

France ... and Islam

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France had scarcely finished with her abominable tragedy in Indochina before she found herself facing another tragedy, scarcely less abominable, in North Africa. And what is strange is that she faces this African tragedy with the very same evasion and vacillation with which she faced her tragedy in the Far East. She rises only to hold back, resolves only to hesitate, offering peace with one hand and war with the other.

And amid this hesitation and turmoil, she spills the blood of her own sons and the blood of innocents who are not her sons, and squanders in extravagance the choicest of her own wealth and the choicest of others' wealth — the Americans' — while her anxious concern for her immediate interests distracts her from any thought of her long-term interests, let alone any thought of right, justice, and fairness. And yet, how many warnings have come to her, and to other colonizing nations, which she has paid no heed to, nor have other colonizers paid any heed to them!

The most distinctive trait of injustice is that it is shortsighted; it does not consider consequences, and heeds nothing but its immediate, pressing interests and the hour it finds itself in; it does not profit from the warnings that preceded it, nor does it consider the signs that call it to caution, nor does it look toward tomorrow or the day after. Such is the way of injustice when it falls from some citizens upon others, and such is the way of injustice when it falls from citizens of one nation upon other nations and peoples.

And if you look closely into the affairs of tyrants in their own lands, and those who oppress their fellow citizens, you find them all utterly immersed in folly, deeply sunk in heedlessness; warnings come to them plainly before their eyes, yet they do not look at them nor listen to them; they take no lesson from what has befallen earlier tyrants, nor from what besets tyrants around them, until the calamity seizes them and the wheel turns against them, and their whole affair becomes a ruin upon themselves and a warning example to others.

And such, too, is the way of nations when some rise up in arrogance over others, and when some oppress others. The oppressive, arrogant nations take no lesson from what has befallen other nations that

oppressed people, rose up haughtily upon the earth, and came in the end to ruin and disgrace. Nor do they take any lesson from the experiences they themselves have undergone in their own history, long or short; rather, they follow their own willfulness, yield to vanity and pride, and are seduced by their immediate interests until they fall inevitably into what they must fall into, and then regret it when regret avails them nothing, little or much.

The French themselves have experienced injustice and tyranny in their own land, when their kings and nobles oppressed them in ages past, and have seen the downfalls of tyrants around them, and have tasted the injustice of the foreigner when he occupied their homeland and filled it with corruption and evil.

And they are among the most widely read of peoples in history, the most discerning of its truths, the most capable of drawing out its lessons and warnings. Yet they profit from none of this in their own conduct when they colonize; rather, vanity takes hold of their policy, so that they fall into error after error, and commit sin upon sin.

As though their own mistakes tempted them into committing other mistakes still more abominable.

They saw what befell them in Indochina, when they grew arrogant and haughty and refused to listen to the rebels, who wanted nothing but peace and the establishment of their relations with France on some basis of right, justice, and fairness. Their affair ended at last in that abominable catastrophe that overtook them some weeks ago, when they found themselves seeking a truce from those they had refused to listen to or heed only a few years before. And they are following that same course in North Africa: warnings come to them from their own wise men, and warnings come to them from outside their country as well; they see the downfalls of colonizing nations around them, and they see the victories of once-subjugated nations around them too. Yet pride drives them into sin, and arrogance keeps them from profiting from the lesson and the warning, and their immediate, pressing interests divert them from thinking even about the most elementary matters that ought never to be in dispute or contention.

They remember how they were driven out of Syria and Lebanon, and they see how the wheel turned against them in the Far East, and they see how Great Britain herself — stronger than they, wealthier than they, and wider in dominion than they — was compelled to yield to India, Pakistan,

and other nations that had once submitted obediently to her authority, so that she recognized their right and relinquished to them their independence, willingly or unwillingly. Yet despite all of this, the French heed nothing, and profit nothing from the warnings and lessons they witness.

And they press on in this abominable tragedy of theirs in North Africa, neither reckoning with its consequences nor heeding its results, repeating in North Africa their mistake in Syria and Lebanon, and their mistake in Indochina; one disaster tempts them into another, and one calamity drives them to the next. They read in their newspapers every day that their own blood and the blood of others is being spilled in North Africa just as it was spilled elsewhere. And so they repeat their old course, insisting on imposing order, subduing the rebels and the insurgents against it, and preserving France's reputation in the world and her prestige before the nations — repeating the very same words, the very same ideas, the very same illusions they have so long repeated with regard to Syria and Lebanon, and with regard to Indochina. It never occurs to them that they will meet in North Africa the same fate they met in those lands, and that their surrender to vanity, their reliance on force, and their pride in illusions will avail them nothing tomorrow, just as it availed them nothing in the recent past, nor in the distant past.

The French speak a great deal about the bond between themselves and Islam, and the bond between themselves and Muslims, just as they spoke a great deal before about being the protectors of Christianity in the Far East, and just as they have spoken, and still speak, a great deal about being the champions and protectors of civilization in many lands of the earth — deceiving themselves with this talk, which signifies nothing.

For they have withdrawn from the Near East, and Christianity has faced no danger, little or great, since their departure; and they are withdrawing from Indochina, and civilization in Indochina will face no danger, little or great, after their departure either.

And they do grave wrong to themselves and to others when they fail to distinguish between lands that have their own precedent in civilization and their own precedent in glory and splendor — such as North Africa — and other lands that have had no share of civilization and have never known glory or splendor, because they have not yet emerged, or have scarcely emerged, from that first stage of humanity which knows nothing, or scarcely knows anything at all.

And the French predicament in North Africa arises from this: that when they conquered those lands while their people were heedless of themselves and of their own rights, the French failed to reckon that this heedlessness was only temporary, and would pass from its people sooner or later; so they were not content with mere political domination, but many of them emigrated to those lands in wave after wave, settling upon its soil and monopolizing the best of what it had to offer, and building for themselves and their fellow countrymen immense wealth and broad standing. And now they are bewildered, with everything thrown into confusion for them. The Africans have awoken to their own rights and have demanded them; they have recalled their own precedent in glory and civilization and wished to revive it; they have seen their land and their wealth in the hands of these newcomers, and have wished that their relations with these newcomers be built on right, justice, and fairness — that they not be strangers in their own land, and that the newcomers not monopolize all the good of it to their exclusion.

So the French predicament is a tangled one: it is not easy for them to relinquish all or part of what is in their hands, nor is it easy for them to keep all or part of what is in their hands — their immediate interests and their pride urge them to impose themselves by sheer force, caring not that in doing so blood is spilled, lives are destroyed, and sins are committed; while urgent necessity, the conditions of modern life, the awakening of peoples to their rights, and the clear signal that old-style colonialism is passing away, urge them instead to restore to these lands all or part of their right. So they are torn between two courses, the sweeter of which is bitter and the easier of which is hard: a colonialism with no way forward and no hope in it, or a withdrawal that is painful to bear and that sacrifices much material benefit, and much of that vanity which the soul can only enjoy through hardship and toil.

And thus France suffers through her bond with this part of the Islamic world, and this part of the Islamic world suffers through its bond with France, and there is no way for France to be delivered from this suffering, which she spreads both within her own homeland and beyond it, except through some measure of compelling herself to do what she dislikes, and sacrificing willingly what there is no way to keep — and establishing her relations with this part of the Islamic world, indeed with the whole Islamic world, upon affection, friendship, and cooperation, rather than upon hatred, enmity, and discord, which avails her nothing, and which will end, without doubt, in the loss of everything.