What?

al-Balagh, 22 February 1945

There is a French proverb: "Calm after the storm." And an Arabic proverb: "At dawn, the travelers praise the night's journey." What is certain is that the storm has not yet calmed, and that dawn has not yet broken, though its first signs are already glimmering in the distance.

By "storm," I do not mean the storm of war, nor by "dawn" the dawn of peace that will break once the armistice is signed — that is not my concern in these pieces. I mean, rather, the political storm, and the political dawn. It is clear that the political storm preceding calm and clarity remains deeply turbulent and confused, and that the dawn of accord has not yet managed to dispel the darkness of disagreement.

I imagine the reader has grown weary of these cheap metaphors and figures of speech, and is impatient to reach plain, comprehensible language. And the plain, comprehensible truth is this: matters of international politics may well be perfectly clear in the minds of Mr. Churchill, Mr. Roosevelt, Marshal Stalin, General de Gaulle, and those in their closest confidence — but they remain thoroughly obscure to the likes of us, poor servants of God with no access to the finer details and hidden particulars of these affairs. The clearest proof of this is that last week's revelation of the decisions the three issued at the Crimea Conference showed people only two directions: one perfectly clear, concerning Russian policy in Eastern Europe; the other thoroughly obscure, concerning policy toward the other parts of this wretched world.

Russian policy in Eastern Europe is simple enough: Poland's borders must change, and their change has already been decided; Romania and Bulgaria must live beneath the shelter of Russian friendship, and are already sheltering beneath that ample shade; Czechoslovakia must recover her independence, resting on the Russian army. The Russian alliance and the Russian army are working to liberate Czechoslovakia, and the Russian alliance has stood for a long time now. But as for everything else, in Europe and in the wider world, matters remain obscure, in need of a great deal of clarification. It might be said the Atlantic Charter guarantees the restoration of order to the rest of the world — but the Atlantic Charter has become a guide, not a rule, as Mr. Churchill himself informed us yesterday in the House of Commons; it is, then, a lamp whose light may grow stronger or weaker, depending on

how fiercely or gently the storms blow. And nothing proves the obscurity of the matter, and the intensity of the storm that promises calm near or far, more clearly than these two questions the whole world speaks of these days, and nothing else: the relations between France and America on the one hand, and the relations between the Arab East and Europe and America on the other.

As for the relations between France and America, people have long known these were never simple, nor easy, nor free of a certain complication — since General de Gaulle's own approach to politics, candid and resolute, confronting matters with severity and gravity, and taking straightforward paths toward them, never much pleased the Americans. Some went so far as to claim a certain personal coolness between General de Gaulle and Mr. Roosevelt, though these reports carry no real weight; the two political leaders have met more than once, in Casablanca and in Washington. But relations between America and the new France have never quite reached the straightforward footing one might have expected, given the traditional friendship binding the two countries since the late eighteenth century.

What matters here is not to search for the causes that have cast a dark veil over this friendship, a veil we hope will soon lift, but to note that France is angered at not having been invited to the Crimea Conference, after having been promised, more than once, that she would be treated, from the moment of her liberation, exactly as she had been treated before the war that cost her very nearly her whole existence. She has expressed this anger through General de Gaulle's own declaration: that France will bind herself to no decision on world affairs unless she has studied it, debated it, and reached her own conclusion through free deliberation and independent judgment. She refuses to have decisions dictated to her — not merely those concerning herself, but those concerning world affairs generally.

For this reason, France received the Crimea decisions with a great deal of reserve and caution. Then came Mr. Roosevelt's own invitation to the head of the provisional French government, requesting that the two meet in Algiers — an invitation General de Gaulle declined, with French politeness, on the grounds that France's own public affairs did not permit him to leave Paris, and that France was still waiting for the President of the United States to visit her, having invited him to do so as far back as this past November.

This decline struck Mr. Roosevelt himself with a certain real pain, and a certain real disappointment as well, since he had wished, according to the official communiqué, to study with General de Gaulle certain grave matters concerning both states. And this decline struck American public opinion very hard indeed, to the point that France's conduct was described as cold, coarse, and lacking in taste. All of this amounts to storms that will settle into calm — clouds that, however violently they gather in winter, will disperse just as summer clouds disperse — but they point to one single thing: that the atmosphere of world politics remains very far indeed from either clarity or calm.

As for relations between the Arab East and the European-American West, these are no closer to clarity than the relations between France and America. Proof of this lies in the fact that people talk endlessly on this subject without touching on anything definite. It is plain that meetings of the greatest gravity took place in Egypt this past week, and that other grave meetings continue in Cairo even now; that our own Prime Minister has spoken to the Chamber of Deputies in something of a hinting, oblique manner; that he receives whomever he receives, summons whomever he summons, and gathers his ministers in what amounts to a near-continuous meeting; that rumours have multiplied, mixed together, and contradicted one another; that the papers tell us today Parliament may hold a secret session on Saturday to hear a statement from the Prime Minister; and that the telegraph tells us Mr. Churchill may deliver a statement in the House of Commons on Arab Eastern affairs.

If all of this points to anything, it points to grave, obscure events about to occur. But what might these events be? That knowledge belongs to those who conduct policy in East and West, and to those closest to them; and yet there are things worth saying, things Egyptians would do well to attend to with the most careful, constant precision. These coming events, it is said, concern the achievement of our national aspirations — and our national aspirations are very well known, entirely clear, matters on which Egyptians never disagree, whatever rivalries divide them: they all want Egypt's independence to be pure, free of any taint; they all want the British armies to evacuate Egypt fully and genuinely; and they all want, when they speak of Egypt, the Sudan to be counted as one of her own constituent parts, with no distinction, great or small, between the two.

These are matters all Egyptians agree upon, and understand, whenever our national aspirations, our national goals, are mentioned. What effect, then, might these coming events have on these goals, on these aspirations? And what further efforts might be demanded of Egypt, beyond the efforts Egypt has already made to reach these goals, to achieve these aspirations? And how can Egypt possibly make her own will known, clearly and plainly, free of ambiguity or obscurity, before binding herself to anything that constrains her own future, or before taking decisive steps in her own history? How can Egypt possibly make her will known in all of this, while still subject to wartime conditions, and to the martial law and censorship of the written and spoken word these conditions demand?

There is another observation worth making: the Prime Minister was calling for Egypt to enter the war back when the war stood close to Egypt, and when entering it would have exposed Egypt to a great deal of terror; I myself was among the few who shared this view and this call. But Egypt did not want war, and chose instead to carry out the treaty faithfully, honestly, and sincerely, for which her allies thanked her.

It might now be said that Egypt could enter the war now that its danger has passed. May I be permitted to say that entering the war after its dangers have passed does not suit the dignity we wish for Egypt, or her rising above the conduct Italy showed toward France? It might be said, too, that if Egypt enters the war, she does so only to have her own voice heard at the peace conference. But I would rather be candid: our British allies promised us their help in securing our participation in the peace conference — let them honour that promise. I have no wish to purchase a seat at the peace conference by declaring war only once the dangers of war have already passed from Egypt. We refused to declare war when our participation might genuinely have been dangerous, when the enemy stood on our own soil, and when his aircraft were pouring some measure of terror and destruction down upon some of our own cities.

It might be said there is no way to take part in the peace conference except by taking part in the war's own final stages. But it seems to me we have already, in fact, taken part in this war — through the effort we expended, the assistance we provided, the burdens we bore — and our allies have themselves recorded all of this on our behalf. Why, then, should we be made to do what we do not wish to do, what we do not see as fitting our own sense of ourselves? I can understand demanding

participation in the war from those who expended no effort in it, and bore no sacrifice for it — but as for us, nothing more ought to be demanded of us than what we have already done.

And beyond this, what exactly are we meant to accomplish at the peace conference? What advantages will we actually gain by taking part in it? Our aspirations and our goals are clear; they harm no one, and diminish no one else's rights — they simply secure our own. It does not particularly matter to me whether Egypt's rights are secured at the peace conference, or elsewhere than the peace conference; what matters to me is that Egypt obtain these rights, and obtain them with her dignity fully intact — since she has done everything within her power to remain dignified and whole.

This concerns Egypt's own affairs — but these discussions are not confined to Egypt alone; they touch the whole Arab world, and touch Arab unity as well. I have no wish to wade into this subject while the Arab world's own statesmen are still negotiating it, but there is one observation an Egyptian ought not to neglect: the British press has taken to insisting that Europe and America ought, from now on, to negotiate with a united Arab federation rather than with separate Arab states. This is a fine sentiment, unobjectionable enough, when these negotiations concern general economic, political, and cultural matters. But when negotiations touch on each state's own independence and national sovereignty, it must be understood that Europe has no choice but to negotiate with each state separately, backed in these negotiations by its own allies, near or far.

Egypt has, in this matter, her own traditions, which she ought not to abandon whatever the circumstances: Egypt has been negotiating her own independence since the last century, and has taken genuinely successful, genuinely impressive steps in these negotiations, backed throughout by the sympathy of the wider Arab world. This tradition must continue; Egypt's own complete independence must be won by Egypt herself, won with dignity and honour intact, never purchased at a price unworthy of the nobility of character and generosity of spirit she holds herself to. And I say again: peoples do not determine their own destiny under martial law and censorship; they determine their own destiny only under complete freedom — a freedom completed and bounded, in turn, by the rule of public law.