

Call for a Civilian Truce in Algeria, Albert Camus

Call for a Civilian Truce in Algeria

Ladies and gentlemen,¹

Despite the precautions that had to be taken to protect this meeting, and despite the difficulties we face, I come before you tonight not to divide but to unite. That is my most ardent wish. It is not the least of my disappointments, to put it mildly, that the deck seems to be stacked against this wish, and that a man, a writer, who has devoted a part of his life to the service of Algeria, is in danger of being denied the opportunity to speak even before anyone knows what he has to say.

But this only confirms the urgency of the effort we must make for peace. This meeting was supposed to demonstrate that there is still a chance for dialogue. It was supposed to prevent the general feeling of discouragement from ending in passive acceptance of the worst.

In using the word "dialogue," I mean to signal that I did not come here to give a standard lecture. The fact is that, as things now stand, I haven't the heart for that. But I thought it possible, and even considered it my duty, to come before you to issue a simple appeal to your humanity, which in one respect at least might be able to calm tempers and bring together a majority of Algerians, both French and Arab, without asking them to relinquish any of their convictions.

This appeal, which has been sponsored by the committee that organized this meeting, is addressed to both camps and calls on them to accept a truce that would apply exclusively to innocent civilians.

My only purpose today is therefore to argue in favor of this initiative. I will try to be brief.

Let me say first—and I cannot emphasize this enough—that by its very nature this appeal falls outside the realm of politics. If it were otherwise, I would not be qualified to discuss it. I am not a politician. My passions and preferences summon me to places other than this podium. I am here only under the pressure of the situation and the way I sometimes conceive of my profession as a writer.

On the substance of the Algerian question, I may have more doubts than certitudes to express, given the pace of events and the growing suspicions on both sides. My only qualification to speak about this issue is that I have experienced Algeria's misfortune as a personal tragedy.

Nor can I rejoice in any death, no matter whose it is. For twenty years I have used the feeble means available to me to help bring harmony between our two peoples. To my preaching in favor of reconciliation, history has responded in cruel fashion: the two peoples I love are today locked in mortal combat. The look of consternation on my face is no doubt a cause for laughter. But I myself am not inclined to laugh. In the face of such failure, my only conceivable concern is to spare my country any unnecessary suffering.

I should add that the people who took the initiative to support this appeal were also not acting on political grounds. Some of them, representing different religious faiths, were responding to a high call and felt a duty to humanity. Others were people whose professions and predilections do not normally involve them in public affairs. Most do work that is useful to the community, work that suffices to fill their lives.

They might have remained on the sidelines, like so many others, counting the attacks while occasionally lamenting the losses in the most melancholic tones. But they felt that the work of building, teaching, and creating—generous, life-enhancing work—cannot continue in a land overwhelmed by hatred and drenched in blood.

Their decision to do something—a decision from which numerous consequences and commitments flow—gives them only one right: to demand that others think about what they are proposing.

Finally, I should say that our goal is not to win your political support. If we tried to get to the heart of the issue, we would risk failing to win the agreement we need. We may differ about the necessary solutions and even about the means to achieve them. To rehearse yet again positions that have already been stated and distorted a hundred times would for now merely add to the insults and enmities under which the country has been struggling and suffocating.

But at least one thing unites us all: namely, love of the land we share, and distress. Distress in the face of a future that becomes a little more inaccessible each day, distress at the threat of a rotten war and an economic crisis that is already serious and steadily getting worse, and which threatens to get so bad that recovery will take many years.

It is this distress that we want to address, even, and indeed especially, in the presence of those who have already chosen sides. For even among the most determined of those partisans, those engaged in the heat of the battle, there remain some, I am sure, who are not resigned to murder and hatred and who dream of a happy Algeria.

It is to that unresigned part of each of you, French or Arab, that we appeal tonight. Without dredging up yet again the errors of the past, and anxious only for the future, it is to those who have not resigned themselves to seeing this great country broken in two that we want to say today that it is still possible to come to an agreement on two simple points: first, to come together, and second, to save human lives and thus bring about a climate more favorable to reasonable discussion. The modesty of this goal is deliberate, yet it is important enough, in my opinion, to deserve your broad approval.

What do we want? We want the Arab movement and the French authorities, without entering into contact with each other or making any other commitment, to declare simultaneously that as long as the troubles continue, civilian populations will at all times be respected and protected. Why? The first reason, on which I will not insist, is, as I said earlier, one of simple humanity. However old and deep the roots of the Algerian tragedy are, one fact remains: no cause justifies the deaths of innocent people. Throughout history, human beings, though incapable of banning war itself, have tried to limit its effects.

As horrible and repugnant as the two world wars were, organizations offering aid and assistance were able to illuminate the darkness with rays of pity that made it impossible to give up hope in mankind altogether. The need for such help seems all the more urgent in what appears in many ways to be a fratricidal struggle, an obscure combat in which lethal force makes no distinction between men and women or soldiers and workers. Even if our initiative were to save only one innocent life, it would still be justified.

But it is also justified on other grounds. Although Algeria's future looks bleak, it is not yet entirely compromised. If everyone, Arab as well as French, were to make an effort to think about his adversary's justifications, then a useful discussion might at least begin.

But if each side in Algeria accuses the other of starting the conflict and both go at each other in a kind of xenophobic frenzy, then any chance of agreement will be definitively drowned in blood. For us, the greatest source of distress is the thought that we may be headed toward such horrors. But that cannot and must not happen until those of us, Arab and French, who reject nihilism's folly and destructiveness have issued a final appeal to reason.

In one sense, as reason clearly shows, Franco-Arab solidarity is inevitable, in life as in death, in destruction as in hope. The hideous face of this solidarity can be seen in the infernal dialectic according to which what kills one side also kills the other. Each camp blames the other, justifying its own violence in terms of its adversary's. The endless dispute over who committed the first wrong becomes meaningless. Because two populations so similar and yet so different, and each worthy of respect, have not been able to live together, they are condemned to die together, with rage in their hearts.

There is also a community of hope, however, and it is this that justifies our appeal. This community accepts the fact that certain realities cannot be changed. Sharing this land are a million Frenchmen who have been settled here for more than a century, millions of Muslims, both Arab and Berber, who have been here for many centuries, and any number of strong and vibrant religious communities. These people must live together where history has placed them, at a crossroads of commerce and civilizations. They can do so if only they are willing to take a few steps toward one another for a free and open debate.

Our differences should then help us rather than drive us apart. In this as in other things, I, for one, believe only in differences, not uniformity, because differences are the roots without which the tree of liberty withers and the sap of creation and civilization dries up. Yet we remain frozen in one another's presence as if stricken with a paralysis from which only sudden spasms of violence can liberate us. This is because the struggle has taken on an implacable character that arouses on both sides irrepressible rage and passions that can be slaked only by escalation.

"No further discussion is possible." This is the attitude that kills any chance of a future and makes life impossible. What follows is blind struggle, in which the French decide to ignore the Arabs, even if they know deep down that the Arab demand for dignity is justified, and the Arabs decide to ignore the French, even though they know deep down that the French of Algeria also have a right to security and dignity on the land we all share. Steeped in bitterness and hatred, each side finds it impossible to listen to the other. Every proposal, no matter what its nature, is greeted with suspicion and immediately twisted into a form that renders it useless.

Little by little we become caught in a web of old and new accusations, acts of vengeance, and endless bitterness, as in an ancient family quarrel in which grievances accumulate generation after generation to the point where not even the most upright and humane judge can sort things out. It becomes difficult to imagine how such an affair can end, and the hope of a Franco-Arab partnership in a peaceful and creative Algeria fades with each passing day.

If we want to keep a little of this hope alive until substantive debate can begin, and if we want to make sure that with an effort of mutual understanding that debate has some hope of altering the status quo, then we must act to change the nature of the struggle itself. For now we are too hamstrung by the scope of the tragedy and the complexity of the passions that have been unleashed to hope for an immediate cessation of hostilities. Any attempt to obtain this would require purely political moves that for the time being might lead to still further division.

We can act, however, on what is odious about the conflict itself. We can propose

not to change the present situation but simply to renounce what makes it unforgivable, namely, the slaughter of the innocent. The fact that such a meeting would bring together French and Arabs equally committed to avoiding irreparable damage and irreversible misery would create a real opportunity to intervene in both camps.

If our proposal has a chance of being accepted—and it does—we can not only save precious lives but also restore a climate that could lead to healthy debate not sidetracked by absurd ultimatums. We can lay the groundwork for a more just and nuanced understanding of the Algerian problem. If we can achieve just a small thaw on this one issue, then we can hope that someday it might be possible to chip away at the mass of hatreds and insane demands that currently block all progress. The initiative would then pass to the politicians, each of whom would have the right to defend his position and explain how it differs from the positions of others.

In any case, this is the narrow position on which we can, for starters, hope to come together. For the time being, any broader platform would only offer scope for additional disagreement. We must therefore be patient with ourselves.

As for the proposed action, of the utmost importance despite its limitations, I do not think that any Frenchman or Arab can, after mature reflection, possibly reject it. To understand why, it is enough to imagine what would happen if, despite all the precautions and restrictions with which we have surrounded this proposal, it were to fail. A definitive divorce would follow, destroying all hope and leading to misfortunes of which we have only the faintest idea at present.

Our Arab friends, who courageously stand with us today in a no-man's-land in which we find ourselves menaced by both sides and who, being torn themselves, already find it so difficult to resist calls for escalation, will be forced to surrender to a fatalism that will snuff out any possibility of dialogue. Directly or indirectly, they will join the struggle, when they might have become artisans of peace. It is therefore in the interest of every Frenchman to help them overcome this fatalism.

By the same token, it is in the direct interest of every Arab moderate to help us overcome another fatalism. Because if this proposal fails and our lack of influence is demonstrated, the French liberals who think that French and Arab can coexist in Algeria, who believe that such coexistence will respect the rights of both groups, and who are certain that there is in any case no other way of saving the people of this country from misery—those French liberals will be silenced for good.

Then, instead of participating in the broader community of which they dream, they will be thrown back on the only existing community that supports them, namely, France. So we too, whether by silence or deliberate choice, will join the struggle. It is this evolution on both sides that we must fear, and that is what makes action so urgent. To explain why, I cannot speak for our Arab friends, but I am a witness to what may happen in France.

Here, I am aware of Arab suspicion of any and all proposals, and by the same token I am aware, as you must be too, that in France similar doubts and suspicions are growing and are in danger of becoming permanent if the French, already surprised by the continuation of the war in the Rif after the return of the sultan and by the revival of guerrilla warfare in Tunisia, are forced by the spread of unrestrained warfare in Algeria to believe that the goal of the struggle is not simply justice for a people but furtherance of the ambitions of foreign powers at France's expense and to its ultimate ruin.

If that were to happen, many in France would reason in the same way as the majority of Arabs if they were to lose all hope and submit to the inevitable. Their argument would be the following: "We are French. There is no reason why considering what is

just in the cause of our adversaries should lead us to be unjust toward what deserves to survive and grow in France and its people. No one can expect us to applaud every form of nationalism except our own or to absolve every sin except the sins of France. Having been pushed to the limit, we must choose, and we cannot choose in favor of another country than our own."

If the adversary adopts a similar but opposite argument, our two peoples will separate once and for all, and Algeria will be left a field of ruins for many years to come, even though a little thought today could still turn things around and avoid the worst.

That is the danger we both face, the fatal dilemma we both confront. Either we succeed in joining together to limit the damage and thus encourage a more satisfactory evolution of the situation, or we fail to come together and persuade, and that failure will then color our whole future. That is what justifies our initiative and makes it so urgent. That is why my appeal will be more than insistent.

If I had the power to give voice to the solitude and distress that each of us feels, I would speak to you in that voice. Speaking for myself, I have passionately loved this country, in which I was born and from which I have taken everything that I am, and among my friends who live here I have never distinguished by race. Although I have known and shared the misery that this country has not escaped, Algeria has nevertheless remained for me a land of happiness, energy, and creativity, and I cannot resign myself to seeing it become a land of unhappiness and hatred for years to come.

I know that many people are fascinated by the awfulness of history's great tragedies. Because of this, they remain transfixed, unable to decide what to do, simply waiting. They wait, and then one day the Gorgon devours them. I want to share with you my conviction that this spell can be broken, that this impotence is an illusion, and that sometimes, a strong heart, intelligence, and courage are enough to overcome fate. All it takes is will: will that is not blind but firm and deliberate.

We resign ourselves to fate too easily. We too readily believe that in the end there is no progress without bloodshed and that the strong advance at the expense of the weak. Such a fate may indeed exist, but men are not required to bow down before it or submit to its laws. Had they always done so, we would still be living in prehistoric times.

In any event, men of culture and faith must never desert when historic battles are being waged, nor can they serve the forces of cruelty and inhumanity. Their role is to remain steadfast, to aid their fellow men against the forces of oppression, and to work on behalf of liberty against fatalism.

Only then is true progress possible. Only then can history innovate and create. Otherwise it repeats itself, like a bloody mouth from which an insane babble pours like vomit. We are still at the babbling stage, and yet the century holds the prospect of great things. We are in a knife fight, or something close to it, while the world is advancing at supersonic speed.

On the same day that French papers ran the horrible story of our provincial quarrels, they also announced the Euratom treaty. Tomorrow, if only Europe could come to an agreement, a flood of riches would inundate the continent and spill over into Algeria, making our problems obsolete and our hatreds moot.

This is the future, so close and yet so hard to imagine, for which we must organize and strive. What is absurd and distressing about the tragedy we are experiencing is

apparent in the fact that to enjoy the new global opportunities, we must band together in small numbers simply to demand that a handful of innocent victims be spared at one isolated place in the world, and nothing more.

But since that is our task, obscure and thankless though it may be, we must confront it boldly so that we may one day deserve to live as free men, which is to say, as men who refuse both to engage in terror and to endure it.

1. This is the text of a speech delivered in Algiers on January 22, 1956.

The End