

# THE NEAR EAST BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

AN ADDRESS BY

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The following is an address delivered by Dr. Charles Malik at the conference on “The Great Powers and the Near East” in 1950 at the Harvard Summer School.

Everyone today is concerned about the Far East, but per tomorrow the Near East may become the focal point of interest. The Far East is “between” East and West in a somewhat accidental and transient sense; the Near East is fundamentally, essentially, permanently between East and West.

The Near East is neither East nor West, nor a synthesis of East and West. This negative characterization is perhaps its most distinctive one. The Near East is not the East, notwithstanding the obvious presence of traces of Hindu mysticism in the Near Eastern spirit. For there are radical differences between the basic and dominant Near Eastern character, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, either the Chinese character, founded on the whole upon social, ethical and family relationships, or the Indian metaphysical-Hindu outlook, which in its typical instance tends to consider everything worldly, historical or material a mere shadow.

Nor is the Near East the West, notwithstanding the indisputable historical influence of the Near East upon the essence of the Western tradition, and the well-known impact of the West upon the Near East in medieval as well as in modern times. That the Near East, despite all this historical interaction, is not the West is the result of two phenomena.

One of these, the establishment and entrenchment of Islam, occurred in the Near East. Although Islam has a high regard for Christ, although the Virgin Mary is revered by Islam, and although there are obvious Hebrew-Christian influences in the Koran, and especially in certain phases of Sufism – yet Islam cannot be said to have taken over and adopted bodily the Christian heritage. Islam was more a substitution for, than a development and completion of, an existing system. Thus it came to be quite distinct from Western Christian spirituality. Nor was Greek thought, despite its fine interpretation by the great Moslem-Arab and Christian-Arab philosophers, ever deeply absorbed into the thinking and literature and general outlook of Arab or Moslem culture. This culture is not an authentic heir of Greek thought in the same way that European culture is. We may then say that the establishment of Islam amounted to at least a partial rejection of the West.

The second phenomenon originated in the West: it was the virtual rejection of the Near East by the West. Ever since the days of the Crusades, the West has neither felt nor made the Near East feel that the latter is part of the West, that there can be peaceful, normal relations between the two. Though all the ultimate values which the West holds sacred, and by which

it is characterized, owe their origin to the Near East, the Near East has invariably been made to feel itself a stranger, an outsider, if not an enemy.

Nor is the Near East a synthesis of East and West, notwithstanding the simultaneous existence in it, in a seething, eclectic fashion, of traces and tinges of both the Eastern and the Western spirits. A genuine synthesis of East and West, one that understands, absorbs, reconciles, and rises above both, has never been accomplished – at least, not in the Near East, despite its middle geographical position.

Though all these negative determinations in themselves merely define what the Near East is not, they nevertheless point to the existence of a Near Eastern character *sui generis*. The Near East arose and developed as an active agent struggling with both the East and the West, partly rejecting, yet partly accepting and assimilating. It was through this active confrontation, at once negative and positive, that it came into its own, became in its latest phase the Islam we know today.

In a fundamental philosophy of culture, the Near East can be shown to exemplify the category of “the between.” The precise determination of this character of “betweenness” with respect to the concrete being of the Near East is a fascinating topic for responsible research.



I have so far referred to East and West in their traditional, more authentic acceptance. We must also inquire into the position of the Near East vis-à-vis the ideological situation of the present day. It is a false usage to employ the terms “East” and “West” with regard to the present ideological conflict. In the first place, communism would have been impossible without classical German idealism and the social and economic phenomena of early nineteenth-century British industrialism. Thus communism is a Western phenomenon, however its precise relation to the true spirit of the West may be finally determined. In the second place, I believe there is no trace of the genuine spirit of the East in Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. In the third place, India – to take a most outstanding example – lies outside the Communist orbit, and although it refuses to be classified other than as itself, yet it is more correct to place India at least alongside the non-Communist world. I shall refer, therefore, not to a conflict between East and West, but to a confrontation of the Communist and the non-Communist worlds, where the effective agent is, in the one case, Soviet Russia and, in the other, if not the United States, then certainly the Atlantic community.

Where does the Near East stand between these two? If we have regard for the truth, I believe the following topics will have to be investigated in a thorough examination of this question:

1. A distinction must be made between the attitude of governments and the attitude of peoples, in so far as peoples are in a position to form an attitude.
2. A distinction must be made between sheer political interest and the presence or absence of a spiritual affinity with the West or with communism: namely, between relations of expediency and relations based on a community of ideas.
3. It is commonly held that there is something in the Near East that is basically foreign to communism. From this assumption certain political cynics have concluded that the West can do almost anything it pleases with the Near East without fearing it would turn in the direction of communism. As one such cynic put it: "No matter how deep a wound we may inflict on this or that part of the Near East, and no matter how much then it might look upon us as enemies, still it would remain faithful to us, because from its point of view communism is far worse. In this instance, the maxim, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, does not apply. Therefore, we can be quite bold in our dealings with the Near East." But in order to determine the truth or falsehood of this belief, the following points must first be ascertained:
  - A. Whether the religious sentiment is sufficiently strong to withstand a socio-economic onslaught of the Communist type.
  - B. Whether communism is not resourceful enough to make use of the religious sentiment itself.
  - C. Whether the unrelieved, though perhaps unconscious, misery of the masses could not be awakened into conscious articulation by the Communist message, especially since the socio-economic meaning of the West has been highly ambiguous.
  - D. Whether the supra-nationalism of the Soviet Union (namely, the overcoming of narrow nationalism by vigorous attachment to an imperial center and by political inclusion within a vigorous imperial idea) does not appeal to a region which has known more of imperial existence than of nationalistic fragmentation.
  - E. Whether Communist universalism by comparison with Western particularism, especially in regard to race and culture, does not strike a responsive chord in the heart of a region whose highest creations have always been forms of spiritual and human universalism.

F. In respect to the basic categories of existence (the human person, reason, truth, spirit, nature, matter, force, history, love, forgiveness, the higher things, freedom, the individual, the collective, the sense of security, the sense of belonging, the possibility of difference and rebellion and non-conformity, the totalitarian idea, the Byzantine identification of temporal and spiritual power), all talk about the real relation between the Near East on the one hand, and communism or the West on the other, is pathetically superficial until the theoretical and actual places of these ultimate categories in the life of each of these three worlds are fully and responsibly determined.

I believe a carefully executed program of research based on my outline will reveal three things: (i) that the Near East is not basically opposed to communism; (2) that the West is under illusion if it supposes that there are no limits to the liberties it can take with certain parts of the Near East on the assumption that it would never, of itself, turn Communist; and (3) that, despite everything, it is perfectly possible to win the confidence of the entire Near East if the West in certain respects undergoes a real and abiding change of heart.



In these days the political situation in the Near East takes precedence over the social and economic; it overshadows even the religious and ideological. Certain sections of the Near East seem to be satisfied politically with respect to the West; this cannot be said of the Arab world.

Political grievances, generated by policies of the Western powers toward the Arab world, outweigh in the popular mind any ideological affinities or antipathies that may exist either between the Near East and the West or between the Near East and communism. In a situation like this, anti-Communist propaganda sounds extremely abstract and hollow, especially since communism has a more vigorous and dynamic appeal to the popular imagination than any half-hearted and unconvincing presentation of the case for democracy.

The long list of pledges voluntarily given and arbitrarily withdrawn, of divisions dug deep into the social structure, and hostilities encouraged among groups and countries, of sinister regimes established and upheld, of open alliances resulting in the creation of permanent threats to the Arab countries, of lost opportunities when badly needed help and guidance were simply not offered-it is these things which, casting dark shadows upon the mind of the people, will not fail to arouse deep anxieties for generations to come.

Putting aside the few political friends of the West whose friendship is based on obvious self-interest (and these are diminishing either in number or in warmth of friendship every day), the genuine Near Eastern friends of the West include some of our intellectuals who are inspired by the truer image of the authentic West. These friends of the West – and in view of the difficult situation under which their friendship is put to the test, they really merit the title of “friends” – are not blind to the dichotomy in the soul of the West today: the discrepancy between the deepest that the West was and is and stands for, and the tangible reality of the West as it acts, and as the symptoms of its present crisis unfold. If these friends maintain their faith; if they hold in check their understandable inclinations to doubt; if they (not without inner crises of the spirit) put aside for the time being the political grievances which they share with their countrymen – if they do all this, it is not because they feel the plight of their countries less, or care less sincerely for the destiny of their peoples. They do so because they believe that the flame of truth, justice and love at the heart of the West has not been and can never be extinguished; that the real Christian spirit, whereby the West means, or ought to mean, only to be helpful, will not fail, in God’s good time, to reassert itself; and that one day the West, when it awakens to its dangers and to its possibilities, will surely redress the injustice it has visited upon the Near East. But, in the nature of the case, such unwavering friends are not many. To the overwhelming majority, the gross political realities are completely disillusioning.

## IV

Let us now turn to the future. What can be done to promote a better understanding between the Near East as a whole and the West?

1. For the last one hundred fifty years, the Near East has been, in so far as its relations with the outside world are concerned, in constant and almost exclusive contact with Western Europe and America – politically, economically and culturally. This is a valuable foundation. Accordingly, what is required is not a creation ex nihilo, not an indiscriminate break with the past, but a qualitative transformation of attitude and policy whereby the West can justly utilize and wisely build upon this priceless heritage of interaction, despite all its unhappy aspects and episodes. The West must realize, and act on the realization, that in the end it is the one hundred million Moslems and Arabs of the Near East who are going to determine its destiny, and not any extraneous forces.
2. There are valuable democratic elements in the Near East – risen from the people, possessing a genuine sense of social responsibility, loving freedom, economic and social justice, hating autocracy, responsibly conversant with the great issues that shake the world

today, and in genuine communion with the Western positive tradition. If these elements are lovingly and courageously sought and supported, they are likely eventually to help overcome the present alienation between the Near East and the West.

3. The West should have a genuine interest in the peaceful, free, independent development of political institutions in the Near East, and a conscious policy for the promotion of political stability in that region. So long as certain situations remain chronically unstable, how can the best elements plan and accept responsibility for the long pull? The region between direct, crude interference and complete unconcern is pregnant with unexplored possibilities.
4. The contact between the Near East and the West in recent decades has been characterized by conspicuous disunity in Western policy. This is the inner significance of the celebrated "Eastern Question." Thus, for instance, the Arab world is an arena of strife and jealousy among the Great Powers. Competition for the oil of the region is a major phenomenon in the world situation. Unless the Western powers harmonize, on a high level and on a long-term basis, their policies with respect to the near East, and unless in this harmonization the Near East is treated not as a means, but as an end to be respected in its own right, it is hopeless to expect stability or peaceful development in that most sensitive part of the world.
5. The joint declaration issued by the governments of France, the United Kingdom and the United States on May 25, 1950, seems to me to be a step in the right direction. However, it could have been made less ambiguous; that is why a great deal depends on the mode and spirit of its application. Despite all this, the response of the Arab League to it has been positive and statesmanlike, thus giving fresh evidence of the desire of the Arab world to encourage and build upon any hopeful sign of improvement in Arab-Western relations.
6. The Arab mind must be thoroughly disabused of the obsession that in certain fundamental conflicts of interest some Western powers will, in the nature of the case, always side against the Arabs. While this obsession lasts, there can be no peace and no confidence. Surely, then, a specific declaration in this regard is indicated, whereby the highest authorities assure the Arabs – and the assurance is periodically made good – that their interests will not be cyclically encroached upon.
7. There is another obvious consideration. Three important resolutions of the United Nations with respect to the Palestine problem have not been implemented, and there are no indications that any effort is being made toward that end. I refer, of course, to the resolutions regarding the frontiers, the internationalization of Jerusalem, and the fate of the one million Arab refugees. I do not believe that the wholehearted support of these measures by the United States could fail to contribute effectively toward their realization. The United States would be respecting the will of the international community,

expressed in each case by more than a two-thirds majority in the United Nations. I believe that nothing can restore the confidence of the Arab world in the West so much as a straightforward support by the Western powers of the standing resolutions of the United Nations.

8. A bold policy must be devised for arming the Near East and enabling it to participate effectively in its self-defense; questions of security should be a cooperative affair. It is bad politically and morally for both parties if one of them feels it is being "protected" militarily by the other. There is a vast reservoir of manpower in the Near East which could certainly be trained to play its part in the service of world peace.
9. There are certain outstanding questions which Egypt rightly feels should be settled. A diplomacy that aims at promoting positive understanding between the Near East and the West ought to be resourceful enough to satisfy Egypt in this regard.
10. Consider, further, the Turkish demand for inclusion in the Atlantic Treaty. Turkey feels—and, I believe, rightly—that if the Near East is important for the defense of the West, some juridical linkage ought to be established between its system of defense and that of the Atlantic community. Existing assurances in this field are important, but the exigencies of the moment make it plain that more than assurances is needed.
11. A statesmanlike application of Point Four on a large scale in the Near East is imperative. But the flow of private capital and the extension of technical assistance are not enough. In addition, public financial assistance is requisite for general economic development. The Near East is supersensitive to the attachment of political strings to economic aid. Rightly or wrongly, people believe that economic aid is primarily a means for political appeasement, i.e., for making certain sections forget their political rights and claims. This suspicion should be effectively removed.
12. Point Four for the most part aims at redressing economic and social injustice throughout the world. But, as thus conceived, it is directed only toward the means of human existence. Far more grievous than economic and social injustice is intellectual and spiritual injustice. There is the order of ends—what man should live for, what he should think, what he should believe, what he should be—about which the United States should have something to say, and for which it should have something significant to offer. It is for contributions of the heart, mind and spirit that the Near East thirsts. As long as there are millions of human beings who have never tasted peace of mind; as long as the goods of the mind and spirit are deficient in our midst; as long as the great classics of human thought and feeling, which have penetrated and transformed the life, literature



and outlook of the West, are totally unheard of by large sections of the Near East, there can be no real prosperity and no genuine human well-being in that part of the world. I believe that an effort to render the finest classics of the West available to the peoples of the Near East, for their immediate use and in their own tongues, would be a potent factor in bringing about in the long run a genuine understanding between our two cultures.

## V

There are grave issues at stake in the world today, issues far graver than many politicians imagine. The highest spiritual values of the last four thousand years lie in the balance today. Who knows how much in the inscrutable course of events will depend on the bringing together of the Near East and the West? Everything depends on the strength of the West, particularly the intellectual and spiritual strength. When the West returns to its best self, our problems in the Near East will be solved-and not ours alone. When that happens, it is entirely possible that the Near East will move into a new golden period, and participate again in the creative arts of civilization. The great challenges facing it need not crush it: they may help to lift it onto a new level of achievement. Above all, its sons must learn how to put aside fruitless, hopeless suffering, which their fathers have known for generations, and how to put on the hopeful kind of suffering which, in joy, accepts everything for the sake of truth and being.