

**Zurayk, Constantine, *The Meaning of the Disaster*. Beirut: Khayat's College Book Cooperative, 1956.<sup>1</sup>**

*The Seriousness of the Disaster*

The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is no simple setback or light, passing evil. It is a disaster in every sense of the word and one of the harshest of the trials and tribulations with which the Arabs have been afflicted throughout their long history – a history marked by numerous trials and tribulations.

Seven Arab states declare war on Zionism in Palestine, stop impotent before it, and then turn on their heels. The representatives of the Arabs deliver fiery speeches in the highest international forums, warning what the Arab states and peoples will do if this or that decision be enacted. Declarations fall like bombs from the mouths of officials at the meetings of the Arab League, but when action becomes necessary, the fire is still and quiet, the steel and iron are rusted and twisted, quick to bend and disintegrate. The bombs are hollow and empty. They cause no damage and kill no one.

Seven states seek the abolition of partition and the subduing of Zionism, but they leave the battle having lost a not inconsiderable portion of the soil of Palestine, even of the part “given to the Arabs in the partition. They are forced to accept a truce in which there is neither advantage nor gain for them.

History has not known a case more just or more obviously flawless than this: A country is snatched from its people to be made into a national home for remnants of mankind who settle on it from the various regions of the world and who erect a state in it despite its inhabitants and the millions of their brethren in neighbouring regions. Despite the pure right of the Arabs’ case, the potentialities of their land, and the interest that other nations have in it (interests which could have been used as bargaining points), the Arabs stand alone in the international arena. The great powers are hostile towards them, and world public opinion opposes them. They have no strong ally prepared to support them in such circumstances or to aid them in their struggle.

Four hundred thousand or more Arabs are forced to flee pellmell from their homes. They have their wealth and property stripped from them and wander like madmen in what is left of Palestine and in the other Arab countries. They do not know what fate has in store for them, nor what means of livelihood they should seek. They wonder whether they will be forced to return to their homes, there to live under the Zionist shadow and to bear whatever abuse or scorn, assimilation or extinction the Zionists may impose on them.

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Only a united, progressive, Arab national being will avert the Zionist danger, or for that matter any danger which has aggressive designs on us. The first principle, then, in the long range Arab struggle is the establishment of this being, which, as I have said above, will not be achieved unless there is a fundamental transformation in Arab life. It follows that the external struggle to repel the dangers of aggression is linked with the internal struggle to establish a sound Arab being. In fact the latter is the pivot of the former, and is essential to its success.

These Zionists do not have the characteristics of a united nation, for they are from widely separate lands, speak different languages, and follow different ways. Their only common bonds are religion and suffering. Despite these facts the idea has united them, sharpened by their determination, and created in them the unflinching will to struggle so that, by this will and by their unconditional acceptance of modern civilisation, they have almost accomplished that which is unnatural, whereas, that which is natural to the Arabs – that they form a nation – is not as yet accomplished. Here is the decisive difference!

The will to struggle and to survive can only be effectively opposed by another will of equal or greater strength. A unified loyalty can only be subdued by a more complete unity and a stronger loyalty. A system steadily pursuing modern civilisation can only be conquered a system which is more thorough in its pursuit of it and which is more completely armed with it. A progressive, dynamic mentality will never be stopped by a primitive, static mentality. To summarise, we repeat that only a united Arab being possessing these characteristics will repel the Zionist danger – or for that matter any danger from abroad – and that the Arabs will attain a being of this type only through a fundamental transformation in their way of life. The minds of intellectuals and of those in the Arab countries who earnestly work for an effective and fundamental solution of the Zionist problem – or better of the whole Arab problem – must be so directed as to understand the reality of this being and to seek ways of bringing it about.

What then are the characteristics of this Arab being which must be brought into existence?

The first of these characteristics is union. That is, the Arabs should organise themselves into a unified state in which their foreign and economic policies and their defence forces are united. Five, six, or seven states, each completely independent of the other (not counting the weak tie which the League represents), each concerned with its own affairs and internal interests, each subjected to various foreign influences and to internal forces with conflicting interests – states in this condition cannot repel the harrowing blows of our time. If, then, the union which we seek is [under normal circumstance] a national goal necessitated by linguistic and historical ties among the Arabs as well as by mutual self-interest, the Zionist danger has transformed it into a condition of existence and a necessity for life itself. For this danger, with other

foreign dangers added to it, will assuredly worm its way through these nations and hammer wedges between them. It will strengthen the disagreements, increase various and contradictory local self-interests, and widen the split in the Arab structure. As long as sticks are separate or [only] tied together with a thin strand, it is easy to break them one after the other. The only thin that will save them from damage is to strengthen the bands so that they will not break, but will face every blow with strength and unity and repel it with decisive loss.

However, by itself this union is not enough. In fact it cannot even be achieved if another fundamental condition is not met by the Arabs. This condition is economic, social, and intellectual development. For that reason we have also described the united Arab national being which we seek as progressive.

The factors making for progress, like all the forces of life, are interrelated and interdependent. A cause produces a result, and this result in its turn may become a cause and thus strengthen and support the first cause. It is not reasonable to want to eliminate those evolutionary factors which we have mentioned, such as propagating knowledge and so forth, but there is no doubt that the point of departure for that change and revolution at which we must today aim is no other than those who lead and shape, the creative elite which can grasp these means and push them hard along that single road which we seek.

This elite, on whose shoulders this most serious task will be laid, or which rather will seize it by force, must have already realised within itself the progress and the revolution which it seeks within society. For he who is motivated by impulse rather than by faith cannot inculcate faith in the nation no matter how loud his voice or how flowery his speech. He who has not liberated himself but remains a slave to impulses and ambitions cannot liberate any one else no matter how exalted his position or how great his authority. He whose mind is obscured and in the corner of whose brain the spider of fanaticism and reaction nests will never bring light to his nation nor will he propagate tolerance, co-operation, and unity in his society no matter what the colour of the garment he wears.

Therefore, the initial condition for the success of revolutionary and progressive action is that its leaders and masters be progressive in their souls and revolutionary down to the marrow of their bones. Each of those who apply themselves to this most serious task must measure himself by this scale and evaluate himself on this basis. The people in general – and the cultured and liberated in particular – must test their leaders by this touchstone. Those whose metal is pure will be worthy of leadership, whereas those whose metal shows debasement will be condemned and rejected...

This elite must, as a prerequisite of its existence, organise and unify itself into well-knit parties and organisations. These must stand on a unified and pure doctrine and must be bound by a strong, sound loyalty to which the elite will

subjugate all its divergent tendencies and in which it will willingly and freely believe. One view of the history of the various awakenings in the world demonstrates most clearly that a bringing together of the forces of these struggling elites within party organisations and the like is the greatest factor in creating the awakening and transforming the situation.

As another prerequisite of its own existence this elite must create true leadership and produce those individuals who build states, create nations, and make history. These are the ones who sow their seeds deep in the very life of the people and whose sights are at the same time set on what ought to be. They continue to work, with the support of those who believe as they do and who associate themselves with them, until they or their successors complete the fashioning of a new life and the rebuilding of a shattered being. These are those who live every minute of their lives under pressure from their consciences and in fear of the judgement of history. These are the Sufis. Sufis not because they are ascetic and abstinent, but because they step forward and accept [the challenge] – who are not striving for personal satisfaction and happiness, but who will receive both through the immersion of the self in the larger entity of the fatherland. In a word these, and other reformers like them, are they without whom a nation does not exist, a civilisation does not flourish, and human life has no flavour or meaning.

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An Arab national life, united and progressive, which as we have said contains within itself the fundamental solution of the Palestine problem and in fact of the Arab problem in its entirety, will remain a dream and a potentiality if it is not first realised in the souls of the nation's struggling elite – led by true leaders drawn from it – and in the system which this elite sets up, and in the parties and institutions which it establishes.

As one looks around himself, he finds that this point of departure is still slight and that the struggling elite which we seek is still small and scattered. It has not become strong as a result of enlightened vision and fire-tested struggle. The hostile forces of imperialism, and the ruling classes and their temptations have collaborated to weaken and scatter it. Some individuals within it have left an impression, but as an organised group it has had no clear or palpable effect.

The young men of this nation look around in all directions, but on the one hand they do not find their ideal within the present leadership, nor on the other hand do the struggles of the disjointed nationalist cliques satisfy their eager ambition; thus despair overcomes them, and perplexity overflows in their souls. They end either by doubting their own nation and despairing of the potentialities of their people, in which case they follow a path leading toward satisfaction of desire and yielding to temptation, or else they fall prey to some destructive movement and find their consolation in uproar and disturbance for its own sake, regardless of result. No one can escape these

dangers and preserve his faith and belief except the few who have strong spirits and sound sinews. But even these are in danger of dispersal and disintegration after the tragedy of Palestine!

However, whatever the case may be and no matter how weak and disunited our struggling elites may be at this time, there is absolutely no doubt that they *are* the point of departure, the beginning of the road, and the source of hope.