United Nations has been founded. Among these fundamental principles is the sharing between the English and the Egyptians in protecting the Canal; the Egyptians hold that this principle has lost all meaning now that the war has ended, while the English hold that it remains sound in its essence. The English and the Egyptians are all agreed on the necessity of cooperation between the two states, but the English base this cooperation on partnership between equals for the protection of their interests. And the Labour government loves partnership, and loves the company of shared interest, and loves everything connected with socialism, for it is, it would seem, a socialist government. Playing with words is one of the arts of rhetoric, but the Egyptians, it would seem, love neither partnership nor company nor any form of sharing, and hold another view of socialism altogether. The British reply then concludes that the British government has taken note that Egypt wishes the question of the Sudan to be a subject of the negotiations.

And so the Egyptians read these two memoranda, and emerge from reading them with nothing but fear, doubt, and ill foreboding. Be that as it may, the British ought to know, and the Egyptians who support this present order ought to know, that the conversations which will begin in Cairo will be conducted, on the Egyptian side, by men who, whatever their standing and whatever their official or unofficial rank, do not represent the people, nor speak in its name, nor rely on its backing, nor have any power to bind it to anything; they can take, but they cannot give. It is the right of every Egyptian, and it is incumbent upon every Egyptian, to take for his homeland whatever benefit he can; but no Egyptian, whoever he may be, has the right to bind his homeland, or to give away any part of its benefits, except with that homeland's own consent, expressed through a true parliament, freely and openly elected.