

Talk and Dreams

al-Balagh, 17 May 1945

The ancient Arab proverb says: war begins with words.

It appears war also ends with words. Discussion has grown abundant, and argument fierce, across every corner of the earth, well before the war itself actually ended; the roar of cannon has fallen silent in Europe, and the exchange of death between combatants has ceased — but the war of words has only grown fiercer and more heated.

There is no doubt it will grow only more heated and fierce as the days advance, right up until the peace conference itself convenes, and arrives at whatever decisions it is capable of arriving at.

And who knows? Perhaps even this will fail to put an end to the war of words — the needs of the living never truly cease, people's own hopes can never be fully contained, their own ambitions can never be fully bounded, and they will inevitably find themselves in dispute. They ought to count themselves genuinely fortunate, though, should their own disputes end in nothing worse than the divergence of opinion, the clash of inclination, and the scramble for ambition and advantage they now find themselves in — never going so far as what they lived through in these past years: death exchanged as if in gift, destruction drawing ever nearer, each side sparing no excess in breaking the other.

Americans love statistics, love them to excess, and insert them into everything — and they have gone ahead and counted the problems facing the victors in Europe, finding them to exceed thirty in number. Some concern Eastern Europe, some Western Europe, some Central Europe, some Southern Europe, and some concern other countries separated from Europe by the sea, yet bound to her by ties neither willing, nor properly able, to be severed.

The modern world loves specialization, and values it highly, and there is no doubt that, among those concerned with the politics of these thirty-odd problems, there exist groups genuinely devoted to specialization, each preferring to devote itself entirely to one problem, or one cluster of problems, exhausting it through research, study, and scrutiny, uncovering whatever secrets and obscurities within it might feed the war of words still further. But these specialists have not yet

managed to distinguish themselves, nor to raise their own voices above the general clamour — we remain, for now, in a stage of genuine confusion, in which every person holds forth on everything, and every writer writes on every subject. There is nothing strange in this: the European war ended only a week ago.

In any case, there are certain essential centres for this grave war of words: London, Moscow, Washington, and Paris. San Francisco was once thought likely to become the most important of these centres, for a time — but San Francisco soon lost its own significance, once the European war ended, and the great powers' own foreign ministers dispersed from it, returning to their own countries to oversee, at close hand, the management of this war of words, both open and hidden, war's own affairs having now passed to them from their colleagues, the ministers of defence and offence. San Francisco has now fallen to second or third rank, a place of much talk and little action.

Nothing proves this more clearly than the fact that the great questions once studied at San Francisco, and fiercely disputed there, have themselves travelled alongside the foreign ministers to the great centres of political and verbal warfare, becoming matters no longer studied jointly by small, large, and middling nations together, but studied, and settled, by the great powers alone.

These great powers once numbered four: Great Britain, America, Russia, and China. They have now become five, France having been restored to her own natural standing, by unanimous decision of the United Nations Conference at San Francisco.

What is genuinely amusing in all this is that it was the Canadian delegation that proposed restoring this standing to France, and that the delegation seconding this proposal was South Africa's own — and, if my memory does not deceive me, Marshal Smuts is the one who heads the South African delegation. This same Marshal Smuts delivered, not long ago, remarks people have not yet forgotten, and France has certainly not forgotten, in which he declared that France had lost her own place among the great powers for a very long time to come. It is, then, genuinely amusing that Marshal Smuts should be the one supporting the proposal restoring France to her own natural, distinguished standing. This reveals two things: first, that the facts of life are far more powerful than people's own thinking and judgment; second, that people were not mistaken in judging Marshal Smuts a great statesman — since he

matches his own views to the facts of life, and does not hesitate to retract an error, once it becomes clear to him he was mistaken.

Perhaps this also reveals something else, something we ourselves ought to reflect upon at length: that despair, however hateful and dangerous it may be for individuals, is nothing short of absurd where peoples are concerned.

In these very days, one year ago, the Germans were occupying the whole of France, and exercising complete control over her own affairs; the Allies were preparing for the invasion, and the Germans were mocking that same invasion, regarding it as an adventure bound for failure.

Then this invasion began in June, and Paris liberated herself in August, and the year had not even completed its own cycle before the defeated had become other than the victor: France had become, once again, one of the great powers, while Germany lay wholly occupied, the French themselves taking part in her own occupation. If there is one thing nations genuinely ought to avoid, and reject with real force, it is despair — something entirely unsuited to living peoples possessed of ancient glory, and genuine confidence in their own capacity for life.

I say this while thinking of a dream that once crossed certain hearts in Egypt during the war. Given the sheer hardship Egypt bore, the effort she expended, the gratitude and acknowledgment she received, the promises made to her, and the aspirations dressed up before her, there emerged, among Egyptians, those whose own hopes expanded to the furthest possible extent. They reckoned the war's end would guarantee them not merely the completion of independence, but something else, of even greater significance than that same completed independence: genuine, significant participation in managing the great affairs of the world. This dream was neither strange nor aberrant — Egypt truly stood as a point of genuine, great significance in the war's own fate; she knew how to remain faithful to her own allies, how to protect their own rear when the Germans were rushing toward Alexandria and the Nile Valley, how to bolster their own resolve once the Germans turned and fled, how to grant them her own genuine friendship when friends grew scarce, and how her own heart remained steadfast when other hearts gave way.

All of this genuinely happened, and all the Allies knew of it, and thanked Egypt for it, again and again, continuously.

These Egyptians believed all of this would never simply vanish with the wind, never be repaid with mere words of thanks and expressions of praise alone. They were confident that one of the very first effects of the war's own end would be the restoration to Egypt of her own complete rights over the whole of the Nile Valley, and that Egypt would be invited to take part in managing the world's own great affairs — deserving this, on the one hand, by virtue of her own geographical position; deserving it, on the other, by virtue of her own faithfulness to her pledge, at a time when faithfulness to pledges grew scarce; and deserving it, on a third count, by virtue of her own significant future, whether people wished it or not.

I neither believe, nor say, that events have already disproven these dreams; the war in Europe ended only a week ago, and a week is a small thing in human history. I simply hope the coming days and weeks will bring us better news than the past days and weeks have brought us. It would be a genuinely good thing for world politics to say something about the completion of Egyptian independence, and for our own allies in particular to say something about it — for the completion of Egyptian independence has nothing whatsoever to do with the peace conference, nor with the San Francisco Conference; it is no matter pending between ourselves and the defeated Axis, nor any matter pending between ourselves and the Russians, Americans, French, and Chinese — it is a matter between ourselves and our own British allies alone. The war, and its own horrors, have proven that everything between ourselves and the British ought to rest on genuine friendship, and on equal exchange, in both taking and giving.

But nothing has been said, as yet. Let us wait, then, firm, resolute, and confident that this thing must be said, and must become an established fact.

These Egyptians reckoned Egypt would not merely be a founding member of the United Nations Assembly, but would become, too, a permanent member of the Security Council — whether that Council came to number eleven members, or more, or fewer.

This may well seem strange to those who look upon things with a sceptical eye, and certain powerful nations, deceived by their own strength into arrogance and condescension, may well laugh at it — but this dream fits entirely with the facts of things, and with the very nature of peace, if genuine peace is truly what is sought. The war has already

shown there is no path toward peace in Europe, nor in the Near or Far East, unless the affairs of the Mediterranean are themselves settled and secure; and no path toward settling and securing the affairs of the Mediterranean, except through Egypt's own participation in settling and securing them.

There are two possible paths to Egypt's own participation in settling and securing these affairs: the first holds no real hope — compelling Egypt into this participation through coercion, force, and condescension, since the days when Egypt could be governed against her own will have already passed; the second is for this participation to arise from complete freedom, genuine desire, and real conviction that Egypt is a significant force in matters of war and peace, in this particular part of the world.

There is, then, nothing strange in Egypt being consulted on everything concerning the affairs of the Mediterranean, nor anything strange in Egypt herself offering counsel on all of these affairs.

The path toward this is for Egypt to become a permanent member of the Security Council. No one has said, and no one will say, that war has gone forever, and that peace has settled in the Mediterranean basin until the end of time — what is said, rather, is that this present war has ended, but left behind grudges, resentments, rancour, hatred, and ambitions, all of it genuinely capable of bringing war back again one day, unless real precaution is taken against it — and real precaution will never be properly taken, if Egypt is neglected, and her own rights, dignity, and hopes go unheeded.

I say again: these dreams may well be laughed at by sceptics, mocked by the powerful and triumphant — but they remain, all the same, the most precise, the most genuine fit with the facts of things.

Whatever the sceptics and the triumphant may think, and whatever certain foreign journalists may think — those who regard these very discussions with a certain measure of pity, and a certain measure of guile, seeing in them talk that depicts mere cleverness far more than actual fact —

Whatever the view of one side or the other, one thing admits of no doubt: it falls to us, who help the Egyptian people understand their own rights and duties, and reveal to them their own hopes and aspirations, to tell the Egyptian people, candidly, firmly, and resolutely, that it is their own right to secure complete independence for the whole Nile Valley,

their own right to take real, permanent part in managing the affairs of peace, and their own duty — to themselves, and to civilization — to work, to hope, and to strive genuinely toward securing these rights, and shouldering these responsibilities.