

October 1, 1938

Letter, Jawaharlal Nehru to Nahas Pasha

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Summary:

In June 1938 Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), a Indian National Congress (INC) leader, one of the earliest INC members calling for full independence in 1927, and the main responsible for INC's foreign relations, took a ship to Europe. This trip was not a first for India's inaugural prime minister (1947-1964) to be. Already in 1905 he had left India to enroll at the elite British boarding school of Harrow, going on to study at Cambridge and work as a lawyer in London before returning home in 1912. And the last time he had sailed was in 1935, staying until 1936 as the INC representative in meetings with fellow Asian and increasingly also African anti-imperialists in Britain and Europe. Sure, by then the League against Imperialism (LAI), whose Comintern-organized foundational conference Nehru had attended in 1927, was defunct. (For the LAI see the 1927 document on Messali Hadj in this collection.) Even so, Nehru continued to see his secularist Indian nation-statist goals within an international leftist-anti-imperialist and now anti-fascist framework and web, as Michele Louro's *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (2020) argues.

Hence, when on the ship en route to Europe in 1938 he received an invitation from Egypt's leading nationalist wafd party and agreed to meet their leaders. Having been in contact with Egyptian nationalists before, a story told in Noor Khan's *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (2011), and having detailed their anti-imperialism in *Glimpses of World History* (1934), he saw the wafd as INC's appropriately leading anti-imperialist counterpart in Egypt. Sure, in confidential INC memoranda, he criticized the wafd's insufficient attention to the masses, especially the peasants, which cost them an election in early 1938, he thought; indeed, the wafdists were liberal nationalists whereas Nehru was a leftist nationalist. Nonetheless, sitting down with the wafd and exchanging views about world politics and anti-imperialist strategies was called for, in his and the wafd's view, at a time when fascism was rising and Britain continued to rule India and be very present in Egypt. Reproduced in the massive compilation *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, this text is a letter by Nehru sent from London to Nahas Pasha (1879-1965), a leading wafd politician.

Original Language:

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Transcript

To Nahas Pasha[\[1\]](#)

London

October 1, 1938

My dear Nahas Pasha,

It was a great pleasure and privilege to meet you again and have a long talk with you. I found that there was so much in common between us and our respective national movements that it would be to the great advantage of both of us to cooperate with each other as far as we can.

I recapitulate below the various points that we discussed.

1. We should organise a weekly exchange of a news-letter between the Indian National Congress and the Wafd Party. These letters to contain news of the political movement as well as economic, social and cultural news.
2. We should exchange our publications.
3. We should try to send delegates to our respective congresses and at other suitable times. Thus I hope that it will be possible for the Indian National Congress to send fraternal delegates to the Wafd congress in November, and I am happy to know from you that representatives of the Wafd will visit India early next year. Their visit will fit in with our annual session of the Congress in February or March.
4. I suggested to you also that we might develop contacts through certain international organisations, with whose objectives we agree. This would give us an opportunity to study international affairs and to influence them to some extent. This does not mean that we should commit ourselves to particular policies in regard to our own countries or our own national movements, but it would help us to some extent if we associated ourselves with progressive movements in the world. Our national problems are so much a part of the international problem that it is difficult to study them separately. Obviously our principal concern must be the freedom of our countries, but in working for this objective international contacts will be helpful.

I mentioned to you the affiliation of the Indian National Congress with the *R.U.P.* (*Rassemblement Universe[pour la Paix]*). We associated ourselves with this organisation because we believe in world peace and freedom, but we made it clear that peace, in our opinion, can only be established on a basis of freedom and anti-imperialism-imperialism, like fascism, being itself a negation of peace or freedom. We have consistently pressed this attitude in the R.U.P. We are represented on the R.U.P. executive by a member nominated by our organisation.

I would suggest that to begin with you might acquaint yourselves with the activities of the *R.U.P.* and develop informal contacts with it, without any formal commitment on your part. Later, you can judge for yourselves what is the best course for you to adopt. In the event of the R.U.P. having international conferences it might be desirable for a fraternal delegate or an observer to be sent by the Wafd. In this way you would come in contact with many organisations and individuals whose cooperation would be useful. You would also bring the question of Egypt before them, as well as problems affecting the Arab world, more especially Palestine, and all this could be done without any formal commitment on your part.

I understand that M. Jacob represents the R.U.P. in Cairo. You are acquainted with him and he will, no doubt, supply you with all necessary information.

5. I also suggested to you the desirability of youth organisations in Egypt getting into touch with international youth organisations, in particular with the World Youth Congress. This is an important body and its influence is a growing one in a large number of countries. I am sure they will welcome the association of Egyptian youth with them.

I would also like your youth organisations to get into direct touch with Indian youth organisations. Wherever possible delegates might be sent to youth congresses, either national or international.

6. All of us in India are greatly interested in the problem of Palestine. It is difficult for us to have direct contacts with the people of Palestine. We would like, therefore, to keep in touch with the situation there through your party. This would help us

greatly. We would therefore welcome news of Palestine in your weekly news-letters. Our general attitude in regard to Palestine has been this. We have looked upon the struggle in Palestine as a struggle for national freedom and not as a religious or racial struggle. It is an anti-imperialist struggle of the Arab people. At the same time we realise that the Jews have been grossly ill-treated in Europe and we have a great deal of sympathy for them, but this sympathy does not mean that they should allow themselves to be used as tools of British imperialism in Palestine, as they have done and are doing. Certainly they have certain rights there, which should be protected, and they can help as useful citizens in building up Palestine, but the essential thing is that Palestine is an Arab country and should achieve freedom as such, with Jewish rights protected. We feel that the only way out of the present difficulty is by means of an agreement between the Arabs and the Jews on the above basis and without any interference by British imperialism.

I understand that there are many Arabs and some Jews who accept this basis and who would gladly cooperate together. I have no doubt that you can exercise a powerful influence in this direction.

7. In India, unfortunately, some difficulties occasionally arise between certain groups of Mussulmans and others. It is our earnest desire to remove every grievance and to build up a unified nation in which every group and community and individual has full and equal rights. We have the example before us of what you have been able to achieve in Egypt. I am glad to say that we have built up a powerful platform of unity in India and among our most noted leaders and colleagues there are many Muslims. Still some elements in the community, for political or other reasons, have opposed the national movement. I have no doubt that with the example of Egypt before us and your goodwill to help us, we can deal with this problem with success.

In effect, the problem has been accentuated by the efforts of British imperialism to create divisions. Of course, it is up to us to solve it by our own efforts and it would be improper for you or your party to associate yourselves with any particular group in this matter. You must necessarily be above such domestic matters. Nevertheless your influence in favour of unity will be helpful.

8. Apart from our official contacts, I would greatly welcome personal contacts by correspondence between you and me.

Weekly news-letters and publications should be sent to the above address and marked 'Foreign Department'. These news-letters can be either in English or French. Any special publications in Arabic might also be sent. I have learnt since my return here that an Arab congress is being organized in Cairo by certain anti-Wafdist and pro-fascist elements, who are known as the 'green shirts', that it will take place on November 7th in Cairo. You did not tell me anything about it when we met. I wonder if this congress has been organised just as a counter-blast to yours. I presume it will be supported by the palace party and will consider the Palestine problems. I shall be grateful if you will let me know more about it and suggest to us what our attitude should be in regard to it.

I understand that it will be a purely Muslim congress with a pan-Islamic bent. As such a national organisation like ours will not have contacts with it. I am told, however, that invitations have been issued to certain Muslim organisations in India and that some Indian Muslims have accepted them, among them being Sir Mohamad Yakub, Mr. M.A. Jinnah, Mr. Abdul Rahman Siddiqui^[2] and Moulvi Madhar el Din.^[3] Of these, Sir Mohamad Yakub, I regret to say, is very reactionary in politics and pro-British imperialism. The others are leading members of the Muslim League, which is a communal organisation. I am told also that two other representatives might be coming from India, namely Mufti Kifayatullah and Moulvi Abdul Halim Siddiqui.^[4] These two might represent the Jamiat-ul-Ulema. This organisation is a semipolitical and semi-religious one, which has often been associated with the National Congress in our struggle. Mufti Kifayatullah is a very fine man, but he is not very political. These people no doubt are very much agitated about the Palestine situation and hence their desire to take part in the congress.

I find that the Palestine Arab Centre here in London knows about this proposed congress of November 7th but that it does not know anything about the Wafdist congress to be held on November 23rd.

I intend returning to India in the last week of October. I shall try to break journey in Egypt so that I may have another chance of meeting you and your colleagues.

You must have followed closely the developments in the international situation. It is remarkable how England and France have deserted Czechoslovakia. For the moment the outlook is depressing and all that we can say is that to rely on the friendship or protection of either of these countries is a dangerous thing.

With warm regards and good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Jawaharlal Nehru

[1] A.I.C.C. File No. G-71-1938, pp. 16 (b-f), N.M.M.L.

[2] A prominent Khilafatist and Muslim League leader of Bengal.

[3] A Khilafat leader and prominent member of the Muslim League in Delhi; was murdered in 1939.

[4] (1889-1969); leader of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind in U.P.