

# Neutrality ...

*Al-Musawwar, 6 September 1940.*

I do not think that any of those who lead opinion in Egypt — or who consider themselves leaders of opinion — would be content to prepare Egyptian youth for a life of neutrality: that neutrality founded on fear and cowardice, on selfishness and self-love, which ends by squandering the nation's pride and dignity in exchange for the individual's own safety and pleasure.

It is a word people love most dearly, because it conjures sweet hopes and enchanting wishes; it conjures safety and ease, it conjures peace and well-being, it conjures the enjoyment of life's material and spiritual pleasures, while the people around you suffer fear and terror, panic and anguish, war and its sins, and deprivations beyond counting — and man always favors himself with the good, driven by this selfishness very often to cowardice and baseness, and he savors his own happiness most keenly precisely when the people around him suffer, and relishes his own safety most fully precisely when the people around him are afraid; he sees himself as singled out by a good that others have not won, and so sees in this a distinction of himself above other people. And what person has not been tempted by superiority?! What person has not delighted in being set apart?!

And the word "neutrality" pictures this distinction in the most ravishing, enchanting colors: for there are nations suffering under war, burning in its consuming fire, their sons' lives cut short, their blood spilled, their vast efforts and immense wealth consumed in the costs of war and in whatever it requires of instruments of destruction and means of death.

And alongside these nations stand other nations, who watch this horror from nearby, and look upon it with pity for those whom it has befallen.

Yet in this very pity there is a kind of arrogance; for the people around them suffer while they themselves are happy, and hasten toward death, or death hastens toward them, while they themselves luxuriate in life, anxious for their own safety lest harm reach them or lest even one tongue of this blazing fire around them should touch them.

And in this pity there is a species of cowardice, an art of degradation; for selfishness has always been, and will always remain, one of the sources of cowardice and degradation.

Be that as it may, the word "neutrality" remains dear to people's hearts, because it pictures for them what they rightly — or wrongly — love: safety and well-being, happiness and ease.

Political neutrality is a species of impossibility — yet this word has lost its true meaning in the age we now live in, and has become a mirage of no avail, for two simple reasons. The first is material, bound up with the advance of civilization and what it has brought about in abolishing distances of time and place between nations and peoples, in abolishing the isolation to which nations and peoples once retreated whenever matters grew earnest and evil declared itself openly, and in the facilitation of ties between states and homelands however far apart their lands and however divergent their ways of life; for the nations that once enjoyed neutrality and its pleasures in the last war, and reaped from it material benefits beyond counting, have in this war suffered from neutrality a suffering scarcely less than that of the warring nations themselves. This befell Holland and Belgium in this war. How Holland and Belgium clung to neutrality! How much effort did Holland and Belgium expend in its pursuit! How often did Holland and Belgium close their eyes to irritants for its sake! And yet it availed them nothing in the end. The same befell Norway and Denmark in this war, and however much effort Norway and Denmark expended, however much hardship Norway and Denmark endured for the sake of neutrality, it too availed them nothing in the end. And there is a moral reason, no less baleful than the material one, namely that the moral yardstick itself has changed drastically in the souls of a generation of Europeans; for Germany had failed to give right its due weight and had believed only in force ever since the last century, but was driven to the utmost extreme of this in the present age, declaring it to people openly, without hesitation and without shame, and her tyrant proclaimed before the war, in word and in deed, that he recognizes neither right nor wrong, neither justice nor injustice — or rather, that he does not measure right and wrong, justice and injustice, by their known and familiar standards, but measures them instead by Germany's own interest, and by Germany's interest as he himself sees it, not as any other person sees it; for he is infallible, and none ought to dispute an opinion of his unless he is capable of overpowering him and compelling him to submit and comply! For right

and justice, in his view, are simply whatever suits his own opinion and his own whim! And so legal doctrine, philosophical law, economic law, and moral law — all of this is idle nonsense, of no value and no use whatsoever! There is but one single law, the only one of any value, the only one to be relied upon: the law of German self-interest, German self-interest as the tyrant of the Germans himself feels it. And so everything that morality has held, and that positive and natural law have decreed, concerning neutrality, is empty talk, mouthed by jurists and pleaded by the weak, by which small nations deceive themselves about the suffering that awaits them on the day the German tyrant wills that suffering upon them for his own interest or for Germany's. And this contagion has spread from Germany to Italy, so that the tyrant of Italy now divorces himself utterly from Roman law and Christian principle, and embraces the new religion — the religion of expedience, before which nothing stands, and for whose sake everything is sacrificed. The advance of civilization on the one hand, and the collapse of moral standards in Germany and Italy on the other, have together stripped the word "neutrality" of that beautiful, enchanting meaning I pictured at the opening of this piece, and have given it instead a new meaning: an anxious, troubled waiting that erases all safety from the soul and all ease from the heart, that drives away calm from people by day and drives away sleep from them by night, and fills their minds, hearts, and consciences with unbroken fear and unceasing dread, and the expectation at every moment that what befell the Dutch, the Belgians, the Danes, and the Norwegians might befall them too — so that the word "neutrality" now, if it signifies anything at all, signifies the kind of waiting that resembles a mouse's waiting for the pounce of the cat that toys with it and plays with it, waiting only for the moment it senses that the time to pounce has come.

Intellectual neutrality is cowardice and baseness. This, then, is the political neutrality whose fruits the nations I mentioned earlier have reaped, and whose fruits other nations in the Balkans are now reaping too, willingly or not — but there is another neutrality no less base than this political neutrality, and perhaps even more steeped in baseness, more deeply sunk in cowardice, and more thoroughgoing in degradation: namely, intellectual neutrality. The neutrality of cultivated individuals and thinkers before the crises that convulse the earth, in which nations collide, and in which human civilization itself is exposed to extinction. These thinking individuals, who have distinguished themselves from others in culture and learning, in letters and art, and whom people have

acknowledged as distinguished, placing them in the rank of guiding leaders — a rank they themselves have accepted — so that when they speak, they expect people to listen to them, and when they call, they expect people to answer their call; for they have been raised by their own nations to the rank of an intellectual aristocracy, which, when it speaks, must be heeded, and which, when it commands, must be obeyed. These same thinking, cultivated men, who look upon these grave problems and violent crises, and then turn their gaze away from them, unconcerned and indifferent, because they have chosen neutrality and committed themselves to isolation, choosing for themselves a place of safety and ease — these men have nothing whatsoever to do with thought or with culture; they are merely selfish people who love themselves more than they love truth, justice, civilization, and progress. And if you examine closely this love of themselves, you will find it base and contemptible; for they do not even favor themselves with the true goods of civilization, the fruits of reason, the achievements of art — since all of this is now the very subject of the war, the very object of the struggle, the very thing exposed to annihilation. Had they truly valued it, they would have offered themselves in ransom for it; had they truly valued it, they would have called upon people to protect it and defend it — but instead they favor themselves with these base, nearby, material pleasures, which in the end reduce to food and drink, and to this life that animals too live. They deceive themselves in various ways, persuading themselves that they are devoting themselves to learning, letters, and art, that they read and research and reflect. But this is nothing more and nothing less than self-deception; for the true enjoyment of learning, letters, and art requires that when you read, you read so that others may benefit from your reading, and that when you research, you research so that others may benefit from your research. But to read for yourself alone, and to research for yourself alone — your case then is exactly like that of a man who eats merely to be full and drinks merely to quench his own thirst, nothing more. These cultivated, thinking men, who withdraw into themselves and devote themselves wholly to their own material and spiritual enjoyment, and who declare, openly or in secret, that they are committing themselves to neutrality amid the problems convulsing the world, have nothing whatsoever to do with true culture or true thought; they are simply people who have confined themselves to themselves, and their nations have lost them, humanity has lost them, and civilization has lost them, because they have severed every tie that bound them to their nations, to humanity, and to civilization. And if these cultivated, thinking men go on calling for the intellectual neutrality they love, they become an

evil that must be resisted, a danger that must be repelled; for they are calling for the worst evil there is — calling for the abolition of social solidarity, and for the individual to devote himself wholly to himself, to live for himself alone, and to sacrifice, for his own sake, what nations and communities themselves stand upon.

Neutrality is at odds with the very spirit of youth. Both this intellectual neutrality and that political neutrality carry a danger I should like people to reflect upon, because its effects reach far into the life of nations and peoples in truth — far into their life now, and into their life once these crises are resolved and matters return to stability; for it corrupts the character of the young, blunts their resolve, alters their very nature, and erases from their souls that fervor which sets them apart from the generations that have gone before them in years. For the chief distinction of youth is precisely that generous fervor by which they embrace truth because it is truth, and defend justice because it is justice, and which drives them to sacrifice their effort and their very selves for the sake of whatever opinion they believe in, heedless of results and unconcerned with consequences — seeing only duty, and being driven toward it, and hearing the call of truth, and answering it. By this fervor have nations lived; by this fervor have nations risen; by this fervor have nations preserved their ancient heritage and added to it a new heritage; and by this fervor have nations handed down both their old and their new inheritance to the generations to come. So if the idea of neutrality spreads and is cast into the souls of the young, and their leaders teach them that the individual is entitled to devote himself to himself, to immerse himself in himself, and to practice material neutrality whenever evil rages around him, and intellectual neutrality whenever doctrines and opinions collide around him — then public rights will come to seem of little worth to them, and public duties will come to seem onerous to them as well; they will be made to feel in their hearts a love of comfort and a preference for safety over risking themselves for the sake of upholding truth and sacrificing themselves for the sake of discharging duty, and they will rest content that life is a pleasure to be seized by the shortest and easiest paths, undeterred by the homeland's exposure to danger, undeterred by the homeland's submission to foreign rule, indifferent to whether the homeland be proud or abased, free and honored or enslaved and servile. And I do not think that any of those who lead opinion in Egypt — or who consider themselves leaders of opinion — would be content to prepare Egyptian youth for this life of neutrality, founded on fear and cowardice, on selfishness and self-love, which ends by squandering the

nation's pride and dignity in exchange for the individual's own safety and pleasure. Nor do I think that any Egyptian youth would accept from weak leaders — were such leaders to be found — that they should teach him this life of neutrality, and plant in his heart the notion that the individual's own safety must weigh heavier than the nation's pride, dignity, and independence. I can understand, to some extent, telling Egyptian youth: do not raid before you are raided, do not begin with evil before evil is begun against you. But I should like to understand when it can rightly be said to these young men: defend your homeland, for it has been attacked; defend your dignity, for it has been violated?! Is this to be said to them only once Egypt's borders have been forcibly breached, and there remains no choice but to defend them — or is it to be said to them once it becomes probable that these borders may be breached tomorrow or the day after?! Is it to be said to them only once the infantry of a foreign army breaches the homeland's borders, or is it to be said to them once foreign aircraft breach them instead, dropping their bombs upon the homeland's soil, killing its peaceful, unsuspecting sons?! Imagine, if you will, that the government had neglected to guard against the Nile's flood, had neither built the dikes nor called for them to be built, until the Nile overflowed, its waters submerging the land, drowning villages and hamlets, and destroying crops and livestock. Would you be content with that government, or indignant at it? Would you think it fit to govern, or fit to step down from government? Imagine, too, that the government had waited for infectious epidemics to spread across the land and invade people's very homes, wreaking upon them the most hideous and horrible destruction, and only then called for resistance against these epidemics — would you be content with it, or indignant at it? I can scarcely distinguish between these near, familiar dangers that a government guards against before they occur, and this looming danger — the danger of war that descends upon a country before any warning reaches it, simply because it knew better. So if Egyptians are told: do not raid before you are raided — then at the very least Egyptians must be made to see clearly when they are being raided, and at the very least Egyptians must be prepared to repel the raid once it is poured upon them. And I do not know to what extent Egyptians have been prepared for the material defense of themselves should war be brought to them — though I believe it has in fact already been brought to them for some time now — but the one thing I know with absolute certainty is that Egyptians have not been prepared as they ought to have been prepared for the moral defense of themselves against this moral assault, should it be poured upon them; and I can only think that it has in fact been poured upon them for a long

time now, ever since the war was declared — indeed, even before the war was declared. And I do not know upon whom the responsibility falls for this neglect of the Egyptian people's moral preparation; nor do I know who might properly be called to account for this disgraceful failure to ready the Egyptian spirit for the moral resistance that befits it, and that befits its glorious past, its rising present, and its great future. I have no wish to go searching for the responsible parties, nor to point them out — but the one thing I know with absolute certainty is that there has been a failure, that this failure must be remedied, and remedied as swiftly as possible, and that Egyptians must come to feel, strongly and deeply, that the homeland may yet ask them to shoulder heavy burdens, that they may be tested in themselves and in their wealth, that they may suffer some diminishment in the goods and bounty they have grown used to enjoying, and that it is a duty they owe to themselves and to their homeland to prepare for all of this with dignity and pride, neither exposed to weakness nor disposed to surrender. Nor do I think that talk of neutrality, talk of the fear of plunging the country into the midst of war, and talk of anxious care to spare Egypt the dangers of war, are of a kind to instill in the Egyptian spirit the strength, the manliness, and the stoic resolve that ought to distinguish honorable people when calamities draw near, or when their approach is to be expected. Let us, then, set aside this talk, which avails nothing, and let us avoid deceiving the people with false hopes and wishes, and let the faint-hearted indulge themselves in these false hopes to which the partisans of neutrality cling for their excuse — but let it be said to Egyptians instead: look — between you and danger there lies nothing but a few moments, which may stretch longer or may prove shorter, and the likeliest thing is that they will not stretch long at all.