

Solidarity

Al-Nida', 4 November 1947.

Umar ibn al-Khattab — may God have mercy upon him — had no way of knowing, as he set out with the Muslims from the pilgrimage in the eighteenth year of the Hijra, that he was about to meet, together with the Muslims of the Arab lands — and especially the people of the Hejaz, Najd, and Tihama — a black and somber year, in which the Muslims would be tested in their persons, their wealth, and their character, and in whatever capacity for endurance under hardship, steadfastness against misfortune, and emergence from calamity had been granted them, and in that noble, distinguished feeling as well which makes a human being truly human, and raises him to the highest rank of dignity — the feeling of sympathy, fellowship, and social solidarity, which plants in the heart of every individual, whatever his station, the conviction that he is a member of a community: he rejoices in its joy, and suffers in its suffering, taking his own share of whatever blessing or hardship befalls it, and of whatever fortune or misfortune comes its way.

Umar — may God have mercy upon him — had no way of knowing that the unseen had in store for him, and for the Muslims of the Arab lands, this harsh ordeal, by which their hearts would be tested, their souls refined, and they would be taught that life is neither unbroken bliss, nor lasting contentment, nor an abundance renewed with every changing season, but rather a mixture of blessing and wretchedness, of pleasure and pain, of happiness and misery — and that the path of the believer, one whose heart faith has truly touched, is never to grow arrogant in abundance, nor intoxicated by ease, nor to despair when tried by wretchedness and misery, never to keep good fortune for himself alone when it is granted to him apart from others, and never to abandon his fellow men as prey to calamities when they strike, and to misfortunes when they descend — but rather to give to people from what he has, so that they may share in his blessings, and to take from people some part of what they have, so that he may share in their hardships.

For God did not spread the light of the sun so that one group of people might enjoy it while another group did not; God did not send the breeze so that one faction of people might breathe it while another faction did not; God did not make the rivers flow, nor cause the springs to burst forth, so that some groups of people might drink from them while

other groups went thirsty; and God likewise did not bring forth plants from the earth so that some might be filled while others went hungry!

Rather, God lavished His bounty so that all people together might enjoy it, their shares of this enjoyment varying, but deprivation ought never to be forced upon any one of them, whoever he may be, whatever his class, and whatever his standing among his fellow citizens.

Umar — may God have mercy upon him — had no way of knowing, as he set out from the pilgrimage that year, that God was about to send the Muslims a new year in which He would test them with hunger, thirst, and nakedness, a trial the like of which they had not known for a very long time indeed. And how could Umar possibly have foreseen this, with the affairs of the young state proceeding exactly as the Muslims loved to see — justice, abundance, far-reaching renown, the spread of conquest, the growth of spoils, and the flow of prosperity?!

But the new year arrives, and lo, the sky withholds its water until the earth burns with thirst for this very water, until it blackens as though turned to ash, until the Muslims are forced to name this very year the Year of Ashes.

The sky withheld water, while the sun poured forth heat without stint, and the earth proved powerless to bring forth for the people what they might eat, and what they might feed to the bleating and braying flocks they used to drive before them.

And Umar looks on, once he has settled in Medina, and lo, the crisis advances slowly and deliberately, yet with unshakable certainty, pressing relentlessly forward; and lo, the people of the desert have been struck by drought, and the drought has grown severe upon them, until they can think of nothing but rushing to their Caliph, seeking from him what might feed their hunger, quench their thirst, and clothe their nakedness. And why should he not do so, when it is he who took their sons and their fathers, their brothers, their breadwinners, and their household providers, and cast them upon those distant frontiers, and drove them into wars whose beginning they knew but whose end they could not foresee?! And why should they not rush to him, when they had felt his love for them, his tenderness toward them, his kindness reaching out to the farthest of them just as it reached the nearest, never once falling short of reaching them, whether by night or by day?!

Then Umar looks on, and lo, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula is sending to him whoever remains in it — the elders, the women, the children, and the helpless who can do nothing at all, and the able who find nothing at all they are able to do... At that, Umar rises to meet this violent, overwhelming crisis as only a man rises who knows the truth as no one after him has known it, who bears the burden as no one after him has borne it, and who faces calamity resolved either to emerge from it or to die in its place, whatever the circumstances — until that very Year of Ashes became one of the treasures of the Muslims, a treasure that never runs dry and is never touched by extinction. In it, Muslims find such lessons, such fine admonition, and such a righteous example that no heart possessing any measure of gentleness or tenderness could possibly resist it — unless it be among those hearts that God, Exalted is He, described as having hardened until they became like stones, or harder still.

And Umar — may God have mercy upon him — began by resisting this calamity in his own person first, insisting on being nothing more than one man among the Muslims: suffering as they suffered, hungering as they hungered, thirsting as they thirsted, and pressing hard upon himself and his own family exactly to the degree that the crisis pressed upon the poorest and most wretched of all people. He did this, first of all, because he believed it was his own due, owed to himself, to God, and to the people; and he did it, too, because he believed it was his due to teach people what solidarity, cooperation, and mutual sympathy ought to look like when trials descend and calamities strike — and so he insisted on living exactly as the poorest of all people lived!

He saw that the Muslims could find clarified butter only with great hardship and effort, and so he forbade himself clarified butter until the common people could find it too... and imposed upon himself plain oil and dry bread. And when the oil grew heavy upon him, he thought that if it were cooked, it might sit more lightly upon his stomach; so he ordered that oil be cooked for him, and ate it cooked — only to find it more painful still and harder to digest, until his complexion changed, his face darkened, though he had once been exceedingly fair.

Then he began feeding people at public tables, sitting with them at these very tables, eating from what they ate; and then he ordered criers to call out among the people: whoever wishes to come to these tables and eat from them, let him do so; and whoever wishes to come to this food and take what he and his family need, to eat it together with them, let

him do so as well.

He personally supervised the preparation of the food, and would sometimes teach the cooks themselves how to cook. But the crisis only grew and grew worse, and the people of the desert kept rushing toward Medina, while many of them were unable to move from where they were, their crops perished, their udders gone dry, their livestock dead — and it became the Caliph's own duty to reach these people in their own homes, and carry their provisions to them, so long as they remained unable to go in search of these provisions themselves.

At this, Umar writes to his governors in the provinces, ordering them to send him relief supplies. Read this brief and magnificent letter that he wrote to his governor over Egypt, Amr ibn al-As — may God have mercy upon him — and consider what this brief and magnificent letter contains of the fiercest urgency, filled all the same with the most merciful mercy and a gentleness beyond which no gentleness can go: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From the servant of God, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to Amr ibn al-As. Peace be upon you. To proceed: do you suppose that I shall perish, and those around me, while you and those around you go on living?! Help, O help! ... O help!"

No sooner had Amr ibn al-As — may God have mercy upon him — read this letter, in which the Commander of the Faithful rebuked him with the harshest of rebukes, than he wrote back to him:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. To the servant of God, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, from Amr ibn al-As. Peace be upon you — I praise before you God, besides whom there is no other god. To proceed: help has reached you; hold fast, hold fast! I shall send you a camel-train whose head shall be with you before its tail has even left me...

Then Amr set about sending this relief by land and by sea, and Umar wrote to his other governors in Syria and Iraq, and all of them did exactly as the governor of Egypt had done. Umar then sent his own envoys to the borders of the Arab lands adjoining Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, ordering them to receive these supplies and carry them out to the people of the desert, in their own places and encampments, to feed them, clothe them, and give them drink. And he was resolved that these envoys of his should never grow weak, nor soft, nor distribute whatever food lay in their hands without first making certain it was truly reaching the bellies of the hungry, and not the storehouses of the hoarders. And more magnificent

still than this, more stirring to the soul, is that Umar — may God have mercy upon him — used to say: "We shall feed them with whatever we find to feed them; and if we lack enough, then let every household that has provisions share its own number with one who has none, until God brings the rain."

And the meaning of this is that he — may God have mercy upon him — had thrown open the treasury's doors wide, resolved to provide for the people from it, and that when nothing more remained in it, he obliged every wealthy household to feed a number of the poor equal to its own, compelling them by the authority of both law and religion, until God brought relief.

And I have not related all of this to you merely to entertain you with the marvels of history, nor to amuse you with these fine anecdotes from the life of the Commander of the Faithful, Umar ibn al-Khattab; for we are living in no time for entertainment, amusement, or diversion — we are living, rather, through black days, no less terrible — and perhaps even more terrible still — than that very Year of Ashes!

For the Muslims, in Umar's days — and in that very year — knew hunger, thirst, and nakedness; but the Egyptians, in this year, know death, and know disease, and know, after death and disease, the very hunger, thirst, and nakedness that the Arabs once knew in the Year of Ashes.

It is the right of the Egyptians, upon whom this plague has been poured, that this plague be driven from them, and its effects turned back from them, so that none among them should go on complaining of hunger, thirst, and nakedness. And this right is a duty incumbent upon the state, so long as its treasury holds whatever money might make this possible. It ought not to turn its thoughts to any other matter until it has dealt fully with this trial; and if its treasuries cannot provide the means, then it is the state's own duty to follow the very path that Umar wished to follow, and to impose upon the capable the care of the incapable, until God brings relief.

The state must know — and the wealthy must know — that giving alms is a virtue in times of ease, comfort, and gentleness; but when hardship grows severe, when crisis presses hard, and when plague descends, then almsgiving becomes a duty imposed by justice itself. And if individuals do not rise to it of their own accord, then it falls upon the state to compel them to it.

The state must know that God commanded the leaders of the Muslims, in times of ease and comfort, to take from the rich and restore to the poor, so that no one among the people should remain hungry or deprived. And when hardship truly strikes, and calamity descends, then it becomes forbidden for the wealthy to eat, to drink, and to clothe themselves, until the hungry among the needy have eaten, the thirsty have drunk, and the naked have been clothed. And it falls to the state to oversee all of this by the authority of law; and if it does not, then it is guilty of the gravest sin — against God, against the homeland, and against its own citizens.

*Indeed, God commands justice and good conduct and giving to relatives,
and He forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression.*

He instructs you that perhaps you will be reminded.

(Qur'an 16:90)

Shall we then dare to hope that the state will listen, and that the wealthy will listen; that the state will take heed, and that the wealthy will take heed; and that we, and human dignity along with us, might be spared the sight of appeals for charity printed in the newspapers, addressed to people who prefer their own wealth to their homeland and to their fellow citizens?!

It is the state's own duty to teach the miserly what generosity and largesse look like, by the authority of law, if these cannot be made to arise from an awakened conscience and a living soul...