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THE QUESTION OF THE SUDAN

"Audi alteram partem."

AN ADDRESS given to
Members of the Women's
International League on
September 11th, 1924

By

E. N. BENNETT, M.A.

late Fellow of Hertford College, Oxford.



[Faint handwritten notes or signatures]

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LADIES,

I will try this evening first of all to put before you what I believe to be the ordinary views of thoughtful and educated Egyptians about the vexed question of the Sudan; and I will then, if I may, suggest for your consideration some possible solutions of the problems involved.

In all disputes with European nations the peoples of the Near and Middle East are severely handicapped. Plenty of newspapers are to be found in these countries—Palestine, e.g., possesses no fewer than 14 journals for a population of three-quarters of a million—but these organs of public opinion are, with rare exceptions, printed in languages—Arabic, Turkish, Persian, etc.—unknown to European readers; they are too poor to afford correspondents in foreign capitals, and the correspondents of our own “millionaire Press” in Egypt or Asia Minor appear frequently to be more deeply concerned with emphasising the policy of the British newspaper they represent than with the unbiassed and sympathetic consideration of local opinion.

In short it is extremely difficult for the average Englishman to gain any reliable information as to “the other side of the question” in disputes with oriental or semi-oriental nations. Who can feel really confident that the Reports of British officials in Baghdad or Khartum necessarily represent any faithful picture of what the native populations of Iraq or the Sudan are really thinking? The only claim I may have in my endeavour to present the other side of the Sudan question to yourselves is the fact that for many years I have done my best to make myself acquainted with the educated public opinion of Egypt, and have always hoped that I should live to see her just aspirations realised, and my own country freed at last from the reproach of national wrong-doing and the violation of many solemn pledges.

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Sudan -

Politics and
Government

Map

Egypt - Boundaries

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It is worth remembering that in nearly all international disputes there is, so to speak, a background of grievances and resentment. Aristotle in his *Politics* says that insurrections usually arise "out of small things, but not about small things"; and the same is true of international conflicts. What a striking confirmation of this was provided by the last great war, set in motion by the murder of an Austrian Prince in a Bosnian town, but in reality fought to restore lost territories, destroy trade rivals, secure commercial routes, and so on. Whole districts of the Western Front during the war were so drenched with poisoned gases that nobody could enter them for weeks: in the same way international wrongs and consequent grievances infect international relationships and lead to inevitable conflicts. The evil that Statesmen and Diplomats, Generals and Admirals do does indeed live after them. The Boer War had its "century of wrong" and its Slagter's Nek behind it; will the monument at Kroonstadt to the 22,000 women and children who perished in the concentration camps serve to accentuate the symptoms of some future war-fever? Think of the age-long injustices inflicted upon the Chinese. India has her Amritsars. A once famous book, *La Sueur du Burnous*, recited in words of fire the unspeakable wrongs (*les injures indicibles*) wrought upon the Arab races of Northern Africa by their French conquerors. So, too, Egypt has her bitter memories of injustice and oppression—the bombardment of Alexandria by a Liberal Government for the benefit of bondholders; the treatment accorded to Arabi Pasha; the virtual annexation of the country; the 65 broken pledges that our occupation would cease (British troops still occupy Cairo and Alexandria); the judicial murders of Denshawi, celebrated in songs throughout the Arabic world; the practical *corvée* of the last war with its handcuffings and floggings, and the death of no less than one-third of the 1,200,000 Egyptian conscripts in Palestine, Mesopotamia and France; and finally the deportation and imprisonment without charge or trial

of the venerated and beloved Zaghlul—all these things and more lie, as it were, behind the present dispute about the *status* of the Sudan.

This dispute is a natural development in the history of our relations with Egypt. In 1914 our virtual annexation of Egypt was stereotyped by the arbitrary establishment of a Protectorate. In 1922, after riots and disturbances, with accompanying bloodshed, had shown the determination of the Egyptians to secure at any cost the fulfilment of their country's promised independence, Great Britain formally declared Egypt to be "a Sovereign Independent State," while certain questions like the Sudan, defence and foreign relations, were temporarily "reserved."

The Egyptians have consistently maintained that the Sudan is an integral part of Egyptian territory. They quote the words of a British official second only to the High Commissioner in importance, the Financial Adviser, in 1904:—

"Give it whatever name we will, the territory watered by the Nile and extending from the mountains of Abyssinia and from the Great Lakes to the Mediterranean forms one integral and indivisible whole. Now that the science of the engineer has reached such a high pitch of perfection, the Power which dominates the upper reaches of the Nile necessarily controls the water supply of Egypt. The possession of the Sudan is vital to Egypt, even more vital than that of Alexandria."

The advances along the Nile culminating in the victory of Omdurman were all declared at the time by British politicians and journalists alike to have as their *raison d'être* the "restoration to the Khedive of his lost provinces." When after the Omdurman fight Great Britain risked a war with France by insisting on the withdrawal of Major Marchand from Fashoda, Lord Kitchener insisted throughout the delicate negotiations with the French officer that the territory was Egyptian, and it was the Egyptian flag

which was planted on the Fort at Fashoda. Exactly the same position was naturally taken up by the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury.¹

In reply to these Egyptian claims, based as they are on historical facts and diplomatic records, it is now urged that such documents were obviously superseded by the terms of the so-called Condominium Agreement of 1899. This document has never been allowed much prominence. It is not, I believe, to be found among the official publications issued by the Foreign Office. It entitles Great Britain "to share in the settlement and future working and developments" of the Sudan.² This claim is especially based on the "rights of conquest," and I do not hesitate to say that it established a military autocracy in time of peace so complete and unmitigated that I know of no modern parallel for it in the history of any imperial nation. The entire Government, civil, and military alike, of the vast regions of the Sudan rests practically in the hands of a British military officer. Egypt's "share" in the Government of the Sudan is mere camouflage. It has consisted

¹ Cp. e.g. *Lord Salisbury to Sir E. Monson*, 12/10/98. "The French Ambassador had a long conversation with me this afternoon on the state of things in the Upper Nile. . . . I generally insisted on the view that the Valley of the Nile had belonged and still belonged to Egypt, and that whatever impediment or diminution that title might have suffered through the conquest and occupation of the Mahdi had been removed by the victory of the Anglo-Egyptian army on the 2nd September."

Lord Cromer to Lord Salisbury, 10/10/98. "The negotiations now proceeding with the French Government to secure the title of Egypt to the territories abandoned by her during the Mahdist rebellion under the pressure of *force majeure*, to which His Excellency (Boutros Pasha) explicitly records Egypt has never renounced her rights."

Lord Kitchener to Lord Cromer, 21/9/98. "I informed M. Marchand that I was authorised to . . . protest in the strongest terms against his occupation of Fashoda and the hoisting of the French flag in the dominions of His Highness the Khedive. . . . I then pointed out that I had the instructions of the Government to re-establish Egyptian authority in the Fashoda Mudirieh. . . . I said to him, 'Do I understand that you are authorised by the French Government to resist Egypt in putting up her flag and reasserting her authority in her former possessions—such as the Mudirieh of Fashoda?' M. Marchand said he could not resist the Egyptian flag being hoisted. . . . The Egyptian flag was hoisted at 1 p.m. with due ceremony . . . and a salute of 21 guns was fired."

² As a matter of fact the question of Egypt's sovereignty does not apparently enter into the Condominium Agreement at all, except in so far as the joint use of the flags may affect the question.

in finding the garrison and paying for it (there is only a single battalion or less of British troops in the Sudan), in meeting the deficits on the Sudan administration, in paying for public works, and so on, while certain minor offices are allotted to Egyptian and Sudanese officials and the Khedive's flag is flown side by side with the Union Jack.

Apart, however, from the obviously unjust and one-sided character of the so-called Condominium, Egyptians have always denied the actual validity of the Agreement. It was signed, it is true, by Boutros Ghali Pasha, but only under the *force majeure* of British bayonets. From the very first indignant protests were raised against it from every section of the Egyptian people, and it has never been ratified by any Egyptian Parliament. Moreover, it is pointed out that when the Condominium was signed the Suzerainty of Turkey over Egypt was admitted by Great Britain, and the terms of this Suzerainty specifically forbade the assignment to any foreign Power of any portion of Egypt's territory or sovereignty. In other words, the Condominium Agreement was a violation of recognised international law.

Further, in support of their claims to the Sudan, the Egyptians hold that

- (a) Whereas the English are a race absolutely alien in every particular to the Sudanese, exceedingly close ties exist between the populations of Egypt and the Sudan. Inter-marriage has taken place to a considerable extent, and the children of these marriages (Mouwallidines) are met with all over Egypt. Throughout all the more civilised portion of the Sudan, Arabic is the common language and Islam the common religion.
- (b) While willing to recognise the immense value of Britain's help in the re-conquest of the Sudan, the fact remains that at Omdurman the Egyptian Army provided two-thirds of the fighting force and bore

two-thirds of the total casualties in killed and wounded. Moreover, the long drawn out campaigns against the Mahdi and the Khalifa, culminating in Omdurman, would have been impossible without the patient toil of hundreds of thousands of Egyptian workmen in building the railways, working the river haulage, and maintaining the immense lines of communication.

- (c) Not only did Egyptians co-operate in the military re-conquest of the Sudan, they have also contributed very large sums towards the administration of the restored provinces. The Egyptian Army provides the whole military garrison of the Sudan, with the exception of a single British battalion—about 13,000 troops in all—at an annual cost of £1,290,000. For 13 years Egypt made good the annual deficits in the Sudan Budgets—nearly £3,000,000 in all. The Egyptian taxpayer has also borne the cost of building railways, harbours, public buildings, telegraphs, etc., to the extent of over £5,000,000. In other words, Egypt's "share" in the Condominium has been in practice little else than paying the piper while British officials held all the well-paid posts and called the tune. The Egyptian peasant has been taxed for the upkeep of the Sudan administration while the British shareholders of the wealthy cotton plantations contributed not a single piastre.

As far as I am able to judge, the Egyptians are willing, provided that their sovereignty over the Sudan is admitted, to meet all our demands in a thoroughly reasonable spirit. They realise our anxiety as to the maintenance of our communications with India and are prepared to offer the most complete guarantees as to the security of the canal waterway against any possible interruption. Our other supreme interest is that of the future development of the vast cotton fields which will render us

less dependent on American supplies. Here again the Egyptians are quite ready to furnish any reasonable guarantees we care to propose.

So much for the position taken up by the vast majority of educated and responsible Egyptians. I will now summarise the current arguments brought forward in our Press and in Parliament against the claims of Egypt.

- (a) We have a right to the Sudan because of the material blessings we have conferred on the population. No one can question the fact that under British control the Sudan has increased its population and its wealth, that transport and irrigation and other forms of public enterprise have been vastly improved. But, as already stated, Egypt has paid for most of these improvements, and I for one can never accept the argument that because a powerful nation seizes the territory of a weak one and builds railways or electric plant, it is therefore entitled to regard the country as its own property. Other factors enter into the problem; nations, like individuals, do not live by bread alone. The boastful appeal, "Look what we have done," is a stock argument regularly employed in the defence of imperialist adventures in other people's territory. Many individual officials and the best of the missionaries are, I think, inspired by sincere and unselfish devotion to the welfare of the weaker races among whom they labour, but as to the genuineness of this argument when put forward by Western Governments, I am often, I confess, quite sceptical.

- (b) It is commonly asserted that the government of the Sudan is quite beyond the capacity of the Egyptians, who, so it is said, have

always shown a marked disinclination to service in the Sudan. The first of these suggestions is, of course, a mere statement of opinion which is naturally enough repudiated by men who are now entrusted with the far more complex government of Lower Egypt. And if it be true that at present Egyptians evince little enthusiasm for duty in the Sudan, one explanation commonly given by themselves is that in the Sudan to-day Egyptian officials work under intolerable conditions, exposed at times to slights and social humiliation at the hands, in some cases, of European colleagues younger and no better educated than themselves.

- (c) It is declared that "the Sudanese want us." *Punch* rushed into the fray with a cartoon of a Sudanese girl clinging to the knees of a stalwart Briton and asking for his protection against the summons of an Egyptian master. Need I say that our delightful *Punch* is almost invariably on the wrong side in politics and not always very accurate in his cartoons; have we forgotten the "Corpse Factory" cartoon of the war-propaganda period? Is it so certain that the people of the Sudan prefer British to Egyptian rule? Anything like a *plébiscite*, while feasible in the more northerly half of the Sudan, would be obviously impossible in the wilder regions of the south and west; and I frankly admit I have myself no certain and precise information as to the feelings and views of the whole population of five millions which inhabits this vast area. British officials and tourists tell us that the Sudanese indubitably prefer the British; on

the other hand, exactly the contrary is affirmed by Egyptians of standing and experience, who, be it remembered, speak the language of their Sudanese co-religionists. The only contribution I can make to this conflict of evidence is to say that if our case is so overwhelmingly strong as it is declared to be it is difficult to see why anybody who ventures to shout "Long live Fuad, King of the Sudan" is beaten by the police or carried off to gaol.

- (d) Another argument pressed into the service against the claims of Egypt is a confused reference to the former existence of the slave trade in the Sudan. The suggestion is made that this cruel traffic was openly carried on by the Egyptian officials with the sanction of their Government, and that because of these misdoings in the past the Egypt of 1924 is obviously unfit to control the Sudan provinces. Now it is quite true, historically, that in the middle of the last century Egypt found it very difficult to curb effectually the activities of wealthy Arab slave-dealers like the notorious Zobeir, and it seems probable too that in some cases Egyptian officials were bribed to ignore or acquiesce in this disgraceful traffic. But all this is utterly irrelevant to the present day problems of the Sudan. As a matter of fact Egypt, in the old days, made repeated efforts to eliminate the slave trade in her southern provinces; men like Baker Pasha and, later, Gordon were specially despatched from Cairo for this purpose; and in 1870—only five years after the similar enactment by the United States—Egypt formally declared slavery to be illegal. Col.

James, M.P., in a recent letter to the *Times*, appears to suggest that because slave dhows have been recently captured in the Red Sea by our warships, it is quite unsafe to entrust Egypt with the control of the Sudan; we must show ourselves "adamantine" to such claims, etc. But a glance at the map might have shown Col. James that any slave convoys which reach the Red Sea coast (for the benefit of *inter alios* the subjects of our ally King Hussein) must obviously pass through territory controlled by either Great Britain, Italy or France. These slave gangs find their way to the coast by slow and toilsome marches, and it is difficult to see how this is possible under the eyes of the authorities. In any case no responsibility for the export of these unfortunate slaves can lie at the door of Egypt, and a question might well be asked in the House of Commons as to the routes taken by the convoys.

Such appears to be in summary the sort of case put forward by Egypt. I have done my best to present the various points as clearly and simply as possible. Without necessarily identifying myself with all of them in detail I am convinced that the Egyptian case cannot in fairness be ignored by any body of public opinion in our own country.

I venture in conclusion to suggest some possible lines along which a solution of this serious problem may be discovered. We may of course insist on leaving things exactly as they are, drawing an arbitrary frontier line across the desert to Wadi Halfa and onward to the sea (there is no natural frontier of any sort), allowing more or less "independence and sovereignty" to lower Egypt and continuing to govern the Sudan under the illusory Condominium. The perpetuation of this arrangement would almost certainly involve the raising in the Sudan of a

voluntary or conscript native army, for the cost of which Great Britain would be ultimately responsible. It would also mean the undying resentment and illwill of the entire Egyptian people, and increased taxation of the unrepresented Sudanese population; nor do I feel sure that the Sudanese would consent to serve as soldiers under such conditions.

Apart, however, from the prospect of a mere continuance of the *status quo* it may be worth while to consider briefly the following proposals, which of course are made on my own responsibility and merely offered for what they are worth:—

(a) The whole question—a judiciable one—of the sovereignty of the Sudan might be referred by the joint consent of Great Britain and Egypt to the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

(b) A real system of co-operation in the Sudanese provinces might be created under which Egypt enjoyed a fair and adequate share in the administration and development of these regions.

(c) Egypt might lease the Sudan to Great Britain on certain conditions for a term of years, say 25, at the end of which the Sudanese would through the progress of popular education be fit to declare by *plébiscite* or otherwise the form of government they desired.

(d) A compromise might be arranged, Egypt ceding to Great Britain in return for certain benefits all the vast regions to the south of Khartum which include the British cotton areas.

(e) Best of all, Egypt as a sovereign and independent state might conclude a treaty, offensive and defensive, with Great Britain, furnishing complete guarantees and safeguards for our commercial interests and the security of our sea route to India, Australia and the East. No better safeguard for the canal could possibly be secured than such an alliance, and our association with Egypt would be immeasurably strengthened both morally and materially.

Suggestions (b), (c), (d) and (e) would obviously involve, as a basis, the acceptance of Egypt's claim to the sovereignty of the Sudan.

Since you invited me to address you the welcome news comes to hand that Mr. MacDonald and Zaghlul Pasha are to meet in London in order to discuss, at any rate, the preliminaries for such negotiations. I feel more hopeful therefore that from such negotiations, when they take place, results of permanent value may issue. Our Prime Minister has consistently stressed the vital need of goodwill and conciliation as a prime factor in the settlement of the tangled problems of Europe. If this same spirit could only be shown in our national dealings with the peoples of the Near and Middle East all might yet be well. It is indeed badly needed. In order to secure it we must rid ourselves of the prevalent notion that we are the "superiors" of Egyptians or Turks, and discard the pernicious idea of Kipling that some barrier exists between "East and West" to keep the two permanently apart. Politicians must drop the boastful reiteration of British "prestige" as a predominant factor in international disputes. Journalists who deal with Turkish or Egyptian questions must not indulge in the silly misuse of words like "Effendi" (= Mr.) and "Pasha" (an ordinary military or official title) as terms of abuse. Above all, perhaps, must we condemn the intrusion of religious bigotry and prejudice into questions involving the claims of Moslems. The Dean of Bristol, some months ago, wrote a confused letter to the *Times* in which he protested strongly against any concession to the claims of Egypt in the Sudan because of the evil character of Islam's "moral fruitage." Moral fruitage indeed! If this clerical imperialist had any real acquaintance with the East he would have learnt, to go no further, that Islam (the faith of 80 millions of his fellow subjects) had rescued whole nations from the curse of drunkenness, and that in Islamic countries prostitution is carried on not by Moslem but by Christian women. The Dean declares that the Sudan

must be held by ourselves because by this means the "Kingdom of God and His righteousness" will be secured. I am afraid there is more cotton than Christianity involved in the problem.

If we can only shed these mischievous and unchristian prejudices and suspicions, a great opportunity is presented for a permanent settlement of our differences with the peoples of the Near and Middle East. Turks and Egyptians are in general eager for our friendship; of that I am quite certain. Bygones will be bygones and permanent goodwill and all the moral and material blessings flowing from it will be "added unto us." Such opportunities, however, may not be extended to us indefinitely. The day is rapidly passing when one nation can colonise and exploit another on the implicit assumption of superiority or by the explicit display of armed force and the "rights of conquest." All over the East imperialist nations may find even to-day their "writing upon the wall." The education of the Near and Middle East makes rapid strides; young Turks, Egyptians, Persians, are educated at Oxford and Cambridge, Berlin and Vienna. In their homelands as elsewhere the stimulus of the war has worked its way; there is a vast difference between the Egypt of 1914 and of 1924. Moreover the evergrowing application of science to modern war is tending to level up, or rather down, the various peoples of this torn and distracted world. Think of the amazing success of 20,000 Riff Arabs against the military efforts of 100,000 Spanish troops. Think of the Lausanne Treaty wrung from the reluctant Powers of Europe by the military valour of the Turkish people stung into action by the shameful wrongs inflicted upon them by Mr. Lloyd George and his friends. In all my journeyings in Eastern lands I have invariably found that justice and kindness formed the traveller's best *viaticum*; and I am convinced that in international dealings with these countries a sincere gesture of goodwill will always prove, like honesty, the best policy. Take one point alone. A really friendly Egypt means a safe passage through an

open canal 100 miles in length. If ever a time arises of stress and peril for our Empire, what may be the meaning of a bitterly hostile Egypt, compelled to submit to what all her people regard as a cruel injustice? Why, in a dark night a couple of determined men with a few sticks of dynamite could block the Canal for weeks!

But there are better reasons for international goodwill and sweet reasonableness than mere considerations of possible damage due to hatred and bitterness. It is comparatively useless to draw up formulæ "in letters of gold" for the betterment of Europe if our old-time attitude towards the civilised peoples of Asia and Africa remains unaltered, for it is amongst these peoples that the dragon's teeth of bitter resentment will yield war crops in the future. From generation to generation the Imperialist Powers of the West have relied on arrogance and force in all their dealings with the peoples of the East. I have always believed that the oncoming forces of Labour would insist that the methods of the old diplomacy and military violence should make way for dealings less harsh but more effective. Mr. MacDonald's work in the past has given me hopes for a policy which will clear the way for national intercourse between West and East, no longer darkened by hatred and suspicion, but illumined by the "sun of righteousness with healing in his wings." "It is," said Richard Cobden, "precisely because Great Britain is strong in resources, in courage, in constitutions, in geographical position, that she can, before all other Powers, afford to be moral, and to set the example of a mighty nation walking in the paths of Justice and Peace."

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