

Two Truths

Al-Balagh, 25 October 1945.

Which of the two ministers is in earnest, and which of the two ministers jests? Which one advises Parliament honestly, telling it nothing but the truth, and which one evades Parliament, telling it only what he wishes to tell it? And which of the two ministers teaches the other the art of statesmanship and the principles of conducting foreign affairs: is it Egypt's Prime Minister, al-Nokrashi Pasha, or is it the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Bevin? There is no doubt that Egyptians are bewildered between these two formidable ministers; one of them wishes to tell the Egyptian Parliament nothing at all, while the other wishes to hide nothing from the British Parliament, and yet both enjoy their parliament's confidence, and both claim to offer their parliament the most sincere advice, confronting it with the plain, unambiguous truth.

Can it be utterly absurd, utterly false, this philosophical and moral principle men have agreed upon ever since they learned to think — that truth is one and does not multiply — and can modern developments have proven true what used to be said in France, that there are two truths separated by the Pyrenees that divide France from Spain? Can there be an Egyptian truth beyond all doubt, and a British truth beyond all doubt, these two truths failing to meet now, each heading in a direction opposite to the other's, yet perhaps destined to meet tomorrow, or the day after, on some day near or far?

And Egyptians know they have demands they will not rest until achieved, and that they have pressed their government to negotiate with the British for their fulfillment, and they know that the head of their government has declared before Parliament that he and his colleagues believe in Egypt's rights, and bear the burden of these rights, and will not fall short in seizing any opportunity to attain them. And Egyptians know they have differed over how to understand and interpret this declaration: most of them say the Prime Minister has done nothing, but merely consoles the people with wishes and hopes, as children are consoled with toys and promises offered to them; and the fewest of them say the Prime Minister has done everything, and will do more than everything, but he is a man of statesmanship and shrewdness, a man of firmness and resolve, a man of caution and care, who speaks only when speech serves him well — a man who prefers gold to silver, gold being, of course, silence, and silver

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And the disagreement continued between the majority who doubted what the Prime Minister had done and the minority who believed in what he had done; then one minister told one newspaper that the ministry had indeed done something, while another minister told another newspaper that the ministry had done nothing. And the head of the ministry wished to settle this disagreement, so the journalists gathered around him, sharpened their ears, readied their pens, and prepared to listen and record; and the Prime Minister spoke — but said nothing at all, and the journalists left him just as they had come to him, their hearts filled with doubt, their souls with suspicion, their minds with confusion.

Then criticism of the Prime Minister intensified, from his own friends before his opponents, and the Prime Minister — ever the final word on matters — decided to dispel the ambiguity, erase the confusion, and remove the anxiety; so he convened his party's political committee, and afterward convened the Council of Ministers, and announced to the people that the political committee had decided, and the Council of Ministers had approved what it decided, that this moment is the most suitable time of all for negotiating the fulfillment of Egyptian demands with the English.

And here the disagreement among Egyptians intensified once more: most of them said this was simply words spoken to Egypt without ever being conveyed to the English, while the fewest of them said this was words spoken to Egypt and to the English together, meant to reassure Egypt that the government could be trusted to carry out its duty in the best manner, and meant to invite the English not merely to open the door to negotiations, but to actually walk through that door. Then the newspapers began to claim, at one moment, that the decision of the political committee and the Council of Ministers had been conveyed to the English, and at another moment, that it had not been conveyed; and some of them began saying the British had responded to this communication, while others said they had not responded to it at all.

And Parliament convened in its special session, and the Prime Minister addressed it but said nothing, and Parliament adjourned, satisfied, or indignant, or torn between satisfaction and indignation. But the Prime Minister remained, as people have always known him, a man of statesmanship and shrewdness, firmness and resolve, preferring gold, which is silence, to silver, which is speech.

Then the newspapers began to differ once more: some of them said the British had responded that they would negotiate only with a government representing the people, and that how this government was formed was no concern of theirs — that being a matter for independent Egypt's own affairs; others said the British had responded that they would negotiate with the present government, and would negotiate with it at Qasr al-Zaafaran, once the British Ambassador returned to Egypt sometime during the coming month.

And while Egyptians disagreed, argued among themselves, and those among them inclined to patience and firmness stood watching, waiting, and fearing for the future, the British Foreign Secretary spoke. And here is where the Egyptian truth ends and the British truth begins, and between the two truths lies a great difference. A difference, first, in form: for the Egyptian truth, as you have seen, is exceedingly tortuous and exceedingly winding, such that a person can scarcely accept it from one side before being turned away to another side, whereas the British truth proceeds smoothly and straight, with no crookedness and no twisting in it at all.

The British Foreign Secretary spoke on the twenty-second of this past August, saying: that he had taken note of the remarks the Egyptian Prime Minister had made before the Egyptian Parliament, and that his government would study the Egyptian questions in a spirit of goodwill and mutual regard for interests, at the suitable time. And the month of August ended, and September came and ended, and October came and nearly ended. And throughout this long stretch of time, the Egyptian truth kept twisting ever more skillfully, and bending ever more skillfully, playing with itself and with the Egyptians as tightrope walkers play upon their ropes. While the British truth remained fixed in its place, never turning right or left, neither twisting nor retreating into itself, neither advancing nor shrinking back, neither rising nor falling — nothing but a block of rock, settled and immovable; for the British Foreign Secretary spoke in the House of Commons yesterday, saying: that he could add nothing to what he had said on the twenty-second of August — that is, that he had taken note of the Egyptian Prime Minister's remarks, and would study the Egyptian-British question at the suitable time, in a spirit of goodwill and mutual regard for interests.

And the British Foreign Secretary had been asked what Egypt might have requested regarding the Sudan, and he said, in plain terms: that he had received no request whatsoever regarding the Sudan, and that he

neither wishes nor advises that this question be raised now. And this is the whole of the British truth, and it is, as you can see, simple: the British government has received nothing from the Egyptian government, and does not wish to raise the Sudan question, and when the suitable time comes, it will study the matters between Egypt and Great Britain in a spirit of goodwill and mutual regard for interests. What could be simpler, easier, or more plainly spoken than this? And what could be more fitting to distress Egyptians, filling their hearts with grief and pain, their souls with rage and fury, than this simple English truth?

The British government has received nothing to this day from the Egyptian government regarding the Sudan, and the British Foreign Secretary has nothing to add to his statement of the twenty-second of August. For all the meeting of the political committee, its decision, the ministers' approval of that decision, and whatever discussions took place in Parliament's special session — none of it gave the British Foreign Secretary anything to add to what he had declared on the twenty-second of August. Why? Because the British Foreign Secretary received nothing whatsoever from the Egyptian government.

Egyptians are free to say and do whatever they please in their own country, for that concerns the British Foreign Secretary not in the slightest, so long as nothing is sent to him, and so long as the Egyptian government has requested nothing of him; and the one thing that concerns the British Foreign Secretary is that Egyptian questions remain dormant, which he has no wish to awaken, and which he does not advise British members of Parliament to awaken either. That is far more likely to spare the British government the trouble of back-and-forth negotiation, and to leave it free for the other, more complicated problems in Europe and elsewhere.

Which of the two truths, then, are we to believe: the Egyptian truth, which puts on a new garment and new finery every single day, adorning itself as in the ignorance of pre-Islamic times in a land where such ostentation is condemned, or the simple, plain, severe British truth, which stirs fury, spreads rancor, and fills hearts with grief and pain?!

Did the Egyptian government request something of the British government, or did it not? Some Egyptians say: yes. Others say: no. Others say: we do not know. And the head of the ministry refuses to say anything plainly, while the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Bevin, tells the British House of Commons in London, on the twenty-fourth of October,

that he has received nothing from the Egyptian government regarding the Sudan, that he does not wish this question to be raised, and does not advise raising it, and that he has nothing to add to what he told the House of Commons on the twenty-second of August.

These, then, are the two truths: a crooked, playful Egyptian truth, tempting at one moment and comforting at another, content one time and indignant the next; and a stern, hateful British truth, from which eyes scarcely dare lift before recoiling, enraged, furious, and in despair. Has the time not come for our Prime Minister to show real earnestness, just once, as the British Foreign Secretary always does?! Has the time not come for the Prime Minister to be frank with the Egyptian nation, telling it the clear, plain truth that puts on no ornament, no finery, and plays no games with people's minds?! Has the time not come for the Prime Minister to realize that the Egyptian people have tasted suffering, and tasted it so thoroughly that they have become suffering itself, and that the Egyptian people have submitted to ordeals, withstood great trials, grown used to facing hardships and enduring misfortunes, neither panicking at calamities nor fleeing from events?

The Prime Minister must know that the Egyptian people are brave enough to meet the truth even when it is hideous to behold, repulsive in appearance, and bitter to the taste; so let him tell them this truth, then, and set it before them exactly as it is, with no affectation of tact, nor of grace, nor of this false allure. We will never believe, whatever the Prime Minister and his supporters may say, that the British Foreign Secretary deceived the British Parliament or lied to it when he declared that he had received nothing from the Egyptian government. And so, a government that has done nothing at all to this day; and so, everything that has been said is idle talk upon idle talk, falsehood upon falsehood, mere words with which the people are consoled, as children are consoled with promises and hopes.

But the Egyptian people are no children, nor do they wish to be children, and the British Foreign Secretary comes close to holding a better opinion of the Egyptian people, and a truer judgment of them, than His Excellency al-Nokrashi Pasha himself. For the British Foreign Secretary knows full well that his statement before the British Parliament will be broadcast throughout every land on earth, and that the Egyptian people will read it without panicking, without being terrified, and without weakening in their insistence on their rights and their demand for them.

The British Foreign Secretary does not hesitate to be frank with Egyptians about the plain truth, while the head of the Egyptian ministry does not dare to be frank with Egyptians about this same plain truth. Why? Because one of them is Mr. Bevin, confident in himself, in his Parliament, and in his people, while the other is His Excellency, Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nokrashi Pasha, who is confident in no one and in nothing, and who fears that the ground might give way beneath his feet — God forgive me — or rather beneath his chair in the office of the premiership, were he to be frank with the Egyptian people and tell them that he has requested nothing whatsoever of the British regarding Egypt's rights and the Sudan.