

Ingratitude ...!

Al-Jumhuriya, 7 October 1961.

Many long years ago, I first heard talk of Arab unity, and I did not hear it, the first time, the second time, or the third time, from anyone but Syrians. Arab unity was a dream for the Syrians when their land, their life, and all their interests lay in the hands of the French, who disposed of them however they pleased and toyed with them however they liked. And perhaps it had been a dream for the Syrians even before that, when Syria was subject to the Ottoman Turks, who managed her affairs and inflicted upon her people the worst of torments. And perhaps the Syrians took comfort in this dream, against the tyranny of the Turks and the injustice of the French. And perhaps they saw in its realization a means by which to escape their harsh trials and recover something of their freedom, their dignity, and their sovereignty — not in their own Syrian homeland alone, but in the whole Arab homeland. And this dream came close to being realized when the Western Allies triumphed over the Turks, and when Syria became an independent state. But that independence had scarcely seen the light of day before the darkness of the French Mandate closed in upon it, and the Syrian homeland was torn to utter shreds in the hands of the French, divided into petty states which the mandatory powers toyed with, steering them toward their own interests, so that the dream returned once more to caress the souls of the Syrians. And everyone knows how splendidly the Syrians conducted themselves in resisting French injustice, how they sacrificed their wealth and their lives in pursuit of a return to independence, and how their hearts grew confident and their souls assured that this independence, once granted to them, would not be an end in itself, but would be a means toward the realization of another, broader, more comprehensive, and more honorable independence — namely, the independence of the whole Arab homeland, and, thereafter, the realization of the unity of the Arab nation.

And the Syrians, in those days, hated to hear from any Arab the phrase "the Syrian nation"; indeed, they would hasten to correct this phrase, saying to whoever uttered it: do not say this, for there is no Syrian nation, nor an Iraqi nation, nor an Egyptian nation, but only a single nation — the Arab nation; say, if you wish, the Syrian people, the Iraqi people, the Egyptian people, for these peoples must inevitably unite in the modern age as they once united in a time gone by, and all become, once more, an Arab nation as they once were in a time gone by.

And I recall that I disputed with them a great deal over this union, and used to ask them: where, then, would the capital of this union be?! Would it be in Medina, as it was in the days of the Rightly Guided Caliphs?! Or in Damascus, as it was in the days of the Umayyads?! Or in Baghdad, as it was in the days of the Abbasids?!

And they would answer me with a scorn beyond all scorn, saying: this is not what matters; what matters is that the Arab nation achieve its unity, and there is no harm in the capital of this union being wherever it is wanted to be.

Then it was not long before they accused me, in their newspapers, first of Pharaonism, and afterward of Shu'ubiyya, and then went beyond me to accuse all, or most, of the Egyptian writers of this very Pharaonism which they claimed to detest with the utmost detestation and to reject with the utmost rejection.

And I was in Syria in the year nineteen forty-four, when delegates from the Arab countries gathered in the city of Alexandria to study the establishment of the Arab League. And I have not forgotten that I delivered a lecture in Damascus on the millennial anniversary of Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, in which I wished success to the idea of the Arab League and to those striving to realize it, whereupon the enormous crowds erupted in cheering and applause, while Mr. Shukri al-Quwatli — then President of the Syrian Republic — presided over that gathering, and the cheering and applause continued without pause until I despaired, or very nearly despaired, of ever finishing my remarks on Abu al-Ala.

And in those days, the Syrians took to congratulating me on having renounced Pharaonism and inclined toward Arab unity — not only in Damascus, but in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, in Aleppo, and in Hama as well.

Such were the Syrians throughout the French Mandate; and when that mandate ended and independence was granted to the Syrians, they had no doubt whatever that the realization of comprehensive Arab unity had become close at hand.

And there is no doubt whatsoever that the Syrians were among the foremost in thinking of unity, in calling for it, and in striving earnestly toward it, until, on a certain day, they found themselves compelled to hasten its realization, to press for that realization with the utmost and most forceful insistence, and to race ahead of the circumstances favorable to the realization of this union, lest obstacles arise in the way of

its realization.

Then they came to Egypt one day and besieged her President with insistence and pressure, all but laying upon him the burdens of the grave troubles then afflicting Syria. Turkey was harassing them along the northern border, Nuri al-Said was dreaming of the Fertile Crescent and seeking England's help in realizing it, and Israel was a looming danger along the border on yet a third side.

And it was as though the Syrians' very bearing were about to recite to the President of the Republic in Egypt that ancient Arabic verse which has become proverbial:

*If I am to be eaten, then let it be you who eats me,
or else come to my rescue before I am torn apart.*

But the President of the Republic had no wish to devour anyone, nor did he wish his own homeland to devour anyone; he was simply a generous Arab man who did not hesitate to rush to the aid of any other Arab citizen in need of that aid and asking for it.

And so, too, the President of the Egyptian Republic found himself compelled to respond to this Syrian call, knowing full well that this response would stir up for him countless problems, and would expose him to kinds of hardship that only men of firm resolve can overcome, and would burden him with weights that only those who believe in truth and in good, and who answer the call of chivalry, honor, and rescue when summoned to it, can bear.

And I recall that I met one of our ministers after this union had been agreed upon, and said to him: this union which you have agreed to, before its time, will stir up problems for you and for us that we have no need of, and we have enough problems already facing us in our own homeland. And his answer was that the generous man prefers to offer up sacrifices, however heavy and however grave, rather than expose his brother to danger.

The union was thus concluded, and the Syrian people ratified it unanimously, and the Egyptian people was no less unanimous in ratifying this union. And problems began, and followed one upon another, and the President of the Republic and his colleagues bore their weights, their burdens, and their troubles, sparing nothing of their effort and sparing nothing of their money. And there is no doubt whatsoever that what Syria

gained from this union was a thousand times and more what the Egyptian people gained from it in these past three years.

The Syrian homeland was preserved for its people, its borders were made secure, the ambitions of the covetous toward it were cut short, life was made easier for the Syrians both in their own country and in ours as well, gains scarcely to be measured were made available to workers and farmers, and social justice was realized among them to the furthest extent that could be realized in this short span of time. But man is prone by nature to insolent ingratitude, quick to deny a favor, quick to disbelieve in a blessing received, and it was for this reason — and for no other reason — that a small faction of Syrians answered the call of colonialism, preferring their own private interests over the interests of the Syrian homeland, indeed over the interests of the whole Arab homeland.

They preferred to live in ease and to indulge to excess in that ease, and for the Syrian people to suffer and drown in suffering; they preferred to realize their own unjust gains and their own sinful tyranny, rather than let the hopes of unity, might, and dignity dawn in the souls of Arabs across all their different homelands.

And the President of the Republic took, in the face of this betrayal, this ingratitude, and this disbelief in a blessing received, a stance that can be described, at the very least, as the stance of a noble and generous man: he chose the safety of the Syrian homeland above all else, refused to yield to mere sentiment, refused to compel the Syrians to be faithful to their oaths, their pledges, and their covenants, and left them alone with their own consciences; indeed, he went further still, and asked of the Syrians only that they not spill one another's blood, and that they preserve the unity of the Syrian homeland so as to defend it when troubles should overtake it. All this he did, without once standing between the Syrians and doing with themselves whatever they wished; he held back on only a single point: that he would not recognize a Syrian government unless the Syrian people had ratified it in a free and dignified plebiscite.

And all Egyptians stand with the position of the President of the Republic, and pray to God to guide the steps of the Syrian people, to direct it toward its true interests, and to make its highest ideal always truth, goodness, and the dignity of the Arabs; and they hope, before God, exalted is He, that this noble verse of the Surah of the Bees may not come

to apply to the ungrateful minority among our Syrian brothers: "And God sets forth the parable of a city that was secure and content, its provision coming to it abundantly from every quarter; then it disbelieved in the favors of God, so God made it taste the garment of hunger and fear for what its people used to do."