

**Statecraft and Institution Building between Two Revolutions:  
Taha Hussein and Egypt's Road to Independence  
(1919-1952)**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a social biography of the Egyptian intellectual Taha Hussein (1889-1973). While studies of Hussein have explored his remarkable literary career, this study uses Egyptian and French state and university archives, as well as Hussein's private papers, to shift the focus to his public career as a statesman and a civil servant. With their exclusive reliance on Hussein's published work, neither Egyptian historiography nor literary projects grounded in postcolonial studies do justice to the institutional and political context in which he was writing and making decisions. As a result, he remains a prime example of an intellectual who is trapped in simplistic binaries, such as "culturally authentic" or "westernized" that fail to account for the complexity of his intellectual outlook. The thesis turns instead to what he did as a leading politician, and shows that far from his image as a "man of letters" disinterested in politics, his promotion of culture was a political strategy to build a strong democracy and guarantee a better life for Egyptians.

Using Hussein's life, this thesis narrates a moment of alternative modernity that gets shut down in the 1950s by increasing public anger against the intervention of colonial powers in Egyptian and Arab affairs. The study shows how this moment was worked out at the ground level through the examination of Hussein's efforts to take the Nahda forward by building strong modern educational and cultural institutions, such as the secular university and the language academy, which he believed were essential to create an Egyptian nationalist humanism that showed a critical appropriation of European culture and fostered an active engagement with the Arab-Islamic tradition. By exploring the understudied history of educational institutions, this thesis turns away from the triangular struggle of power between the British, the palace and the political parties dominating the historiography of the parliamentary period (1922-1952). It shows that, despite a challenging political context, Hussein and others were able to introduce free



education, expand Egypt's cultural influence in the region, and empower important institutions of culture and education that continued under Nasser.

## Résumé

Cette thèse est une biographie sociale de l'intellectuel égyptien Taha Hussein (1889-1973). Alors que les études existantes sur Hussein ont exploré sa remarquable carrière littéraire, cette étude, le fruit de recherches menées auprès des archives nationales égyptiennes et françaises, des archives de l'université du Caire, ainsi que des archives personnelles de Hussein, porte sur sa carrière publique en tant qu'homme d'état et fonctionnaire public. Ni l'historiographie égyptienne ni les projets littéraires fondés sur des études postcoloniales, ayant focalisé exclusivement sur l'œuvre publiée par Hussein, ne rendent justice au contexte institutionnel et politique dans lequel il écrivait et prenait ses décisions. En conséquence, il reste un excellent exemple d'un intellectuel piégé dans des binaires simplistes, tels que «culturellement authentique» ou «occidentalisé» qui ne tiennent pas compte de la complexité de ses perspectives intellectuelles. La thèse se tourne plutôt vers ce qu'il a fait en tant qu'homme politique de premier plan et montre que, loin de son image d'homme de lettres désintéressé par la politique, promouvoir la culture était sa stratégie politique pour construire une démocratie forte et garantir une vie meilleure pour les Égyptiens.

A travers la vie de Hussein, cette thèse raconte un moment de modernité alternative qui s'arrête dans les années 1950 devant la montée de la colère publique contre l'intervention des puissances coloniales dans les affaires égyptiennes et arabes. L'étude montre comment ce moment s'est déroulé, et ce par l'analyse des efforts de Hussein visant à avancer la Nahda en construisant de solides institutions éducatives et culturelles modernes, telles que l'université laïque et l'académie de la langue arabe, qui, selon lui, étaient indispensables à la création d'un humanisme nationaliste égyptien capable de s'approprier l'essentiel de la culture européenne et d'aborder la tradition arabo-islamique de façon critique. En explorant l'histoire peu étudiée des

établissements d'enseignement, cette thèse se détourne de la lutte triangulaire de pouvoir entre les Britanniques, la monarchie égyptienne et les partis politiques qui dominent l'historiographie de la période parlementaire (1922-1952). Cela montre que, malgré un contexte politique difficile, Hussein et d'autres sont arrivés à adopter la gratuité de l'éducation, à élargir l'influence culturelle de l'Égypte dans la région et à habiliter des institutions importantes de culture et d'éducation qui ont continué sous Nasser.

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### **Note on Translation and Transliteration**

All translations from Arabic and French into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. In my translation from Arabic, especially of Taha Hussein's writings, I have opted for a resistant translation to give the reader a better sense of Hussein's style and sentence structure.

Transliteration follows the Library of Congress system. Accepted English spellings for place names like Cairo and Beirut have been used, and so have familiar English spellings for famous people like Taha Hussein, Fouad I and Nasser.

### **List of Abbreviations**

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>DWQ</b>             | Dār al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah (Egyptian National Archives) |
| <b>MW</b>              | Majlis al-Wuzarā' (Council of Ministers Archival Unit)                |
| <b>Abdin</b>           | Abdīn (Abdīn Palace Archival Unit)                                    |
| <b>DMZ</b>             | Dār al-Maḥfūzāt (The Egyptian Registry and Property Records Archive)  |
| <b>Faculty of Arts</b> | The Archives of the Faculty of Arts – Cairo University                |
| <b>Private Papers</b>  | Taha Hussein's Private Papers   |
| <b>AMAE</b>            | Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris-France)          |



## Introduction

*I do not believe there is a single intellectual (muthaqqaf) in the last four decades in Egypt, or in the Arab World in general, who has not been influenced by Taha Hussein. This was, and will continue to be, what sets him apart from the rest of his generation. Some will say they have been influenced by al-‘Aqqād, Salāmah Mūsa, or al-Māzinī, but in addition to their favorite writer, you will find that they have all been influenced by Taha Hussein.*<sup>1</sup>

Ghālī Shukrī

The Egyptian Marxist critic, Ghālī Shukrī (1935-1998) made this observation a few months after Taha Hussein had passed away on October 28, 1973. The laudatory remark came from Shukrī despite the intense debates that had pitted Hussein against many young leftist intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s. These lively literary debates that echoed across the Arab world had distanced Hussein from the younger intellectuals like Shukrī, Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim, ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Anīs, Ra’īf Khūrī and others. Faced with a new generation of writers who promoted “committed literature,” Hussein held steadfastly to his views defending the total freedom of writers to choose both the literary form and content of their work. Hussein, by then a veteran who had championed the cause for social justice under the monarchy in his literary works and political chronicles, disheartened the enthusiastic leftist writers who had expected his encouragement and blessings. Since they believed literature must support the new anti-colonial struggle and become a tool for social change, they saw Hussein as a “bourgeois and liberal” intellectual, a defender of “art for art’s sake,” and a representative of an older generation that failed to grasp the new role literature had to play in society. Their critique of Taha Hussein was part of their overall critique of Egypt’s liberal experiment, which followed the 1919 revolution and ended with the army coup of July 23, 1952. In line with the new regime in Egypt after the

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<sup>1</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā yabqa min Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?* [What Remains of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?] (Beirut: Dār al-Muṭawassit, 1974), 6.

coup, these leftist critics argued that a corrupt monarchy and petty partisan politics had destroyed the potential of the 1919 revolution and failed to achieve full independence or the necessary social reform.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, during and after the debate, Shukrī, Amīn, Khūrī and others never hid their admiration and respect for Taha Hussein. Shukrī, for example, emphasized the impact Hussein had had on the intellectual formation of several generations of writers and critics, including the younger ones who were now challenging him. Shukrī even credited Hussein's famous periodical *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* (1945-1948) with having introduced Shukrī's generation to Sartre, Camus and Kafka in the first place.<sup>3</sup> In Shukrī's view, the influence of Taha Hussein's ideas, and his long fight for intellectual freedom and critical scholarship could not be denied.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, championing critical thinking and subjecting the canonical works of the Arab-Islamic tradition to academic scrutiny also earned Hussein many enemies over the years. Decades after his death, he is still glorified by some and vilified by others as if he was still alive and as if his work had just been published. However, in these polarized and passionate debates, the context in which he wrote his books is usually completely absent. In November 2016, for example, the media reported that al-Azhar had suspended the scholar, Yusrī Ja'far, professor of philosophy and theology in the college of the principles of religion, for three months. Among many allegations, he was accused of "adopting Taha Hussein's critique of al-Azhar's curriculum

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<sup>2</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā yabqa min Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8. In my own interview with the late Egyptian novelist Jāmāl al-Ghītānī, he also mentioned *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* as a landmark in the history of Egyptian periodicals dealing with culture, art and literature. He especially praised the books the periodical published regularly, and which he described as "exemplary," not only in terms of content, but also the quality of translation. He said that as editor-in-chief of *Akḥbār al-Adab*, Ghītānī tried to do what Hussein had done by asking his friends around the world to write for *Akḥbār al-Adab* to provide Egyptian and Arab readers with access to new and different ideas. Jāmāl al-Ghītānī, interview, Cairo, April 6, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā yabqa min Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?*, 13.

and reviving Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s thought.”<sup>5</sup> The media did not need to elaborate on what the critique and the thought in question were. The readers understood implicitly that if the sheikh’s work was associated with ‘Abduh and Hussein then it must have been deemed controversial, and possibly disrespectful of traditional scholarship. Ironically around the same time, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, praised Taha Hussein saying that he was, in al-Ṭayyib’s words, “extremely polite with the Islamic heritage, with the Prophet, and [with his companions] Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān.”<sup>6</sup> Yet al-Ṭayyib’s measured statement does not reflect the opinion of other religious groups and their followers. As will be shown below in more detail, they blame Hussein for having westernized Egyptian thought and for having collaborated with Orientalists and missionaries. Some go further and accuse him of having secretly converted to Christianity and worked to undermine Islam from within.

In these debates, Hussein also has his ardent supporters. In one of the many protests that paved the way to the 2011 revolution, the Writers and Artists for Change Movement organized a peaceful demonstration in downtown Cairo in August 2005, in which the protesters held banners calling for political change. Inspired by Taha Hussein, some of the banners carried images of him as a symbol of a long unfinished battle for freedom of thought and expression.<sup>7</sup> Then, following Mubarak’s overthrow, some leftists forgot the “art for art” debate and appealed to other aspects of Taha Hussein’s legacy to address Egypt’s volatile political situation. For example, writing in 2012 during the battle that raged between religious and non-religious

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<sup>5</sup> Ja‘far was also accused of promoting atheism, criticizing al-Bukhārī, and calling for revising the curriculum taught at al-Azhar. ‘Azzah Kāmil, “Limādhā yakhsha al-azhariyūn Muḥammad ‘Abduh wa-Ṭāhā Ḥusayn??” [Why do Azharites Fear Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn??], *al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, November 7, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad Shihṭah, “Shaykh al-Azhar: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn shadīd al-adab ma‘a al-turāth wa-ṣaḥābat al-nabī” [Sheikh al-Azhar: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn is Extremely Polite with the Heritage and the Companions of the Prophet], *Ṣada al-Balad*, November 11, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Samia Mehrez, *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

political parties over writing a new Egyptian constitution, leftist journalist Mājidah al-Jindī argued that the road Hussein had proposed for freedom, culture and education in his classic *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938) was more relevant then than ever.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in a more recent statement, the poet Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinnah called for adopting the book, without any changes, as the official program for reforming the ailing educational system in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Abū Sinnah's statement speaks to another heated debate on the economic viability of free education in the country. In recent years, universal free education, one of Hussein's most enduring and well-known legacies, has come under sharp criticism. Between 1944 and 1950, as a senior civil servant, Hussein had managed to make primary, secondary and technical education free. Yet, recent local and international reports on the declining quality of Egyptian public schools fuel debates over the utility of costly state support for these schools and universities. In this debate, leftists appeal to Hussein's name and his famous views on education as a "right for every citizen" to counter arguments by neoliberals who see education as a commodity for which people should pay.<sup>10</sup> References to Hussein, his legacy and the structural changes he introduced to the educational system in the country abound in Egyptian public life. The passing of time has so far denied him the dispassionate debates granted most intellectuals of his generation.

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<sup>8</sup> Mājidah al-Jindī, "Al-Ṭarīq ila miṣr qawwīyah kamā khaṭahu al-‘amīd" [The Road to a Strong Egypt as Drawn by the Dean], *al-Ahrām*, October 28, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinnah, "Ṭarḥ ru'yat mustaqbal al-thaqāfah fī miṣr" [Putting Forward the Vision of The Future of Culture in Egypt], *al-Yawm al-Sābi*, December 15, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> In a controversial statement the Egyptian Minister of Education, Tāriq Shawqī, announced that education was a "commodity," and that like any other commodity, people and not the state should pay for it. The article also referred to a recent statement by President 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, in which he was quoted to say (in colloquial Egyptian): "I don't know anything that is for free, and you, Egyptians, must get used to [that], and you, the army, should be the one to start: when you receive a service, you [must] pay for it." "Wazīr al-ta'lim al-jadīd: Al-Ta'lim sil'ah, wa-l-dawlah qad la tastamir fī daf' fāturatihā" [The Minister of Education: Education is a Commodity and the State Will not Continue to Pay its Bill], *Mada Miṣr*, February 16, 2017. <http://www.madamasr.com/ar/2017/02/16/news/وا-سلعة-التعليم-الجديد-وزير-سياسة> [Last accessed: March 3, 2017]

Taha Hussein was born on November 15, 1889, in the village of ‘Izbat al-kīlū, near the town of Maghāghah in the Upper Egyptian province of al-Minīyah. He lost his eyesight at the age of two or three due to a maltreated ophthalmia. While his blindness caused him much distress throughout his life, it also added an aura of heroism and even genius to his exceptional intellectual accomplishments.<sup>11</sup> His disability did not stop him from pursuing his studies at the village kuttāb in a traditional educational system that had long accommodated the blind. He memorized the Qur’an by the age of nine, and went to continue his studies at the prestigious university of al-Azhar in Cairo in 1902, where, mostly through his brother Aḥmad and his friends, he came under the influence of the religious scholar and modernist reformer Muḥammad

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<sup>11</sup> For many accounts of the difficulties Hussein experienced in his life due to his blindness, see his autobiography, *The Days* (in three volumes). In the first volume, for example, he remembers a moving incidence from his childhood during which his siblings made fun of the way he ate with both hands, leading to his subsequent decision to always eat alone away from people’s eyes. This continued for years until his wife Suzanne managed slowly to help him get over his reluctance to eat in public. See Taha Hussein, *al-Ayyām*, vol. 1, trans. E.H. Paxton (Cairo: The American University Press, 1987), 19-20. Other incidents include his panic as a child when his family forgot and left him on a train all by himself. At al-Azhar he resented being pejoratively called ‘you blind’ by one of his Sheikhs, and at the Egyptian University he was afraid of not being admitted as the rules were not clear about blind students. He described his vulnerability and helplessness when his chaperone was denied entry to the classroom to help Hussein to his seat, and in France he was singled out by a French professor at the University of Montpellier and told to wear dark glasses to cover his eyes. Several scholars have also referred to the impact of blindness on Taha Hussein’s character and literary style. Albert Hourani, for example, says Hussein’s blindness can help explain “both the quality of his imagination and something about his literary style – the thin line of development of narrative and argument, the endless repetitions of words, the long sentences formed of clauses linked by simple conjunction.” See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 326. Literary scholar, Fedwa Matli-Douglas has argued that Hussein’s blindness was the reason behind the literary structure of his famous autobiography, and she offers a compelling analysis of *The Days*, in which she reads his autobiography as a struggle against blindness as a personal and social handicap. Fedwa Matli-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: Al-Ayyām of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). In terms of the impact of blindness on Hussein’s personality, literary scholars Ḥamdī al-Sakkūt and Marsden Jones believe that unlike al-Ma‘arrī whose blindness isolated him and turned him into an ascetic, blindness had the opposite impact on Taha Hussein, “making him aggressive in his engagement with life, forcing his way into its challenges, in addition to his incessant attempts to change many of its circumstances.” Ḥamdī al-Sakkūt and Marsden Jones, *A ‘lām al-adab al-mu‘āṣir fī miṣr: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* [Contemporary Literary Luminaries in Egypt: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn] (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabīyah bi-l-Jāmi‘ah al-Amrīkīyah, 1982), 4. Aḥmad ‘Ulabī is another intellectual, who argued that blindness resulted in Hussein’s stubbornness, and that his effort to surmount the restrictions imposed by his disability gave him the power and perseverance to face all the dilemmas that dotted his life since childhood. See Aḥmad ‘Ulabī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: sīrat mukāfiḥ ‘anīd* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: The Biography of a Stubborn Combatant] (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1990).

‘Abduh (1849-1905). It was also at al-Azhar that he was introduced to the classics of Arabic literature by Sayyid ‘Alī al-Marṣafī (1862-1931).<sup>12</sup> Disappointed with al-Azhar’s teaching methods that emphasized memorization and verbal analysis, he was among the first students to attend classes at the newly opened Egyptian University created in 1908. He was the first Egyptian to earn a doctorate degree at the new university in 1914, where he defended his dissertation on the blind poet and philosopher Abū ‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (973-1057), who was famous for his pessimism about life and for having described himself as “a double prisoner” of blindness and solitude.<sup>13</sup> Hussein then went on a scholarship to France, first to Montpellier then to Paris, and returned to Cairo in 1919 with his doctorate degree from the Sorbonne on *La Philosophie sociale d’Ibn Khaldoun*. In France, he met his wife, Suzanne Bresseau, and she returned with him to Egypt where she lived until her death in 1989. Back in Cairo, Hussein started his long academic career as a professor of ancient history, and then Arabic literature at the faculty of arts.

Visitors to Cairo University and Egypt’s ministry of education are constantly reminded that Hussein, more than any other intellectual in Egypt’s modern history, is associated with the country’s modern secular education. These visitors see busts of the “Dean of Arabic literature” in his familiar glasses, sternly scrutinizing both institutions whose names remain invariably tied to his. Students and employees attend classes and hold meetings in various classrooms and conference halls bearing his name, not only at the university and the ministry, but also at the

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<sup>12</sup> There is the famous Zāwiyat al-‘umyān, built by the wealthy officer, ‘Uthmān Katkhudah, in the early eighteenth century, which had, as the historian Bayard Dodge has described, “washing facilities in the basement, a classroom with four columns and a prayer niche on the ground and three living rooms upstairs.” See Bayard Dodge, *al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1961), 87 and 165.

<sup>13</sup> The dissertation was published as a book later: Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Dhikra Abī al-‘Alā’*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Hilāl, [1922]). It was not until 1920 that the University decided students must first get a bachelor’s degree. See Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah* [Prince Ahmed Fouad and the Creation of the Egyptian University] (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Jāmi‘at Fu’ād al-Awwal, 1950), 228.

national council for translation. His ministerial oak desk (shown in the photograph below) is the only desk on public display at the museum of the ministry of education reminding museum visitors that the controversial intellectual and the outspoken literary critic was also Cairo University's Dean of Arts (1928, 1930-1932, 1936-1939), a senior civil servant at the ministry of public instruction, first as Controller of General Culture (1939-1942), then as Technical Advisor to the Minister of Public Instruction (1942-1944) and finally as Minister of Public Instruction himself (1950-1952), and that he was also President of the Arabic Language Academy until his death (1963-1973).<sup>14</sup>



Taha Hussein's role as a statesman, politician and civil servant has received little attention compared to his better-known career as a writer and a critic. Unlike many intellectuals of his generation, such as 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād (1889-1964), Salāmah Mūsa (1887-1958), or Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī (1889-1949), Hussein had a long and active political career between the two revolutions. The 1919 revolution had triggered Great Britain's unilateral declaration of Egypt's nominal independence in 1922, followed by the adoption of the constitution in 1923, and the beginning of parliamentary life in 1924. All these events heralded what later came to be

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<sup>14</sup> Photo taken by the author, Museum of Education, Cairo, October 2013.



known as the liberal or parliamentary period, which lasted until the army coup in 1952 and the dissolution of the political parties in 1953. While this independence in 1922 was hampered by the four famous reservations that maintained Great Britain's political and military control over Egypt, education was one of the areas over which the Egyptian government reassumed full control.<sup>15</sup> This period became thus dominated by efforts and debates on how to turn the nominal independence into a full one, and like many intellectuals of his generation, Taha Hussein became actively involved. For him, the real battle for full independence was about building strong institutions of learning and knowledge production. His political activities began in a serious way when he aligned himself with the popular Wafd party in the 1930s and used the Wafd as a platform from which he pitched his ideas on culture and education while responding to his adversaries on the pages of widely read journals and periodicals. This dissertation turns to Hussein's understudied public career as a guide to understanding not only the history of those institutions, which exist to this day, but also the history of the parliamentary era in which he was a main historical player until the end of his political career in 1952. Before I explain the interventions this dissertation is making, I need to set up the context for it by outlining the areas it intersects with and exploring my source base.

### **A Social Biography**

By using the life and work of Taha Hussein as a lens to look at various social, political and cultural transformations in Egypt in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, this dissertation is a social biography, which is not a biography in the usual sense. Historian Nick Salvatore sums up nicely the various reservations historians have had about

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<sup>15</sup> Great Britain reserved the right to continue to protect Egypt and all communications vital to the interests of the British Empire against any foreign aggression, and to protect minorities living in Egypt. The fourth item stipulated that the Egyptian independence would not change the status quo of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.



traditional biographies, and how a social biography, when rigorously done, could address these concerns. Biography, he argues, has traditionally been seen as a lesser form of history, a genre in which the historian's main task of periodization is predetermined by the birth and death of the biographical subject.<sup>16</sup> Another concern is that too much focus on individual agency could undermine the wider historical context flattening other forces at play.<sup>17</sup> Historians who contributed to the American Historical Association's forum on biography in 2009, for example, take these criticisms seriously. All these historians start by explaining the ways in which their biographies and methodologies differ from the usual biographical approach, leading David Nasaw, the well-known American historian and biographer, to say there was an "apologetic tone" in their essays.<sup>18</sup> Yet all these historians agree that there has been a recent revived interest in biography, whereby this "biographical turn" has shifted the focus to the capacity of individual life to enhance our understanding of broader historical changes.<sup>19</sup>

For Salvatore, a social biography does not take the individual alone as its subject, but takes equally seriously the individual in a particular historical context.<sup>20</sup> This double-focus, he argues, results in a valuable perspective by allowing the historian to address the following question

How, in what ways, with what success, does an individual interact with, create life from, and possibly alter a culture and a society not of their own making, one which they largely inherit.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nick Salvatore, "Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship," *Labor History* 87 (2004): 187.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Taylor, "Separation of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 641.

<sup>18</sup> David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography: Introduction," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Salvatore, "Biography and Social History," 187.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

According to Salvatore, this does not mean, however, that a social biography should seek to romanticize and applaud the ways in which its subject rose above various societal challenges. Instead, as a historian, Salvatore is more interested in the individual's response to the choices available to her and the transformations happening around her. He argues that

[A] broad and deep agenda allows the biographer to explore the particular response of one individual who occupies a specific social and cultural space without losing perspective on those transformations. Indeed, it is precisely the play between the two that is the crux of the matter.<sup>22</sup>

In this way, and similar to microhistory and memory studies for example, a social biography can help us gain a greater understanding of particular institutions and forms of social change by analyzing how they had been understood and negotiated by particular individuals, allowing us to work with and against the grand narratives that usually fail to match the experience of individuals on the ground.

The extent to which the biographical subject can be said to be representative of his context becomes critical here. Taking the subject as an example of his times might be tempting in order to justify the focus on one individual. Yet, as Salvatore, Hans Renders and Sigurdur Magnusson show, such "representativeness" can be misleading. They all agree that an agenda that sees the subject as representative will inevitably try to fit her in a general picture of history, thus suppressing the many contradictions and inconsistencies that we all experience in our daily lives as individuals. Magnusson goes even further to say that this leads to manipulating the subject matter into an already known outcome.<sup>23</sup> Henders also believes that a good biography or microhistory should always question such representativeness, look for breaking points in this

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 189-91.

<sup>23</sup> Sigurdur Magnusson, "The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory Within the Postmodern State of Knowledge," *Journal of Social History* 36.3 (2003): 718.

larger narrative and see the subject not as an example, but as a “point of reference” in a complex context.<sup>24</sup>

### **Why Taha Hussein and What Can He Tell Us?**

Why is Taha Hussein a good candidate for a biographical subject? At the turn of the twentieth century, Egypt was witnessing many changes. Besides the new independence, these changes included the introduction of a new secular university system, the development of the Arabic novel, a burgeoning press, active literary salons, and intense public debates over nationalism and social reform, in addition to the role of religion, women, and education in society. Taha Hussein was involved in all of these debates and experienced all these transformations firsthand. Moreover, Hussein’s French education and university position gave him access to the vibrant francophone cultural scene in Cairo and Alexandria with its many literary and artistic groups particularly active during the interwar period. Hussein circulated in all those circles with such ease that the literary scholar Richard Jaquemond remarks how Hussein was “parfaitement à l’aise dans sa double culture, actif sur tous les fronts.”<sup>25</sup>

Yet, surprisingly, scholarship on this iconic figure is extremely limited. Historian Donald Reid points out that the main source on Taha Hussein in English remains his autobiography, *The*

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<sup>24</sup> Hans Renders, “The Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory,” *Storia della Storiografia* 59-60 (2011): 32-42.

On the challenges of writing biographies, see Laila Parsons, “Mirco-narrative and the Historiography of the Modern Middle East,” *History Compass* 8 (2010): 1-13, and Laila Parsons, “Some Thoughts on Biography and the Historiography of the Twentieth-Century Arab World,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 21, no. 2 (2010): 5-20. Parsons argues that in the field of modern Middle Eastern history, there is a huge shortage in biographies in particular and complex narrative histories in general. As a result, descriptions of daily life, professional networks, schools, public disputes, and other immediate concerns such as money, family and friendship tend to go missing.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Jaquemond, *Entre Scribes et écrivains: Le champs littéraire dans l’Egypte contemporaine* (Paris: Sindbad Actes Sud, 2003), 143.

*Days*.<sup>26</sup> In one of the few studies dedicated to Taha Hussein's thought, *Taha Husain's Education from the Azhar to the Sorbonne*, the intellectual Abdel Rashid Mahmoudi laments how "at a time when interest in Taha Husain should be at its highest, there is a scarcity of good books on this great Egyptian writer."<sup>27</sup> The main scholarly work on Taha Hussein's life in English remains Pierre Cachia's *Taha Husayn, his Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance*, published in 1956—a revised version of Cachia's doctoral dissertation submitted in 1951.<sup>28</sup> Considered a pioneer for choosing an Arab subject at the time, Cachia focuses mostly on Hussein's literary works and reformist ideas. An important work of literary criticism is Fedwa Malti-Douglas' structural analysis of *The Days*, in which she reads Hussein's autobiography as a struggle against blindness, both as a personal and social handicap.<sup>29</sup>

Mahmoudi's work, along with the earlier works of Miftah Tahar, *Taha Husain, sa critique littéraire et ses sources françaises* (1976), Jābir 'Uṣfūr's *al-Marāyā al-mutajāwirah* (1983), and Aḥmad Buḥasan's *al-Khiṭāb al-naqdī 'inda Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (1985) are all valuable scholarly contributions to Taha Hussein's intellectual biography.<sup>30</sup> They have engaged with Taha Hussein's critical thought and analyzed his widely-acclaimed innovation in the field of Arabic literary studies. To varying degrees, these critics focus on Hussein's application of French rationalist and positivist research methods in his study of Arabic literature and its history. While

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<sup>26</sup> Donald Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 236.

<sup>27</sup> Abdelrashid Mahmoudi, *Taha Husain's Education from the Azhar to the Sorbonne* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Cachia, *Taha Husayn, his Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance* (London: Luzac, 1956).

<sup>29</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: Al-Ayyām of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Miftah Tahar, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: sa critique littéraire et ses sources françaises* (Tunis: Maison arabe du livre, 1976), Jābir 'Uṣfūr, *al-Marāyā al-mutajāwirah: dirāsah fī naqd Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* [Adjacent Mirrors: A Critical Study of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn] (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Ammah li-l-Kitāb, 1983) and Aḥmad Buḥasan, *al-Khiṭāb al-naqdī 'inda Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's Critical Discourse] (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 1985).

recognizing the French influence on Hussein, Mahmoudi also emphasizes the enduring influence of Hussein's earlier training in Egypt on his literary career, first at al-Azhar under the mentorship of Sheikh Sayyid 'Alī al-Marṣafī, a protégé of Muḥammad 'Abduh's, and then at the Egyptian University where Hussein studied with the Orientalist scholar Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872-1938). Marṣafī and Nallino introduced Taha Hussein to classical Arabic literature, its history and methods of literary criticism. Hussein himself recognized their influence on him, when, in his preface to the second edition of Nallino's *Tārīkh al-ādāb al-'arabīyah*, he wrote that he "owed his entire intellectual life to these two great professors."<sup>31</sup> Other studies in Arabic include al-Badrāwī Zahrān's *Uslūb Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī daw' al-dars al-lughawī al-ḥadīth* (1982), in which Zahran analyzes the phonology, morphology and syntax of Taha Hussein's style in his autobiography, *al-Ayyām*.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the literary scholar Rashīdah Mahrān studies, in *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn bayna al-sīrah wa-l-tarjamah al-dhātīyah*, how Hussein wrote about himself in his autobiography and how he wrote about various Islamic subjects in his other books. She also compares between Hussein and other intellectuals of his generation who also wrote autobiographies and biographies, discussing the ways in which she believes he surpassed them in his storytelling technique.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this shortage of single studies of Taha Hussein, there are numerous references to him in secondary literature. As literary scholar Roger Allen has pointed out, there is hardly a single work dealing with the history of the modern Arabic novel and its criticism that does not

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<sup>31</sup> Taha Hussein, preface to *Tārīkh al-ādāb al-'arabīyah min al-jāhilīyah ḥatta 'aṣr banī Ummayyah: nuṣūṣ al-muḥāḍarāt allatī alqāhā bi-l-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah fī sanat 1910-1911* [The History of the Arabic Belles-Lettres from Pre-Islam to the Ummayyads: Lectures Given at the Egyptian University 1910-1911], by Carlo Nallino, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1970), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Badrāwī Zahrān, *Uslūb Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī daw' al-dars al-lughawī al-ḥadīth* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's Style in the Light of Modern Linguistics] (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Rashīdah Mahrān, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn bayna al-sīrah wa-l-tarjamah al-dhātīyah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn between Biographies and Autobiographies] (Alexandria: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Ammah li-l-Kitāb, 1979).

refer to Taha Hussein's masterpiece, *al-Ayyām*.<sup>34</sup> Allen refers not only to studies in English and French, but also in Arabic. These studies include Sabry Hafez' *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (1993), Mohamed M. Badawi's *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (1985), Jan Brugman's *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt* (1984), Nada Tomiche's *La littérature arabe contemporaine: Roman-nouvelle-théâtre* (1993), Roger Allen's own *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1982), as well as work in Arabic such as 'Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭāhā Badr's *Taṭawwur al-riwāyah al-'arabīyah al-ḥadīthah fī miṣr* (1963) and Yaḥya Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Dāyim's *Al-Tarjamah al-dhātīyah fī al-adab al-'arabī al-ḥadīth* (1975).

Besides works that deal with Hussein's contributions to modern Arabic literature, other scholarly literature makes many references to him. Historian Omnia El Shakry, for example, in her recent study of the development of the social sciences in Egypt, describes Taha Hussein as "Egypt's premier literary intellectual."<sup>35</sup> She looks at him and other social reformers as case studies of intellectuals who were deeply influenced by their western education but who were extremely conscious of the historical specificity of their own culture, grappling with what they clearly saw as a tension between the universal and the particular. Historian Yoav Di-Capua, in his study of the Egyptian historiography, is critical of the nationalist framework that defined and

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<sup>34</sup> Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 36. Scholars and critics continue to debate the exact genre of *al-Ayyām* and its resistance to easy classification as a novel or an autobiography. For example, Yaḥya 'Abd al-Dāyim argues that it is not an autobiography because of its lack of names, places and dates (See Yaḥya 'Abd al-Dāyim, *al-Tarjamah al-dhātīyah fī al-adab al-'arabī al-ḥadīth* [Autobiography in Modern Arabic Literature] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣrīyah, 1975), 420). Fedwa Malti-Douglas refuses this approach, and thinks that despite the overlap of first and third narration, the reader of *The Days* always understands that author, narrator and protagonist are one and the same, hence meeting Philippe Lejeune's condition for an autobiographical pact (See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: Al-Ayyām of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 95).

<sup>35</sup> Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1.

continues to dominate the historiographical field in Egypt since the nineteenth century. Yet he sees Taha Hussein as an exception to this rule. He hails him as the “intellectual giant of the Egyptian Nahda” and presents him as someone who saw the danger inherent in the post-1952 historical discourse in Egypt and its depiction of a simplistic linear historical narrative that celebrated the revolutionary moment as the culmination of a series of Egyptian nationalist triumphs. In response to this threat, Di-Capua shows how Hussein edited a schoolbook with some of his friends, in which they used fragmented primary sources from various eras, and in the words of Di-Capua, “rather than presenting one familiar story (modernistic transition under European tutelage or revolutionary struggle), [the editors] presented history as a confusing, yet beautifully rich and colorful, experience,” inviting students to actively engage with the material and form their own opinions.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, scholars refer repeatedly to Hussein’s famous 1926 book, *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*, in which he doubted the authenticity of this poetry as well as the historical existence of Abraham and Ishmael. As is well known, the book created a huge public debate and a court case was brought against Hussein. As a result, he was forced to revise the book and republish it in 1927 under a different title: *On Pre-Islamic Literature*. Literary scholar, Richard Jacquemond argues that this case of intimidation and censorship set the stage for a pattern all too familiar for Arab authors to this day.<sup>37</sup>

Despite their astonishing dearth in English, books on Taha Hussein abound in Arabic. Most, however, tend to see Hussein either as hero or villain, leading to the frustration of critics like Mahmoudi who dismisses authors of Arabic books on Hussein altogether saying they make no serious attempt to read Hussein critically.<sup>38</sup> Mahmoudi is probably referring to Islamist

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<sup>36</sup> Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 259-60.

<sup>37</sup> Jacquemond, *Entre Scribes et écrivains*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Mahmoudi, *Taha Husain’s Education*, 1.

writers who slander Taha Hussein, and their enemies who glorify him. The Tunisian literary scholar Munjī al-Shimlī, however, is less harsh in his criticism. He remarks that while many studies have been written on Taha Hussein in Arabic, they are of varying degrees of quality. “Some of [these studies] are good,” he says, “but others are shallow, and the absence of some of those studies would be better than their presence.”<sup>39</sup> On this shallow scholarship, he wrote elsewhere that he is always surprised at the number of writers who do not read Hussein’s work critically or try to make connections between his books.<sup>40</sup> To this uncritical scholarship, one could also add the uncritical appropriation of the works of Taha Hussein by the Egyptian postcolonial state, which republishes his works regularly and distributes them widely at affordable prices. In its complex and ambiguous relationship with Islamists, the state likes to portray itself as a legitimate defender of certain liberal values espoused by Hussein and his generation.

In the abundant Islamist literature on Taha Hussein, he comes across as a dangerous scholar. Islamist authors claim in one way or another that Hussein was a “traitor” to his religion and community.<sup>41</sup> The underlying criticism is that he combined his traditional training and perfect command of classical Arabic with his western knowledge to undermine Islam. They argue that he did this by promoting Orientalist scholarship, which questioned the integrity of the tradition, and by calling for an uncritical appropriation of European culture. An example of such literature is *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Jarīmah wa-l-idānah* (1985), with Taha Hussein drawn on the front cover standing behind bars in prison uniform. The author, Jābir Rizq, collected various articles

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<sup>39</sup> Munjī al-Shimlī, preface to *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Mu’arrikhān* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn a Historian], by ‘Umar al-Jumnī (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Ammah li-l-Kitāb, 2013), 6-7.

<sup>40</sup> Munjī al-Shimlī, introduction to *Sulṭat al-kalimah: Masālik li-dirāsāt adab Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-fikrih* [The Power of the Word: Ways to Study Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s Literature and Thought], by Munjī al-Shimlī, ‘Umar al-Jumnī and Rashīd al-Qarqūrī, eds. (Tunis, Markaz al-Nashr al-Jāmi‘ī, 2001), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Tahar, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: sa critique littéraire et ses sources françaises*, 147.



that more or less summarize the list of (mostly undocumented) accusations made against Hussein over the years. In the introduction, Rizq states his satisfaction with his effort.

I was very happy because, with success from God, I was able to participate in stripping one of those who conspired against the Egyptian Muslim mind. [Hussein] worked to destroy it and empty it of its Islamic bases in collaboration with the colonial plan.<sup>42</sup>

The various authors in Rizq's volume accuse Hussein of having plagiarized some of his books from other Egyptian and foreign writers, that he was a political opportunist who ingratiated himself with all political parties, that he was created by the university as a "black Orientalist" in order to serve the Western colonial project intent on promoting missionary activities and conversion from Islam, that he had secretly converted to Christianity himself in a French village, that he was actually an atheist, and so on. These and other accusations circulate not only in printed material, but also on the social media when articles or photographs of Taha Hussein appear on various occasions that celebrate his anniversary or discuss his books. In these accusations, like the one by the Islamist scholar and literary critic Muḥammad Najīb al-Bahtītī, Hussein's marriage to a French woman, and his children's compound Arabic and French names, only reinforce the suspicion

Taha Hussein spent his long life, which exceeded ninety years as far as I know, except twenty something years in the beginning, in this iron cast: between a Christian woman, and a Christian secretary delegated by the Jesuits. [This secretary] always had his eyes on Hussein, which were the eyes of the Jesuits. [Hussein's] two children, Claude and Marguerite, were called only by those names by their father, mother, the secretary and the servant. I swear, I never heard any Muslim name called in this house except Taha Hussein and Muḥammad, the black servant.<sup>43</sup>

Another example is *Al-Zūr wa-l-Buhtān fīmā katabuh Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī al-shaykhān wa-mu'alafāt ukhra lahu*, published in 1991 as part of a series entitled: "Saving Education: The Islamic

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<sup>42</sup> Jābir Rizq, ed., *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Jarīmah wa-l-idānah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: The Crime and the Condemnation] (Cairo: Dār al-I'tisām, 1985), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Muḥammad Najīb al-Bahtītī, "Ṭāhā Ḥusayn kāna būqan li-l-mustashriqīn" [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was an Agent for Orientalists], in *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Jarīmah wa-l-Idānah*, ed. Jābir Rizq (Cairo: Dār al-I'tisām, 1985), 103.

Solution.” The authors criticize Taha Hussein’s book *al-Shaykhān* (1966) on the first two Muslim caliphs, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, calling on the Ministry of Education to stop teaching it in public schools. The authors accuse Hussein of doubting the authenticity of some of the sayings of the Prophet, and thus “destroying the second source of the religion after the Qur’an,” as they say. They also argue that by questioning how some of these sayings were transmitted, Hussein was “questioning Islam itself, because the transmitters of the hadith are the carriers of the religion who delivered it to us.”<sup>44</sup> In their view

Hussein’s methodology is the farthest from proper scientific investigation. For we see that he investigates with his mind issues on which the texts have been proven, and then he goes against them. This, despite how he himself has described his mind as contradictory and confused in his autobiography, *al-Ayyām*.<sup>45</sup>

The authors then summarize other accusations by other Islamist thinkers, like Anwar al-Jindī in his book, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Hayātuhu wa-fikruhu fī mīzān al-Islām*, in which he claimed Hussein supported Zionism, that he wanted to destroy al-Azhar, that he promoted pornography (ibāḥīyah) through his study of certain Abbasid poets like Abū Nūwwās, and so on.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, this Islamist critique of Taha Hussein has been paralleled by postcolonial literary scholars in the West who draw on select passages in public writings by Taha Hussein and his generation to create an image of them as uncritical intellectuals who were “seduced” by European culture. This self-Orientalization was analyzed and criticized, for example, by the literary scholar Stephen Sheehi in *The Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*.<sup>47</sup> By analyzing

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<sup>44</sup> Jamāl ‘Abd al-Hādī, Wafā’ Muḥammad Rif ‘at and ‘Alī Aḥmad Labn, *al-Zūr wa-l-Buhtān fīmā katabuh Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī al-Shaykhān wa-mu’alafāt ukhra lahu* [The Falsehood and Slander in what Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wrote in the Shaykhan and other Works] (Cairo: Dār al-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘ al-Islāmīyah, 1991), 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-74. Other books include ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Muḥtasib’s *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn mufakirran*, (Amman: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah, 1980), Anwar al-Jindī’s *Muḥākamat fikr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Cairo: Dār al-I‘tiṣām, 1984), Maḥmūd al-Istanbuli’s *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī Mīzān al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-udabā’* (Beirut; Damascus: Al-Matkab al-Islāmī, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004).

some key Nahdawi texts, Sheehi has skilfully shown that while these intellectuals critiqued colonial discourses, they also appropriated colonial assumptions in their writings, developing a language of binaries to help them make persuasive arguments. These binaries include: rise and decline, East and West, backwardness and civilization, and so on. Sheehi concludes that the reform they championed became inherently paradoxical because it made the re-creation of the Arab subject conditional on accepting the existence of a certain “lack” as inherent to his subjectivity. Building on Sheehi’s argument, the literary scholar Shaden Tageldin has argued that the Nahda was first and foremost a translation project that translated not only English and French into Arabic, but was also translating Arabic and the Arab subjectivity itself in the process. She reproaches the Nahdawis for having given in too easily to the charms of western knowledge disguised as the universal, and argues they were thus not suspicious enough of what the translation process entailed. She attributes their lack of caution to their seduction by the colonial project, in the figure of the knowledgeable Orientalist, who appreciated the old Arab-Islamic glory and promised the Nahdawis the return of this glory through this dubious translation project.<sup>48</sup> In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad has argued that the Nahda never managed to revive the classical Arab-Islamic thought, because Nahdawis censored and suppressed aspects of that tradition, which they feared bourgeois European critics at the time would have found decadent or degenerate, such as Abū Nūwwās’ poetry.<sup>49</sup> Massad then takes this thought further, and argues that by accepting certain western critiques of Islam (especially those pertaining to the condition of women and queer Arabs), current Arab liberals and social activists are only colluding with the neo-imperialist project and justifying its intervention in the Arab-Islamic world.

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<sup>48</sup> Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Contrary to the Islamist and postcolonial critique, laudatory literature on Hussein tends to glorify him as the stubborn secularist, who heroically rose above his physical disability to become a staunch defender of liberal values in the Arab world. These studies include, for example, Kamāl al-Mallākh's *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Qāhir al-ẓalām* (1973), in which Mallākh sees Hussein's life as a long struggle against darkness, whether his physical blindness or the conservative forces that had encaged free thinking in the country.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Maḥmūd al-Samrah published a recent study (2004) on Taha Hussein describing him as the "Arab Prometheus," who stole fire from the Gods to give it to humans.<sup>51</sup> In *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-sīkūlūjīyat al-mukhālafah* (2006), Miṣrī 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥannūrah analyzes what he argues was Taha Hussein's "creative genius" that crystalized in what the author describes as Hussein's "consciousness, will-power and action towards the future."<sup>52</sup> In another work, Aḥmad 'Ulabī's *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Sīrat mukāfīḥ 'anīd* (1990), the author retells Taha Hussein's life story as a model to follow in what 'Ulabī sees as an ongoing struggle against the increasing influence of Salafism in society.<sup>53</sup>

On the more critical side, the Tunisian academy has produced thorough studies on Taha Hussein. Literary scholar Munjī al-Shimlī, mentioned above, and his students, have organized conferences and produced important manuscripts on Hussein's literary and historical works.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Ṭāhā Ḥusayn gave us light and thought," the author remarks gravely. Kamāl al-Mallākh, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Qāhir al-ẓalām* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn the Conqueror of Darkness] (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1973), 19.

<sup>51</sup> Maḥmūd al-Samrah, *Sāriq al-nār* [The Fire Thief] (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabīyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Miṣrī Ḥannūrah, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-sīkūlūjīyat al-mukhālafah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the Psychology of Disagreement] (Cairo: Dār Gharīb, 2006), 7.

<sup>53</sup> Aḥmad 'Ulabī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Sīrat mukāfīḥ 'anīd* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: The Biography of a Stubborn Combatant] (Beirut, Dār al-Farābī, 1990), 13.

<sup>54</sup> In the preface to one of these volumes, al-Shimlī speaks on behalf of the Tunisian university and how Tunisian scholars see Hussein as "the Dean of Arab Thought." In *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī mir'āt al-'aṣr: shihādāt wa-dirāsāt* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in the Mirror of Time: Testimonies and Studies] (Tunis: Al-Majma' al-Tunisī li-l-Ādāb wa-l-Funūn, 2001), 14.

They highlight Hussein's longstanding ties with Tunisian scholars since his early days, like Hussein's mentor the Azharite scholar 'Abd al-'Azīz Jāwīsh (1876-1929) who gave Hussein as a young man the opportunity to write for Jāwīsh's *al-Hidāyah*, encouraged him to study French and to apply to go to France on a scholarship. While emphasizing Hussein's strong influence on generations of Tunisian writers and educators, these Tunisian academics agree that there needs to be a more careful examination of the variegated aspects of Hussein's thought. To address this lacuna, al-Shimlī's student, 'Umar al-Jumnī, for example, wrote his 1989 doctoral dissertation in Arabic literature on Taha Hussein's historical work, and published it later in two volumes under the title *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Mu'arrikhān*. This important work was well received by the Egyptian academy, and was re-published in Cairo, with a preface by the chair of the history department at Cairo University, Muhammad 'Afīf.<sup>55</sup> In his work, Jumnī examines Taha Hussein's training as a historian in Egypt and France, the influence of Ibn Khaldun and the French positivist school on the way Hussein understood history and its philosophy, and analyzes his methodology through a careful reading of his historical works such as *al-Fitnah al-kubra*.

As far as Taha Hussein's political career is concerned, there is an even more remarkable dearth in scholarship. In *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-siyāsah* (1986), Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ghanī was one of the first to engage with Hussein's involvement in politics before 1952.<sup>56</sup> Later, he also wrote *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-thawrat yūliū: ṣu'ūd al-muthaqqaf wa-ṣuqūṭuh* (1989) dealing with the relationship between Hussein and Nasser's regime. In both works, 'Abd al-Ghanī reproaches Hussein for not having criticized Farouk enough and for not having publicly denounced Nasser's

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<sup>55</sup> 'Umar Muqḍād al-Jumnī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Mu'arrikhān* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn a Historian] (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Ammah li-l-Kitāb, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ghanī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-siyāsah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Politics] (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-'Arabī, 1986) and *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-thawrat yūliū: ṣu'ūd al-muthaqqaf wa-ṣuqūṭuh* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the July Revolution: The Rise of the Intellectual and his Fall] (Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1989).

policies. In ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s reading of Hussein, he sees him first and foremost as an intellectual who should have always been at odds with the state. Such analysis overlooks that Hussein was also a public servant and member of government at times, and so he could not have been part of the opposition at the same time. Regarding Hussein’s silence during Nasser’s reign, ‘Abd al-Ghanī wrote several years later that he might have been too harsh on Hussein given the suppression of all political opposition under Nasser, and Hussein’s old age at the time.<sup>57</sup>

More recently, another of Munjī al-Shimlī’s students, Rashīd al-Qarqūrī, wrote his doctoral dissertation in Arabic literature on *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Mufakirran siyāsīyan* (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: A Political Thinker, 2000), and analyzed Taha Hussein’s political thought, which he eventually summarized in four words: “people, homeland, democracy and culture.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the historian Aḥmad Zakāriyā al-Shalq has recently published *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Jadāl al-fikr wa-l-siyāsah* (2008).<sup>59</sup> Both works offer more measured views on Hussein’s politics. They use published material to focus on Taha Hussein’s relationship with the various political parties before 1952, especially the Liberal Constitutionalists in the twenties, and then his cooperation with the Wafd from the thirties onwards.<sup>60</sup> Qarqūrī relies mainly on some of Hussein’s books to trace his views on Egyptian politics since his early days at al-Azhar, and explores the role played by various people, such as Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, and Hussein’s education at the Egyptian University and

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<sup>57</sup> The author mentions that it was Egypt’s well-known intellectual Aḥmad Bahā’ al-Dīn (who was on the author’s doctoral defense committee) who asked him to reconsider his understanding of Hussein’s position under Nasser, and advised him to take into consideration Hussein’s age and the political circumstances that existed at the time. Mustafā ‘Abd al-Ghanī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn kamā lam ya ‘rifahu aḥad* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn as Nobody has Known Him] (Cairo: Dar al-‘Alam al-‘Arabī, 2010), 130-1.

<sup>58</sup> Rashīd al-Qarqūrī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Mufakirran siyāsīyan* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn a Political Thinker] (Tunis: Dār al-Ma‘ārif li-l-Ṭibā‘ah wa-l-Nashr, 2000), 424.

<sup>59</sup> Aḥmad Zakāriyā al-Shalq, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Jadāl al-fikr wa-l-siyāsah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: The Debate between Thought and Politics] (Al-Hay’ah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Ammah li-l-Kitāb, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> For articles that deal with Hussein and his relationship with political parties also see: Rajā’ al-Naqqāsh, “Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-aḥzāb al-siyāsīyah,” in *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn kamā ya ‘rifuh kuttāb ‘aṣrih* (Cairo: Al-Hilāl, 1966), and Lam‘ī al-Muṭī‘ī, “Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Siyāsah fī ḥayātih al-thaqāfiyah,” *al-Thaqāfah* (November 1974).

the Sorbonne, in forming his views on democracy and constitutional life. Al-Qarqūrī also analyzes in detail how key events, such as the publication of *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* in 1926 was politicized and debated in parliament. In a similar vein, al-Shalq uses articles by Taha Hussein from the Nasserite period to demonstrate Hussein's initial excitement about the 1952 revolution, then his silence over most of Nasser's policies, which al-Shalq interprets as a disapproval of these policies. As I will show below in more detail, by using new archival documents my dissertation builds on these works by turning to Hussein's public career as an institution builder and by investigating the impact of Nasser's revolution on Hussein's project for culture and education.

### **Taha Hussein and his Status as a Cultural Visionary**

That there is such limited scholarship on Taha Hussein's politics, according to 'Abd al-Ghanī, is primarily due to the difficulty of finding Taha Hussein's political articles, which he had written for dozens of periodicals over several decades.<sup>61</sup> Rashīd al-Qarqūrī gives another reason when he says such dearth is because Taha Hussein did not write explicitly on politics.<sup>62</sup> While it is true that Taha Hussein did not write theoretical works in which he neatly explained his project for educational reform and how it intersected with politics, this does not mean that such theory did not exist. His ideas are dispersed in several books, and in the dozens of articles that 'Abd al-Ghanī refers to. As I will explain below, besides the published books and articles, this dissertation turns to official archival records and memoranda in which Hussein made a case for his projects and documented the decisions that he made as a politician and a civil servant.

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<sup>61</sup> Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ghanī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-siyāsah*, 6-7.

<sup>62</sup> Rashīd al-Qarqūrī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Mufakirran siyāsīyan*, 17.

The published work in which Hussein suggested a list of practical steps that he believed were necessary to reform the educational system in Egypt was his famous classic, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, references to which have already been made above. It is a useful starting point for thinking about Taha Hussein as an institution builder, and this section will show how this work fits within Hussein's overall reform project. Moreover, I will argue that the institutional focus of this dissertation suggests a different way of reading this iconic work, especially as Hussein's views on Egypt's cultural identity, which he argued was intimately tied to Europe, remain controversial to this day. Hussein wrote the book initially to be submitted as a report on two conferences on education and culture that he had attended in Paris. He then decided to publish a book instead in 1938 addressing it explicitly to university students who had been asking him and other intellectuals about concrete steps Egypt should take to build on the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and achieve full independence. So instead of submitting a traditional report to the ministry of public instruction, where, in his usual biting sarcasm, he said he feared it would only gather dust with other similar reports, he decided to go public.<sup>63</sup>

University students had a long history of political activism.<sup>64</sup> In the immediate context that saw the publication of this book, students had managed after effective demonstrations in 1935 to force the government to abolish the 1930 constitution, which had given sweeping powers to King Fouad, and restore the more liberal 1923 constitution. The photo below is the cover of a special issue of the magazine *Kul Shay' wa-l-Dunyā* in honor of students with the caption "Two students embracing each other in celebration of the restoration of the constitution."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, al-Majmū'ah al-Kāmilah, vol. 9 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1974), 9-10.

<sup>64</sup> See for example, Ahmed Abdallah, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt, 1923-1973* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985) and Haggai Erlich, *Students and University in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Egyptian Politics* (London; Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1989).

<sup>65</sup> *Kul Shay' wa-l-Dunyā*, no. 528, December 18, 1935. Special Issue: The Students.





Adding to the euphoria was the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty signed the following year. While the treaty did not give Egypt the full independence the public had been demanding, the historian ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ramaḍān explains the ways in which the treaty was seen as a major step forward. While the treaty did not end the occupation, it restricted British military presence to the Suez Canal Zone, and gave the Egyptian government control over the army. The treaty also paved the way to ending the Capitulations, which Ramaḍān describes as having been “an obstacle in the way of the progress of the country, and a tangible affront to its sovereignty.” Ramaḍān explains that removing the Capitulations, which accorded foreigners living in Egypt fiscal and legal privileges, allowed the Egyptian government for the first time to impose its laws and legislations equally on all people living in the country, to raise taxes in a fair manner, and prepare the annual budget accordingly. In that way, Ramaḍān argues the treaty managed to “achieve equality between Egyptians and foreigners [in Egypt] for the first time since the nineteenth century.”<sup>66</sup> On the negative side, however, the treaty bound Egypt to Great Britain in a twenty-year military

<sup>66</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ramaḍān, “Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās bayna al-ḥaqīqah wa-l-tazyīf” [Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās between Truth and Falsehood], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, September 15, 1977. Republished in *Miṣr fī ‘aṣr al-Sādāt* [Egypt in the Reign of Sadat] (Beirut: Dār al-Ruqīy, 1986), 39.

alliance giving the British the right to impose martial law and press censorship in case of an international emergency. The British argued Egypt was too weak to protect its own canal, which was vital for British interests. In his introduction to *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, Hussein explained that the purpose of writing this book was to propose solutions to overcome the weakness that stood between the country and its independence. Hussein argued that Egypt had to become a strong nation and develop the kind of strength Europe recognized and respected. Hussein contended that only then would Europe recognize Egypt as fit to handle its full independence and the British would have no reason to stay in the country.

The result was this thick book, which is painstakingly technical with several hundred pages of suggestions on how to improve the country's educational system, including its pre-university education, higher education, teachers' training, and so on. Since the publication of the book, most of the debates over it tend to ignore the actual program in favor of the introduction, in which Taha Hussein stated provocatively that Egypt had no path to follow but the one Europe had taken. He insisted that there was no way for Egypt to become strong and independent but

To follow in the path of Europeans, to become their equals, and to be their partners in civilization, in its good and its bad, its sweetness and its bitterness... And he who claims otherwise is deluding or deluded.<sup>67</sup>

Such a path was necessary, he insisted, so Egypt could create the strong army it needed to protect its privileged geographical position and its wealth. In the absence of a strong army the British would not relinquish their control of the country, and other European powers would continue to rely on the British to keep Egypt safe and stable for their own interests. He argued that the army, over which the government had just reassumed control, must be reorganized along European lines, and its soldiers and leaders educated in the European ways if that army was to be taken

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<sup>67</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 54.

seriously and entrusted with protecting the canal.<sup>68</sup> Hussein then made similar arguments for economic and cultural independence. His overall argument was that Egypt's safety and stability were important for the European powers, so much so that if Egypt could not protect itself then Britain would always step in to provide that protection. Implicitly, he accepted that Europe was setting the terms, and if Egypt were to impose itself as an independent nation then it would have to play by the rules Europe understood. In his thought and action, Hussein had accepted the premises informing those European rules: the nation-state, progress and reason. More concretely, the way to achieve all this, he insisted, "was one without second: building [a system of] education on solid basis."<sup>69</sup> Egyptians, he went on, were under the watchful eyes of Europe, warning Egyptians not to take the 1936 independence for granted and see how fragile it was.

They are monitoring us, the Europeans in general, and our friends the English in particular. They keep a watchful eye on everything we do, they count our every step, and they hold us accountable for everything, be it minor or major.<sup>70</sup>

By mentioning the Europeans and not just the English, Hussein's readers at the time would have understood he was referring to Egypt having just joined the League of Nations in 1937.

Egyptians had to prove their capabilities not only to the British, but also to the Europeans.

Hussein was using a language all too familiar at the time, and Europe's "watchful eye" was not a metaphor. The League of Nations itself had decided the level of control by the Mandatory power over each mandate based on its readiness to govern itself. In this view, some nations were promising, others less so, and the European powers were the judge of that.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> As such there were Classes A, B, and C mandates depending on how ready they were to govern themselves as decided by the European powers.

Missing from most debates involving *The Future of Culture in Egypt* is the urgent political context in which it was written, as well as the initial excitement that followed the treaty. Ironically, Taha Hussein did not specify what he meant by “culture” in the title of his book. This did not go unnoticed by the Marxist critic and philosopher, Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim, when he remarked in his own book *On Egyptian Culture* that in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, “Taha Hussein did not define what Egyptian culture was, except in a few lines at the end of his book. But [as a definition] it still remains vague and mysterious.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, without properly identifying what he meant by culture, Hussein analyzed near the end of his book what he referred to as a “distinct Egyptian culture” saying it was composed of three elements: “an ancient Egyptian artistic heritage, an Arab-Islamic heritage, and what Egypt has acquired from the European civilization.”<sup>73</sup> In the absence of a clear definition of culture, it does not come as a surprise that someone reading Hussein’s book for the first time is indeed struck by the lack of explicit literary, artistic or linguistic references from all those historical periods Hussein referred to at the end of his book.

A possible explanation for the absence of references to, or analysis of, influential works on Egyptian culture in the book, is that it is not about consuming culture, but about producing it. In a symposium organized in Tunisia in 1990 dedicated to Arab reformist thought, the scholar Muḥammad al-Marākishī takes issue with Hussein’s call for Egyptians to follow Europe, and accuses Hussein of not having constructed a sound argument. Al-Marākishī first deconstructs Hussein’s text by showing how elsewhere in the book Hussein contradicted himself by calling for a selective and not a total appropriation of European culture. For example, he quotes Hussein

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<sup>72</sup> Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim, introduction to *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah* [On Egyptian Culture], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1989), 27.

<sup>73</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 491.

when he explained that in his call to take from European life he was not calling for adopting Europe's "sins and bad deeds," but only "what is useful and good in their lives."<sup>74</sup> Or again when Hussein said,

I do not call for us to forget who we are, be ungrateful to our past, or to dissolve in Europe. How could this be possible, when I am calling to stand up to Europe, protect our independence from its aggression and tyranny and prevent it from consuming us?<sup>75</sup>

These internal inconsistencies, according to al-Marākishī, take from the integrity of Hussein's argument, leading al-Marākishī to conclude that Hussein's call for following Europe was "excessive," and only due to what al-Marākishī describes as Hussein's "emotional enthusiasm towards Europe and the West, rather than a fruit of serious rational scientific research."<sup>76</sup> Like most critics of Hussein's book, al-Marākishī focuses almost entirely on the introduction and makes no mention to Taha Hussein's constant calls, in this book and elsewhere, for engaging with the Arab-Islamic heritage and preserving classical Arabic. This has led him and others, like the historian Miftah Tahar, to conclude that Taha Hussein "wanted Egypt to become part of Europe, culturally."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>76</sup> Muḥammad Sāliḥ al-Marākishī, "Al-Mas'alah al-tarbawīyah wa-l-thaqāfīyah min khilāl kitāb Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Mustaqbal al-thaqāfah fī miṣr" [The Pedagogical and Cultural Question through Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's book The Future of Culture in Egypt], in *Waqā'i' al-multaqa al-qawmī: Al-Tafkīr al-iṣlāhī al-'arābī; khaṣā'ishu wa-ḥudūdahu; Khayr al-Dīn, Muḥammad al-Bairam, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn namādhij* [Arab Reformist Thought: Its Characteristics and Limits; Khayr al-Dīn, Muḥammad al-Bairam, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn as Examples] (Tunis: Manshūrāt al-Ma'had al-Qawmī li-'Ulūm al-Tarbīyah, 1991), 139.

The famous Arab nationalist, Ṣāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī wrote an article in *al-Risālah* in 1939 in which he made similar remarks about various inconsistencies that he found in Taha Hussein's book. For example, al-Ḥuṣrī pointed out that while Taha Hussein used the word "sharq" to deny that Egypt was part of the East the same way China and Japan were, he still used it when he said that Egypt had a responsibility towards other Arab countries and should disseminate an "eastern Arab culture." From this, and other examples, al-Ḥuṣrī argued that Taha Hussein repeated himself in different ways using new words each time, without, as al-Ḥuṣrī went on, "complying with the meaning of those words and their limits using the 'scientific compliance' necessary for this kind of research." Ṣāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, "Ḥawla kitāb mustaqbal al-thaqāfah" [About The Future of Culture in Egypt], *al-Risālah*, July 11, 1939, quoted in Sāmīḥ Kurayyim, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī ma'ārikihi al-adabīyah wa-l-fikrīyah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in his Literary and Intellectual Battles] (Cairo: Majallat al-Idhā'ah wa-l-Tilfīzyūn, 1974), 115-21.

<sup>77</sup> Miftah Tahar, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: sa critique littéraire et ses sources françaises*, 25.

During the same symposium, the scholar, Munīyah al-Ḥamāmī responded to al-Marākishī. In her response, she warns against trying, in her words, “to impose [our] current anthropological, philosophical or sociological understandings of the term culture on Hussein’s use of the word in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*.” Her understanding of the book as a whole has led her to believe that for Taha Hussein, the word culture in this book stood for a “comprehensive intellectual production” that takes Egypt away from “intellectual consumption to production,” as she explains, so that the country could achieve what she describes as a “cultural parity” with Europe (al-niddīyah al-thaqāfiyah).<sup>78</sup>

By shifting the focus to institution building, this study agrees with al-Ḥamāmī’s reading of the book. If the *Future of Culture* were a call for building structures for knowledge production, then a less literal reading of Hussein’s controversial introduction could be useful. Al-Marākishī is not wrong to point out Hussein’s excitement over his program. Hussein uses this “excited” introduction to persuade his readers – whether university students who were anxious to hear his thoughts on the way forward, or policymakers who were expecting his official report on

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A more recent similar reading is Georges Tarabichi’s critique of the book in which he argues that instead of allowing every non-European culture to find its own way of modernizing itself, Hussein conflated the end with the means by asking Egyptians and Arabs to follow Europe’s path in everything. See Georges Tarabishi, “Taghrīb amm taḥdīth: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-sū’āl mustaqbal al-thaqāfah” [Westernization or Modernization: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the Question of the Future of Culture], in *Min al-nahḍah ila al-riddah: Tamazuqāt al-thaqāfah al-‘arabīyah fī ‘aṣr al-‘awlamah* [From the Renaissance to Apostasy: The Ruptures of Arabic Culture in the Time of Globalization] (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2009), 39-44.

Interestingly, while the Marxist critic Ghālī Shukrī sees *The Future of Culture as Egypt* as a book on democracy, even if Hussein’s research revolves around education, the pedagogue Sa’īd Ismā’īl ‘Alī argues the book was the first and most comprehensive examination of the Egyptian educational system, and says no similar studies have been undertaken since. Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā yabqa min Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 8, and Sa’īd Ismā’īl ‘Alī, preface to Kamāl Ḥāmid Mughīth, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasāt wa-l-Ma’lūmāt al-Qānūniyah li-Ḥuqūq al-Insān, 1997), 10.

<sup>78</sup> Munīyah al-Ḥamāmī, “Munāqashāt” [Discussions], in *Waqā’i’ al-multaqa al-qawmī: Al-Taṣfīr al-iṣlāḥī al-‘arabī: khaṣā’iṣhu wa-ḥudūdahu; Khayr al-Dīn, Muḥammad al-Bairam, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn namādhij* (Tunis: Manshūrāt al-Ma’had al-Qawmī li-‘Ulūm al-Tarbīyah, 1991), 175-6.

On the terms “culture” and “civilization,” Omnia El Shakry notes that “The Arabic terms *thaqāfah* and *ḥadārah* contain the same ambiguity as their English counterparts, denoting civility, education, and refinement, and also the anthropological idea of culture and the historical concept of civilization (in its moral and material senses).” Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 56.

what Europe was doing in the fields of culture and education – that the only way forward, according to his assessment of the political situation, was to build those institutions along European lines. He believed such an endeavor was possible to achieve, that nothing should stop these institutions from working in Egypt, and he was confident these institutions would not, in his words, “dissolve” Egyptians “into Europe” (al-fanā’ fī urūbā).<sup>79</sup> After all, he believed, those institutions were to foster a critical engagement with the Arab-Islamic tradition, and find the necessary means to preserve classical Arabic in order to keep that tradition alive and accessible.

Hussein was also aware that his book was addressing a particular moment in Egyptian history, and years later he confided to his secretary that he wished to update it so it became a more accurate reflection of the country’s current system of education.<sup>80</sup> Those who call for adopting the book today as a valid program for educational reform tend to ignore the immediate context in which it was written. Moreover, in their calls to adopt the book, their focus is usually on educational reform, whereas for Hussein, the battle for democracy and the battle for education were one and the same, as he pushed for both simultaneously.<sup>81</sup> In fact, as the dissertation will show, he predicated the proper functioning of these institutions on the presence of a strong

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<sup>79</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 71.

<sup>80</sup> Muḥammad al-Sayyid Dusūqī, *Ayyām ma‘a Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* [Days with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn] (Beirut: Al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabīyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1978), 45.

<sup>81</sup> In one of several public lectures that Hussein gave at the famous Ewart Hall of the American University in Cairo, probably in 1924, he talked about Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his life. Hussein mentioned Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and its role in making people understand that they were the source of all powers. Hussein spoke of Rousseau as the initiator of the French Revolution, which in Hussein’s words, then “spread democracy in Europe and even in countries in the East,” and gave credit to Rousseau’s *Social Contract* for the way Egyptians understood democracy at the time. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, “Rūssū,” [Rousseau], in *Ārā’ Hurrah* [Free Opinions] (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Aṣrīyah, n.d.), 166-7.

In his analysis of the impact of the French revolution on Arab intellectuals, Ra’īf Khūrī has argued that Rousseau was a major influence, especially in the way that he and others, like Jean-Paul Marat, linked democracy and education. (Based on the idea of a “general will,” or the general interest of society as a whole, which Rousseau argued could only coincide with the “will of all,” or the majority of voters, through education. In this understanding, education helps the public realize what that general interest is and how to achieve it.) Ra’īf Khūrī, *al-Fikr al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth: athār al-thawrah al-firinsīyah fī tawjīhih al-siyāsī wa-l-ijtimā’ī* [The Influence of the French Revolution on the Political and Social Orientation of Modern Arab Thought], (1943; Beirut: Dār al-Saqī, 2013), 60-1.



parliamentary system. Shortly after the book was published, Taha Hussein became Controller of General Culture in 1939, which was the beginning of his career at the ministry of public instruction. The fact that this happened right after his book had come out indicate that the message of the book resonated within official circles and that it was well-received by those in power. It confirmed that Hussein was a man with a project responding to a particular need at a specific moment in time.

Yet, as this dissertation will demonstrate, the project itself did not begin with *The Future of Culture in Egypt* in 1938, but right after Egypt's nominal independence in 1922. As he expressed his views in various articles, Hussein believed it was his duty as an intellectual and an academic to explain to the public the importance of reforming Egypt's educational system, which he believed had suffered under the British administration. So, while *The Future of Culture in Egypt* is an important document, this dissertation sees it more as a snapshot of the condition of the educational system at the time Hussein wrote it. The different chapters will explore how Taha Hussein's project developed over the years, leading to the publication of the book, and how his official duties helped him implement some of his ideas (1939-1944, 1950-1952). Over those years, Hussein was responding to various changes happening around him, and was in dialogue with the public and his adversaries over the pages of widely read journals and periodicals. Even when he was not in power, he still shared his thoughts in many articles and was involved in debates as member of the opposition and as a public opinion maker. His views and debates when he was out of office (1944-1950) will shed light not only on how he defended his project and what his adversaries had against it, but will also provide valuable understanding of how these institutions evolved during this period.



## Nahdawis, the Liberal Age and Parliamentary Egypt

Interestingly, Albert Hourani ends his classic, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, with a chapter on Taha Hussein whom he describes as “primarily a man of letters” and “the most systematic thinker” of all the writers active in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>82</sup> Hourani devotes much of the chapter to his reading of *The Future of Culture in Egypt* and sees Hussein’s ideas as the logical culmination of a system of liberal thought that inspired three generations of Arabs.<sup>83</sup> Hussein’s call to follow in Europe’s footsteps fits comfortably in Hourani’s overall thesis foregrounding the provenance of liberal ideas from Europe. Although he mentions that, as a public servant, Hussein managed to implement some of his ideas, this does not take away from the strength or the coherence of Hourani’s overall argument, which is structured around the liberal thinkers’ struggle – and eventual inability – to apply their ideas in ways that could ensure the creation of enduring democratic institutions. Because of his exclusive focus on published ideas, Hourani argues that Hussein’s years of greatest activity were those between 1919 and 1939 – 1939 being the year Hourani chooses as the end of the “liberal age.”<sup>84</sup> Because of his sources and periodization, Hourani restricts Taha Hussein’s project to *The Future of Culture in Egypt* and leaves no room to discuss his efforts at the ministry of public instruction, which he joined, ironically, in 1939.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 325-6.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Hourani mentions very briefly Hussein’s major role in the creation of Alexandria University in 1942 and the expansion of state schools as two of the measures Taha Hussein worked hard to implement as a civil servant. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 338. Interestingly, while Hourani puts *The Future of Culture* in the context of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, he reads Taha Hussein’s introduction to the book as a celebration of the new independence without referring to Hussein’s emphasis on the nominal nature of that independence and the necessity of building strong institutions to be able to enforce a fuller one. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 329.

Twenty years after the publication of the first edition of his book, however, Hourani reflected on his methodology and how he would write the book differently after all those years.<sup>86</sup> On one hand, he insisted he would still choose to write about the same thinkers whose ideas he had analyzed in the first edition. On another hand, he said the book was a product of its time, and that if he were to rewrite it, he would also consider “how and why the ideas of my writers had an influence on the minds of others.” More importantly, he said he would be interested in other forms through which those ideas were mediated to the public.<sup>87</sup>

Historian Dyala Hamzah builds on Hourani’s self-criticism and takes issue with Hourani’s paradigm as a whole.<sup>88</sup> In the introduction to her edited volume on *The Making of the Arab Intellectual (1889-1960)*, Hamzah argues that Hourani’s approach, which has dominated the field since the appearance of the book, has undersold the contributions of various Nahdawis. By constantly using Europe and its achievements as a yardstick against which their contributions are measured, it becomes difficult to see them as original or effective, having failed to achieve their predetermined objectives. According to Hamzah, due to this paradigm “the Nahda was

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<sup>86</sup> For a different approach that tries to build on Hourani’s legacy instead of breaking away from it, see the new edited book in two volumes by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016). At the time of writing this introduction only the first volume had been published.

<sup>87</sup> Hourani, Preface to the 1983 edition of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, vii.

<sup>88</sup> In a more sympathetic reading to Hourani, Israel Gershoni resituates Hourani’s work in the context of the “crisis narrative” in which Orientalists like H.A.R. Gibb and Gustave von Grunebaum were furious with Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s modernist school including Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal and Taha Hussein for having written on Islamic topics in the 1930s considering it as a serious relapse in their commitment to rational, objective, scientific and liberal principles. Hourani, according to Gershoni, helped deconstruct that narrative by breaking away from the static study of texts typical of Orientalist work, and introducing, according to Gershoni, the concept of time to these ideas by analyzing how they developed, shifted and flowed. Hourani did not critique the “crisis narrative” directly, but demonstrated in his book, by introducing other texts and other intellectuals, that modernist ideas continued well into the thirties reaching a climax with Hussein’s *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. More importantly, Hourani refused to accept that the Islāmīyāt were a setback, and supported Taha Hussein’s biographer Pierre Cachia in his interpretation that Hussein wished to re-write aspects of the Islamic tradition in a way that appealed to the sensibility of modern readers. See Israel Gershoni, “The Theory of Crisis and the Crisis in a Theory: Intellectual History in Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Studies,” in Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer and Hakan Erdem, eds., *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2006): 131-82.

enduringly locked within a dialectics of impact and reaction. It is [in Hourani's paradigm] that the defining trope of [the Nahda's] historiography, imitation (and its corollary: failure), was engineered."<sup>89</sup> To break with Hourani, Hamzah proposes to look at various Nahdawis and assess their contributions within their complex local context. She turns to the framework of the public sphere in order to read the ways in which the different Nahdawis articulated their thoughts and under what conditions. In her work, she focuses on Sheikh Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935), and how he and others were able to build a public sphere, which, in the process, she argues, also defined their identities as public intellectuals. By using the public sphere as a paradigm to look at the Nahda, Hamzah argues that

One is able to map the web of [the Nahdawis'] relations, the space of their experiences, the horizon of their expectations, the ideational matrix in which they evolved, in their sustained endeavors to plot the coordinates of selfhood as against the coordinates of statehood.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Dyala Hamzah, ed., *The Making of the Arab intellectual (1880-1960): Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012), 3. Among the reasons Hamzah gives for Hourani's paradigm foregrounding the failure of the Nahda, is its total reliance on the published work of the liberal age intellectuals. She calls for including other sources to help contextualize those writings, especially that the period in question included a large variety of sources such as court records, fatwas and petitions, and, in her words, "a whole new range of writings, artefacts, institutions and modes of social organization, [...] which evidenced the reforming state's enormous engagements with, and the society's negotiations of, all things modern." Ibid., 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 8. Hamzah distinguishes between the public space and the public sphere, defining the latter as "a legal-political site which is bound territorially by the nation-state and sanctioned by law, and where society, comes together as various collectives or diverse individual citizens, assembles and confers about the public interest and challenges its definition by the State." See Hamzah, *The Making of the Arab intellectual*, 5.

Since the 1990s, the popular use of Habermas' theory of the public sphere, as presented in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, has drawn criticism from scholars of Islam and the Middle East as the theory does not consider the history of practices and institutions outside Europe. Taking this critique into account, some of these scholars, like Armando Salvatore and Mike Lavine, have argued that Habermas' ideas could still be useful once the idea of "the public" is understood as "culturally embedded." So in their work, these scholars have recognized the importance of the concepts introduced by Habermas but also argued that, in Salvatore and Lavine's words, "it is critical to explore the different means through which social practices inspired by Islam interact and sometimes clash with different forms of secularity as incorporated in the ideologies and practices of most states within Muslim majority societies." See Armando Salvatore and Mark Lavine, eds., *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7.

By turning attention to these details Hamzah believes that the public sphere could help historians turn away from what she describes as the “impact paradigms,” that is to say “the Coming of the West,” or “the Clash of Civilizations.”<sup>91</sup> More importantly, such details allow Hamzah to make the larger claim that by constructing a public sphere promoting state accountability and constitutional governance among other things, those Nahdawis successfully made a tangible contribution, and the Nahda could then appear in a more positive light.<sup>92</sup>

While this dissertation does not explicitly use the framework of the public sphere, it follows Hamzah’s lead by focusing on the complex details of Taha Hussein’s local context, the ways in which he articulated his ideas as an influential writer in various periodicals, and how he tried to implement those ideas as a civil servant. By engaging the public in questions about the role of education, what it was and how it should be designed, Hussein and others were defining the role of the institutions they were building while making sure the new system was rooted in the specific reality of the country and spoke to the people’s needs. These institutions were not an abstract idea that Hussein and others imported wholesale from Europe. The existence of a relatively free press, conferences and public lectures allowed Hussein, his supporters and his adversaries to include and address the public in those debates. Such attention to involving the public goes beyond the usual Nahdawī self-assigned task of educating the masses. Instead, I will show that the very existence of a parliamentary system implied that Hussein and others had to *persuade* the public in order to gain their votes. The debates on education became thus infused

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<sup>91</sup> Hamzah, *The Making of the Arab intellectual*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> In her work, Hamzah has focused on Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s student, the Pan-Islamist Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. She turns attention away from the usual framework of “Islamic revivalism,” in which Riḍā has been traditionally understood, to journalism as an emergent profession, arguing that in the debates over expressing the public interest during the Nahda, a discursive shift happened from ‘ilm (Islamic knowledge) in favor of ṣiḥāfah (journalism). See Dyala Hamzah, “From ‘ilm to ṣiḥāfah or the Politics of Public Interest (Maṣlaḥa): Muhammad Rashid Riḍa and his Journal *al-Manār* (1898-1935),” in Dyala Hamzah, ed. *The Making of the Arab Intellectual (1889-1960): Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012), 90-127.

with ideas on democracy, proper governance, the role of state and political accountability. If Taha Hussein and others were to make the institutional changes they thought were necessary, the majority of voters had to agree. This battle over the reform of educational institutions will show that in parliamentary Egypt, what the general public thought mattered.

In general, however, the historiography on parliamentary Egypt has tended to dismiss this brief parliamentary moment as a failure. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot's *Egypt's Liberal Experiment* remains a classical reference on the topic.<sup>93</sup> In her work, Marsot focuses on the infamous triangle of power and the struggle between the king, the British and the political parties, especially the Wafd. In her view, King Fouad's autocratic rule and the monarchy's subservice to the British set the pace for divisive politics that made it impossible to build proper democratic institutions in this formative period of Egypt's modern history. Nevertheless, Marsot is careful to point out in her introduction, albeit very briefly, that the liberal experiment was not a total failure

The liberal experiment was a partial success, and in fact saw the burgeoning of several elements that were vital to the future development of Egypt, such as the beginning of industrialization, the emancipation of women, the spread of education and of better hygiene, and the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of Alliance of 1936 – which for all its defects was a step in the right direction.<sup>94</sup>

Yet, the partial success of the experiment is not the focus of this important work. Marsot wants to pin down the political and social reasons that stopped the 1919 nationalist revolution from responding to longstanding demands for more grassroots social measures, such as land reform. Seeking the British tacit or explicit approval before appointing cabinets, the incessant shuffling

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<sup>93</sup> For example, Talal Asad refers readers to Marsot's work as the reference on Egypt's pre-1952 liberal politics, in "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no.1 (September 2015): 200 (footnote 74).

<sup>94</sup> Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 6.

of those cabinets, King Fouad's attempts to circumvent the constitution, and the constant bickering between elitist political parties, made it impossible, in Marsot's view, to enact any real change.<sup>95</sup> By unpacking those political reasons, Marsot's aim is to explain what made the flourishing of democratic institutions difficult

That period of Egyptian political life has generally been regarded as an experiment in constitutional life which failed. When the Nasir era in mid-century ushered in a more extreme period of repression than Sidqi's, it accentuated the belief that constitutional institutions were incapable of taking hold in so hostile a political soil as Egypt seemed to be. The Egyptians have therefore been described as servile, unaccustomed to self-government, and incapable of appreciating it.<sup>96</sup>

The Egyptian historian Yūnān Labīb Rizq also reads the liberal experiment as a failure. He discusses this understanding in a piece tellingly entitled “*Šuqūṭ al-tajrubah al-librālīyah fī miṣr*” in which he accuses the political parties of having accommodated, if not collaborated with, the autocracy of the palace, even though Rizq points out that the occupation made the conditions extremely difficult for any democratic institutions to prosper. He also cites other reasons for this collapse of liberalism, such as illiteracy and social injustice.<sup>97</sup>

In his study of Marsot's book, the historian Roger Owen has critiqued the work's focus on the triangular struggle between the British, the king, and the political parties, which, he agrees was detrimental to the growth of parliamentary democracy. He argues, however, that such an approach oversimplifies the complex relationship between these main political actors. He also raises another concern, which is more relevant to this dissertation when he says that such a focus

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 244-5.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>97</sup> Yūnān Labīb Rizq, “*Šuqūṭ al-tajrubah al-librālīyah fī miṣr*” [The Liberal Experiment in Egypt] in Ra'ūf ‘Abbās Hāmid ed., *Arba ‘ūn ‘āman ‘ala thawrat yūliū: dirāsah tārikhīyah* [The Fortieth Anniversary of the July Revolution: A Historical Study] (Cairo: Al-Ahrām, Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-l-Istirātījīyah, 1992), 40-51.

overlooks the role played by other historical agents in challenging and influencing government policies and political events.<sup>98</sup>

In an attempt to shed more light on the period between 1919 and 1952, Arthur Goldschmidt, Barak Salmoni and the late Amy Johnson edited a volume in 2005 in which several scholars re-examined various political, social and cultural transformations that took place during the liberal experiment. To justify the attention to this period, Goldschmidt and Salmoni argue that it “continues to receive insufficient scholarly attention” when it was characterized by “a cultural vibrancy, societal dynamism, and intellectual-political legacy requiring a renewed intensity of focus.”<sup>99</sup> The various scholars who contributed to this volume try to flesh out both the challenges and the accomplishments of this period, including a general commitment to the constitution, lively parliamentary debates, a growing judicial efficacy, and a thriving intellectual life. They also indicate that a thorough examination of the period that preceded the 1952 coup is essential to understand the one that followed, as the postcolonial state adopted and built on many of the policies and trends already set before 1952 – including foreign policy, social reform, and democratizing army admissions.<sup>100</sup> They identified the history of education in this period as one of the areas that require further attention and study

Perhaps because of its manifest shortcomings in the past thirty years, some of the more under-studied achievements of the 1919-1952 years relate to education. After decades of British neglect, state educational efforts underwent a gradual revolution under the

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<sup>98</sup> Roger Owen, “Review of *Egypt's Liberal Experiment: 1922-1936* by Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot,” *The English Historical Review* 95, no. 375 (April 1980): 462.

<sup>99</sup> Arthur Goldschmidt and Barak Salmoni, introduction to *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, by Arthur Goldschmidt, Barak Salmoni and Amy Johnson, eds. (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press), 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 7. Among the essays, there is a contribution by Amy Johnson and Scott David McIntosh in which they discuss some of the early measures of social welfare taken in the thirties as well as the establishment of the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1939.

constitutional monarchy. This included an expansion in numbers of schools, their geographic distribution, and the provision of female education.<sup>101</sup>

In his conclusion to this volume, Roger Owen gives several reasons for the scholarly disinterest and the general dismissal of the pre-1952 period as one rampant with decay and failure. He mentions Nasser's own views, which emphasized the corruption of the monarchy. These views, according to Owen, were then taught to students in textbooks, and continue to shape the way Egyptians see the constitutional period, including "most of Egypt's own historians," as he says.<sup>102</sup> Historian Joel Gordon says something similar in the introduction to his own book on the early years of the 1952 revolution, when he says that the new regime promoted the inevitability of the fall of the previous one, and then foreign scholars propagated this official history uncritically.<sup>103</sup> Another reason related to Nasser's ideology, according to Owen, is the nationalist stress on defining Egyptian history in terms of a series of struggles against foreign forces, which, as far as the pre-1952 period is concerned, was translated into the famous triangular struggle between the British, the king and the Wafd.<sup>104</sup> Referring specifically to Marsot and Hourani's works, Owen criticizes them for their teleological reading of the period in question – Marsot for reading the liberal experiment as a failure and Hourani for choosing to end the liberal age with the year 1939.

Owen also stresses the difficulty of accessing the national archives and the way most Egyptian ministries zealously guard their records as other important factors that hamper any

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 4, with a reference to Barak Salmoni's "Pedagogies of Patriotism: Teaching Socio-Political Community in Twentieth-Century Turkish and Egyptian Education" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2002).

<sup>102</sup> Roger Owen, conclusion to *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952* (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press), 494-5.

<sup>103</sup> Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4-5.

<sup>104</sup> Roger Owen, Conclusion to *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, 494-5.



serious study of this period. Instead, journalistic accounts, like those of Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, and accounts by whom Owen describes as “gifted amateurs,” like Samir Raafat with his nostalgic writings on Egypt’s *belle époque*, become the main sources of information on this period.<sup>105</sup> Finally, Owen blames, what he calls “a particularly short supply” of scholarly biographies on the important political actors of the parliamentary period, including those who helped overthrow the monarchy, like Nasser himself.<sup>106</sup> Much work needs to be done, he insists. Speaking of the work already done on this period so far, he says

Illuminating though [all these works] are, they just touch the tip of an iceberg consisting of all the institutions, relationships, practices and processes which make the monarchical period so important, interesting and, in its own special way, unique.<sup>107</sup>

The shortage of scholarly works on this period has not gone unnoticed on the Egyptian academy itself, and for years voices have been calling for questioning the prevalent accepted wisdom on pre-1952. One such academic historian is ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ramaḍān, who has written important works of reference on the Egyptian nationalist movement.<sup>108</sup> In a few articles that he wrote between 1974 and 1977, for example, he called for revising the historiography on the Wafdist leader and Sa‘d Zaghlūl’s (1859-1927) successor, Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās (1879-1965). In those articles, Ramaḍān argues that the role played by al-Naḥḥās in the national struggle has been systematically ignored and deliberately dismissed after 1952. His explanation is similar to Owen’s in that there was an effort to discredit any accomplishments that happened before the

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 495-6.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 497.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ramaḍān, *Taṭawwur al-ḥarakah al-waṭanīyah fī miṣr min sanat 1918 ila sanat 1936* [The Development of the Nationalist Movement in Egypt from 1918 to 1936] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1983), and *Taṭawwur al-ḥarakah al-waṭanīyah fī miṣr min sanat 1937 ila sanat 1948* [The Development of the Nationalist Movement in Egypt from 1937 to 1948] (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Āmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1989).

coup.<sup>109</sup> In his analysis, Ramaḍān claims that al-Naḥḥās' marginalization was carried out by partisan historians, such as 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Rāfi'ī who, according to Ramaḍān, wrote history from a perspective strictly loyal to the Watani party, a traditional rival of al-Umma and the Wafd parties. Similarly, Ramaḍān argues that the official historiography taught in schools and universities has completely adopted Nasser's view on pre-1952, which dismissed all political parties as corrupt and inept. While Ramaḍān praises leftist historians, such as Muḥammad Anīs and Muḥammad Zakī 'Abd al-Qādir, as more serious and objective, he still thinks leftist historians tend in general to support the revolution of 1952 and finds it unlikely that they would devote entire studies to the career of the discredited Wafdist leader.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, after Nasser's death, the well-known intellectual Luwīs 'Awaḍ also spoke out in favor of revising the historiography of the pre-1952 period, especially, as he said, that the 1952 revolution denigrated the period between the two revolutions, and in doing so, generations of Egyptians could no longer distinguish between Sa'd Zaghlūl and Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās on one

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<sup>109</sup> 'Abd al-'Azīm Ramaḍān, "Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās al-za'im alladhī ta'āmar 'alayhī al-jamī'" [Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, the Leader Against Whom They all Conspired], *al-Kātib* (September 1974). Republished in *Miṣr fī 'aṣr al-Sadāt* [Egypt in the Reign of Sadat] (Beirut: Dār al-Ruqyī, 1986), 25.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 25-7. In another article that appeared in *al-Jumhūrīyah* two years later, Ramaḍān says that Muḥammad Anīs had joined him in calling for the re-inclusion of Naḥḥās in textbooks as a "hero" of the nationalist struggle. Ramaḍān, "Mata ta'atarif al-thawrah bi-l-Naḥḥās?" [When Does the Revolution Recognize al-Naḥḥās?], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 24, 1976. Republished in *Miṣr fī 'aṣr al-Sadāt*, 35-6. Similarly, James Whidden has used British archival documents from the early 1920s to unpack the elitism of the Wafd. As he looks at the aftermath of the 1919 Revolution, the formation of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party and the palace-supported Ittihad Party, Whidden shows how the Wafd stood out as the most radical party of the three in promoting social change. He gives an example with Sa'd Zaghlūl's open involvement in labor politics by supporting the tramway workers union in 1924, resulting in the opposition press calling him "King of the riff-raff." See James Whidden, "The Generation of 1919," in *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, by Arthur Goldschmidt, Barak Salmoni and Amy Johnson, eds. (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press): 19-45.

On the history of the various political parties and the relationship between them, see Marius Deeb's Party Politics in Egypt: *The Wafd and its Rivals, 1919-1939* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), Ra'ūf 'Abbās' edited volume, *al-Aḥzāb al-miṣrīyah 1922-1953* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-l-Istirāṭījīyah, 1995), and Yūnān Labīb Rizq's *Al-Aḥzāb al-siyāsīyah fī miṣr 1907-1984* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1984).

hand, and Muḥammad Maḥmūd and Ismā‘īl Ṣīdqī on another.<sup>111</sup> In his own assessment of the period, he wonders if the political parties at the time could have forced real change, succeeded in toppling the monarchy, or resisted feudalism and capitalism. “Highly unlikely,” he concludes, because in his view the British would never have let it happen comfortable as they were with a regime they knew well how to manipulate.<sup>112</sup>

Likewise, the scholar of philosophy Fu’ād Zakarīyā wrote in the early 1980s that an entire generation of Egyptians ignored what happened during the monarchical period as it “was written about by its opponents,” and as such it needs further study and analysis.<sup>113</sup> He accuses the journalist Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal of having obliterated the differences between the various political parties active during that period when he claimed that they all “betrayed, failed and disavowed the national struggle.”<sup>114</sup> As a result, Zakarīyā calls on historians to revise the history of that period. He describes the last two years of the Wafdist rule between 1950 and 1952 as the “culmination of the democratic experience that had developed over a period of seventy-five years,” despite what he sees as various forces that opposed the development of this democracy, including the palace, the occupation and the army itself.<sup>115</sup> In response to critics of the Wafd and the tendency of its leaders, whether Zaghlūl or al-Naḥḥās, to monopolize decision-making, Zakarīyā admits that the Wafd was never “a homogeneous perfect party.” Yet, Zakarīyā

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<sup>111</sup> Luwīs ‘Awaḍ, *Aqni ‘at al-nāṣirīyah al-sab ‘ah: munāqashat Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wa-Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal* [The Seven Masks of Nasserism: Debating with Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal] (1976; Cairo: Markaz al-Maḥrusah, 2014), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>113</sup> Fu’ād Zakarīyā, *Kam ‘umr al-ghaḍab: Haykal wa-azmat al-‘aql al-‘arabī* [How Old is Anger? Haykal and the Crisis of the Arab Mind] (Cairo: Dār al-Qāhirah, 1983), 75-8.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 75-77. Zakarīyā describes the army as having had an “absolute loyalty” to the King. Interestingly, this comment on the loyalty of the army to the King agrees with a statement by Egypt’s former minister of culture and former free officer, Tharwat ‘Ukāshah, when he describes a feeling of “shame” that he felt in the days leading to the coup of 1952 when he was seen wearing the official army uniform. Tharwat ‘Ukāshah, *Mudhakkirātī fī al-siyāsah wa-l-thaqāfah* [My Memoirs on Politics and Culture], vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1987-1988), 35-6.

goes on to say that the Wafd was well aware that popular vote was the source of its power, which explains its continued support for the constitution and people's demands.<sup>116</sup> Interestingly, in Zakarīyā's view, Taha Hussein's decision to make education free was, in his words, "the real beginning of social change."<sup>117</sup>

## Education

As explained in the previous sections so far, this study focuses on what Taha Hussein *did* as a statesman to implement his project on culture and education, which culminated in the adoption of free universal education in 1950. The focus is therefore on some key institutions that were the object of Hussein's attention. Since the independence of 1922, he called for reforming the ministry of public instruction and ridding it of all British influence, which he believed had been responsible for reducing the number of schools, introducing tuition fees and favoring the *kuttābs* over higher education. Higher education, and especially the faculty of arts, quickly became the cornerstone of Hussein's project, as he hoped the university would provide the nation's much-needed "thinking elite." Besides the university and the ministry, a third key institution in which Hussein was especially active as member and president (1940-1973) was the Arabic Language Academy. The Academy brought together experts on the language, from Egypt and abroad, in order to protect the language and respond to the modern challenges it was facing.

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<sup>116</sup> Fu'ād Zakarīyā, *Kam 'umr al-ghaḍab*, 73. Such critics include the Marxist historian Ra'ūf 'Abbās, who accused the Wafd of autocracy and of having monopolized speaking on behalf of the people for itself, refusing to see itself as a political party. Ra'ūf 'Abbās Ḥāmid, "Al-Ṭarīq ila al-thawrah" [The Road to the Revolution], in Ra'ūf 'Abbās Ḥāmid ed., *Arba 'ūn 'āman 'ala thawrat yūliū: dirāsah tārikhiyah* (Cairo: Al-Ahrām, Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-l-Istirāṭijīyah, 1992), 17. Like Haykal, the historian 'Abd al-Khāliq Lāshīn accuses all political parties working before 1952 of having favored their own interests, see 'Abd al-Khāliq Lāshīn, "Qiyādāt thawrat yūliū" [The Leadership of the July Revolution], in Ra'ūf 'Abbās Ḥāmid ed., *Arba 'ūn 'āman 'ala thawrat yūliū*, 64. In his work, Joel Gordon also argues that the Wafd was "undemocratic" with its president in charge of the party for life and appointing the executive committee. See Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement*, 23.

<sup>117</sup> Fu'ād Zakarīyā, *Kam 'umr al-ghaḍab*, 76.

Besides these three key institutions, as minister of public instruction (1950-1952), Taha Hussein created several institutes for Arabic and Islamic studies around the Mediterranean, hoping to extend Egypt's "awakening" and its cultural influence beyond its borders.<sup>118</sup> To ensure the proper operation of all these institutions, he also created or restructured what he called technical offices, which he believed would empower technocrats and shield them from divisive partisan politics. These included the technical office of the language academy, the Supreme Council of Education, and the Supreme Council of the Universities, all of which exist today.

In telling the story of Hussein's efforts in the building of these institutions, I will be referring to and building on existing scholarship on Egyptian education. By investigating the ways in which the faculty of arts, with its new specialized program for the study of the humanities, extended the Nahda project, and the challenges it faced by proposing such a program ending with the state takeover in 1925, this study will add to Donald M. Reid and 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Jumai's remarkable works in which they focused on the overall history of Cairo University and how it became a key political player in the country.<sup>119</sup> The story of Hussein's institutions between 1922 and 1952 will also build on Heyworth-Dunne's encyclopedic *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt*, published in 1939, with its detailed empirical history of the educational institutions in Egypt from the eighteenth century until the British occupation in 1882. Moreover, Aḥmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm's well-known *Tārīkh al-ta'līm fī miṣr min nihāyat ḥukm Muḥammad 'Alī ila awā'il ḥukm Tawfīq (1848-1882)* provides

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<sup>118</sup> For more on the history of the various Egyptian cabinets, see Yūnān Labīb Rizq, *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-miṣrīyah, 1878-1953* [The History of the Egyptian Ministries, 1878-1953] (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-l-Istrāṭījīyah bi-l-Ahrām, 1975).

<sup>119</sup> Donald Malcom Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 'Abd al-Mun'im Ibrāhīm al-Dusūqī al-Jumai'ī, *al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash'atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama'* (1908-1925) [The Old Egyptian University: Its Creation and Role in Society (1908-1925)] (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jāmi'ī, 1980), and also Aḥmad 'Abd al-Fattāh Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Jāmi'at Fu'ad al-Awwal, 1950).

the background history of education from an Egyptian nationalist perspective, which is necessary to understand Taha Hussein's agenda as a civil servant. According to this nationalist perspective, British policies had stopped the modernization of the educational system started by Muhammad Ali, and after the independence in 1922 it became expected of all the successive governments to reverse those policies.<sup>120</sup>

## Sources

This dissertation relies mainly on archival documents from the Egyptian National Archives, the Ministry of Education, and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to dozens of periodicals and Taha Hussein's private papers, which I was able to gain access to through the kind authorization of the Taha Hussein family in Egypt and France. Regarding the actions proposed or the decision made by Taha Hussein during his time at the ministry of public instruction, the archives of the Council of Ministers at the Egyptian National Archives hold records of the meetings and the various memoranda submitted to the Council for approval. Each memorandum makes a case for a proposed project, explains its context, history, justification, and the Council's recommendations and final decision. The archives of the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University hold Taha Hussein's employment record at the university, and Dār al-Maḥfūzāt al-'Umūmīyah has Taha Hussein's pension dossier as a state employee. Together, both files clarify many of the duties that were assigned to him by the ministry and the university, including his promotions, assignments and job descriptions. The archives of the Ministry of Education, housed in the Museum of Education, provide useful reports and information on the ministry itself, as well as the *kuttābs* and their history.

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<sup>120</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm, Aḥmad 'Izzat, *Tārīkh al-ta'lim fī miṣr min nihāyat ḥukm Muḥammad 'Alī ila awā'il ḥukm Tawfiq (1848-1882)* [The History of Education in Egypt from the End of the Reign of Muhammad Ali to the Beginning of the Reign of Tawfiq (1848-1882)] (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Naṣr, 1945).

Moreover, recently under the initiative of Egypt's former minister of culture and Taha Hussein's student, Jābir 'Uṣfūr, the Egyptian National Archives collected many of Taha Hussein's articles from 1908 to 1967. At the time, 'Uṣfūr was president of Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, and he tasked the Egyptian historian Ra'ūf 'Abbās with supervising the project. Collecting the articles took four years, then editing and publishing them in six volumes took another four years. The first volume was published in 2002 and the sixth in 2006. 'Abbās indicated that out of hundreds of articles, 144 articles focused on education, and that they had never been published before.<sup>121</sup> These articles that span more than forty years of Hussein's active involvement in the question of education and its ties to democracy are crucial in unpacking how his project developed over time and how he tried to persuade the Egyptian public of the utility of his ideas. They also contextualize this development within the overall debates and politics of the period between the two revolutions. Furthermore, the articles Hussein published after the coup of July 23, 1952 until the mid-sixties help us understand his reaction to the revolution, how it impacted his project and what led to his eventual marginalization. Finally, the periodical of the Arabic Language Academy offers a wealth of details on the structural changes Taha Hussein introduced in the academy, the reasons for them, as well as the different ways in which he redrew the policies of the academy to focus on the tasks he believed were necessary to protect classical Arabic and make it more accessible.

In France, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs keeps detailed records of the cultural relations with Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After WWII and in preparation for the de facto end of the Capitulatory privileges in 1949, hundreds of mostly confidential reports and

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<sup>121</sup> Ra'ūf 'Abbās, preface to vol. 6 of *Turāth Ṭāhā Husayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyyah min 1908-1967* [Ṭāhā Husayn's Heritage: Journal Articles from 1908 to 1967] (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu'āṣir, 2006), 7-9. 'Abbās mentions that, besides the articles on education, another 39 articles on the Islāmīyāt and literary criticism had never been published before.

telegrams document French concerns over the future of dozens of French educational establishments in Egypt. These reports also indicate how the French authorities dealt with Taha Hussein when he became minister of public instruction. These records give fascinating insights into Taha Hussein the statesman and the politician, as he clashed with the French government over the expansion of Egyptian cultural influence in French-controlled North Africa.

Although the dissertation relies mostly on archival material, it reads these documents with and against Hussein's more well-known published work. An engagement with both is necessary not only to get a better sense of Hussein, his intellectual outlook and the context in which he both worked and published, but also to compare theoretical ideas and their actual implementation. On one hand, Hussein's official letters, memoranda and public decrees address statesmen and cabinet members to whom he reported or who were his colleagues. Together with the French archival reports on Taha Hussein, official Egyptian documents are precise, often with a reserved and dry tone. As they documented proposals addressed to decision makers, these reports provide the background information and cross-referencing necessary for every case at hand. Many documents from the Council of Ministers, including memoranda and meeting agendas, exist in the original Arabic and in French translation. The minutes also recorded unscheduled urgent events the Council had to discuss, like the violence that erupted in the Suez Canal Zone after abrogating the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in October 1951.

Taha Hussein's published work on education, culture and politics requires a different kind of reading, one that is broad and deep at the same time. Many scholars have noted the difficulty of reading Taha Hussein, despite his beautiful and flowing writing style. The Tunisian scholar Muḥī al-Dīn Ḥamdī, for example, has warned that "tracing [Taha Hussein's thought]



requires long years.”<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the internal contradictions noted above in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, are not specific to that work. Abdel Rashid Mahmoudi points to the existence of what he describes as “various sorts of tension and ambivalence, if not outright inconsistency” in Taha Hussein’s thought as a whole.<sup>123</sup> Regarding Hussein’s style, with its music, rhyme and repetition, the famous Orientalist Jacques Berque said that it could be “seductive.”<sup>124</sup> Miqdād al-Jumnī has elaborated on Berque’s observation by saying that the beauty of Hussein’s style ends up diverting attention from the idea itself. To understand his texts, al-Jumnī argues that it was important for him to also “understand the philosophy of the text from a psychological and emotional point of view, as well as rationally, and especially, culturally.”<sup>125</sup> Likewise, the writer Shukrī Faiṣal, who collected some of Taha Hussein’s podcasts on Arabic poetry and published them under *Taqlīd wa-Tajdīd*, describes Hussein’s style as “mysteriously clear, or clearly mysterious.”<sup>126</sup> Faiṣal explains that Hussein’s deceptively clear sentences and their music causes the impatient reader to gloss over the details of Hussein’s argument, and ends up retaining the overall idea at the expense of the subtle details.<sup>127</sup> He even thinks that Hussein sets up his prose deliberately in such a way so as to prevent the reader from losing sight of the main argument despite what Faiṣal describes as a “plethora of steps, turn of phrases and side points.” When the reading is finished, Faiṣal explains, the main idea “continues to ring in the reader’s ears against

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<sup>122</sup> Muḥī al-Dīn Ḥamdī, “Al-‘ilm wa-l-dīn fī tafkīr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn” [Science and Religion in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Thought], in *Waqā’i’ al-multaqa al-qawmī: Al-Taḥkīm al-iṣlāḥī al-‘arābī; khaṣā’iṣahu wa-ḥudūdahu: Khayr al-Dīn, Muḥammad al-Bairam, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn namādhij* [Arab Reformist Thought: Its Characteristics and Limits; Khayr al-Dīn, Muḥammad al-Bairam, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn as Examples] (Tunis: Manshūrāt al-Ma’had al-Qawmī li-‘Ulūm al-Tarbīyah, 1991), 183.

<sup>123</sup> Mahmudi, *Taha Hussein’s Education*, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Jacques Berque, introduction to *Au-delà du Nil*, by Jacques Berque, et al. eds. (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 31.

<sup>125</sup> Al-Jumnī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Mu’arrikhān*, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Shukrī Faiṣal, introduction to *Taqlīd wa-Tajdīd* [Tradition and Innovation], by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 1978), 8.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6.

the backdrop of the musical rhythm generated by [Hussein's] particular style.”<sup>128</sup> That Hussein employed a captivating style as a device to keep his readers focused on the main idea could help us understand why some of the subtle arguments and the internal inconsistencies in his texts sometimes go unnoticed.

Taha Hussein's particular way of writing, which is related to his blindness, could also explain his dedicated focus to the main idea of the text. In 1934, he wrote for the Egyptian francophone periodical *Un Effort* explaining how the writing process was exceptionally burdensome for him. He said he always dictated his texts and never liked to be interrupted as he did so. Glad when the dictation was over, Hussein said he never returned to the text after that. He could not, in his words, “bear the burden of re-reading what he had written again.”<sup>129</sup> In a much later interview, his son, Moenis, confirmed that as far as he knew, his father “never revised a single line that he had written.”<sup>130</sup> While fact verification and crosschecking occurred whilst preparing for the dictation, the actual writing involved none or very little. It is therefore safe to assume that focusing on the main idea was important for Taha Hussein himself as he dictated his thoughts so he would not lose his line of thought and keep the text coherent.

Another challenge contemporary readers face when reading Taha Hussein's political writings is his vocabulary. Today, many readers have been desensitized to the discourse on democracy, people's rights and the state's responsibility towards the people. For decades, postcolonial states in the region and imperial powers have used those same words to legitimize

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>129</sup> *Un Effort*, vol. 47, October 1934. Quoted in Taha Hussein. *Min al-Shāṭi' al-ākhar: kitābāt Ṭāhā Ḥusayn al-firinsīyah*, ed. Abdel Rashid Mahmoudi (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Tarjamah, 2008), 33.

<sup>130</sup> “M. T-Hussein à Arabies: Mon père était désespéré,” *Arabies* no. 35, 1989, 90-1. Quoted in Munjī al-Shimlī and ‘Umar Muqḍād al-Jumnī, eds., *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī mir'āt al-‘aṣr* (Tunis: Al-Majma‘ al-Tunisī li-l-‘Ulūm wa-l-Adāb wa-l-Funūn, 2001), 25. This was also confirmed by his last secretary, Muḥammad Dusūqī, who wrote in his memoirs that Taha Hussein never revised what he wrote, but sent it straight to the publisher. Muḥammad al-Sayyid Dusūqī, *Ayyām ma‘a Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 79.

their repressive agendas while suppressing the same rights they claim to defend. Quite rightly, contemporary readers therefore treat these words with suspicion and they become an obstacle when trying to read Taha Hussein carefully and critically. It takes an effort to go beyond what the reader could assume are futile clichés in order to understand that, at the time, for Taha Hussein and his readers, “promoting true democracy,” “respecting the constitution,” “holding the state accountable” and “achieving full independence” were all feasible and interdependent goals.

This dissertation uses all the sources mentioned above to drive a new narrative in which the focus shifts from Taha Hussein the literary figure to Taha Hussein the statesman and public servant. This narrative tells a detailed story of Hussein building strong educational and cultural institutions, which he believed were necessary to foster a critical engagement with the old and the new, lead the country to intellectual parity with Europe, and ensure full independence. My aim is not only to understand the ways in which these institutions, like the secular university, the ministry of public instruction, the language academy and various supreme councils, were conceived and restructured to face the colonial challenge, but also how the builders of those institutions, like Taha Hussein, tried to overcome the shortcomings of Egypt’s unstable parliamentary system, and how he implicitly relied on that system as a framework within which these institutions were to operate. Moreover, the dissertation investigates how Hussein tried to use these institutions to expand Egypt’s regional cultural influence, and how this got him into conflicts with the French authorities in North Africa several years before Nasser’s Pan-Arabism. While Hussein’s institutions continued after 1952, pointing to a continuity rather than a rupture between parliamentary and Nasserite Egypt, the dissertation shows how political events, in Egypt and abroad, made it impossible for Taha Hussein to continue the promotion of his project of reform leading to his exclusion from government and his eventual marginalization under Nasser.

Three main questions thus animate this thesis, which are then divided into several sub-questions. What was Taha Hussein's overall project for education and culture in Egypt? What can Hussein's promotion and implementation of his project over the years tell us about what we call "liberal" or "parliamentary" Egypt, and what did these descriptions mean to him and others at the time? As is well known, Hussein was a prolific writer, but he did not write a theoretical work explaining his various views on educational reform and how they all came together. This does not mean that such information does not exist. Instead, he developed and discussed his ideas over time, in response to various political developments, and those ideas became more concrete as his executive powers at the ministry of public instruction increased.

These three large questions are then broken into the following questions: What were the contours of Taha Hussein's public career as a politician and civil servant? And how can understanding more about the details of his public career inform or change our understanding of Taha Hussein the writer and the intellectual? In his approach to facing the colonial challenge and fighting for Egypt's independence, how does Taha Hussein differ from the earlier Nahdawis? If Egyptian institutions of learning and culture were created by Nahdawis like Muḥammad 'Abduh's students and Taha Hussein, then how did the late nineteenth-century Nahdawi discourse impact the design and role of those institutions? How can we reconcile Taha Hussein's championing of academic and intellectual freedom with the central role he assigned to the state in his project, and how did he try to resolve the tension between academic freedom and using the state as a platform to build institutions? As a statesman and a civil servant, how did Taha Hussein respond to the partisan politics that undermined efficient policymaking and the overall parliamentary system? Within that system, what platforms did he use to promote and defend his

ideas? Finally, in what ways can this dissertation's focus on institutions help us revise our understanding of the parliamentary period as a whole?

In order to answer these questions, the dissertation follows two streams, which dislodge several assumptions about both the man and the parliamentary period in which he worked. The first deals with Taha Hussein, and explores his public career, duties and responsibilities. Studies of Taha Hussein have often been susceptible to a narrowed focus on his published work and literary debates. In the light of these studies, he comes across as an intellectual who idealized a "pure" form of art and culture that he claimed should transcend politics in order to enable a genuine understanding and cooperation between peoples and nations. For this, he has been criticized for having overlooked the impact of the unequal power relations that existed between colonizers and colonized and which undergirded all cultural exchanges between them. By exploring Hussein's career as a politician and a decision-maker with an urgent reform project, I will contend that a different Taha Hussein emerges. His political conflicts with local adversaries (such as King Farouk and the Saadists who opposed his calls for free education), and surprisingly with France (which opposed his attempts to expand Egyptian cultural influence in North Africa despite his famous cultural and family ties with the land of Voltaire and Rousseau) can help us get a more rounded understanding of Hussein. Similarly, in his published work, Taha Hussein expressed his wish for Egypt to follow in Europe's path, and repeatedly criticized al-Azhar and its educational system. This has led many scholars to categorize him as the archetype "westernizer," "modernist" or "secularist" as opposed to other intellectuals who were "traditionalist" or "religious." By looking at Hussein's efforts at the Faculty of Arts and the Arabic Language Academy, I will show that such binaries do not help us account for his serious engagement with the Arab-Islamic tradition, nor his dedication to preserving classical Arabic.

Moreover, studying the concrete steps he took to implement his project, including how he sought to challenge the authority of the religious establishment over the tradition and the language, will enrich our understanding of his complex intellectual outlook and clarify his multilayered relationship with al-Azhar.<sup>131</sup>

The second stream of argumentation uses Taha Hussein's efforts in the building of some of Egypt's key modern educational and cultural institutions to examine the history of these institutions, especially in terms of their development and operation during the parliamentary period. I will first argue that understanding Hussein's efforts requires investigating the links that tied these institutions, and him, to an earlier Nahdawi discourse that proposed facing the western colonial challenge by reviving the classical Arab-Islamic thought while forging strong ties with modern Europe. I will show the ways in which Hussein's lifelong engagement with the university, the language academy and the ministry of education reflected his unwavering commitment to this Nahdawi mission. Furthermore, examining the ways in which Taha Hussein responded to the challenges facing these institutions after the independence in 1922 will shed

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<sup>131</sup> See for example, Hisham Sharabi's *Arab Intellectuals and the West* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), Zaki Badawi's *The Reformers of Egypt: A Critique of al-Afghani, 'Abduh and Ridha* (Slough : The Open Press, 1976), and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi's *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) and *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2004). For a recent summary and critique of these binaries, see Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

Abu-Rabi', for example, refuses Sharabi's distinction between Muslim and Christian intellectuals, whereby the latter were seen as more receptive to European ideas because of their religion. Instead, Abu-Rabi' argues that both Muslim and Christian intellectuals were more united by class than by religion. In place of Muslim and Christian, Abu-Rabi' distinguishes between "Arab modernists" and "Muslim modernists" in which the latter based their ideas for reform on reviving an Islamic intellectual tradition, whereas the Arab modernists like 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, Faraḥ Antun and Taha Hussein, were willing, according to Abu Rabi', to let go of that tradition. See Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 94-7. As this dissertation will show, the cornerstone of Taha Hussein's project was the protection of the tradition and engaging with it, so he would not fit comfortably in this binary. Nor would he fit in Sharabi's assertion that "Muslim secularists, including Taha Hussein, seemed incapable of constructing a focused and coherent intellectual position." Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 9.

light on how their roles and responsibilities came to be defined within a new and volatile parliamentary system.

For Hussein, these institutions of learning and culture were essential to take the Nahda project forward, as he believed it was no longer sufficient to rely solely on the efforts of intellectuals, their books and periodicals. In his view, modern methods had to be applied at an institutional level to engage critically with both the tradition and the new ideas coming from Europe. Relying on a specialized study of the humanities, including languages, literature, history, and moral philosophy, he hoped to create a form of Egyptian nationalist humanism that was securely rooted in the tradition and possessed the appropriate tools necessary to think about the problems of modern times.<sup>132</sup> He hoped that such a form of modern critical scholarship produced in Egyptian universities would diagnose the problems facing the nation and offer the adequate solutions. This was to include designing a primary, secondary and technical educational system through which the knowledge produced at the university would trickle down to the rest of the population, and create competent Egyptian citizens aware of their rights and responsibilities. In

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<sup>132</sup> In theory, humanism has always elevated the value of the “human” and promoted individual agency. In practice, however, questions like “who constitutes a human being” or “who deserves full political rights” have traditionally dehumanized large segments of human beings, like women, slaves, and the colonized peoples in general. Literary scholar, Lisa Lowe has recently shown, for example, that John Stuart Mill’s work on liberty and his ideas on democratic governance rested primarily on deciding who was fit to handle that liberty and who was not, reserving despotism for the latter. See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Three Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

As I will show in Chapter five, Taha Hussein was aware of these misgivings. Faced with the horrors committed by the French authorities in North Africa during the Algerian war of independence, he wrote in 1958 questioning the utility of a concept like “freedom” if that freedom, in his words “does not exist unless blood has been spilled, people have been killed, and orphans, widows and infants have been made homeless.” Taha Hussein, “Ahl al-Kahf” [People of the Cave], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 26, 1958. This did not lead Hussein, however, to abandon his calls for a continued engagement with the classical Arab-Islamic and European humanisms.

Edward Said, as well, has engaged with this question. As is well known, in his classic *Orientalism*, he has shown us the ways in which “the West” created its own identity by othering and dehumanizing “the East.” Yet, Said believed in humanism until the end of his life, when he wrote in his later work on humanism and democracy: “It is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism.” Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

this vision, the parliamentary system in place was to involve citizens in decision-making and ensure the country was headed in the right direction towards full independence.

Yet, this new parliamentary system was fraught with problems, and this brings us to a key set of issues with which this thesis is concerned. As many scholars have shown, the ongoing British occupation, and the political struggle between an autocratic king and various political parties undermined the whole system and had a detrimental impact on policymaking. Without discounting these frustrations, the dissertation will explore the ways in which Taha Hussein not only dealt with partisan politics, but also used the parliamentary system in place to regulate the operation of these state-funded institutions, and keep the state in check. By telling the story of Hussein's attempts to manoeuvre this system to introduce free universal education and expand Egypt's cultural influence beyond its borders, I hope to deepen our understanding of this crucial period, and challenge scholarship that has tended to focus mainly on the failures leading to the army intervention in 1952.

Taha Hussein's political career came to an abrupt end after the famous Cairo Fire of January 25, 1952, which removed the Wafd from power, and thrust the country into several months of political chaos leading to the army coup of July 23. Nasser and the Free Officers respected Taha Hussein, and quickly asked him to become an editor-in-chief of their new daily, *al-Jumhūrīyah* in 1953. Later, Nasser appointed him to the Order of the Nile in 1965. Yet, Hussein was never asked to resume his responsibilities as a government official. To understand the reasons behind Hussein's marginalization under Nasser, this dissertation will assess how his project for culture and education fared under the new regime. Besides the suppression of the opposition, I will investigate the impact of key events on Hussein's project. Such events include the end of the multiparty system in 1953, the rejection of the 1954 liberal constitution he had



helped draft, and more importantly the Tripartite Aggression in 1956 and the decolonization struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. I will show how these events shut down his project of critical scholarship and made it impossible for him to continue the promotion of a natural synthesis of the classical Arab-Islamic tradition and modern European accomplishments.

## **Dissertation Structure**

The first chapter examines Taha Hussein's efforts, as minister of public instruction, to create Egyptian cultural institutes and university chairs for Arabic and Islamic studies in the Mediterranean region. The details of his unknown conflict with the French authorities in North Africa over the creation of such institutes in the Maghreb tell the story of Egypt's rising cultural influence in the region, paving the way for Nasser's Pan-Arabism. The chapter shows how Hussein believed it was Egypt's duty to share the fruits of its modern educational and cultural institutions with other Arabs and push back against French colonial policies in North Africa. Furthermore, the chapter argues that despite Hussein's own claim that culture transcends politics, the details of his negotiations with the French reveal that for him the cultural was always in fact political.

Chapters two and three unpack Taha Hussein's project for culture and education in Egypt, which he pursued not only on the pages of widely read periodicals, but also as a civil servant. Chapter two shows how the mission of the private Egyptian university internalized one of the Arab Nahda's central tenets prescribing cultural reform in terms of reviving the Arab-Islamic classical culture while learning from the "more advanced western civilization." The chapter argues that the humanist education offered by the university for the proposed cultural reform, with its novelty and limited career options, was a formidable challenge that contributed to the problems facing the private institution leading eventually to the state takeover in 1925.

Furthermore, the chapter calls for situating Taha Hussein's commitment to the mission of the Egyptian university within the larger history of Nahdawi calls for spreading humanist *adab* education, and argues that such a lens – a lens that integrates his engagement with the tradition – can help us better understand his complex intellectual outlook.

Chapter three explores how for Taha Hussein the secular university, with the Faculty of Arts at its heart, was to become the driver of the Egyptian Nahda and of a democratic life. Both of these would in turn lead to Egypt's independence. The chapter argues that free education, for which Hussein is remembered, was only part of his larger project, in which he saw the university as providing the intellectual leaders capable of designing the required primary and secondary education to be disseminated without cost to all Egyptians. Furthermore, the chapter looks in detail at how Hussein responded to the challenges of the political context within which he called for and implemented his project. It shows how he was conscious of the shortcomings of Egypt's volatile multiparty system, and thus proposed technical councils to shield the country's technocrats from the rapid turnover of political power and focus on short and long-term policymaking. Finally, the chapter analyzes how Taha Hussein predicated his entire project on the existence of a democratic parliamentary system using its checks and balances to control what he believed was an inevitable and necessary state role in culture and education.

The fourth chapter looks at the role Taha Hussein played in diversifying the authority over classical Arabic and breaking al-Azhar's monopoly over it. I argue that in line with his cultural project in which the university played a major role, he believed the modern institutions of the Faculty of Arts and the Arabic Language Academy were better prepared than al-Azhar to meet the challenges facing the language in terms of deriving new terms, simplifying grammar rules, creating modern dictionaries, making the language more accessible and training school

teachers. In addition, the chapter looks in detail at Hussein's ministerial decision to abolish elementary schools, or the former *kuttābs*. It situates this decision within a series of attempts going back to the mid-nineteenth century to change the "backward" *kuttābs* into modern primary schools thus putting an end to an older system of education that relied on the *kuttāb* to prepare students for their future studies in classical Arabic at the *madrasahs* and *al-Azhar*.

Finally, the last chapter looks at Taha Hussein's special relationship with Nasser and Hussein's marginalization following the coup of 1952. It shows that on the one hand Hussein's calls for the return of democratic rule waned and disappeared as he hailed Nasser's foreign policy, a foreign policy which succeeded in negotiating an end to the British occupation and actively contributed to the decolonization of Africa and Asia. The attempt on Nasser's life in 1954 and the possible re-occupation of the country during the Suez crisis in 1956 only convinced Hussein that Nasser needed the nation's support in the face of colonial powers. But the chapter also argues that Hussein's almost total silence on Nasser's domestic policies, his refusal to endorse the new "committed literature," and his public disagreement with Nasser over undermining the study of the humanities and dismissing what Hussein believed were important pre-1952 cultural achievements, did not go unnoticed by the regime and its supporters. This led to Hussein's eventual marginalization from the circles of those who were driving Egypt's future direction.

## Chapter One

### Culture for Culture's Sake?: Taha Hussein's Regional Cultural Diplomacy

S.E. Moustapha El Nahas Pacha,  
Président du Conseil,  
Le Caire

Institut Farouk Ier études islamiques a été inauguré aujourd'hui midi dans une cérémonie grandiose digne de l'Egypte et de son grand Roi digne aussi de l'Espagne grande et fière STOP A cette occasion adresse à Votre Excellence ma profonde et fidèle affection et mes meilleures amitiés à tous les collègues STOP Partons pour Paris demain Dimanche<sup>1</sup>  
Taha Hussein

On November 7, 1950, Dr. Taha Hussein, Egypt's minister of public instruction, arrived in Madrid on a six-day official trip to Spain. Awaiting Taha Hussein and his wife, Suzanne, at the train station were Spain's minister of national education, the deputies for the Spanish ministers of foreign affairs and national education, Taha Hussein's old student the Spanish Arabist and future ambassador, Emilio García Gómez, students from the Egyptian educational mission in Spain as well as members of the Egyptian diplomatic corps, as shown below.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> His Excellency Moustapha El Nahas Pacha, President of [the] Council [of Ministers] Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies was inaugurated today at noon in a grandiose ceremony worthy of Egypt and its great king worthy also of great and proud Spain STOP On this occasion I would like to express to your Excellency my deep and sincere affection and my faithful friendship to all the other colleagues STOP Leaving tomorrow Sunday for Paris (Taha Hussein)  
DWQ/MW/0081-096923/ "Creation of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Spain," Telegram from Taha Hussein to Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās.

<sup>2</sup> Taha Hussein Private Papers. Courtesy of the Taha Hussein family in Egypt and France.

Spanish newspapers, interested in the visit, focused on Taha Hussein and his many accomplishments, as well as the reason for his visit: the official inauguration of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies. In his confidential report to Cairo, the Egyptian Ambassador Muḥammad Ḥusnī ‘Umar described the event as a great victory for Egyptian foreign policy in matters of cultural affairs (al-thaqāfah al-kharijīyah). In his words, the extremely positive reaction of Spanish officials, newspapers, radio and even average Spanish citizens, was a “wonderful showcase proving to the world Egypt’s scientific standing and cultural influence.”<sup>3</sup>

For Taha Hussein, then at the peak of his career, taking Egypt’s “scientific standing and cultural influence” to a regional level was integral to what he called “Egypt’s mission.” In his view, this mission was predominantly cultural, and the country’s modern awakening, or Nahda, had qualified Egypt for resuming what he believed was its historic role of leading the Arab-Islamic world in what he described as “the advancement of civilization and the consolidation of peace.”<sup>4</sup> His wide executive powers as minister of public instruction in the popular and last Wafdist government under monarchical rule led by Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās (January 1950 - January 1952), allowed him to take his regional agenda forward, especially in the Mediterranean world. He created the Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Madrid, a Muhammad Ali al-Kabīr Chair for Arabic Language and Literature in Nice, and a similar Chair at the University of Athens. When he tried to create Egyptian Institutes for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Tangier, Rabat, Tunis and Algiers, however, Taha Hussein came to a head-on collision with the French

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<sup>3</sup> Taha Hussein Private Papers/ Muḥammad Ḥusnī ‘Umar, “Secret Political Report no. 3 to Egypt’s acting minister of foreign affairs in lieu (bi-l-wikalah) on the inauguration of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies,” Madrid, November 21, 1950, 1 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> “Tarqīyat al-ḥadārah wa-tathbīt al-silm.” Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, al-Majmū‘ah al-Kāmilah, vol. 9 (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-Lubnāni, 1973), 453.

authorities. Despite the traditional Franco-Egyptian friendship, France feared and opposed any official Egyptian presence in North Africa.

Using primary sources from the Egyptian National Archives (Dār Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah-DWQ), the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the Quai d'Orsay-AMAE) as well as Taha Hussein's private papers, this chapter tells the story of Egypt's rising regional cultural influence around the time Taha Hussein was minister of public instruction. His conflict with France was born following the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty (1936) and the abolition of the Capitulations (1937) when the Egyptian government assumed more control over its foreign policy and over hundreds of foreign establishments operating in Egypt. Only mentioned in passing in very few secondary sources, however, this dispute remains largely unknown. Overshadowed a few years later by Nasser's more direct political involvement in Morocco, Tunisia, and especially Algeria, this conflict between Taha Hussein and the French, which had serious repercussions on the Franco-Egyptian relations, signaled Egypt's expanding regional cultural influence and the government's growing faith in its cultural institutions.

Using the details of this story, an important continuity emerges between Egypt's so-called liberal age and the Nasserite era that followed. The meetings of the Egyptian Council of Ministers and the impressive explicatory memoranda (*notes explicatives*) for every proposed project reveal a conscious effort to assert an official cultural role in the region. Egypt's cultural and educational involvement in the surrounding Arab countries had started long before Nasser came to power and had established important channels of communication that paved the way for his Pan-Arabism later on. Furthermore, by insisting on having an official Egyptian presence in North Africa, Taha Hussein forced both the French and Egyptian authorities to articulate their cultural policies in the region. Setting a precedent for more radical measures under Nasser,

Hussein's unprecedented retaliatory measures against the French influence in Egypt, a French influence to which Taha Hussein was intimately tied, signaled an important shift in Egyptian foreign policy, which until then had avoided tampering with the Franco-Egyptian friendship.

Secondly, by following Taha Hussein's projects and diplomatic negotiations in Egypt and abroad, details about the workings of Egypt's multiparty system come to the front. In their dealings with an unwavering minister of public instruction, the French authorities took into consideration that Taha Hussein was member of an elected government. As member of the popular Wafdist cabinet, Taha Hussein had committed to developing cultural institutes in North Africa during the Throne Speech, in which every minister explained his plan of action to the king and members of parliament. Having to honor his commitment, Taha Hussein pressured the French government into accepting his proposal for the creation of his cultural institutes in North Africa. Moreover, the French authorities followed Taha Hussein's press conferences very closely and were concerned that he was using the Egyptian press to turn the public opinion against them. They took Taha Hussein's weight and reputation seriously, and feared the impact of his statements in the press, especially as many of these Egyptian journals and periodicals found their way to French-controlled North Africa often without French permission. Instead of direct confrontation, the French government preferred to stall Taha Hussein's demands for opening these institutes, and wait for a less nationalist government to be elected in Egypt, a government for which the cultural institutes would no longer be a priority. In this conflict, King Farouk was largely absent. Although the French considered getting him involved, they eventually decided his relationship with the popular Wafd cabinet was too tense to allow for any intervention in their favor.

## Egypt and the World

Nowhere does Taha Hussein explain his vision for Egypt's culture and education better than in his famous and controversial work, the *Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938). Signing the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty (1936) and the agreement to abolish the Capitulations in the Montreux conference (1937) was a moment of hope. For Taha Hussein, it was a moment requiring immediate action.<sup>5</sup> He wrote that without culture and knowledge the newly acquired freedom and independence would be insufficient to ward off the aggression of other nations. He stressed that Europeans in general and "our English friends in particular" were carefully monitoring everything the Egyptians did to see if they deserved independence and could handle its responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> For Taha Hussein political sovereignty and culture went hand in hand. It is almost paradoxical that he predicated his entire cultural project on the political necessity of safeguarding independence and standing up to European powers, and yet insisted repeatedly on the importance of separating culture from political motives.

Before making a case for the importance of building Egypt's educational and cultural institutions along European lines, Taha Hussein argued that the future of culture in Egypt should be envisioned as a continuity of an ancient culture that influenced and was influenced by the Mediterranean world.<sup>7</sup> He also argued that Egypt's modern Nahda reinvigorated this culture by re-establishing the old connection with the Mediterranean, long interrupted by the Turkish domination.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in Hussein's view, which continues to stir controversy more than the actual program to which he devoted most of his thick book, Islam did not alienate Egypt from

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<sup>5</sup> The Montreux Convention in 1937 stipulated a twelve-year transition period, so the Capitulations came to a defacto end in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, 12-4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40.



Europe or the Mediterranean, for he argued that both Islam and Christianity shared the same core values and both shaped and were shaped by Greek philosophy.<sup>9</sup> According to Hussein, the Egyptian and European minds were therefore not different from one another and nothing stopped Egyptians from benefitting from Europe. He stressed that the difference was only due to political and economic circumstances. His conclusion before moving on to charting his cultural project was one that made a clear distinction between the cultural and the political:

No, there are no intellectual or cultural differences among the peoples who grew around the Roman Sea (baḥr al-rūm) and who were influenced by it. Only political and economic circumstances made the inhabitants of one shore triumph over the other. These same factors continue to rotate among these peoples, favorable to one group, [and] inimical to the other.<sup>10</sup>

Hussein argued that if the ultimate goal was for Egypt to stand up for itself and see Europe eye-to-eye, to have its proper army and a working democracy, along with the proper education and the training that went with them, then the only path available was the one the Europeans had taken.<sup>11</sup> Walking down this inevitable path, according to Hussein, posed no threat to the Egyptian character (shakhṣīyah), as long as Egyptians were aware of Egypt's main characteristics (mushakhaṣṣāt), which he defined as "its geography which needed protection, its religion, the Arabic language and its artistic and literary heritage as well as the country's long history." Dissolving into Europe, he warned, was a real threat only when Egyptians were weak, unaware of their old and recent past, and when some of them believed that the Europeans were of a higher essence (jawhar mumtāz).<sup>12</sup> He stressed that Egypt needed to know how to engage with Europe and speak its language if it was to survive.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 54-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 71-3.

After carefully going through his program in which he offered solutions to the problems facing Egypt's educational system, Taha Hussein turned to culture and argued it was not limited to schools and higher institutes of learning. According to Hussein, cultural independence, just like political and economic independence, did not mean isolation. On the contrary, it would have no meaning without exchanging various forms of knowledge with other peoples. Speaking in unequivocal terms about Egypt's rising power, he claimed that politically and economically Egypt was in a good position to participate actively in the building of civilization and world peace

Our views on politics are being listened to in some countries, and some peoples are taking them seriously. We are an important element in the political equilibrium of the Mediterranean region, and tomorrow or after tomorrow we will be responsible for the communication channel between East and West. We import and export enough products to make our international economic situation viable.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, he argued that on the cultural front, Egypt's participation was minimal, and this cultural shortcoming would negatively impact the political and the economic. For Taha Hussein, a growing cultural influence went hand in hand with political and economic influence: "Winning in politics or in economy does not come to ignorant nations, nor to unaware peoples, nor to countries that only give little attention to culture."<sup>14</sup> Both the government and the people had important roles to play, he said. The people needed to understand the importance of culture, especially the rich, and how their money could make a difference, while the government needed to support knowledge production organizations in Egypt and give them the proper funding they needed. Furthermore, these organizations must be in close contact with similar international

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 453.

organizations. Through this communication and exchange of knowledge and science, Egypt would be participating in building what he called “the human civilization.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in another chapter about Egypt’s duty towards Arab countries, Taha Hussein argued that the culture he wished to make accessible to Egyptians should also be extended to other countries that could benefit from it:

For some reason, some Eastern countries said that Egypt was the leader of the Arab East, and for some reason Egypt has believed it. If this is true, then there are consequences that follow and arrangements to be made. If it is not true, then it is our duty to make it true, not only for our dignity, but because it implies transcending the selfishness that does not befit a generous people. I have no doubt that God has granted Egypt the means to revive and spread culture, which he has not given yet to the other Arab countries. It would thus be inappropriate for people who consider themselves generous not to share the good Egypt has and the wealth that it has been given. They should do what agrees with its generosity and dignity to achieve what it aims for, which is becoming a model for the region. In this way, Egypt’s present will match its past, and it will become a beacon of light to the surrounding countries, the place to which those who seek knowledge and desire it will rush.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Egypt, he warned, had so far done very little in that respect. Even though Arab countries read Egyptian publications, Egypt did little to make these publications more accessible to them. He also encouraged sending more teachers to Arab countries, receiving Arab students in Egyptian schools and universities and making sure the Egyptian government did everything possible to facilitate their stay in Egypt. More importantly, he suggested building Egyptian schools in Arab countries in response to all the foreign schools providing European education there. He referred to a report he had submitted ten years earlier upon his return from a trip to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Upon seeing the impact of western schools on the local populations there, he suggested building Egyptian primary and high schools in these countries, which would provide an “Eastern Arab culture” to the students. He clarified that Egypt should

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 454-6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 481-2.

avoid what foreign schools had done in Egypt and allow the local population to work in these schools, while avoiding teaching Egyptian history or geography, because the students should be “raised for their countries, not for Egypt.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, given the sophistication of Egypt’s higher education which attracted students from various Arab countries, Taha Hussein suggested the unification of all educational systems in Arab countries to prepare Arab students for the Egyptian academic life the way Egyptian students were. He had represented Egypt in a conference on intellectual cooperation in Paris, and said that Egypt could become one of the most important centers for such an intellectual cooperation if it assumed its cultural responsibilities towards the Arab countries. He gave the Egyptian University as an example. Through its Egyptian and European professors and their different backgrounds, the university brought together various strands of human cultures. They “meet, mix, and melt in the Egyptian mind giving it an Egyptian nature,” thus making it easier to broadcast in the East.<sup>18</sup> Egypt, according to Taha Hussein, was particularly suited for taking on such a cultural role:

Given its geographical location and its modern Nahda, Egypt is the best example of what the League of Nations is aiming for in terms of pure intellectual cooperation, one that brings nations together, and abolishes their differences, in order to raise their intellectual life beyond bickering and conflict (khuṣūmah wa-nizā‘).<sup>19</sup>

Although Egypt continued to rely heavily on Europe in matters of education, for Taha Hussein this could be turned into an advantage if Egypt, faithful to its old history, became the cultural link between “East” and “West.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 482-6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 489.

That Taha Hussein idealized culture and believed it transcended the complex web of unequal power relations that existed between colonizers and colonized has been subject to much criticism. Some work grounded in postcolonial theory, like Shaden Tageldin's *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seduction of Translation in Egypt*, argues that Egyptian intellectuals, including Hussein, surrendered too easily to the charms of western knowledge, which she contends was often presented by western scholars as "universal knowledge."<sup>21</sup> She considers Hussein's claim that culture should transcend politics, and carefully analyzes the impact of that claim on translation. She examines one of Taha Hussein's published debates with another famous Egyptian intellectual, 'Abbās al-'Aqqād (1889-1964), in which Hussein argued that all nations translated texts from other languages into their own out of their social and intellectual needs. He even provided historical examples to prove that at times the colonizer needed the culture of the colonized more than the other way around, for example, when Romans translated from Greek, and Arabs translated from Greek and Persian.<sup>22</sup> In her analysis, Tageldin takes issue with Hussein's understanding of such a "universal need" to translate, which in her view implies a natural willingness to exchange and presumes an "innate predisposition of all human beings to think and feel alike."<sup>23</sup> Tageldin's concern is that Hussein's universalization apoliticizes the act of translation, removes it from its imperial context, and masks the complex web of unequal power relations that undergird the translation process.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tageldin's main argument is that cultural imperialism works most effectively through what she calls 'the translational seduction,' by which the colonized see their best selves in the colonizer—their great pre-colonial self whose language and culture the Orientalists value and master, and their post-colonial self which they can realize only when they have successfully translated themselves into the colonizer. She uses the figure of the Orientalist as the agent of seduction. She analyzes the works of several Egyptian intellectuals from the Napoleonic invasion to the mid-twentieth century, and shows how the figure of the approachable knowledgeable Orientalist was instrumental in seducing them.

<sup>22</sup> Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seduction of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 280.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 273-88.

The lack of overt political action on the part of Taha Hussein also disappointed many North African intellectuals. In his book *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-maghrib al-‘arabī*, literary scholar Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Karrū is among the very few who wrote about Taha Hussein and the Maghreb.<sup>25</sup> Karrū states that North African writers have reproached Hussein for not having been outspoken enough about French colonialism in North Africa, especially in Algeria. As a case in point, Karrū refers to the speech Taha Hussein gave in Tunisia in 1957, at the height of the Algerian war of independence against French colonial occupation, and how he disappointed his audience by choosing a purely literary topic and not mentioning Algeria at all. This irritated many intellectuals at the time and some received his visit coldly.<sup>26</sup> In his chapters on Tunisia and Algeria, Karrū softens these critiques and takes Hussein’s attempt to create an Egyptian cultural institute in Algiers, sending Egyptian professors to Tunis at the request of Sheikh Fāḍil Bin ‘Ashūr, head of the Zaytūnah Mosque, and the creation of the Institute for Islamic Studies in

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<sup>25</sup> In his book, Karrū devotes a chapter to each of the three North African countries, and a fourth chapter to Sicily and Spain. He is one of several Tunisian literary scholars who did serious scholarly work on Taha Hussein. For sources, he mainly uses newspaper articles and excerpts from biographical works on Taha Hussein that mention something about his trips to North Africa—by his wife, Suzanne in *Avec toi: De la France à l’Egypte: “un extraordinaire amour: Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2011) and his son-in-law, Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt in *Mā ba ‘da al-ayyām* [After the Days] (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1986). Karrū argues that Taha Hussein had a very special relationship with Tunisia, going beyond the active engagement of Tunisians with his work that started well before Morocco and Algeria. He mentions Taha Hussein’s early mentor of Tunisian origin, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh, who encouraged him to write in newspapers and magazines and was the first to suggest he should continue his studies in France. See Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Karrū, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-maghrib al-‘arabī* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the Maghreb] (Tūnis: Mu’assasat Ibn ‘Abdallah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 2001), 27-33. He pays much attention to Hussein’s visit to Tunisia after its independence in 1957 in which he was invited to supervise the Higher Teachers’ Academy (Dār al-Mu‘alimīn al-‘ulyā) first Arabic language and literature exam (Karrū, 67). During the visit, Habib Bourguiba awarded Taha Hussein the Order of Independence, rarely given to non-Tunisians (Karrū, 76). In two shorter chapters on Morocco and Algeria, Karrū deals mainly with Taha Hussein’s visit to Morocco in 1958, the speeches he gave there, his meeting with Muḥammad V and the Order of Intellect (al-wissām al-fikrī) that was created especially for him (Karrū, 249, 298-306). Hussein never visited Algeria, but was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Algiers in 1964 (Karrū, 193). Moreover, He was the first Arab personality to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Algiers after independence (Taha Hussein’s Private Papers/ Letter from the Director of Higher Learning Ibrahim Ghafa to Taha Hussein, June 6, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Karrū, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-maghrib al-‘arabī* (Tūnis: Mu’assasat Ibn ‘Abdallah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 2001), 11.

Madrid, as three large projects that testify to Hussein's interest in the Maghreb.<sup>27</sup> Without giving details, Karrū believes that Taha Hussein's clash with the French authorities over the Institute in Algiers proved that Hussein had thought about the "Arabness" of Algeria as early as 1950 when he was minister of education.<sup>28</sup> Karrū then goes on to say that two years after leaving office and encouraged by the regime change in Egypt in 1952, Taha Hussein wrote several articles in the newly-created daily *al-Jumhūrīyah* attacking French colonialism, and in Karrū's opinion, that signaled Hussein's shift from the silence and courtesy that characterized his time as minister to a more blunt and violent approach under Nasser. While Karrū refers to what he describes as Taha Hussein's very honorable record against British colonialism in Egypt from 1909 to 1954, Karrū states that before Hussein's articles against French colonialism in *al-Jumhūrīyah*, "no stand against French colonialism was neither known nor read about him."<sup>29</sup>

Through narrating Taha Hussein's struggle with the French authorities, this chapter provides a detail-rich historical context for how Hussein negotiated his cultural projects with the French. At the same time, the chapter explores the extent to which Hussein was successful in separating the cultural from the political, and shows that he was very aware of the political impact of the cultural institutes he was trying to build. He also understood the political opposition that these institutes provoked in French circles. In his public statements, he held steadfastly to his well-known (and now very controversial) opinion that culture was universal, that it did not belong to any one country, and should therefore transcend politics.<sup>30</sup> But the main

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 56-8.

<sup>28</sup> Karrū does not mention his sources here, but he is probably referring to the short passage on the Algiers Institute in the book by Taha Hussein's son-in-law, Dr. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, *Mā ba'da al-ayyām* [After the Days] (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1986), 153-4.

<sup>29</sup> Karrū, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-l-maghrib al-arabī*, 56-7.

<sup>30</sup> Private Papers/ A report from Taha Hussein to the Egyptian minister of education on his visit to Tunisia in 1957, July 9, 1957.

theme of most of the correspondences and reports relating to his projects is the extent to which the cultural was indeed political. Upon arriving in Madrid Taha Hussein spoke to the local radio station and gave a speech that carried his unmistakable watermark: “Cultural relations are the right foundation for bringing nations together because they are free from political motives. This is the aim of what Egypt has done here in Spain.”<sup>31</sup> For Taha Hussein, and precisely because of his awareness of the unequal power relations that thwarted his efforts in spreading Egypt’s cultural influence abroad, capitalizing on the cultural and downplaying the political became the cornerstone of his negotiations.

### **Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Madrid**

Before having separate ministries for education and culture, the Egyptian ministry of public instruction was responsible for both domains, in Egypt and abroad. On January 4, 1950, a few days before the instatement of the new Wafd government under Prime Minister Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, the Council of Ministers approved a request by the Minister of Public Instruction, Muḥammad al-‘Ashmāwī, to create an Institute for Islamic Studies in Madrid.<sup>32</sup> Behind the idea was Taha Hussein, who, during a visit to Spain with other Egyptian intellectuals in 1949, had raised the issue with Spanish officials and discussed the possibility of opening an Egyptian Institute in Madrid similar to the ones already operating in London and Washington. His idea was positively received.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Private Papers/ Muḥammad Ḥusnī ‘Umar, “Secret Political Report no. 3 to Egypt’s acting minister of foreign affairs in lieu (bi-l-wikalāh) on the inauguration of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies,” Madrid, November 21, 1950, 1.

<sup>32</sup> DWQ/MW/0081-096923/ “Creation of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Spain.” Memorandum by the Minister of Public Instruction, Muḥammad al-‘Ashmāwī to the Council of Ministers.

<sup>33</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ “Telegram from Madrid to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the inauguration of the Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Madrid,” March 20, 1950. The same telegram indicates that upon the inauguration of the Institute, Taha Hussein also suggested the creation of a University Farouk I in Madrid as well.



‘Ashmāwī’s explicatory memorandum traced the interest in creating cultural centers abroad back to 1943 (when Taha Hussein was the technical advisor of Najīb al-Hilālī, the Wafdist minister of public instruction). ‘Ashmāwī argued that the status Egypt had reached in modern times, especially after its full independence under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, meant that Egypt should have a proper policy for cultural representation abroad. Such representation, argued ‘Ashmāwī, should reflect Egypt’s position on the world cultural scene and build on what began in 1943 with the creation of Egyptian institutes in London and Washington. Both institutes were created to keep Egyptians up to date with the recent scientific, technical and administrative innovations in both countries, as well as informing citizens of both countries about Egypt’s modern renaissance and its accomplishments. The intention was therefore to strengthen cultural relations between Egypt and these countries. With this success in mind, the minister went on, there would be a great benefit in, if not even a necessity for, creating similar ties with Spain because of the impact this could have on Arab culture and the proper study of Arab history. Given the old Arab legacy in Spain, the minister argued that such a center would facilitate the task of researchers in the West and the East by copying and publishing the Arabic manuscripts that existed in Spain in the fields of literature, philosophy, language and religion.

Egypt, according to ‘Ashmāwī, was especially fit for taking on such a task. Historically, Egypt had enjoyed a very privileged cultural exchange with Muslim Spain as many Andalusian ‘ulama came to Egypt, and their works were still being taught at al-Azhar. Such an old tie, ‘Ashmāwī continued, could benefit from Egypt’s modern institutions, such as the Islamic Monuments Institute, the Arab Monuments Institute, the School of Fine Arts, and Egypt’s recent interest in studying the Mediterranean culture, especially where it overlapped with the Islamic civilization. To convince his colleagues, the minister argued that other countries, richer and

poorer than Egypt, were already investing in creating such institutes. He used France as an example and said it already had two institutes in Spain, one dedicated to the study of art and the other for culture. European countries, he thought, should not monopolize such institutes, especially in a country that mattered so much to the Arab-Islamic world. It was not difficult to get the council's approval and both the ministries of public instruction and foreign affairs were sent copies of this decision.<sup>34</sup>

Upon becoming minister of public instruction in 1950, Taha Hussein made this institute in Spain one of his main priorities. On June 27, 1950, he wrote to the ministry of finance saying that all the required studies for the creation of the institute had been undertaken. He asked the ministry of finance to provide L.E. 30,000 for the Madrid institute and for another one the ministry of public instruction intended to open in Tangier. The money would be used to pay for rent, furnishings, salaries and other expenses. Taha Hussein suggested that it was necessary to have the Madrid institute ready by no later than October or November 1950.<sup>35</sup> The funds were authorized by the Council of Ministers on July 30, 1950 and Taha Hussein inaugurated the institute on November 11, 1950. Naḥḥās duly replied to Taha Hussein's telegram expressing his pleasure with this success, his wish to see the institute, shown below, contributing to the development of cultural ties between Egypt and Spain, and his personal wishes for Hussein's safe return. Both telegrams were forwarded to the King's Court.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> DWQ/MW/0081-096923/ "Creation of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Spain." Memorandum by the Minister of Public Instruction, Muḥammad al-ʿAshmāwī to the Council of Ministers.

<sup>35</sup> DWQ/MW/0081/096923/ "Creation of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Spain." Memorandum by the Finance Committee to the Council of Ministers, July 1950.

<sup>36</sup> DWQ/MW/0081-096923/ "Creation of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Spain." Telegram from Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās to Taha Hussein.



### **Taha Hussein in Spain**

By this time in his career, Taha Hussein was a man of fame and many accomplishments, accustomed to receiving honors in Egypt and abroad. Soon after his return to Cairo he would learn that King Farouk had granted him the prestigious title of Pasha in December 1950.<sup>37</sup> The Egyptian ambassador to Spain's reported Hussein's busy schedule in Spain and listed the Spanish officials and dignitaries who met him during his visit. His lunches and dinners were programmed in advance with the ministers of foreign affairs and national education, the deputy of the minister of foreign affairs, the general director of cultural relations at the ministry of foreign affairs, with García Gómez and the president of the Spanish Academy of History. The Academy of History organized a session presided by the Spanish minister of national education

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<sup>37</sup> It is a common misconception that the title Pasha was granted automatically to ministers. As the case with Taha Hussein shows, he became minister in January 1950 but was not awarded the title until December of that year. DWQ/MW/0081-021260/ "Bestowing the title of Pasha on his Excellency Dr. Taha Hussein Pasha, minister of public instruction," January 1, 1951. Farouk made the decision on December 30, 1950.

in which García Gómez introduced Taha Hussein in Spanish then in French. Taha Hussein then gave a lecture on a topic relevant to his visit and the cultural relations between Spain and the Arab world. The title of his lecture was “Fictional Prose in the Islamic East and West,” in which he made a comparison between Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* and Abū ‘Āmir Aḥmad Ibn Shuhayd’s (Ibn Shuhayd al-Andalusī) *Risālat al-tawābi‘ wa-l-zawābi‘*. The Spanish minister offered Hussein the Academy’s Medallion, appointing him a correspondent member. The Spanish government also awarded him an honorary doctorate degree in recognition of his “exceptional talents.”<sup>38</sup>

The inauguration ceremony for the new institute began at noon on November 11, 1950. Taha Hussein had invited Spanish officials, including the ministers of foreign affairs and national education. A newsletter in Arabic and Spanish was distributed to the guests, highlighting the mission of the institute. In his opening speech, which he made in French, Taha Hussein thanked the Spanish government for its support, and reiterated that the creation of the institute would not have been possible without the royal patronage of King Farouk I of Egypt. Arabs and Spaniards created a civilization together, which they built with their blood despite all the wars that took place between them, Taha Hussein said. Behind the idea of this Institute, however, was a renunciation of violence, and proof that humanity had progressed: “Relations between people are now based on culture,” he insisted. He encouraged the Spanish government to authorize using a printing press at the institute to reproduce the Arabic manuscripts held in Spain, expressing his hope that the institute would prove useful to Egyptian students and become a place for what he described as an “innocent scientific cooperation between the two countries.” The Spanish

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<sup>38</sup> Private Papers/ Muḥammad Ḥusnī ‘Umar, “Secret Political Report no. 3 to Egypt’s acting minister of foreign affairs in lieu (bi-l-wikalāh) on the inauguration of Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies,” Madrid, November 21, 1950, 2.

minister of national education then gave a speech in which he referred to the historical relations that tied Spain to the Arab World, especially Egypt, saying that the institute would work hand in hand with the two other Spanish Institutes: the Asín Palacios Institute in Madrid and the Institute for Arabic Studies in Granada. Subsequently the Spanish minister awarded Taha Hussein the Civil Order of Alfonso the Wise, as shown in the photograph below.<sup>39</sup>



Present at the event organized by the Spanish History Academy in the honor of Taha Hussein was the chargé of the French delegation to Spain, who congratulated the Egyptian ambassador on Taha Hussein's knowledge, his mastery of the French language, the clarity of his presentation and methodology. He also transferred to the Egyptian ambassador the wish of the French minister of public instruction to receive Taha Hussein and his wife as his guests during their stay in France. The chargé also relayed the wish of the director of the University of Paris to have Taha Hussein give a lecture at the Sorbonne and that the director hoped Taha Hussein

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3. The photograph is from Taha Hussein's private papers, courtesy of his family.

would be present in Paris on December 2, 1950 to attend the official celebration of the beginning of the school year at the University. Taha Hussein accepted the invitation.<sup>40</sup>

Behind the formalities, not all was well between Taha Hussein and the French authorities, which were carefully monitoring his projects outside of Egypt. In his report to the Quai d'Orsay on November 21, 1950, the French chargé focused almost entirely on the political implications of the event and Hussein's astute awareness of these implications. According to the French chargé, the creation of such an institute posed problems for the Spanish who were worried about possible political repercussions. The French intelligence report revealed that the Spanish approval came on a personal initiative from Martin Artajo, the Spanish minister of foreign affairs, despite serious opposition from his own ministry. Furthermore, the reserve shown by the Spanish Directorate of Cultural Relations with regards to opening an Egyptian school in Tangier revealed Spanish concerns over possible expressions of nationalism that the authorities in Cairo might be tempted to undertake. The French chargé believed the pro-Arab Spanish regime was facing a problem of how to improve Hispano-Egyptian ties while avoiding any political consequences in Spanish Morocco. The report concluded that like France, Spain was uncomfortable with an expanding Egyptian cultural influence.<sup>41</sup>

The report also tried to explain the lavish attention that Taha Hussein received from the Spanish government, for in the chargé's words "during his stay, Dr. Taha Hussein Bey was the object of the most distinct attentions from the Spanish authorities." In his analysis of the visit, the French chargé wrote that this attention could have been an attempt by the Franco regime to give an impression that Hussein's visit was motivated by stronger political ties between Madrid and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2 and 5.

<sup>41</sup> The French intelligence report also mentioned the challenge of appeasing Cairo while trying to improve the relationship with the Hashemite King Abdullah of Jordan.

Cairo. Yet throughout his visit, the Egyptian statesman insisted on the apolitical nature of his endeavor. The chargé even quoted Hussein who said: “We only want one thing, and that is to deepen culture and spread knowledge. Our relations with Spain, based on this pure and healthy concept, are only interested in the sciences.” If the Spanish government had hoped to draw some political benefits from the visit, the chargé concluded, they were certainly deceived, because, in the chargé’s words, “the Egyptian minister knew skillfully how to avoid the trap that was set for him.”<sup>42</sup> Hussein’s official message was clear. The institute was created for cultural reasons. It neither promoted political gains nor sought to stir nationalist sentiments in Spanish-controlled Morocco, or elsewhere.

### **More Cultural Institutes: Istanbul and London**

Several months later, in May 1951, Farouk’s Private Secretariat (al-sikritāriah al-khāṣṣah li-jalālat al-malik) submitted a special report from Taha Hussein to the king in which Hussein proposed to create a Farouk I Institute for Arabic Studies in Istanbul. He conveyed to Farouk an official Turkish suggestion to have Egypt create an institute in Turkey like those established elsewhere. The Turkish ambassador had expressed this wish to Taha Hussein over dinner two days before, saying it would have the best impact in Turkey, and Hussein promised he would think about it. Acting very quickly, he told the king that he was in favor of such an institute, not only for the prestige that would come with it but also for the major benefit of copying and transferring the Arabic manuscripts that the Turks had moved from Egypt to Istanbul following the Ottoman conquest, and which filled thirty-two libraries there.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> AMAE/ Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the Chargé of the French Delegation to Spain to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the inauguration of the Institute Farouk I in Madrid, November 21, 1950.

<sup>43</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004681/ Papers concerning the creation of a Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in North Africa, May 13 and 19, 1951.

Should the king approve his recommendation, Taha Hussein was proposing immediate action as he had enough funds under his disposition to get the institute ready in time for the Orientalists Conference expected to be held in Istanbul in September of that year. The inauguration of the institute would then coincide with the presence of all the important scholars in the field. Well-versed in government bureaucracy and having developed ways of handling the exigencies of the ministry of finance over the years, Taha Hussein explained that he had at his disposal 32,000 Egyptian pounds assigned to the Madrid Institute, and a similar amount for the Tangier Institute. He would negotiate with the ministry of finance to reassign part of this budget to Istanbul until more funds were made available the next financial year. Yet, Farouk, who was not on good terms with Hussein and whom he repeatedly accused of being a communist, denied the request. Without giving reasons, a comment in red said: “No need to create an institute in Istanbul.”<sup>44</sup>

Failing to bring Farouk on board with his ambitious project of creating as many Egyptian cultural centers abroad as possible, Taha Hussein addressed his next request to create a center in London to the Council of Ministers. On September 22, 1951, Taha Hussein wrote a memorandum to the Council of Wafdist Ministers, knowing they were more receptive to his ideas and that he had Nahḥās’ support. The minister of public instruction explained that a Center for Islamic Culture was created in London during the Second World War financed by various Islamic governments and organizations. The British government had also donated the building and a piece of land for the construction of a mosque. The ministry learned, however, that the funds for the center had dwindled, and the capital put aside for the construction of the mosque was being used for the daily operations of the center. It was thus no longer possible to provide

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



the necessary teachers and researchers capable of representing Islamic culture in the best light. The ministry, as mentioned in the memo, conscious of Egypt's responsibilities and duties in the field of international cooperation, dictated by its status as "leader and guardian of Islamic Studies," was willing to take on all the center's expenses. This would be conditional, however, on the full Egyptianization of the administration and calling the center Farouk I Institute for Islamic Culture in London.<sup>45</sup> The Council approved the request.<sup>46</sup>

### **Taha Hussein and the Maghreb**

In the report that Taha Hussein submitted to Farouk, Hussein had made another request, which Farouk also denied. In the preceding months, Taha Hussein had been in close communication with the French authorities in Paris over the creation of a Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in North Africa. Sensing the French reluctance to setting one up in Tangier, he insisted that an Egyptian Institute open in another North African city: Rabat, Tunis or Algiers. He insinuated to French officials that, should France refuse, Egypt would reciprocate and close down the prized Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale in Cairo (IFAO). He wrote to Farouk asking for his support in case he had to make the threat official. The French sources reveal, however, that from the start King Farouk was against taking any measures against French interests in Egypt. Technically Taha Hussein did not need the king's approval, but closing down the prestigious institute, a hallmark of France's cultural influence in Egypt, was unprecedented and Hussein probably wanted to unify the Egyptian front, i.e. both the king and the government, before making such a decision. Including the Turkish request for the creation of an Institute in

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<sup>45</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057167/ Minutes of the Session of November 18, 1951. Memo on the "Institut Farouk I pour la culture islamique à Londres," November 17, 1951. The memo also explained that the funds would come from the item: "New projects, General Culture," and requested extra funds of L.E. 6,000.

<sup>46</sup> DWQ/ Council of Ministers/0075-057873/ Minutes of the Sessions October-November 1951, Minutes of the Session of November 18, 1951.

Istanbul in the same report was certainly to show the king the importance and the utility of his projects. Yet Farouk opposed his minister again: “The relations [between Egypt and France] are still cold. This should wait until the situation has cleared, so the creation of the institute becomes a beautiful manifestation of the desired serenity (*maḥzar jamīl li-l-ṣafā’ al-manshūd*).”<sup>47</sup>

The cold relations were due to a political incident involving Egyptian journalists in Tangier, which seriously undermined Taha Hussein’s efforts to establish a cultural institute in the international city. To his report to Farouk, Taha Hussein had attached a telegram given to him by the French ambassador in confidence. In this telegram, a French official wrote to the French ambassador in Cairo telling him that France had no objections to the creation of an Egyptian Institute for scientific research in Rabat, a no-objection that Taha Hussein read as a sign the French would eventually relent. The creation of such an institute would have to wait, however, until the relations between the two countries had returned to normal after it had been compromised by a visit made to Tangier by some Egyptian writers whom the French official described as “irresponsible.” Employing a familiar colonial trope, the French official used this incident to claim that Egypt was not mature enough to assume its political responsibilities in North Africa and that he doubted any Egyptian would respect the mission on which he was sent. The “irresponsible” Egyptian writers were the Egyptian journalists Maḥmūd Abū al-Faṭḥ and Saīd Ramaḍān who spoke in favor of Moroccan nationalism in front of an audience of two thousand people. According to the French official, not only did they encourage people to adopt a hostile attitude towards France, but Saīd Ramaḍān also went further and called on fellow Muslims to consider “holy war” as a measure of uniting all Muslims. The consequences were such that the Moroccan officials had to intervene and put an end to this gathering. The French

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<sup>47</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004681/ Papers concerning the creation of a Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in North Africa, May 13 and 19, 1951.

official concluded that he was sure Taha Hussein would concur that such an attitude did not befit a nation conscious of its international responsibilities.<sup>48</sup> As the story of the Egyptian institute in North Africa unfolded, however, it became clear that France had many more serious concerns about this project, and that the incident with the journalists was only a convenient excuse to stall negotiations.

France's worries about Egypt's influence in North Africa did not start with Taha Hussein. The French had refused any official Egyptian presence in North Africa, and were extremely sensitive not only to visits by Egyptian intellectuals and educators, but they also inspected very closely the Egyptian publications, films and theatre productions that were distributed in the Maghreb. After signing the Montreux Convention in 1937 and the expiry of Capitulations in 1949 putting an end to the extra-territorial agreements that European nationals and establishments had enjoyed in Egypt, the French expected that it was only a matter of time before Egyptian officials raised the much-dreaded question of cultural reciprocity. French reports reflect a genuine anxiety over the continued smooth operation of the French establishments in Egypt—mainly, the cultural institutes, schools, the *Ecole française de Droit* and the hospitals—and so they expected the question of the Egyptian influence in North Africa to re-surface at any moment. Ironically, the appointment of Taha Hussein, with his well-known domestic and cultural ties to France, as minister of public instruction, signaled the first long official political dispute between Egypt and France over North Africa. Moreover, his retaliatory measures against the French establishments in Egypt indicate that these establishments were in a precarious position long before the Suez crisis in 1956 after which they came under the direct control of the Egyptian government.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Two years previously, on February 9, 1948, Algeria's Governor-General, Yves Chataigneau, wrote to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault reminding him of a report Chataigneau had sent him on July 18, 1947. The report endorsed a cultural exchange between Egypt and France involving Algeria. Dr. Anne-Marie Goichon, the specialist in Islamic Philosophy, had submitted this report in 1946 after her return from a mission to Egypt commissioned by the French ministry of national education. The purpose of the mission was to collect information on what the Egyptians needed and what they wanted in an effort to know what cards France could play when the time came for negotiations over North Africa and the French establishments in Egypt.<sup>49</sup> Goichon proposed an intellectual cooperation in which any exchange involving Algeria would pass by Paris, ensuring France maintained the upper hand. In her report, Goichon recommended the creation of a Franco-Oriental Center of Cooperation in Paris, where high-caliber professors would give a series of lectures. The existing Institut d'études supérieures islamiques would be affiliated with this center. The Governor-General of Algeria believed that an exchange of professors between Cairo, Paris and Algiers would only benefit France's "cultural and moral influence" in Muslim countries. In the Governor-General's words, he was taking the liberty to insist on the significance of Goichon's report and was hoping for a swift reply from the minister of foreign affairs.<sup>50</sup>

The immediate reply from the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles was dismissive. It quoted Goichon's report in which the Egyptians consulted, most notably Taha Hussein himself, foresaw a violent opposition from Great Britain to such a project and suggested

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<sup>49</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the Direction d'Afrique-Levant to the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 32.

<sup>50</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the Governor-General of Algeria to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the Franco-Egyptian cultural exchange, February 9, 1948.

that these steps should be taken discretely. Based on these recommendations, the Direction Générale believed it was not the right moment to implement such an ambitious plan, and that Paris should focus instead on grants and exchange programs allowing Egyptian students to pass their exams in France.<sup>51</sup>

Exactly a month later, on March 9, 1948, the minister of interior wrote to the minister of foreign affairs requesting an update on the Goichon project.<sup>52</sup> In the face of this pressure, the Direction Générale de Relations Culturelles relented and forwarded the project to the Direction Afrique-Levant for its opinion. In its letter to the Direction Afrique-Levant, the Direction Générale expressed its real concerns over the project

The Direction Générale de Relations Culturelles would be grateful to know if the Directorate of Africa-Levant thought that such a project – so contrary to the usual policy of the North African administrations – would not have dangerous consequences, at least for Algeria, by setting precedents for our North African protectorates towards which the Egyptian authorities sometimes show an excessive concern.

The Direction Générale said it would be happy to conclude an agreement with the Egyptians if the Resident-Generals of France in Morocco and Tunisia did not mind this Egyptian presence in Algeria and later on in their territories, as it would help maintain the French institutions in Egypt after the expiry of Montreux in 1949. The Direction Générale warned, however, that the Egyptians would see in this, if not a weakness on the French part, then at least an opportunity to ask for the creation of more official Egyptian institutions in North Africa, and possibly even regular consular services, which have so far been denied them. The letter ended with a reminder, that even though such suggestions were very interesting on strictly cultural terms, they would

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<sup>51</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Memorandum from the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles to the Direction d’Afrique-Levant regarding Miss Goichon and the Franco-Egyptian intellectual cooperation, February 9, 1948.

<sup>52</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the minister of interior to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the Franco-Egyptian cultural exchange, March 9, 1948.

cause “a serious inconvenience on the political level.”<sup>53</sup> Hearing about what was going on from the Resident-General in Morocco, the French ambassador to Egypt, Gilbert Avengas, requested details on this project given the impact it would have on Franco-Egyptian relations.<sup>54</sup>

### **Centre de Coopération Intellectuelle**

As requested, the Direction Afrique-Levant, sous-direction du Levant, ran its investigation and updated Goichon’s 1946 report before sending it back to the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles. In forty-eight typed pages, the report covered in detail the French response to a shifting cultural landscape in North Africa in which Egypt was pushing for a more active role in what the report described as “the Arabization of North Africa and the spreading of the traditional Islamic culture.”<sup>55</sup> While the investigators consulted with important leaders in the Maghreb, they only turned to French North African administrators for their opinion on the thorny question of introducing Egyptians to the scene.

The proposed intellectual cooperation was to be regulated through a center created for that purpose in Paris. For France to maintain its leading cultural role in the region, the report recommended that the focus should shift to the sciences instead of the traditional literary fields. The Centre de coopération intellectuelle would have a section devoted to literature, philosophy and history with a focus on the exchange between the two civilizations, a section on society, economy and law, but more importantly, it would also have a scientific section. Even though

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<sup>53</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Memorandum from the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles to the Direction d’Afrique-Levant regarding a project for Franco-Egyptian cultural exchange suggested by the Governor-General of Algeria, July 20, 1948.

<sup>54</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the cultural exchange between Egypt and France, August 4, 1948.

<sup>55</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the Direction d’Afrique-Levant to the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 32.

some opposition was raised, most notably by the famous Orientalist Louis Massignon, against such a scientific intervention in the Near East, the report made a case for it using the common and much debated paradigm of 1798. According to this paradigm, Egypt owed its advance over other countries in the Near East to the scientists Napoleon had brought with him, and to Muhammad Ali who sought France's help in Egypt's modernization. Muhammad Ali, the report went on, did not ask for literary scholars, but "scientists, engineers, chemists, doctors, and also builders and mechanics."<sup>56</sup> In its attempt to defend the sciences, the report also cited the case of the successful Jesuit scientific role in China (running the Imperial Observatory and leading the Mathematics bureau). If Arab countries were asking for French support in the fields of science, then it would be vain to restrict it to a literary influence only, the report warned.<sup>57</sup>

Between the time the initial report was submitted in 1946 and the attention it received in 1948, the impending expiry of the Montreux Convention in 1949 was looming over the horizon. The report argued that what was strictly cultural in 1946 had now acquired a political dimension. The fate of all French educational facilities in Egypt depended on the cultural agreements that would follow Montreux. Egypt was no longer expected to allow these facilities the freedom they had enjoyed for decades without some measures of reciprocity in North Africa. Egypt, warned the report, deemed the lack of cultural reciprocity "humiliating." Important as French institutions were to the country, Egypt could invite other foreign teachers to run them under the direct control of the Egyptian government instead of having independent French educational systems

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<sup>56</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 2 and 3.

<sup>57</sup> According to this report, Louis Massignon opposed a French scientific role in the region due to a mystical-Manichean disapproval of science (for example over the horrors experienced due to the atomic bomb) which he expressed in several articles, a stance that does not even agree with Catholic theology according to the report. More specifically Massignon used his influence to stop a scientific mission to Egypt in March 1948, which intended to investigate various possibilities for a "discrete and efficient French intervention in the scientific domain." Ibid., 1.

on its soil.<sup>58</sup> As for the institutes of higher learning, like the Ecole Française de Droit, the degrees they gave were already facing strong competition from local institutes.<sup>59</sup> The report claimed that Egypt, having received no benefits from France in the past years, was now “playing the role of the protector of the oppressed Africa,” bluntly speaking against the French presence in North Africa whenever the occasion arose. The solution according to this study was to accept the principle of cultural reciprocity.

What a better means of undermining Egypt than by asking it, in terms of reciprocity of the French education in Egypt, to fill posts of teachers in North Africa, where there is not enough French teachers to meet the demands of all kinds of high schools and other schools that are opening up, and to participate in the education offered by the great mosques, which has fallen so low?<sup>60</sup>

The report stressed that the traditional French support in the humanities was no longer enough for Egypt. The benefits for Egypt, the report insisted, had to be large enough to turn the Egyptian press away from its aggressiveness towards France and even help spread the French thought.<sup>61</sup> Yet, appeasing Egypt by allowing Egyptian professors to come to North Africa would only weaken France in Egypt’s eyes. To overcome these issues, France had to maintain the upper hand by helping Egypt and other countries in the Near East with their scientific development. According to the report, France needed to know that although Arab countries preferred French help, they would easily turn to other powers for support should France decline to provide that help.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the impact of scientific assistance on Egypt would be felt immediately.

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<sup>58</sup> This not only refers to the French schools (missionary and secular) but also the British, American, Italian, Greek, German and other schools that followed the schooling systems in place in their countries of origin. See for example, Jirjis Salāmāh, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm al-ajṇabī fī miṣr fī al-qarnayn al-tāsi’ ‘ashar wa-l-‘ishrīn* [History of Foreign Education in Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries] (Cairo: Al-Majlis al-A’la li-Ri’āyat al-Funūn wa-l-Ādāb wa-l-‘Ulūm al-Ijtimā’iyah, 1963).

<sup>59</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 5 and 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11 and 12.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 6.



Literary support was no longer enough, even if it were in French literature or if it involved allowing Egyptians to teach Arabic and nourish their “amour propre,” for, as the report described, “arts are not enough for life.”<sup>63</sup> If done properly, France could even count on Egyptian books and magazines, “read all over the Near East” to disseminate French thought in the form of positive propaganda. As the report put it, “Our thought would do so well to return by this route.”<sup>64</sup> All arguments raised against providing French scientific assistance should be dismissed, the report concluded.

To address this political urgency the investigation revolved around a series of questions, some of which were addressed to French officials in North Africa. For example, “are we favorable to the potential arrival of Egyptians in North Africa, and in what form?”<sup>65</sup> Except for one official, the answer was a resounding no to having any Egyptian permanent presence in North Africa. “Better shut down all the French establishments in Egypt than allow the Egyptians to come to North Africa!” exclaimed an important Parisian personality. The report also explained

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>65</sup> The other three questions were: How would the expansion of Arab and Muslim culture be envisaged? Should France exert more influence in the sciences? A learning center created under the new proposed form in Paris, would it be satisfactory?

Like the question on the Egyptian presence in North Africa, the first of these three questions was also mainly addressed to French officials, and the opinion of some Arabs was asked on occasion. See AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 7. Some of the people consulted in Morocco included: Chef du Cabinet civil, Secrétaire général du Protectorat, Conseiller diplomatique, Directeur de l’Intérieur, Chef de la Section Politique, Directeur de l’Instruction Publique et son sous-directeur, Directeur de l’enseignement Marocain; Directeur de l’Institut des Hautes Etudes marocaines et un Professeur à l’Institut, Directeur du Centre chérifien d’Etudes supérieures scientifiques, Directeur des Mines, Directeur du Collège musulman Moulay Youssef à Rabat, Président de la Fédération des Chambres d’Agricultures, Professeur au Collège musulman de Marrakech (all French in addition to five Moroccans); in Algeria: Délégué général au Plan, Chef adjoint du Cabinet du Gouverneur général (Algerian), Directeur de l’Agriculture, Inspecteur général, Recteur de l’Université d’Alger, Directeur de l’Institut des Etudes Islamiques, Doyen de la Faculté des Sciences, Doyen honoraire de la Faculté des Lettres, Maître de conférence à la Faculté des Lettres; in Tunisia: Secrétaire général, Directeur de l’Instruction publique, ancien Ministre de la Plume (Tunisian), Directeur au Ministère de l’Agriculture (Tunisian), Inspecteur général des services administratifs, Directeur et fondateur de l’Institut des Belles-Lettres arabes, adjoint au Conseiller diplomatique.

why the French felt the need to appease the Egyptians. As the French presence in the Mashriq was primarily cultural, the report explained, closing down the establishments in Egypt meant “abolishing what is left of the French influence in the Near East.”<sup>66</sup> Weakening such presence in the Mashriq, especially without the French institutions to remind Egyptians of France and its culture, would have negative consequences on North Africa, the report continued. Egypt was actively preparing for the abolition of foreign education in the country, and the report expected that the excitement over the end of the French cultural presence in Egypt would only antagonize the Egyptian press, already antipathetic to the French presence in the Maghreb. As the ties between the Maghreb and Egypt were close and Egyptian publications circulated secretly in the Maghreb, the report asked if the Egyptian professors banned from North Africa would not find other ways of exerting their influence. Wouldn’t it be better, the report continued, if Paris accepted and regulated the cultural reciprocity? Closing North Africa completely would not stop the Egyptian influence and would not stop Egyptians and North Africans from developing secret ties, while opening it completely would only lead to what the report described as “the most insane and false politics, because the Egyptians are full of prejudices against the French work [in North Africa].”<sup>67</sup>

Scientific cooperation was consequently recommended as the ideal compromise to encourage the desired cultural reciprocity while keeping a political invasion at bay. Egyptian lecturers would be carefully chosen for very short assignments organized through the Cooperation Center.<sup>68</sup> In what the report described as a “better solution that nobody had thought

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<sup>66</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report on the mission of April-May 1946 regarding a possible intellectual cooperation between Egypt and France, August 18, 1948, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere in the report, Goichon thinks that the professors would come mainly from Egypt, but the center should also aim to invite professors from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon...etc. Ibid., 39.

about before,” scientists would be invited but not politicians, literary people, theologians or philosophers. “Personally, I would only reluctantly allow any Egyptian here, but if we really had to, then I would prefer scientists,” said the director of education in Morocco. “I would receive an Egyptian geologist here without any inconvenience, and he would leave after having acquired knowledge useful for him and his country,” the director explained condescendingly. France, the director also implied, no longer enjoyed the same power over Egyptian men of letters, journalists, or scholars of the humanities. The study called for a stronger French involvement in the sciences because scientists were seen as objective, less politicized, and more likely to be impressed by the French advanced sciences.

Scientists are also more objective, more in touch with what is real, less saturated with local prejudices, and in general, the French leaders in North Africa prefer to see their work judged by scientists, even if they were of a low level, rather than men of letters imbued with politics, the way they all are in the East.<sup>69</sup>

Having such a cooperation center in Paris would allow for North Africans in France to meet their counterparts from the Mashriq under French supervision and in a framework of common work and preset tasks, without which, the report warned, they would inevitably drift to politics. The need for such a center would be even more pressing should Egypt manage to create the longed for “Institut égyptien” in Paris, which the North Africans would surely frequent, and over which France would have no control at all.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, the report also included its view on how the North Africans felt about Egypt’s rising cultural influence, describing this feeling as a “very nuanced desire.” On the one hand to feel left out from “the Egyptian development, the focal point of Muslim thought” (*essor égyptien, du foyer de pensée musulmane*) would be unbearable, as they felt the need to be in

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 41.

touch with what was happening in the Mashriq. Yet, this did not imply being submissive to Egyptian directives. An influential Moroccan in Paris reiterated that as much as he desired more contact with Egypt, he was dreading an Egyptian control, which he did not want to see replacing the French tutelage.<sup>71</sup> Whereas Egyptians thought Moroccans were outside the influence of the Nahda, the Moroccans thought their closer contact with western knowledge and French methods put them ahead, and the report cited the case of a Moroccan student who went to write his philosophy thesis at al-Azhar, but being used to the French methods, he did not like it and decided to continue his work in Paris. As the report put it, “Egyptians see Moroccans as wild, and Moroccans consider Egyptians to be oafs who would slow them down.”<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, such fears do not appear in the direct communications between Egyptians and North Africans. In an official letter to Taha Hussein dated December 18, 1950, the Tunisian Grand Vizier (Prime Minister), Muḥammad Shanīq (1889-1976) reiterated his government’s wish to have Egyptian professors teach at the Zaytūnah and informed Taha Hussein that his government had decided to send four graduate students to finish their degrees in Egypt. The introductory paragraph had nothing but praise for Taha Hussein, saying Egypt could not have chosen a better person to look after the Egyptian culture, which, in Shanīq’s words, was the culture of the whole Arab World: “Egypt is [the Arab World’s] beating heart, thinking mind, and overflowing resource” (qalbuḥu al-khāfiq, dimāghuḥu al-mufakkir, wa mawriduḥu al-fayyāḍ).<sup>73</sup>

### **Taha Hussein and the French Fears**

On January 22, 1950 Charles Lucet, the French chargé d’affaires in Egypt sent a telegram marked URGENT to the Quai d’Orsay saying that an article had appeared in *Zamān* magazine

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 16-7.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>73</sup> Private Papers/ Letter from Muḥammad Shanīq, Grand Tunisian Vizir to Taha Hussein, December 18, 1950.

indicating that a group of Moroccan intellectuals had resubmitted their request for building an Egyptian high school, a Lycée Farouk, to the new Wafdist government in Egypt. Predicting France's opposition to any Egyptian cultural presence on French-controlled territories, these Moroccan intellectuals suggested the school be built in the Spanish controlled zone in Morocco, or in Tangier, under international control since 1923. The magazine also indicated that the new minister of public instruction had announced his wish to build Egyptian educational establishments in all the Arab capitals, and added that such a project would be particularly feasible in North Africa given the numerous French educational and cultural establishments operating in Egypt.<sup>74</sup> The new minister in question was none other than Taha Hussein.

A few days later, Lucet sent the French minister of foreign affairs a five-page report on the new Egyptian minister of public instruction. The report summarized Taha Hussein's career and his strong ties with France, in terms of culture, education and family, but warned that:

If the knowledge of his deep thinking gives us the strongest hope for the future of our work here, the sensitiveness of his character and his political position with respect to the country mean that we should only approach him with the most prudent steps.<sup>75</sup>

The chargé d'affaires also warned that newspapers in Egypt had attributed to Taha Hussein some plans that would pose, what he described as, "a thousand difficulties" to the French. The new minister was expected, according to these newspaper reports, to request permission from the French and Spanish governments to send Egyptian professors to North Africa, and based on reciprocity to ask for the creation of Egyptian lycées in all the big cities in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. In addition, Taha Hussein would not decide on the status of the French schools in Egypt

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<sup>74</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French ambassador in Cairo to the ministry of foreign affairs, January 22, 1950.

<sup>75</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in Cairo to the minister of foreign affairs on the new minister of public instruction (Taha Hussein), January 26, 1950.

until the Egyptian requests had been addressed. Lucet added that he did not think Taha Hussein would really clash with the French government over this. Hussein had made these promises during the last elections, and at least initially, he would have to position himself as an “intransigent nationalist.” Lucet said he would inform the Quai d’Orsay if the new minister decided to go ahead with these projects, but his recommendation was to wait and hope that once in power, Taha Hussein’s ideas would mellow down.<sup>76</sup>

But Lucet was wrong. Two days after sending that report, the French Resident-General in Tunis wrote to the minister of foreign affairs on January 28, 1950 attaching a two-page intelligence report on the visit of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Fāḍil Bin ‘Ashūr (1909-1970), the Tunisian theologian and professor at the great mosque of al-Zaytūnah to Cairo. Bin ‘Ashūr had put together a plan to bring a mission of Egyptian professors to Tunisia, an idea that was received enthusiastically by Taha Hussein and the latter started working on it immediately. According to the French ambassador in Cairo, Taha Hussein even promised Bin ‘Ashūr that he would intervene with the French authorities to get their approval. The Resident-General was proposing to refuse all these requests, or at least to postpone the decision on them. He argued that even though the worry over Egyptian visits to North Africa had been symbolic so far—with the French fears mostly unjustified and the Tunisian expectations not met—this case was different and could present problems. According to the Resident-General, not only would this plan put the Egyptians in touch with the teaching staff and students of the Great Mosque known for their nationalist tendencies, but it would also interfere with a project proposed by the directorate of public instruction to establish a new high school diploma, the “Baccalauréat des territoires de la France d’Outremer et de l’Etranger,” which would give more weight to teaching

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Arabic, as well as the history and geography of Tunisia and North Africa. Yet, Bin ‘Ashūr had contacted the Egyptian intellectuals explaining to them the exam system in Tunisia and discussed with them the methods required to establish an Arabic high school diploma instead, or a “Baccalauréat arabe.” Even though the director of public instruction in the Tunisian government had already explained the limitations of the proposed degree to Bin ‘Ashūr, once at the Zaytūnah the Egyptian mission would surely bring up the topic again, and compromise the success of the new French baccalauréat.<sup>77</sup>

The intelligence report showed how closely the French authorities followed the movements of the Zaytūnah emissary in Cairo, and more importantly, why Cairo was seen as a source of political trouble as it had become home to, or was regularly visited by, several leaders of North African nationalist movements including the future presidents of Tunisia and Algeria Habib Bourguiba and Ahmed bin Bella. Bin ‘Ashūr met the Tunisian scholar, Sheikh Muḥammad al-Khiḍr Ḥusayn, who had moved to Egypt and cofounded the “Front de Défense de l’Afrique du Nord” (Jabhat al-difā‘ ‘an ifriqīyah al-shamālīyah) in 1944.<sup>78</sup> The Algerian nationalist Chadli el Mekki, who had also sought refuge in Cairo and created an office for the Algerian People’s Party in 1945, was also eager to receive Bin ‘Ashūr. Members of the Bureau du Maghreb Arabe, founded in 1947 in Cairo to coordinate action for the liberation of the three North African countries, also invited Bin ‘Ashūr and organized a press conference from which some of Bin ‘Ashūr’s declarations were reported in the daily Tunisian *Ez-Zohra*:

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<sup>77</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the Resident-General of France in Tunis to the minister of foreign affairs regarding sending a mission of Egyptian professors to Tunis, January 28, 1950.

<sup>78</sup> A renowned theologian, Sheikh al-Khiḍr Ḥusayn became the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar in 1952 (until 1954). He was also a sympathizer of the Tunisian old Liberal Constitutional Party (al-ḥizb al-ḥurr al-dustūrī), founded in 1920 protesting against the French protectorate and calling for the independence of Tunisia. The new Dustūr party, however, was created in 1934 by Habib Burguiba.

Tunisians feel that their attachment to their natural alliance, which is the Arab League, is the only way for the realization of their national aspirations for independence, which will protect them against the dangers threatening their national existence and will thwart the efforts done to push them towards a union that is foreign to them. Being the popular center of the Arab mind and the Arab League, Egypt is considered by Tunisians to be a refuge to which they turn to achieve their independence... Egypt will remain the refuge for our independence movement, and His Highness, the King of the Nile, whose name is often invoked in all the Arab circles, remains the protector of the hopes of the left wing of the Arab world.<sup>79</sup>

Bin ‘Ashūr passed most of his time in Cairo accompanied by his compatriot Ḥasan Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Wahāb, member of the Arabic Language Academy and longtime friend of Taha Hussein. In his meeting with Taha Hussein, Bin ‘Ashūr asked to have the diplomas from al-Zaytūnah and the Khaldūnīyah made equivalent to those from al-Azhar to encourage Tunisian students to come to al-Azhar for their graduate studies. An agreement was to be announced in that regard, and his wish to have Egypt send professors was quickly granted. Upon his return to Tunisia, he announced that three Egyptian professors would arrive at al-Zaytūnah to teach philosophy, history and geography. He also announced that an agreement had been made with al-Azhar for the exchange of books between Tunis and Cairo. In a meeting with students, he also expressed his wish to create a Bureau for the Zaytūnah in Cairo. This organization would have an official nature and would represent the Zaytūnah in the Mashriq. It would support Tunisian students in Cairo and ensure stronger ties between the Zaytūnah and Egypt. Immediately following this visit, Tunisian students in Cairo announced the creation of the “Association des Etudiants Nord-Africains,” and many of those students, as the report highlighted, were known to have had strong relations with the old Dustūr party of Tunisia.<sup>80</sup> Worried by these developments, the French minister of foreign affairs authorized the French Resident-General in Tunis to delay issuing visas

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<sup>79</sup> For more on the Bureau, see Attilio Gaudio, *Guerre et paix au Maroc: Reportages: 1950-1990* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Intelligence report on the trip of Fāḍil Bin ‘Ashūr of the Zaytūnah Mosque to Egypt, January 23, 1950.



to the Egyptian professors in question, and promised to follow a similar procedure should the French Embassy in Cairo raise the issue.<sup>81</sup>

In the mean time, Taha Hussein was not wasting any time. On January 28, 1951, the Egyptian Council of Ministers approved the request submitted by the ministry of public instruction to send (nadb) four teachers to the Zaytūnah to teach science, mathematics, the English language and geography. The Egyptian government was responsible for doubling their salaries, in addition to a special inflation subsidy (i'ānat al-ghalā') amounting to 40% of the salary. Egypt would also cover the expenses of their trips, with their families, to and from Tunis, as was the custom with other Egyptian teachers on mission to Syria and Lebanon.<sup>82</sup> The reason the memorandum gave for such careful attention to the well being of the teachers was that the ministry of public instruction was keen on promoting a closer cultural cooperation between Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>83</sup>

It was in this context that the French authorities requested more information on the Egyptian institute in Madrid on March 4, 1950. Taha Hussein had declared that he would ask the French government to allow the creation of a similar institute in Paris. The French were interested in the organization of the Madrid institute, its methods, the quality of its programs and the impact it was expected to have on the Muslim milieu in Spain and in Spanish Morocco. Of particular value was information on whether the activities of the professors and leaders of the institute were limited to education or if they had any political nature.<sup>84</sup> Egypt was keen on

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<sup>81</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Response from the minister of foreign affairs to the Resident-General in Tunis on sending Egyptian professors to Tunis, February 14, 1950.

<sup>82</sup> DWQ/MW/0075-057866/ Agenda of January 1951, the pre-Session of February 4, 1951.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the ministry of foreign affairs, Direction d'Afrique-Levant, to Madrid requesting information on the Farouk I Institute for Islamic Studies in Madrid, February 9, 1950.

spreading its cultural influence, and the colonial powers were concerned about possible political repercussions of these institutes.

Trying to make sense of Taha Hussein's agenda for North Africa, the French even suspected Great Britain was encouraging him. The minister of France in Syria wrote to the French ambassador in Egypt, informing him that the correspondent of the Arab Press and Documentation Bureau of Damascus in Egypt reported on February 11, 1950 that Egypt was having problems establishing its influence over members of the Arab League, so it was now turning to the Maghreb. In his last visit to Cairo, Britain's Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, made it understood that Great Britain would continue to run its own policies in the Mashriq and keep its army in the canal zone, but would have no problem if Egypt directed its influence westwards. That could explain not only the demands made by Egypt's minister of public instruction regarding opening Egyptian schools in North Africa, but also the Egyptian Freemasonry's request to the Masonic Lodges in France to allow for the creation of lodges in North Africa reporting directly to Egypt.<sup>85</sup> A stronger Egyptian economic influence in North Africa was expected too. With this policy, the British also hoped Egypt would play a stronger role in defending the Mediterranean against any Bolshevik expansion.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> For an account of Freemasonry in Egypt and the various Lodges in their British and French variants, see Karim Wissa, "Freemasonry in Egypt 1798-1921: A Study in Cultural and Political Encounters," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin* 16, no. 2 (1989): 143-61. For the way Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī tried to use Freemasonry to further his political agenda in opposition to Khedive Ismail, see Albert Kudsi-Zadeh, "Afghānī and Freemasonry in Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, no. 1 (January – March 1972): 25-35. Other important freemasons in Egypt included the Islamic reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh as well as the nationalists Muṣṭafa Kāmil, Sa'd Zaghlūl, and Muḥammad Farīd. For a more recent work on the history of freemasonry during the Ottoman period, see Dorothe Sommer, *Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire: A History of the Fraternity and its influence in Syria and the Levant* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>86</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the minister of France in Syria to the French ambassador in Egypt regarding the direction the Egyptian politics in the Maghreb was taking, February 18, 1950.

A few weeks into his position, Taha Hussein's demands did not mellow as the French had hoped, and the clash happened much quicker than they had anticipated. On March 7, 1950, the French ambassador in Cairo wrote to Paris:

The step taken a few days ago by Dr. Taha Hussein, the minister of public instruction, with the advisor of this Embassy, raises for the first time, in an official manner, the question of an Egyptian presence in North Africa.<sup>87</sup>

In this meeting with the French ambassador, Taha Hussein insisted on more substantial cultural exchanges with the three North African countries and raised the question of the restrictions imposed by the French authorities over the circulation of the Egyptian periodicals there.<sup>88</sup> What the ambassador signaled as "much more serious" was Hussein's wish to open, by the following October, an Egyptian secondary school in Tangier, along with a cultural center and a library. Taha Hussein would not stop at this, warned the ambassador, and would soon ask for similar establishments in Algiers, Tunis and Morocco. "The question that is currently being asked in a hesitant and limited way could quickly take on a larger scope," the ambassador predicted. Nothing would stop Taha Hussein from carrying out his project, said the ambassador, even if Egypt did not have the technical ability to open such schools in North Africa. Taha Hussein, the ambassador went on, had made it a question of prestige and he would not hesitate to deprive some local facilities of what was needed for the success of his project in North Africa. With the Egyptian academic missions in all the Arab Mashriq, and with specialists graduating from al-

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<sup>87</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French Ambassador in Egypt to the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the Egyptian politics in North Africa, March 7, 1950.

<sup>88</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the Direction d'Afrique-Levant to Tunis and Rabat regarding the meeting with Taha Hussein, March 9, 1950.

Controlling the circulation of Egyptian publications in North Africa was not a new issue. In an undated article among Taha Hussein's private papers, which seems to have been published in the *Muṣawwar*, signed by Taha Hussein when his title was still "Bey" indicating this was before 1951 when he became Pasha, he criticized the French government for stopping the Egyptian publications from reaching North African readers, and warned that should France continue to stop spreading the Egyptian culture, then Egypt should put some limitations on the freedom of French culture in Egypt. (Taha Hussein's Private Papers/ Article by Taha Hussein Bey, no date.)

Azhar and from the ministry of public instruction every year, the project, concluded the ambassador, was entirely feasible.

To continue his assessment of the Egyptian position, the ambassador mentioned that Egypt was experiencing what he described as “an intense intellectual life” expanding with its growing population and “accumulated wealth.” The ambassador argued that although Egypt should focus first on the needs of the Nile Valley and the “the well-being of its own population,” being the center of the Arab World, its natural tendency, especially with the current government, would be to extend its influence outside its borders.

When Taha Hussein was asked who these schools were for, as there were hardly any Egyptian students in Tangier, Taha Hussein replied: “If there are no Egyptians in Tangier, there are at least Arabs and Muslims, and it is our right to educate them (c’est un droit pour nous de les éduquer).” To speak of an “Egyptian right to educate” was a clear indication for the ambassador that Egypt’s goal was to extend its influence over the Arab world. It was also a way of dealing with what the ambassador described as an inferiority that the Egyptians felt with respect to France and other foreign European countries that operated successful and prestigious schooling networks in Egypt, while Egypt was denied any similar role in countries with which it shared the same religion and language.

The ambassador forewarned that the initiative taken by Taha Hussein would continue to grow. It came to the ambassador’s knowledge that the question of opening Egyptian consulates in North Africa had already been discussed in the Congress of Egyptian diplomats recently held in Cairo. He predicted an upcoming dispute that had been dormant for the two previous years. Despite some radical calls for the closure of French consulates and establishments in Egypt if Egypt was denied similar rights in North Africa, the ambassador believed there were many more

moderate Egyptian voices who understood the importance of the French establishments in Egypt and the risky nature of the North African project, especially King Farouk himself, who would probably intervene if such extreme voices started to gain ground.

During the meeting with the ambassador, however, Taha Hussein made no such open threats. On the contrary, the ambassador seemed to appreciate the subtlety and cleverness of Hussein's negotiating style. In his analysis, the ambassador explained that Hussein's choice of Tangier was not haphazard. Given the international nature of the city, the ambassador argued that the Egyptians hoped France would be more vulnerable there than elsewhere, thus they favored a setting that would allow them to play one international power against the other. He described Taha Hussein's approach as very courteous but precise. That Taha Hussein took on an assignment that would normally have been given to the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs but who was known for his impulsiveness did not go unnoticed by the ambassador. Furthermore, given Taha's famous ties with France, the Egyptians were tugging the chord of the traditional Franco-Egyptian friendship. Other Wafdist ministers repeated to the French ambassador on several occasions that choosing Taha Hussein as minister of public instruction was further proof of the friendship the Wafd felt for France.

The demand for building a cultural institute in Tangier, repeated the ambassador, was one of prestige for Egypt. He said he believed Taha Hussein did not want to use the institute to stir any political unrest in North Africa. The ambassador also indicated that North African nationalists in Cairo had nothing to do with Hussein's initiative, and added that on the contrary, any pressure from them would have had the opposite effect on Hussein.<sup>89</sup> As proof, he said that during the second Arab Conference on Culture held in Alexandria between August 22 and 31,

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<sup>89</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the Egyptian politics in North Africa, March 7, 1950.

1950, no delegations from North Africa were invited. Still, North Africans present in Egypt tried to bring this up during the Congress hoping the Congress would address the issue of sending Egyptian cultural missions to countries under French control, but Taha Hussein stopped this discussion saying it was not on the agenda. He added that from his experience with what he called “the French mentality” it would be easier to accomplish this through diplomacy rather than a series of resolutions.<sup>90</sup> The French ambassador believed the French government might be able to buy some time, but eventually it would have to face these initiatives. “We are facing a well thought-out and precise move from the Egyptian government,” he concluded.<sup>91</sup>

### **Tangier, Rabat and Algiers**

On September 17, 1950, the French chargé d'affaires sent a telegram to his ministry saying that upon Spain's approval of Taha Hussein's request to open an Egyptian institute in Madrid, Hussein announced he would seize the opportunity and open another one in Tangier. Hussein told the French cultural attaché that he had not yet heard from the president du Comité du contrôle de l'administration internationale of Tangier, but that he read in the *New York Times* that both France and Spain were raising objections to the project. Yet, he was still counting on the French support in this matter.

The councilor of the French Embassy in Cairo dreaded Taha Hussein's reaction once he learned about the negative attitude of the Tangier administration.<sup>92</sup> The Egyptian government's decision to allocate L.E. 20,000 for the creation of the Egyptian Institute in Tangier had caused

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<sup>90</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs on the Second Conference for Arab Culture in Egypt, September 5, 1950.

<sup>91</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the Egyptian politics in North Africa, March 7, 1950.

<sup>92</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French Chargé d'affaires to the ministry of foreign affairs, September 17, 1950.

the authorities of Spanish-Morocco and the French protectorate to worry. They feared that Egypt wanted this institute to become a de facto center of the Arab League in Morocco and a hub for nationalist agitation run by Emir Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭṭabī, the Moroccan political and military leader. ‘Abd al-Karīm had fought the Spanish and French forces in northern Morocco in the early 1920s and achieved some remarkable victories. After his defeat by the French, he was exiled and eventually sought political asylum in Egypt in 1947. Consequently, the two governments asked the comité du contrôle, chaired by the United States, to deny Egypt the permission to create such an institute using the existing treaties forbidding any political or social agitation in the international zone as an excuse. Adding to the worries of France and Spain, the Egyptians also expressed their wish to open a consulate in Tangier. As a French protectorate, granting such permission not only required the approval of the Sultan but also that of the French Resident-General of Morocco. The refusal of the latter would surely damage the Franco-Egyptian relations, at a time when Egypt was threatening to close the French establishments in Egypt in response.<sup>93</sup>

The French authorities decided to stall and wait for an opportune moment to shift the project away from Tangier to the regions they controlled more directly in North Africa. The moment came with the incident of the Egyptian journalists mentioned above and whom the French accused of political agitation. As explained earlier, the French ambassador to Egypt then shared the telegram with Taha Hussein in May 1951. Sensing the difficulty of establishing his center in Tangier, Taha Hussein shifted his attention to Rabat. In a telegram on May 23, 1951, Morocco’s Resident-General Alphonse-Pierre Juin declared his firm opposition to the new

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<sup>93</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in the United States to the minister of foreign affairs summarizing a *New York Times* article on the Egyptian institute in Tangier, September 20, 1950.

request and suggested creating the institute in Algiers instead. Juin argued that having an Egyptian institute in Rabat the way proposed by Taha Hussein (he mentions Taha Hussein by name), meant that Egyptian citizens would be given permission to stay in the French-controlled zone of Morocco and could move freely around in order to visit the institute, inspect it or teach in it. This implied that France would be granting Egypt undeniable privileges making the continued refusal of Egyptian consular services in that zone very difficult. Although he would comply with the department's decisions, he suggested taking Taha Hussein's idea to Algeria, which, unlike the protectorates of Tunisia and Morocco, was considered then to be part of French soil, "a sovereign land," as the Resident-General described Algeria in his report.<sup>94</sup> Having shifted the location of the future institute away from internationally administered Tangier to French controlled territories, the French disagreed amongst themselves as to where they could have more control over the institute. Should the institute be built in the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, which were expected to become independent at some point in the future, or in Algeria, which was considered to be a French province?<sup>95</sup>

On June 4, 1951, the French ministry of foreign affairs informed the Egyptian government that the French authorities saw no objection in opening an Egyptian institute in North Africa. Still unable to decide on where to host the institute, however, the Quai d'Orsay postponed announcing the choice of city until Taha Hussein's next visit to Paris for the UNESCO conference. The Quai d'Orsay asked the French Embassy in Cairo to seize this

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<sup>94</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l'institut français d'archéologie lié à la création d'un institut égyptien à Alger/ Telegram from A. Juin Resident-General of Morocco to the ministry of foreign affairs, May 23, 1951. In another telegram dated September 8, 1951, he suggested that France should ask Egypt for similar privileges in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan where King Farouk was officially king. AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from A. Juin Resident-General of Morocco to the ministry of foreign affairs September 8, 1951.

<sup>95</sup> As a French province, Algeria was departmentalized in 1848 into civil zones (départements) similar to metropolitan France. Algiers was within the civil zone of Alger (département d'Alger).



opportunity and express to Hussein the deep surprise of the French government that Egypt would resort to threats over an affair that “never posed a problem” to the French government, describing them as threats that went against the traditional Franco-Egyptian friendship.<sup>96</sup>

But the affair was causing a headache to the French government. In a telegram from Rabat, the Resident-General Alphonse-Pierre Juin informed his department that the local press in Morocco republished an interview with Taha Hussein in which he declared that Egypt would retaliate against the French establishments in Cairo if the French government did not authorize the Egyptian institute in Rabat. Juin wanted to know what the department had decided to do in order to face what he referred to as Hussein’s “blackmail,” and whether it intended to limit the cultural exchange with Egypt to metropolitan France.<sup>97</sup>

Sensing the French continued hesitation and not satisfied with the vague response from Paris, Taha Hussein gave a statement on June 7, 1951, duly communicated the next day to the Quai d’Orsay, in which he warned the French authorities that friendship should imply reciprocity. He said

It is time that the cultural relations between France and Egypt become based on reciprocity. The two countries are joined together by a traditional friendship. Yet, by its very nature, friendship is reciprocal. Its outcomes need to be, too. That is why I asked for, and received in May last year, France’s support to create a Farouk I Institute for Arab Culture in Tangier. Some difficulties happened in Tangier, and while we were about to solve them, the Moroccan crisis erupted. Seeing that Tangier had become a center for political activity and wanting to raise culture above any suspicion, I asked that our Institute be founded in Rabat.

I have not yet been told no, nor have I been told yes.

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<sup>96</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l’institut français d’archéologie lié à la création d’un institut égyptien à Alger/Telegram from the ministry of foreign affairs to the French embassy in Cairo, June 4, 1951.

<sup>97</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l’institut français d’archéologie lié à la création d’un institut égyptien à Alger/Telegram from A. Juin to the ministry of foreign affairs, June 11, 1951.

That is why I have approached our French friends, informing them that the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale as well as all the excavations currently being undertaken by the French learned societies could suffer from this ambiguity.

I am leaving tomorrow for Paris to participate in the General Conference of the UNESCO, and upon my return the decision of the Egyptian government will be made in accordance with the French government's decision.

The French cultural movement in Egypt is very important, and I do not like to act violently with friends. I will hold on to this principle for now. Policies based on trying to win time have their advantages, but in the context of cultural matters this could also have negative consequences. Believe me when I say that taking such measures will not be easy for me. But no one is sworn to the impossible.<sup>98</sup>

On September 20, 1951, the French minister of foreign affairs wrote to the minister of Interior (sous-direction de l'Algérie) informing him that the French Council of Ministers approved the creation of an Egyptian institute in Algiers. The institute would not provide any form of education, however, nor would it be a space for public discussions, but only a place for scholars or archaeologists to engage in scientific research, like the IFAO or the French institutes in Rome and Athens. Like the French institute in Cairo, the number of visiting scholars would be limited to four at a time. A library would be created, but its access restricted to the visiting guests.<sup>99</sup> To minimize any inconveniences, the institute would not be authorized to carry out any public activity. The Egyptian government agreed to these limitations and requested copies of the texts governing the roles of the three French archaeological institutes (in Cairo, Rome and Athens) to help write the statutes of the Egyptian one in Algiers. Taha Hussein assured the French Embassy in Cairo that once ready, these statutes would be communicated to the French government for its approval.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French embassy in Cairo to the ministry of foreign affairs on a statement made by Taha Hussein, June 7, 1951.

<sup>99</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the minister of foreign affairs to the minister of interior regarding the creation of an Egyptian institute in Algiers, September 20, 1951.

<sup>100</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Letter from the minister of foreign affairs to the minister of interior regarding the creation of an Egyptian institute in Algiers, October 24, 1951.

Yet, the Egyptians continued to feel the reluctance of the French to move forward with their promises. Upon being told by the French Embassy in Cairo that his visa to Algeria would take time, and that it would be better for him to leave to Paris without waiting for it, Yaḥia al-Khashāb, nominated by Taha Hussein to become the future director of the Egyptian institute in Algiers, went straight to Taha Hussein. Hussein asked the French cultural councilor if the French government had changed its mind about the project. He also mentioned, *in passing*, the situation of the French establishments in Egypt, and announced he would not allow al-Khashāb to go to Paris without his Algerian visa in hand.

The Ambassador, Couve de Murville, went to see Taha Hussein to avoid a “new incident,” as he called it. Taha Hussein told him that it was not difficult to guess that there was a connection between the Arab countries’ recent stand in support of Morocco and the new French hesitation over the creation of an Egyptian institute in Algiers. This Arab support for Morocco had come after strong calls by Moroccan nationalists for demonstrations in favor of independence. Riots broke out in Casablanca and other major cities leading to violent confrontations between Moroccans and French forces. Earlier that year, the Egyptian Chamber of Deputies denounced the French aggression in Morocco and declared the Chamber’s support for Sultan Muhammad V and the nationalist Istiqlāl party.<sup>101</sup> Referring to Taha Hussein, the ambassador said in his report to Paris, “my interlocutor was as well informed as I was about all our current problems.” Hussein reiterated Egypt’s commitment not to stir any political unrest in North Africa and made no direct threats against French interests in Egypt. He repeated, however, that he would not send al-Khashāb to Paris without having completely understood the French intentions towards the institute first. Taha Hussein, according to the ambassador, was mistrustful,

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<sup>101</sup> *Chronology of International Events and Documents* 7, no. 6 (March 1-18, 1951): 145-78.  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45693279#>

and nothing would make him change his mind. In his telegram to the ministry, de Murville suggested that the French government find other means of stalling the project instead of a direct refusal of al-Khashāb's visa, which Taha Hussein would surely interpret as putting the entire project on hold.<sup>102</sup>

The French Embassy in Cairo was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. On November 26, 1951, a special note was sent to the French minister of foreign affairs reiterating that the Egyptian government had made it a question of honor to create this institute, and that al-Khashāb's visa question should be quickly resolved. The embassy warned again that the visa refusal could have bad repercussions on the future of the French establishments in Egypt, especially the IFAO. This time, it was the Governor-General of Algeria who stalled the project, refusing categorically to have al-Khashāb on his territory. The Governor-General saw al-Khashāb's visit and the possible acquisition of a building for the institute as a threat. He preferred to have the institute created in Tunisia instead and argued that the French position there was weaker, whereas in Algeria there was still a possibility of what he described as "a definitive assimilation" of the local population. The French ambassador in Egypt believed that delaying the opening of the institute was still possible, given that the French government had to approve the statutes submitted by the Egyptian government, which could buy the French some time. Refusing the visa, however, the ambassador insisted, would certainly give the impression that the future of whole project was questionable. The director of the Africa Division in the French ministry of foreign affairs was opposed to the position of the Governor-General, arguing that anything happening in Morocco or Tunisia would have immediate repercussions on Algeria, and it would be easier to control such an institute in a "large, very French city, like Algiers." As a result of

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<sup>102</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French Ambassador in Egypt to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 November 1951.

these internal squabbles amongst the French, the issue ended up being pushed up to the Council of Ministers.<sup>103</sup>

Al-Khashāb, according to a French intelligence report, was the ideal man for the job, and if creating the institute were strictly cultural, he would have no problem getting his visa. Al-Khashāb was Professor of Persian at the University Fouad I, and married to Taha Hussein's famous student and protégée, Suhayr al-Qalamāwī. Al-Khashāb had obtained his doctorate degree from the Sorbonne, where he worked under the supervision of Dr. Massé of the Ecole des Langues Orientales, and his friendship with many French renowned professors like Massé, Massignon, Levi-Provencal and others was certainly expected to facilitate his task in Algiers. In Egypt, he was in touch with the French scholars working on Oriental Studies, especially the Dominicans in Cairo, who endorsed his deep attachment to France, and described him as a loyal Muslim without "fanaticism." More importantly, the Dominicans confirmed that al-Khashāb "always kept himself away from any any political activity."<sup>104</sup> Taha Hussein understood what the French expected, and he nominated a man whose credentials they could not fault.

### **Taha Hussein Strikes Back**

To the Egyptian government, and especially to Taha Hussein, expanding Egypt's cultural influence abroad had become a question of honor and prestige. During the Throne Speech given on November 15, 1951, it was announced that following the creation of the Egyptian Institute in Madrid the previous year, the ministry of public instruction was creating a Farouk I Institute for Arabic Studies in Algiers this year. King Farouk boasted that the Egyptian government "is

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<sup>103</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Memorandum to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the Egyptian request to create an institute in North Africa, November 26, 1951.

<sup>104</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l'institut français d'archéologie lié à la création d'un institut égyptien à Alger/ Report from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs on Yahia al-Khashāb, October 25, 1951. "Any any" was repeated in the document ("de toute de toute activité politique").

determined to employ all possible means to enhance the prestige of the Egyptian culture, inside and outside the country, going forward with steady steps.”<sup>105</sup> Not only was he referring to the two aforementioned institutes, but also to two Chairs that Taha Hussein had created in Europe: Farouk I Chair of Arabic Literature and Language at the University of Athens earlier that year, and the Muhammad Ali al-Kabīr Chair, created in Nice the previous year.

Over a year earlier, on April 11, 1950, the ministry of public instruction had submitted a memorandum to the Council of Ministers in which it said that an Institut d’Etudes Méditerranéennes, affiliated with the University Aix Marseille, was created in the French city of Nice. This institute offered neither examinations nor certificates, but was devoted to literary studies as well as the natural and the social sciences related to the Mediterranean region and its civilizations. French and non-French lecturers gave public talks, funded by various organizations and governments. According to the memorandum, “given Egypt’s status in the Mediterranean and its close ties with its civilization, it should participate in the efforts of such an institute, and the institute itself is worthy of Egypt’s support in carrying out its mission in the best way.”

The ministry therefore proposed providing a series of lectures entitled “The Grand Mohamed Ali Annual Memorial Lectures,” (*Conférences commémoratives de Muhammad Ali El Kébir*). That year Egypt was celebrating the centennial anniversary of the death of Muhammad Ali who, according to the ministry report, “renewed Egypt’s ties with the West, and established its modern Renaissance, and was one of those who revived the Mediterranean Sea, politically, militarily and economically, and thus paved the way for its return as an artery for world trade and as a vital center of International relations.” This proposition also involved

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<sup>105</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l’institut français d’archéologie lié à la création d’un institut égyptien à Alger/ Letter from the French ambassador in Egypt to the minister of foreign affairs regarding the creation of an Egyptian institute in Algiers, November 16, 1951.

supporting the institute with L.E. 1,200 a year, as it would invite Egyptian and non-Egyptian lecturers to give talks in the Muhammad Ali Series.<sup>106</sup> Taha Hussein himself went to Nice to represent the Egyptian government during the inauguration of the Muhammad Ali Chair, as shown in the photograph below accompanied by his son Moenis to his left.<sup>107</sup>



A year later, on March 11, 1951 the council approved another official trip for Taha Hussein to go to Greece between March 22 and April 3, 1951 to receive an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Athens.<sup>108</sup> The following week the council approved the ministry of public instruction's request to provide the funds required for the creation of a Chair for Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Athens.<sup>109</sup> In his memorandum to the council, dated

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<sup>106</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-056781/ Session of April 12, 1950. The proposition was approved as indicated in DWQ/ Council of Ministers/ 0075-057859/ The Minutes of the Sessions of April 1950/ The Minutes of the Session of April 12, 1950.

<sup>107</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-056784/ The pre-session of April 19, 1950. The approval indicated in DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057859/ Minutes of the Sessions of April 1950/Minutes of the Pre-session of April 19, 1950. Among those who gave lectures at the new institute was the historian Shafiq Ghurbāl and who was also an undersecretary at the ministry of public instruction at the time. He gave two lectures in 1951. The writer Dr. Ḥusayn Fawzī, then Professor of Oceanology at Farouk I University in Alexandria gave two lectures in Nice as well. See DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057866/ Minutes of the Sessions of January 1951/ Minutes of the Session of January 21, 1951. Photo courtesy of the Taha Hussein Family.

<sup>108</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057867/ Minutes of the Sessions of February-March 1951/ Minutes of the Session of March 11, 1951.

<sup>109</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057867/ Minutes of the Sessions of February-March 1951/ Minutes of the Session of March 18, 1951.

March 17, 1951, Taha Hussein explained that to strengthen cultural cooperation between Egypt and Greece, and given his upcoming visit to Athens, he thought the time was convenient for creating such a Chair, which would cost around L.E. 1, 200 from the following year's budget, and that he had already consulted with this colleague, the minister of finance who gave his approval. He wanted the council to quickly decide on the matter so he could officially announce the news in Greece during his visit. He expected the Greek government to reciprocate and announce the creation of a Chair for Hellenic Studies at the University of Farouk I in Alexandria.<sup>110</sup>

The thorny issue was North Africa, and after announcing the creation of the Institute in Algiers during the Throne Speech in November 1951, Taha Hussein was ready to retaliate if the matter was not resolved. On board with all of this was the Wafdist Prime Minister, Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, Taha Hussein's close friend and ally. In a letter to Naḥḥās dated July 19, 1951, Hussein, ignoring Farouk's wish not to create the institute in Algeria, raised the issue and told the prime minister that if the French delayed the process any longer, Egypt should close down their institute in Cairo and stop their archaeological missions in Egypt. "They are perfectly aware of this, and fear it completely," he wrote to Naḥḥās.<sup>111</sup>

Taha Hussein was in regular contact with the French ambassador who was pushing for granting the visa to al-Khashāb in order to avoid another confrontation with Hussein. In response to a telegram dated November 12, 1951 from the Quai d'Orsay telling him there was no problem allowing al-Khashāb to travel to Paris, the ambassador replied requesting an update on al-

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<sup>110</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057025/ Minutes of the Session of March 18, 1950.

<sup>111</sup> Private Papers/ Letter from Taha Hussein to Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās reporting on his trip to France and Italy, July 19, 1951.



Khashāb's visa to Algeria on November 19, 1951.<sup>112</sup> Then he sent a more pressing telegram on November 28, 1951: "The minister of public instruction, to whom I have indicated that I am pushing the department for an answer on that issue, is pushing me with extreme insistence."<sup>113</sup>

Taha Hussein then took what the French ambassador described as "shocking measures" against the French excavations in Egypt.<sup>114</sup> Exactly two weeks after the Throne Speech, on November 29, 1951, Taha Hussein decided to act. All permits of scientific works given to the French missions working on Egyptian territory were suspended, and Egyptian representatives abroad were given instructions to refuse the majority of visa applications by French personalities coming to Egypt on cultural missions. These measures affected directly the work done by the IFAO as well as the excavations committee, stopping the missions working in Dayr al-Madīnah and Karnak. Moreover, the heads of these missions were evicted from the houses in which they lived on the archaeological sites. The arrival in Egypt of other French archeologists was cancelled, and the intended work in Ṭanīs, Saqqārah and Dārat Manfalūt was suspended. Similarly, an important medical team planning to come to Egypt saw their trip cancelled as the Egyptian authorities refused to grant them entry visas.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the ministry of foreign affairs to the French embassy in Cairo granting a visa to Yaḥia al-Khashāb to visit Paris, November 12, 1951, and AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French embassy in Cairo to the ministry of foreign affairs inquiring about Yaḥia al-Khashāb's visa to Algeria, November 19, 1951.

<sup>113</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Telegram from the French embassy in Cairo to the ministry of foreign affairs inquiring about Yaḥia al-Khashāb's visa to Algeria, November 28, 1951.

<sup>114</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l'institut français d'archéologie lié à la création d'un institut égyptien à Alger/ Letter from the French ambassador to the minister of foreign affairs regarding Taha Hussein's measures against the French archaeological missions, December 7, 1951.

<sup>115</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ Report on the situation of the Egyptian institute in Algiers, May 2, 1952.

After such measures, the ambassador was against showing weakness and giving in to the Egyptian threats. Yet he was unsure what to do. He reported that speaking to King Farouk should only be reserved for very serious situations. Although the king would disapprove of the measures taken by Taha Hussein, the ambassador was not sure Farouk would intervene because of the tension between him and his current government. Using the normal path and addressing these concerns to the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs would also be futile, and the ambassador concluded that the problem could only be resolved with Taha Hussein himself. The French should talk to him “with all the vigor that is necessary” and perhaps threaten to take matters to the king.<sup>116</sup>

On December 13, 1951, De Murville informed his ministry that nothing seemed to suggest that Taha Hussein was planning on taking more retaliatory measures soon, but that the minister of public instruction was very annoyed with the delay and could eventually do so. De Murville summarized an article that appeared in *al-Ahrām* on December 13 in which Taha Hussein announced that he would do his best to make sure France stopped obstructing the establishment of the Egyptian Institute for Arabic Research in Algiers, warning that: “If France persists in its attitude, he will adopt a similar attitude towards the French Institute in Cairo and the French teachers in Egypt.”<sup>117</sup> Similar statements appeared in the *Progrès Egyptien*, signaling that Taha Hussein had started an escalation against France by getting the Egyptian press involved.

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<sup>116</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Marchandage relatif à l’institut français d’archéologie lié à la création d’un institut égyptien à Alger. Letter from the French ambassador to the minister of foreign affairs over Taha Hussein’s measures against the French archaeological missions, December 7, 1951.

<sup>117</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1948-1951/ Report from the French ambassador in Egypt to the ministry of foreign affairs, December 13, 1951.

Following the events of Black Saturday of January 26, 1952, during which riots and fire destroyed much of downtown Cairo's commercial center, King Farouk dismissed the Wafdist cabinet and Taha Hussein left office. After his exit from the ministry, however, the ministers that followed did not revoke any of the measures he had taken. The Algiers institute had become a matter of prestige, and the successive ministers could not lose face. More importantly, these ministers feared the reaction of Taha Hussein and the Egyptian press. On May 2, 1952, *al-Ahrām* announced that the Egyptian ministry of public instruction had asked the Egyptian Embassy in Paris to stop issuing any visas to French teachers and professors until the French government had issued the entry visas to Algeria required by the future director of the Egyptian institute and other personnel. The ambassador added that at the end of the school year Egypt would be in a stronger negotiating position as it could put pressure on the French government by stalling issuing return visas to French teachers summering in France.<sup>118</sup>

The French ambassador and other important French and Egyptian personalities, like Muḥammad Maḥmūd Khalīl (1877-1953), decided that any attempt to speak directly to the king would be fruitless.<sup>119</sup> The only way out of this impasse was granting the visa to al-Khashāb, especially because not issuing return visas to French teachers vacationing in France would have negative consequences on the operation of French schools in Egypt.<sup>120</sup> Yet, in a telegram to the Quai d'Orsay on June 20, 1952, the French ambassador reported that the attempt on behalf of

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<sup>118</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ A French translation of an article on the suspension of the Egyptian Institute in Algiers," *al-Ahrām* May 2, 1952.

<sup>119</sup> Muḥammad Maḥmūd Khalīl Pasha was a jurist, politician, senator and president of the Egyptian Senate between 1938 and 1940. Khalīl studied law at the Sorbonne, was an avid art collector and, with Prince Yūsuf Kamāl, he founded the Société des Amis de l'Art in 1925, which organized an annual art salon. Upon his and his French wife's death, their mansion and impressive collection of paintings were bequeathed to the state and is now a museum.

<sup>120</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ Report on the situation of the Egyptian institute in Algiers, May 2, 1952.

Mahmūd Khalīl to intervene and stop the measures taken against the French had failed and warned the department not to expect any solution from Cairo in the near future.<sup>121</sup>

Three days later, exactly a month before the coup d'état of July 23, 1952, the ambassador met with the new Egyptian minister of foreign affairs. The minister explained that the current government was not inclined to reverse any of the measures taken by the previous Wafd government, because they were sure Taha Hussein would attack them heavily in the press and turn the public opinion against them. To appease the French, the minister reiterated Egypt's "moderate position that it took during the Tunisian crisis, the discretion of the Arab League, the press censorship, the silence imposed on Tunisian ministers, and the political measures taken to facilitate issuing residence permits for professors working for the Mission Laïque Française." The minister insisted, however, that the problem of the institute in Algiers must be taken care of and the visa issued to al-Khashāb. The ambassador concluded that: "Overall, the general impression that one can draw from the conversation is that the case of the Algiers institute continues to embarrass our relationship with Egypt. The return to power of a more nationalist government risks changing this embarrassment into tension."<sup>122</sup>

Following the army coup against King Farouk on July 23, 1952, the Quai d'Orsay decided it would be wiser to wait as those who had envisaged the creation of the Egyptian cultural institute in North Africa were no longer in power. In the mean time, and given the French minister of interior's firm opposition to the creation of a purely Egyptian institute in Algiers, the foreign ministry was studying the possible idea of creating a Franco-Egyptian institute in Morocco instead, and whether this would allow France more control over the

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<sup>121</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ Telegram from the French ambassador to the ministry of foreign affairs, June 20, 1952.

<sup>122</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ Telegram from the French ambassador to the ministry of foreign affairs, June 23, 1952.

activities and administration of such an institute. Yet the Quai d'Orsay advised its ambassador to Cairo to wait until the Egyptian government had raised the issue again, and to investigate if the idea of a Franco-Egyptian institute might be favorably received by Cairo or not. The ministry was especially interested in finding out if such a suggestion could impact the operation of the French establishments in Egypt, and if it would be understood as an invitation to have a joint Franco-Egyptian administration of the schools.<sup>123</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The time Taha Hussein spent as minister of public instruction in the last Wafdist government before July 23, 1952 reveals a systematic official effort by Egypt to assert its regional cultural influence. Examining the cultural projects that his ministry proposed, implemented or inherited from previous governments show that this cultural influence had gone beyond periodicals, films, and theatre plays. By the 1940s, Egypt was actively creating Egyptian cultural institutes in North Africa and Europe. Confident in the expertise of its scholars who were being solicited by other Arab countries, and proud of its educational and cultural institutions – not only al-Azhar but also its new modern institutions like the Arabic Language Academy, the Egyptian universities, the Arab Monuments Institute, and others – Egypt considered that it had the necessary wealth and technical expertise to position itself as the guardian of Arabic and Islamic studies.

In his reading of history, Taha Hussein claimed that until the Ottoman conquest, Egypt had always played a key cultural role in the Mediterranean and Islamic world. He believed that Egypt's Nahda and modern institutions, especially the university, could restore that role, for they

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<sup>123</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431. 1948-1959/1952-1961/ Telegram from the ministry of foreign affairs to the French ambassador, August 30, 1952.

allowed Egypt, more than any other country in the Arab world, to engage with both the classical Arab-Islamic heritage and the challenges of the present using modern research and teaching methods. In response to the European education offered to students in various Arab countries, he called for opening Egyptian schools there and for unifying the curricula in all Arab countries. As minister in 1950, Hussein judged this role to be especially pertinent in the Maghreb, which French colonialism was trying hard to isolate from the rest of the Arab World. The Wafdist government was willing to supply the funds and the personnel required for his projects that expanded the country's regional cultural role in addition to validating Egypt's recently acquired independence and the end of the humiliating Capitulations. Totally aware of the French concerns over the fate of their establishments in Egypt after the expiry of Montreux in 1949, Taha Hussein demanded an official Egyptian cultural presence in the Maghreb in the name of cultural reciprocity.

The French feared Taha Hussein's project of building cultural institutes would undermine their control of the Maghreb. While they wanted their longstanding cultural mission in Egypt to continue uninterrupted by the end of the capitulatory privileges, they saw Egypt's rising cultural influence as a threat, and they resisted any official Egyptian presence in North Africa. They even considered shifting their cooperation with Egypt to science and technology, a field they believed Egypt needed their support with, and that such support would dissuade Egyptians from pursuing their North African cultural agenda. The French assumed it would be easier to work with Egyptian scientists than with Egyptian literati and politicians. Egyptian scientists, the French hoped, would be impressed by a more advanced French science and technology and would be thus less likely to intervene in the local politics of Northern African countries. Egyptian professors of the humanities, writers and journalists, however, were less likely to be contained

and their engagement with the Arab-Islamic tradition and classical Arabic made them a potential source of dangerous ideas, which the French feared would fuel nationalist sentiments against the French cultural hegemony in North Africa. The French authorities minded an Egyptian Arabic language teacher more than an Egyptian chemist.

Furthermore, the French response to Taha Hussein's cultural institute reveals interesting details about political power in parliamentary Egypt. As far as this dispute was concerned, power revolved around the king, Taha Hussein and his Wafdist cabinet, as well as the Egyptian press. The French saw Taha Hussein as member of a popular elected government and a strong stubborn nationalist committed to his electoral campaign. They felt this way despite Hussein's strong cultural and family ties with France. King Farouk did not play an important role in this dispute between the French government and Taha Hussein. Hussein suspected the French might try to use their influence on the king to hinder his project, but when he failed to bring Farouk on board, he ignored the king's advice and went ahead with his plans anyway. The French considered having Farouk intervene, but seriously doubted he would be able to reverse Taha Hussein's retaliatory measures against their interests given the tension between the king and his cabinet. Finally, a major political player was the Egyptian press. The French were uncomfortable with Taha Hussein turning the press against them and feared its impact on the public opinion in Egypt and the Arab World. Finally, Taha Hussein, taking advantage of the expiry of the Capitulations, did not hesitate to use his political power as a government minister against the French cultural establishments in Egypt signaling the precarious position of these establishments years before the Suez crisis and their ultimate nationalization.

Insisting on the *cultural* nature of his projects was the only strategy available to Taha Hussein to promote an official Egyptian presence in North Africa. On the surface, his insistence

that his projects were only cultural seems to agree with his published ideas about the “universality of culture” and that culture should transcend political gains. This does not mean, however that Hussein’s decisions as minister were not political. For him, the promotion of culture over politics was a supremely political strategy, which was the result of his acute awareness of the unequal power relations that hindered the expansion of Egypt’s cultural role abroad. Far from his image in some scholarly literature as “seduced” by the culture of the colonizers, he was fully aware that Egypt, despite the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, was not independent, and that politically his government could not stand up to any of the colonial powers. Framing Egypt’s wish to exercise a stronger cultural role in North Africa in terms of scientific exchange and cultural reciprocity was a request the French could not offhandedly dismiss. It was the language they understood and used themselves to justify the operation of their own schools and cultural institutes in Egypt and elsewhere. Even when Hussein finally decided to take retaliatory measures against French interests in Egypt, his decision came after careful and laborious negotiations. While the French authorities eventually managed to outmaneuver Hussein and stall his project, the French diplomatic records show that Hussein managed to cause confusion among the various French centers of power in Paris, Rabat, Tunis and Algiers. Moreover, in Egypt, he had managed to build a strong case for creating his North African institute that no subsequent Egyptian cabinet was able to reverse his decisions against French interests without losing face. The French felt cornered and could not resort to their usual tactic and claim they were protecting North Africa from political agitators, since Hussein had made it clear, time and again, that the institute was for strictly cultural purposes, and would be built along the lines of the French institutes already operating in Athens, Rome and Cairo.



Yet, *culture* was never *strictly cultural*. Faithful to a career-long tradition of resigning whenever he felt his judgment was put into question, Taha Hussein submitted his resignation to the prime minister when another minister challenged the utility of his cultural institutes and antagonizing the French over such an issue. In this resignation, which Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās immediately refused, the indignant Taha Hussein wrote

It is my honor to send to your Excellency my resignation from my post in the ministry after the valuable lesson that I learned from one of the colleagues. He taught me humility and convinced me that I was not fit for my position as minister, for I am only good at trivialities (al-qushūr) like the creation of useless institutes.

I see no harm if the Council listened to the opinion of my honorable colleague and stopped the plans for the Institute in Algiers, as well as shut down the Madrid Institute, the Muhammad Ali Chair in the Institut d'Etudes Méditerranéennes in Nice, and the Arabic Language Chair at the University of Athens. These are all trivialities that can neither fight off colonialism nor achieve the independence of the Arab nations.<sup>124</sup>

Taha Hussein, with his usual sarcasm, thus revealed in his resignation letter the long-term anti-colonial goal of his institutes, in which the lines between the cultural and the political fade completely.

While Taha Hussein's published work has led many scholars to believe that he was only interested in culture and that this (supposed) exclusive attention to culture was an indication of his having been "seduced" by what scholars have assumed he considered to be a "superior French culture," this hitherto unstudied conflict with the French authorities reveal that Taha Hussein was very conscious of the political impact of the culture he was trying to promote, and the unequal power relations that dominated these cultural exchanges. It is only through a close examination of the details of his disputes with the French over the establishment of the Egyptian institute, that this very political Taha Hussein emerges. In other words, it is important to look

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<sup>124</sup> Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, *Mā ba'da al-Ayyām* [After the Days] (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1986), 153. Resignation was submitted on October 1, 1951.

carefully at what he tried to do rather than just make assumptions about what he believed from his published work. In fact, the published work can be read quite differently when examined alongside his actions.

## Chapter Two

### Nahda Goes to University: Taha Hussein and the Mission of the Private Egyptian University (1908-1925)

*Yes, Egypt will not rise and attain modern civilization, while preserving its character and dignity, unless it knows its past, revives it and connects it to the present. From the past and the present, it must find the right code, which becomes the basis for a life that neither dissolves in the old and ossifies, nor dissolves in the new and strays... Only the faculty of arts can lead Egypt to achieving these goals.<sup>1</sup>*

Taha Hussein

Although Taha Hussein did not participate in the early stages of the Nahda, he shared many of the Nahdawi concerns with the Arabic language, classical *adab* and the importance of a humanist education. Early Nahdawi intellectuals believed that a cultural reform was necessary to face what they perceived to be a more advanced western civilization with an active colonialist agenda. Taha Hussein was convinced that the secular university was the only institution capable of undertaking such a task. He had returned from France with his doctoral degree in the aftermath of the 1919 revolution and immediately started teaching in the faculty of arts at the private Egyptian University. A key moment in modern Egyptian history, the revolution triggered a series of events culminating in Egypt's nominal independence from Great Britain in 1922. For Hussein, the university was to lead the way towards a proper democratic life and full independence. While the next chapter will unpack Hussein's project for culture and education in more detail, this chapter shows how his project intersected with the Nahda and was a continuation of its legacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Taha Hussein, "Kullīyat al-ādāb" [The Faculty of Arts], *al-Muṣawwar*, March 4, 1932. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyah min 1908-1967 (al-Ta'lim)* [Ṭāhā Husayn's Heritage: Journal Articles from 1908 to 1967 (Education)], vol. 1 (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu'āṣir, 2010), 315-6.

To show this continuity, the chapter turns to the history of the private Egyptian University (1908-1925). While most historical accounts have celebrated the transformation of the private university into a state institution in 1925 seeing the private initiative only as a rudimentary step towards what later became a fully-fledged university, this chapter shifts the focus back to the early years of the university when it was completely independent from the state. Using primary sources from the Egyptian National Archives (Dār Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah), the archives of Cairo University and secondary sources on the Nahda, I argue that those early years were more than just a passing phase that found its conclusion in the creation of the state university. The private university was a crucial endeavor in and of itself, and it left its unmistakable mark on the future of Egypt's higher education. During those early days, the founders of the university raised important questions about the role of university education, why its new humanities program was essential to the nation, the steps required to create such a program of studies, and how to teach it. These early discussions determined the intellectual mission not only of the private university but also of the future state university, which later became the leading university in Egypt and the model for other Egyptian and Arab state universities.<sup>2</sup> I will show how these decisions internalized some of the Nahda's central tenets prescribing cultural reform in terms of two interrelated tasks: reviving classical *adab* humanism while integrating the sophisticated accomplishments of western civilization. The university was to "revive" the Arab scholar, who had once impressed the west with his knowledge and abilities. Not only would Taha Hussein become the prime example of such a scholar, but he also remained committed to this mission throughout his long career as an intellectual, a university professor and a senior civil servant. Such a commitment can help us understand the complexity of his

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<sup>2</sup> Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

intellectual outlook better than the usual binaries in which he had been trapped, such as modernist/traditionalist or secularist/religious.

Furthermore, in this chapter I will argue that the private university was not only the institution in which Taha Hussein received his secular education and where he started teaching upon his return from France, but also where he formed his views on the quintessential role he felt the state had to play in the fields of culture and education. While most historical accounts have focused on the financial difficulties the university faced leading to its acquisition by the state, these accounts have paid little attention to the challenges posed by the new type of education the university was offering. Students were unfamiliar with studying the humanities as a program in and of itself, and in the absence of official government recognition of the university degrees, such a program of studies proved unattractive. The short turbulent life of the private university convinced Hussein that the humanist education advocated by Nahdawis was not an economically viable project and could not survive without state support. How to regulate this state role in culture and education posed a serious challenge for Hussein, and became an integral part of his project, as the next chapter illustrates in more detail.

### **Taha Hussein in the Footsteps of Early Nahdawis**

Taha Hussein's calls for a stronger institutional role in the fields of public instruction and culture were in the tradition of early Nahdawis. In his recent work on the Arab Nahda, the intellectual historian Abdulrazzak Patel stressed how leading reformers of the nineteenth century agreed on the importance of education and learning for any proposed reform – whether social, cultural or political. Patel showed how Azharite scholars like Rifā'ah Rāfī' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī, Ḥusayn al-Jisr and Muḥammad 'Abduh not only advocated the introduction of

modern secular knowledge, but also promoted teaching the classical *adab* tradition and the Islamic sciences. Through such a humanist education, Patel argued these reformers wanted to

Reproduce the literary legacy and moral philosophy of the Arab classical period in an attempt to foster the virtues of character suitable for an active life of public service among their subjects. They wanted to produce citizens who would not only be able to speak and write with eloquence and clarity, but also possess wisdom and learning and who would be endowed with a sense of duty to the community and state.<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish these goals, all four reformers were active in educational institutions, which were eventually closed down or which resisted the proposed reform: Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in the School of Languages (Madrasat al-ʿAlsun), al-Jisr in al-Madrasah al-Waṭanīyah al-Islāmīyah in Tripoli, ‘Abduh in al-Azhar, and al-Marṣafī in al-Azhar and Dār al-‘Ulūm.<sup>4</sup>

In this discussion, Patel proposes using humanism as a way of looking at the legacy of Nahdawis. Using scholarly work on humanism by Paul Oskar Kristeller, George Makdisi, Edward Said and others, Patel first concludes that *adab* humanism, in which all these reformers were interested, “was a characteristic and pervasive intellectual current of medieval Arab-Islamic culture.”<sup>5</sup> Kristeller had defined humanism as a program of studies centered on grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Although he and others argued that humanism originated in Renaissance Italy, George Makdisi demonstrated that practices of humanism started in the Muslim world two centuries earlier – debunking the idea that Arab-Islamic scholarship

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<sup>3</sup> Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 198.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>5</sup> In his work, Patel calls on scholars to study pre-modern Arab writers (udabā’) as humanists. He joins other scholars critical of the paradigm that the Arab-Islamic world was living in a state of decline and was jolted out of its intellectual stagnation and into modernity by the West. He believes that to properly understand the Arab Nahda, scholars must consider the pre-modern internal cultural factors, which he argues were key factors in the emergence of the Nahda, and which later reacted to and became a product of external influences, namely the contact with the West. The period pre-dating the Nahda, in Patel’s view, has not received enough scholarly attention and he offers a fresh reading of works by several Arab intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as: Rashīd al-Shartūnī, Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, Muḥammad al-Ṣabbān, Ḥasan al-Aṭṭār, Murtaḍa al-Zabidī. See Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 2-15.

was nothing but a passive link between antiquity and the renaissance.<sup>6</sup> He showed that the major fields of humanism defined by Kristeller as *studia humanitatis* were all included within the term *adab*, and Makdisi argued therefore that they could be referred to as *studia adabiya*. These fields included: grammar (naḥw) and lexicography (lughah), poetry (shi‘r), rhetoric (khaṭābah), history (tarīkh, akhbār) and moral philosophy (‘ilm al-akhlāq).<sup>7</sup> Patel then uses this literature to argue that in order to acquire a deeper understanding of humanism within the context of the Nahda, scholars should consider elements of the European Renaissance and *adab* humanism together.<sup>8</sup> He identifies some of these essential humanist elements as follows

The underlying motive [of humanism] must be preservation and purity of language from external influence; the concept of eloquence, seeking substance in the classical or distant past, derivative methodology, and eclecticism and many-sidedness.<sup>9</sup>

These issues, as will be shown in the next chapter in more detail, were of prime concern to Taha Hussein, and such a humanist lens allows us to reconsider Taha Hussein’s complex intellectual outlook in a different light. The usual binary of modernist/traditionalist, for example, neither accounts for his serious engagement with classical *adab* and his fierce defense of classical Arabic against colloquial, nor his work at the university creating various chairs, locating, editing and publishing old Arab-Islamic manuscripts, as well as trying to render classical *adab* more accessible to his contemporaries. Ibrāhīm Abu Rabī‘ is an example of a scholar who uses this misleading binary to classify Taha Hussein, along with other intellectuals such as ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq, Farah Antūn, Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf, and Salāmah Mūsa as “Arab modernists, who were focused

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said uses Makdisi’s thesis to call for an expansion of the humanities so it becomes more “democratic” going beyond Europe and including other cultures in Africa and in Asia. See Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West: With Special Reference to Scholasticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 120-1, 332 and George Makdisi, “Inquiry into the Origins of Humanism,” in Asma Afsaruddin and A. H. Mathias Zahniser (eds), *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 18-9. Quoted in Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

on the future and content to forgo the tradition. Similarly, Zakī Badāwī saw Muslim secularists, like Taha Hussein, as willing to follow the European path in nearly all aspects of life.<sup>10</sup> But as Patel rightly points out, these Arab-Muslim intellectuals in question held a variety of views on a range of issues and cannot be reduced to these kinds of simplistic categories.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, humanism allows us to see important links between Taha Hussein and earlier Nahdawi figures, such as Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī (1815-1890) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). Decades before Taha Hussein, both scholars wanted to disseminate a humanist education, believing it was necessary for the “revival” of the Arabic language and literature. Marṣafī, in particular, is mostly remembered as the first teacher of Arabic rhetoric and literature. Like Taha Hussein, he lost his eyesight at the age of three, received a solid religious education first at al-kuttāb then at al-Azhar where he started working as an Arabic language teacher. He then moved to the newly opened school of Dār al-‘Ulūm in 1872 where he taught the Arabic linguistic disciplines.<sup>12</sup> Marṣafī is famous for having promoted the study of Arabic literature by grouping and publishing the lectures he gave at Dār al-‘Ulūm in his masterpiece *al-Wasīlah al-adabīyah ila al-‘ulūm al-‘arabīyah*, which influenced generations of Egyptian poets and a new generation

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23. See Ibrahim Abu Rabi‘, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany; New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), and M.A. Zaki Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt* (London: Croom Helm, 1978). Patel also argues that the secular elites overshadowed the Islamic intellectuals until the first half of the twentieth century when it became clear in the 1960s that they were unable to “produce a new version of secular modernity,” and that the social and political institutions they built were not rooted in the Islamic tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ghanī Ḥasan, “Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī,” in *A‘lām al-nahḍah al-ḥadīthah, al-ḥalaqah al-ūwla*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥamrah, 1990), 285-6 quoted in Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 183-6. As Patel goes on to say, “Although some Western and Islamic learning had been taught in Ṭaḥṭāwī’s School of Languages, [Dār al-‘Ulūm] was the first institution of its kind to combine a comprehensive programme of modern Western learning with the traditional Azhari education and instruction in Arabic *adab* humanism. Men could be trained as teachers of geometry, physics, geography, Arabic literature, history and calligraphy, in addition to the branches taught at al-Azhar as such Arabic, Qur’anic Exegesis, ḥadīth and fīqh. [...] the new school aimed solely at producing teachers for the primary schools and turbaned shaykh-teachers were not being equipped to be sent out to schools.” See Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 183.



of Azharite scholars.<sup>13</sup> He was able to lecture on literature more freely at Dār al-‘Ulūm than at al-Azhar, which, despite courses on rhetoric, provided no courses on literature considered then to be too frivolous.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Muḥammad ‘Abduh in his attention to educational reform, proposed courses that combined *adab* humanism with existing religious instruction and called for the inclusion of modern history, sciences and languages in the curriculum.<sup>15</sup> However, his attempts to reform the curriculum at al-Azhar were met with fierce opposition from both Azharites and Khedive Abbas II who accused him of “wanting to turn al-Azhar into an institution of philosophy and literary education (*ādāb*) bent on extinguishing the light of Islam,” an accusation in response to which ‘Abduh resigned in 1905.<sup>16</sup> It was not a surprise, therefore, that ‘Abduh supported the idea calling for the creation of a national secular university that would be more open to such a kind of humanist education.<sup>17</sup> His students, Sa‘d Zaghlūl (1859-1927), Luṭfī al-Sayyid (1872-1963), and

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<sup>13</sup> Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 184.

<sup>14</sup> Brugman, J., *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 326, quoted in Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 184.

<sup>15</sup> Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-ustādh al-imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh wa-fīhi tafṣīl sīratih wa-khulāṣat sīrat mūnqidh al-Sharq wa-ḥakīm al-Islām al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī* [The History of the Imam, Sheikh Muḥammad ‘Abduh with his Detailed Biography and the Biography of the Savior of the East and the Wise Man of Islam al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī] (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1906-1931), reprinted by Dār al-Faḍīlah, Cairo, in 2003, Vol. 2, 427-9, 503. Quoted in Patel, 193. One of the changes ‘Abduh failed to introduce was the study Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* at al-Azhar, a suggestion to which Shaykh al-Azhar, Muḥammad al-Anbābī replied: “It would be against the tradition of teaching at al-Azhar.” Ibid., 426, quoted in Patel 194. Patel interprets ‘Abduh’s wish to include the *Muqaddimah* as showing “that [‘Abduh] intended not only to introduce modern Western learning into al-Azhar, but also to revive Arab Islamic intellectual and literary traditions and that he considered both equally important for Arab reform. In fact, to retrieve ‘modernity’ from within the Islamic heritage was central to Abduh’s reformist thinking and to this end he also called for the revival of original Islamic classics, including the theological works of the rationalist Mu‘tazilah school which had been boycotted for centuries as heretical. He also formed several cultural societies and associations to bring to fruition his ideas on an institutional level. In 1900, he founded the Society for the Revival of Arabic Studies to reprint masterpieces by classical authors, which he believed was an absolute must if the desired reform (*iṣlāḥ*) was to materialize.” See Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Ibrāhīm al-Dusūqī al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash‘atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama‘* (1908-1925) [The Old Egyptian University: Its Creation and Role in Society (1908-1925)] Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jāmi‘ī, 1980), 14. Interestingly, al-Jumay‘ī also uses a reference to the university in Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm’s (1868-1932) *Layālī Ṣaṭīḥ* (1906) in which the students of Muḥammad ‘Abduh are

Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908) as will be shown below, took on his call after his death, and created Egypt's first university that was entirely devoted to studying the humanities.

At the end of his study, Patel concludes by making a distinction between those whom he refers to as “Nahda humanists” like Sa‘īd and Rashīd al-Shartūnī who engaged with their immediate past, and other Nahdawi humanists who did not, like Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh and others. He argues that the latter faced a different reality in which they had to confront not only ideas of “civilization and progress” coming from the west, but also its colonialist agenda. Their solution was to prescribe a reform based on

Assimilating, through translation and adaptation, the great learning and achievements of western civilization, while simultaneously reviving the classical Arab culture that preceded the so-called centuries of ‘decadence’ and foreign domination.<sup>18</sup>

Decades later, Taha Hussein took this call forward and insisted that only the secular university possessed the know-how required to engage seriously with these questions.

### **Creating a National University**

“For strengthening the nation, the victory of the truth and the dignity of mankind”<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have recognized the impact of Cairo University on Egyptian society and its significant role in the making of modern Egypt.<sup>20</sup> In his work of reference on the university, historian Donald Reid noted that the University of Paris, Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford were never as vital on their national scenes as was the Egyptian University (later renamed to Fouad I

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reproached for not having implemented his idea for a secular university. See al-Jumay‘ī, 174. Also, Donald Reid, *Cairo University*, 12-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 229-30.

<sup>19</sup> “Li-rif‘at al-waṭan, wa-nuṣrat al-ḥaqq wa-karāmat al-insān,” by Shafīq Ghurbāl in his preface to *Prince Ahmed Fouad and the Creation of the National University*, by Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Budayr, initially published in 1950 by Fouad I University Press marking the Silver Jubilee of the University, and republished by Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah in 2008 in celebration of the centenary of Cairo University. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Jāmi‘at Fu’ād al-Awwal, 1950).

<sup>20</sup> A nod to Donald M. Reid’s classic on the history of the university: *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

University in 1940 and then Cairo University in 1953).<sup>21</sup> The early phase between 1908 and 1925, when the university began as a private institution, stands out as a formative experimental period that prepared the ground for the new institution to develop later into a fully-fledged state university.

After a successful nationwide fundraising campaign spearheaded by key nationalists and intellectuals, the private university was inaugurated in December 1908 in a grand ceremony attended by Prince Fouad surrounded by other dignitaries as shown in the photograph below.<sup>22</sup>



Convinced the university would produce Egyptian nationalists harboring anti-British sentiments, Britain's Consul-General in Egypt, Lord Earl Cromer, was opposed to the project, and his

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<sup>21</sup> Reid, *Cairo University*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> In 1908, the university founders must have felt optimistic about the success of their project encouraged as they were by Japan's recent victory over Russia in 1905, which demonstrated the success of modernization of a non-Western country. As the French scholar Alain Roussillon has shown, for Egyptian nationalists and intellectuals at the time, like Muṣṭafa Kāmil, Japan represented an inspiring model for successful modernization without compromising the country's proper identity. See Alain Roussillon, *Identité et modernité. Les voyageurs égyptiens au Japon (xixe - xxe siècle)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005). Similarly, adding to the optimism of that moment, in Turkey the Young Turks had just forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to restore the constitution of 1876 and general elections were held in November and December of 1908.

opposition only turned the struggle for building it into a national cause.<sup>23</sup> Even after its creation, the university continued to be a hotbed for contestation among the various political players in the country including the competing political parties, the palace, and European powers. Frustrated with the political parties' overt politicization of students and the continued disruption of university life, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, president of the university from 1925 to 1941, resigned from his post in 1937. In his resignation, he recorded his objection to the constant attempts by politicians to mobilize students along partisan lines, which in his words “damaged the bonds of fraternity among university students.”<sup>24</sup> Within the walls of the university, Britain, initially opposed to the project, quickly started fighting with France and Italy over programs of study, creation of chairs and appointment of deans. The university had quickly become a key political player to reckon with.

Most historians have focused on how the university developed against this backdrop of political struggle and in their accounts the private university figures as an inchoate structure, a rudimentary step on the road towards a mature university. As the private university faced severe financial and administrative problems, these historical accounts consider its acquisition by the

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt 1882-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1966), 337.

As Roger Owen has shown, Cromer did not believe the state should invest in education in general, and while in Egypt, he used his previous experience in India as his guide. On one hand, he believed it was better to educate a small elite, instead of an “overeducated underemployed agitators,” and on another hand, he was sceptical that the natives, as a different race, could benefit from a British kind of education. As a result, education under Cromer only received about 1% of the annual budget. He imposed tuition fees in state schools and was in favor of investing in the existing kuttābs rather than higher education. See Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Preconsul* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 313-5.

<sup>24</sup> Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, *Turāth Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid* [The Heritage of Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, 2008), 231-2. For more on the students' movements and involvement in politics see: Ahmed Abdalla, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt: 1923-1973* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985), Haggai Erlich, *Students and University in 20th Century Egyptian Politics* (London, England; Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1989) and Malak Badrawi, *Political Violence in Egypt 1910-1924: Secret Societies, Plots, Assassinations* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000).

ministry of public instruction in 1925 as a laudable moment in the overall history of the university. Promises of stable funding, a more systematic expansion of faculties, and recognition of its diplomas were hailed as the necessary steps to save the university and help it fulfill its national mission. Historians have echoed what seemed to be a genuine relief at the time that state intervention had rescued the floundering institution, together with all the national hopes that had been placed on it. For example, in his autobiography, *Qiṣṣat ḥayātī*, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid (shown in the photograph below surrounded by faculty members, including Taha Hussein standing behind him in 1925) divided the history of the university into three phases: the “publicity phase” (*dawr al-di‘āyah*), starting with the fundraising campaign, “the preparation phase” (*dawr al-tamhīd*), in which the university sent educational missions to Europe and offered general lectures, and finally, he celebrated the transformation of the private university into a state university as the phase of “completeness” (*dawr al-tamām*).<sup>25</sup>



Although the university started off as an independent private initiative, the seeds of government control were planted in those early days. The founders of the university saw no inherent contradiction in framing its intellectual mission as “seeking knowledge for knowledge’s

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<sup>25</sup> Luṭfī al-Sayyid, *Qiṣṣat ḥayātī* [My Life], 223.

sake” while simultaneously trying to fulfill “the needs of the nation” for progress and independence. They identified one objective with the other, presumably because at this early stage the university alone was to interpret what it meant to be seeking knowledge for knowledge’s sake. By emerging as the embodiment of the national cause and by continuing to champion this cause, however, the university was setting itself up in an uncomfortable relationship with the state. The decision to appoint the minister of public instruction as the higher president of the university in 1925 was one in a series of steps that reflected the state’s vested interest in defining what the “nation’s needs” were and how the university was to fulfill those needs, especially as the university became financially dependent on the state. Over the years, the state involvement became more and more pronounced culminating in the creation of the Supreme Council of the Universities in 1954 and the ministry for higher education in 1961.

Egyptian nationalists and academics hailed the creation of the national university as a cornerstone of the modern Egyptian nation-state. The famous Egyptian nationalist historian, Shafīq Ghurbāl, for example, called for a re-periodization of the national movement so it started with the creation of the university in 1908 and not with the 1919 revolution. Writing in 1950, he argued that the fight for the creation of the university marked the beginning of the real fight for independence. Such a fight, he continued, initiated Egyptians into an education that was foreclosed to them (by the British occupation) forcing them to search for it abroad. The university opened such “gates of knowledge,” as he called them, to Egyptians in Egypt marking a revolution against a form of “slavery” that was forced upon them, and thus laid the proper groundwork for independence.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Shafīq Ghurbāl, preface to *Al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, mīm and nūn.



Like Ghurbāl, contemporary Egyptian historians continue to pay tribute to the role played by the university in the national struggle. Most of their accounts of the university start by a battle for origins to decide whose idea it was first and who should get credit for it. For the purpose of this chapter, this debate is important because it shows that most of these university founders were either Nahdawi figures or people who had a direct connection with leading Nahdawi reformers like Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Jirjī Zaydān.

In more recent historical accounts, Egyptian nationalist historians like Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Budayr, ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jumai‘ī, and Yūnān Labīb Rizq start with Jirjī Zaydān (1861-1914) as the first to have called for the creation of the university, followed by the Egyptian nationalist Muṣṭafa Kāmil (1874-1908). According to these accounts, it was students of Muḥammad ‘Abduh, like Sa‘d Zaghlūl (1859-1925), Luṭfī al-Sayyid (1872-1963), and Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), who took on the idea and implemented it. Contemporary historians, like Samiah Ibrāhīm and Amīnah Hijāzī, go back even further in time to Ya‘qūb Artīn (1842-1919) who had an idea for creating a college-university when he was minister of public instruction, and which he advocated in his book on education in Egypt in 1893.<sup>27</sup> Artīn’s idea was to appoint an academic president for the existing higher schools of medicine, engineering and others, in order to transition them into colleges.<sup>28</sup> Historian ‘Alī Barakāt, however, credits ‘Alī Mubārak (1823-1893) with creating something akin to a university by grouping all higher schools of education in the palace of Darb al-Jamāmīz when he became head of dīwān al-madāris in 1868.<sup>29</sup> Ḥasan Naṣr

<sup>27</sup> Yaqub Artin, *Considérations sur l'instruction publique en Egypte*, Paris, 1894.

<sup>28</sup> Amīnah Hijāzī, “Ābā’ al-jāmi‘ah al-ahlīyah” [The Fathers of the National University], in *Mi‘at ‘ām ‘ala al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah* [The Egyptian University over One Hundred Years], ed. Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 95. Samiah Ibrāhīm, *al-jāmi‘ah al-ahlīyah bayna al-nash’ah wa-l-taṭawwur* [The National University between Creation and Development] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 14.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Alī Barakāt, “Jāmi‘at al-qāhirah wa-takwīn miṣr al-mu‘āṣirah: Mi‘at ‘ām ‘ala nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah” [Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt], in *mi‘at ‘ām ‘ala al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, ed. Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 53.

al-Dīn and Amīnah Hijāzī trace all these attempts to Muhammad Ali's changes and the creation of a modern state to serve his army following the French campaign of 1798. The road to the university, Naṣr al-Dīn concludes, took a hundred years.<sup>30</sup> Despite these minor differences, all these accounts agree that the *real* university took off and started to reach its potential with the creation of the state university in 1925.

The struggle for origins and the role the university was expected to play in the nation's fight for independence was an important political debate among the founders of the university at the time of its creation as well. Muṣṭafa Kāmil, for example, objected during a trip to Europe that the first administrative meeting under the leadership of Sa'd Zaghlūl took place in his absence, when Kāmil saw himself as the initiator of the idea and that its implementation should have happened under his supervision.<sup>31</sup> Kāmil was sidestepped to appease the British who feared his radical nationalist politics. He had just created a club for students of the higher colleges in 1905 and this may have antagonized the British Agency in Cairo even further. Kāmil and his National Party openly refused to deal with the British until Egypt's full independence and he was in favor of realigning Egypt with the Ottomans.<sup>32</sup> In 1906, *The Times* was glad Kāmil did not get full credit for the idea, and *The Globe* was still worried Kāmil might find a way of controlling the university and subject it to the influence of his National Party.<sup>33</sup>

Muḥammad 'Abduh's students were equally keen on realizing their mentor's idea for the creation of a secular university. One of his students, the well-known journalist Muḥammad

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<sup>30</sup> Ḥasan Naṣr al-Dīn, *al-Ajānib fī al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah* [Foreigners at the Egyptian University] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Tarājim miṣrīyah wa-gharbīyah* [Egyptian and Western Biographies] (Cairo: Kitāb Ruz al-Yūsuf), 61. As quoted in al-Jumay'ī, *al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash'atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama'*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> See for example 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāfi'ī, *Muṣṭafa Kāmil: bā'ith al-nahḍah al-waṭanīyah* [Muṣṭafa Kāmil: The Reviver of the Nationalist Renaissance] (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1957).

<sup>33</sup> Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ad wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 15-6.



Rashīd Riḍā wrote in his book, *Tārīkh al-ustādh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, that ‘Abduh’s students, including Sa’d Zaghlūl, decided that creating a college associated with his name would be the best means to keep his memory alive.<sup>34</sup> Riḍā was equally interested in the project but wanted the university to offer courses on religion.<sup>35</sup> Sa’d Zaghlūl and other ‘Abduh students started a fundraising campaign of which Zaghlūl was in charge, and he offered to host the first committee meeting in his house on October 12, 1906. The committee was composed of 27 members including Zaghlūl, Qāsim Amīn, and from the National Party Muṣṭafa Kāmil’s friend and associate Muḥammad Farīd as well as Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh, Taha Hussein’s mentor.<sup>36</sup>

Jirjī Zaydān’s *al-Hilāl* supported the fundraisers and reminded its readers that Zaydān was the first to call for the creation of a national university out of his belief that “creating such a university would be an important milestone in the history of al-Nahda.” In the style of the day the article went on to say that “hopes are tied to [the university] and the eyes are fixed on it.”<sup>37</sup> While western Orientalists were invited to teach at the new university without hesitation, Zaydān was denied teaching a course on Islamic history in 1910. Worried about the public reaction to having an Arab Christian teaching Islamic history, the University Council chose to focus on more immediate battles. Zaydān, who had already prepared his course lectures, was utterly disappointed.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-ustādh al-imām al-shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh wa-fīhi tafṣīl sīratih wa-khulāṣat sīrat mūnqidh al-sharq wa-ḥakīm al-Islām al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1931), 1066. As quoted in al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash‘atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama‘*, 15. Based on this decision, according to Riḍā, Faṭḥī Zaghlūl took the project to Lord Cromer, as they knew the British were not enthusiastic about such a project.

<sup>35</sup> Samīah Ibrāhīm, *al-Jāmi‘ah*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah: Lā’iḥat ijrā’ātihā al-dākhilīyah wā tarīkh mashrū‘ihā* [The Egyptian University: Its Internal Regulations and the History of its Project] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Wā’iz), 8-9. As quoted in al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> “A University, or a College; Literary or Natural Sciences,” *al-Hilāl* 9 (Year 16), June 1, 1908. As quoted in al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Zaydān learnt in October 1910 from *al-Mu‘ayyad* that he had been replaced. The following day a delegation from the university went to see him, and explained that, fearing strong public sentiments, the University

When Sa'd Zaghlūl resigned as head of the committee in 1906 – to accept his new appointment by Cromer as minister of public instruction – 'Abduh's other student Qāsim Amīn took over the leadership of the committee.<sup>39</sup> Amīn's leadership signalled the takeover of the University Council by 'Abduh's students who were in charge of the Ummah party, including Luṭfī al-Sayyid.<sup>40</sup> Predicting that the university would run into political and financial obstacles, the university founders hoped royal patronage would give the university more political weight and open locked doors. Under the leadership of the Qāsim Amīn, the University Committee intentionally left the president position empty hoping a member of the Royal Family would accept to occupy it. The committee wrote to Prince Fouad on December 22, 1907 asking if he would accept the position, which he did.<sup>41</sup>

The choice of Prince, later King, Fouad (r. 1917-1936) made sense given his connections and his wish to be seen as an enlightened patron carrying on with the legacy of his father, Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-1879). Until the declaration of the Republic in 1953, Fouad was considered as the patron-father of the university and in an official decree in 1940 the university was renamed to Fouad I University. Fouad used his friendship with European dignitaries, like Italy's Victor Emmanuel and others to recruit some of Europe's most famous Orientalists to teach at the new university. The Egyptian National Archives (Dār Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah) has a folder of correspondences between the prince and various Orientalists and universities in Europe,

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Council had decided to assign his course to a Muslim. He was offered L.E. 100 in compensation for the material he had prepared and the maps he had printed. The following year the university awarded a prize to his book, *The History of Arabic Literature*, perhaps as a consolation and recognition of his competence. For the details of the story, see Anne-Laure Dupont, *Gurgi Zaydan 1861-1914: Écrivain réformiste et témoin de la Renaissance arabe* (Damascus: Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2006), 629-42.

<sup>39</sup> Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Zaghlūl was criticized for this resignation which commentators believed was detrimental to the project and showed that Zaghlūl wanted to be on the good side of the British Agency. Zaghlūl refuted these accusations, saying he believed he would be more beneficial to education in Egypt in general by accepting this position.

<sup>41</sup> Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 19-26.

in French and Italian, arranging the details of their teaching assignments in Cairo. In a speech he gave to the University Council on March 15, 1911, Fouad reminded the council how he had managed to recruit the Orientalists Ignazio Guidi (1834-1935) and Carlo Nallino (1872-1938), and how he wrote to the government of the German Emperor William II requesting that the Orientalist Enno Littman (1875-1958) teach in Cairo

With this we managed to bring to the first Eastern literary college created in our days in the Muslim World, a professor whose worth scientists know, [and who is] versed in the origins of Semitic languages.<sup>42</sup>

Fouad's name and connections also helped the university receive sizeable donations from the governments of France, Italy, Germany, Russia and Romania.<sup>43</sup> He personally supervised the educational missions and the organization of student life in Europe, strengthened cooperation with several European universities and he made sure the new Egyptian University was invited to participate in some of the events organized by other universities in Europe.<sup>44</sup> During his term, donations and waqfs (endowments) from rich Egyptians were made and they dwindled after his resignation on May 20, 1913. Fouad's connections also ensured that the university library received thousands of books donated by various universities and governments in Europe in addition to private collections from members of the royal family and others in Egypt.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Speech of Fouad to the University Council on March 15, 1911, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 90. For more on the international missions of French and German professors between 1880 and 1930, see Christophe Charle, "Ambassadeurs ou chercheurs? Les relations internationales des professeurs de la Sorbonne sous la IIIe République," *Genèses* 14 (1994): 8-19.

<sup>43</sup> Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 83.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. For example, Fouad accepted the invitation extended by the German Emperor to attend the centennial of the University of Berlin on behalf of the Egyptian University in 1910, and similar events at the University of Geneva and Edinburgh.

<sup>45</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004479/ Report on the University in the academic year 1911-1912 to be presented to the General Assembly. The annual report for the academic year 1911-1912, for example, says the following: "The library has also seen progress and is now home to over 10,000 books which did not cost us anything. Most of these books were gifts from foreign governments, associations and scientific institutions, thanks for the respect the president of the university has and his good connections with foreign governments and the scientific establishments there. These gifts continue to arrive to the library from institutions and individuals, for example from government offices like the publications of the ministry of public instruction. This in addition to the

Although the difficult political and financial context in which the university was created pushed the university founders to seek royal patronage, the royal weight came at a price. The future king, as time would reveal, was tough-minded and impatient with opposition even within the University Council, forcing two of the council members, Aḥmad Zakī and Ibrāhīm Najīb, to resign due to their disagreement with his policies.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, despite his early reassurances that the university should remain independent of the government, when Fouad became king of the newly independent Egypt (1922), he did not try to help the struggling private university back on its feet so it could work on its own terms. Instead, his government opted for the creation of a state university under the presidency of the minister of public instruction signaling the end of the private initiative. The historian Yūnān Labīb Rizq argued recently that by announcing the intention of the government to build a state university including a new faculty of arts, the existing university knew it could never compete, and in Rizq's words, it raised "the white flag."<sup>47</sup>

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offers we have received from the governments of Germany and Bulgaria, the administration of the British Museum and the Kensington Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museums and other organizations and universities in Europe and America to choose what we need from their scientific collections and publications..."

<sup>46</sup> "Fourth Annual Report 1911-1912," republished in *al-Jāmi'ah al-ahlīyah (1908-1925): ṣafahāt min dhākirat al-ṣahāfah* [The National University (1908-1925): Pages from the Old Press] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, 2010), 131. Aḥmad Zakī and Ibrāhīm Najīb were replaced by Aḥmad Shafīq and Ismā'īl Ṣidqī. Zakī and Najīb's disagreement with Fouad was reported in *The Gazette*, not in the annual report, DWQ/Abdin/0069-004481/ Notes on the University/1912/ The Egyptian University and the Egyptian Gazette. Budayr mentions that they resigned because they were unsatisfied with how the university was being run. See Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 291.

<sup>47</sup> Yūnān Labīb Rizq, "Al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah min al-ṭawr al-ahlī ila al-ṭawr al-ḥukūmī" [The Egyptian University from the National Phase to the Government Phase] in *Mi'at 'ām 'ala al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, ed. Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 29. State direct involvement in education, at the expense of private initiatives, was not only limited to Egypt. See for example, Andreas Kazamias, *Education and the Quest for Modernity in Turkey* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), in which he explored the role of the Kemalist state in nationalizing education in Turkey to the detriment of private initiatives.

## Knowledge for Knowledge's sake?

Despite the tense national context in which the private university was born, all inauguration speeches and official communiqués stressed that the “noble” mission of the new university was the pursuit of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake.” The university was to focus on teaching the humanities to compensate for the dedication of the existing higher colleges to the practical sciences, such as medicine and engineering. The university founders argued that just like the country needed doctors and engineers, it also needed thinkers and intellectuals.

During the official inauguration of the University in 1908, Prince Fouad announced that the purpose of building the university was “to have, in Cairo itself, a center of high culture that would spare young Egyptians the trouble of going abroad to complete their intellectual training.”<sup>48</sup> The university was to be the institution responsible for defining this high culture and providing the training necessary for acquiring it. Similarly, members of the University Council echoed the same vision for the university. In a sumptuous dinner on April 18, 1908 thrown by Ḥasan Bey Zāyid in honor of the new university, the guests were taken from downtown Cairo on the Nile using two steamboats to Zāyid’s large estate in Munūfiyah. There were 160 guests in

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<sup>48</sup> “Posséder, au Caire même, un foyer de la haute culture qui épargnerait à la jeunesse égyptienne la peine de s’expatrier pour aller parfaire, à l’étranger, sa formation intellectuelle.” DWQ/Abdin/0069-004610/ Memorandum on the Egyptian University/ Note: Université Egyptienne 1933-34. This memo also explained that besides the annual grant of L.E. 2000 from the ministry of public instruction, the university received L.E. 5000 from the ministry of waqfs in addition to other donations from members of the Royal Family, most notably Princess Fatima Ismail, sister of Prince Fouad, and other notables. In 1923 King Fouad instructed his minister of public instruction to reorganize the University. The private university (l’Université libre) became the faculty of arts, the old law and medical schools were incorporated in the new State University as the faculties of law and medicine, and the faculty of science was created. “[L’Université] a pourvu à l’Egypte d’une éducation universitaire et elle fait de son mieux pour inspirer à ses étudiants l’amour de l’étude et de la recherche désintéressée. On espère que l’Egypte pourra ainsi, bientôt, contribuer d’une manière plus active, au progrès de la civilisation dans le monde et deviendra un foyer de pensée et de culture dans le proche Orient.” Ibid. Budayr also agrees that it was Fouad who asked the minister of public instruction to create a new state university and merge the old one into it. See Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 308.

total, including Prince Fouad, members of the University Council, journalists and lawyers.<sup>49</sup>

Qāsim Amīn, head of the University Council, gave a speech in which he argued that Egypt desperately needed such a project to address the huge shortage in thinkers whom it required to lead the public opinion, especially since its current system of education was only tailored to produce government employees. He called on Egyptians to support this new initiative.

We hope to see among our compatriots a community that seeks knowledge out of love for the truth, and out of eagerness to discover the unknown, a community whose principle would be to learn for the sake of learning. We wish to see among the children of Egypt, as we see in other countries, a scientist who is aware of all human sciences, and a specialist who has specialized in a specific branch of science dedicating himself to cover everything that is associated with it. [We wish to see] a philosopher who has earned a wide fame, a writer whose name has become known to the whole world, and a scientist whose opinion is sought and who becomes an authority to turn to when solving problems. These are the leaders of public opinion in other nations, who guide [these nations'] success, and direct their progress. In the absence [of these leaders], they are replaced by ignorant advisors and humbugs.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, to explain to the public the mission of the new university and the importance of focusing on the humanities, a communiqué from the university was distributed to several newspapers explaining that higher education in Egypt – law, medicine and arithmetic – had so far targeted practical subjects, and its graduates sought this type of education only to secure jobs as lawyers, doctors or engineers. “Given that the purpose of a university,” the communiqué went on, “is much more noble than this practical need,” the University Committee decided that the university would do its best to instill in the people the desire to “seek knowledge for knowledge’s sake.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Al-Mu’ayyad*, issue number 5444, April 18, 1908 as quoted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 29-38.

<sup>50</sup> Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 34-6.

<sup>51</sup> Communiqué from the University Committee to the press upon the creation of the Egyptian University, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 54-5.

Trying to legitimate the “authenticity of seeking knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” the committee argued in its communiqué that such was the approach to learning in the early days of Islam (ṣadr al-Islām), and that it was the approach followed by the “more advanced” nations of Japan and the west. Consequently, the committee believed that for Egypt to revive the “old glory” and attain the desired “civilization,” the university must introduce the types of knowledge that had not yet received enough attention in the country such as history, art, literature and the higher sciences. According to the communiqué, these were the subjects that had helped the advanced nations of Europe, America and Japan rise to “glory and power.” Therefore, the university founders reasoned, if Egypt was to become an advanced nation, then the path was clear

All nations, when they decide to adopt the means necessary for their awakening (nahda), they have no option but to do the same as the peoples that have acquired the most advanced civilization. History has shown the result of such an approach: the Greeks have taken from the ancient Egyptians, and the Arabs from the Greeks during the Abbasid era, and the Europeans from the Arabs during their renaissance, and from the Europeans took the Americans and the Japanese.<sup>52</sup>

In terms of tangible logistics, establishing such a connection with knowledge production in European universities was to start by hiring European professors and training Egyptian ones. The university’s priority was therefore to train qualified professors. These future professors had to be prepared to teach in Arabic, and the first step was to send them on educational missions to Europe. There, they could spend all the time necessary to “receive the highest degree in the branch of knowledge in which they are to specialize.” The regulations indicated that half the students on missions would study the arts, and the other half would study the sciences.<sup>53</sup> As for destinations, the inauguration communiqué indicated that these students would learn the literary

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 54-5.

<sup>53</sup> “The Regulations of the Educational Missions,” reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi’ah al-misrīyah*, 41-2.

arts from “the two great nations whose languages have spread the most among Egyptians,” that is to say France and Britain. Such training, the communiqué went on, was the only means by which students could become “saturated with modern methods.” After receiving enough training, they would then use the modern methods they had acquired to “dig into the treasures written in the Arabic language”.<sup>54</sup>

All inauguration speeches carried similar message to Fouad and Amīn’s. The only speech in a foreign language was given in French by A. Beauvilliers, professor of French literature, in which he framed ensuring the success of the new university as a debt the new world owed the old. Europe had a role to play, Beauvilliers insisted, as it was its duty to rekindle the civilization in the once-prosperous east, which had helped build the western one

We should teach the new nations how we [i.e. the Europeans] have attained this civilization, which they [mistakenly] think is easy to achieve. Let’s unveil our efforts and experiences, the losses that befell us, and the successes that we achieved. Let us explain the suppositions, the dreams and the ideas that paved our way to progress and helped us change our situation.

Then addressing those present by switching from the third to second person pronoun, he went on:

And if in your hearts the fire of hope is rekindled and life is fresh in them again, then we can congratulate ourselves, and with that we would have repaid our debts to the old world.<sup>55</sup>

As for the internal organization of the university, Fouad was ambitious. Discontented with general courses, he wanted a proper faculty of arts. Due to budgetary and logistical reasons (not having enough professors or textbooks), the university had started with the following mandatory eight courses only: History of the Ancient East, Philology of Semitic Languages,

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<sup>54</sup> “li-taqrīb mā fī al-lughah al-‘arabīyah min ma‘ārif wa-ādāb.” Communiqué from the University Committee to the press upon the creation of the Egyptian University reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi’ah al-miṣrīyah*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> Speech by Beauvilliers during the inauguration of the University, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi’ah al-miṣrīyah*, 80.



Geography and Ethnography, History of Philosophical Doctrines, Arab Philosophy, History of the Muslim Peoples, and Arabic Literature. Students were also given the choice between a course on English or French Literature.<sup>56</sup> In 1910, however, the faculty of arts was officially created. Addressing the University Council on March 15, 1911, Fouad expressed his pleasure with this step. He reiterated that general lectures were not enough and that the development of the faculty of arts along the lines of its western counterparts must continue.<sup>57</sup> The country, he argued, had been deprived of this kind of education that focused on the arts, when it needed “writers, wise people, historians and the like,” as he called them. Such an education, he added, must be offered in the Arabic language, within a system compatible with what he described as “the modern scientific spirit” (al-ruḥ al-‘ilmīyah al-ḥadīthah). He declared that he wanted this new institution to “become unique in the east.”<sup>58</sup>

In several speeches that he gave before the University Council, Fouad explained his vision for the new faculty. A faculty of arts, Fouad believed, would give more coherence to all the individual lectures and courses offered at the university. More importantly, the faculty would “revive the scholar of the Arabic Arts (dāris al-ādāb al-‘arabīyah) so he is on par with his counterparts in European and American countries.” Using its modern research methods, he went on, the faculty would be able to revive the early Arab accomplishments in the literary (al-ādāb), scientific and artistic fields, accomplishments which Fouad argued had impressed the west in medieval times but which contemporary Arabs had forgotten about. The impact of this revived

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<sup>56</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004476/ Minutes of the Sessions of the University/December 2, 1910-1913/ Règlements de la Faculté des Lettres”/December 2, 1910. Here it is called the Conseil d’Administration. The University Council included the professors while the University Administration Council met without them.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the history of the university in Europe, see Walter Rüegg and Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, eds., *A History of the University in Europe*, 4 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1991-2011).

<sup>58</sup> Minutes of the Technical Committee meeting of the Egyptian University/ Session of April 19, 1910/ Prince Fouad to the Committee members, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 121-2.

knowledge would trickle down from the top to the bottom, that is to say from the scholars at the university to the general public, or in his own words, “the light of the literary and intellectual renaissance will flow from the peaks of education to its foundations, bit by bit, until it illuminates the entire Egyptian world.”<sup>59</sup> To resolve the question of knowledge provenance and to encourage an intellectual cooperation with western institutions, Fouad turned to another familiar Nahdawi trope, saying that the faculty would “bring back the treasures of the old Arabic sciences, which we are now taking from the west.”<sup>60</sup> Fouad declared he was proud the country finally had the kind of institution that offered the education from which it had been deprived.<sup>61</sup>

At this key moment in the history of the Egyptian-Arab academy, basic Nahdawi tenets were inscribed into the mission statement of the faculty of arts, the core of the new secular university.<sup>62</sup> The faculty, according to the university founders, was to “revive” the “glorious” classical Arab-Islamic thought, once appreciated by the west and then forgotten by contemporary Arabs. This was to happen by first creating the modern Arab scholar, and those Fouad described as the writers, wise people and the historians. Such a discourse was not new, and had developed during the Arab Nahda as a solution to what Nahdawi intellectuals perceived to be Arab cultural “backwardness” facing a strong western “civilization.” Stephen Sheehi has skillfully shown in the *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* that while these intellectuals critiqued colonial

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<sup>59</sup> Fouad’s speech to the University Council on March 15, 1911, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 87-8.

<sup>60</sup> Fouad’s speech to the University Council in 1912, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Fouad to the University Council session on April 19, 1910 on the creation of a faculty of arts, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu’ād wa-nash’at al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, 121.

<sup>62</sup> The University Administrative Council expressed the same idea in a report presented in 1912: “Par la nature de ses enseignements et de ses finalités, cette Faculté répondait le mieux à notre espoir de consolider d’un côté l’enseignement supérieur et de préparer en même temps à leur haute mission selon les principes de la pédagogie scientifique moderne les maîtres futures de nos écoles secondaires.” DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Rapport présenté par le Conseil d’Administration de l’Université Egyptienne à l’Assemblée Générale du 25 Rabi Awwal (jeudi, 14 mars 1912)

discourses, they also appropriated colonial assumptions in their writings. They developed a language of binaries to help them make persuasive arguments: rise and decline, East and West, backwardness and civilization, and so on. By analyzing some major Nahdawi texts, for example Buṭrūs al-Bustānī's (1810-1883) magnum opus, *Khutbah fī adāb al-‘arab* (Discourse on Arab Culture, 1859), Sheehi argued that the Arab subjectivity was constructed in such a way so as to include both a “knowing self” corresponding to the “enlightened Abbasid” (mentioned explicitly in the university communiqué to the press above), and an “unknowing self” corresponding not only to present-day Arabs, but also to the “ignorant Umayyads.” This binary, in Sheehi's words, finds its “dialectical resolution in the ‘representation of the third term,’ which can be, for instance, the literary figure of a European humanist or a wise Arab ruler or good government.” Sheehi concludes that the required reform is inherently paradoxical because it made the re-creation of the Arab subject conditional on accepting the existence of a certain “lack” as inherent to his subjectivity, or as he puts it: “These [Nahdawi] intellectuals thus arranged selfhood around an unbridgeable gap at the core of its being.”<sup>63</sup>

Yet, the university founders believed the gap was bridgeable. They understood there was a power discrepancy between the “advanced” nations and the “less advanced” ones, and believed building a secular university was the ideal practical solution for redressing this presumed weakness. Producing knowledgeable thinkers and intellectuals, in the view of the university founders, would achieve the required cultural reform, and push back against the colonialist threat. For them, this reform was to be carried out by a new generation of Arab scholars who were well trained in modern research and teaching methods, already being used by Orientalist scholars to examine the Arab-Islamic classical tradition. Building a secular university along

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004), 36. For Sheehi's analysis of Bustānī, see 15-36.

western lines was the means for creating such scholars. To try to understand these men on their own terms, it is worth emphasizing again the challenging colonial context in which they were working, and especially the British Agency's resistance to any investment in higher education. They were thrilled by the available research possibilities and were excited to be embarking on a project of natural synthesis, which they did with circumspection and confidence. They were neither intimidated by western scholarship nor felt threatened by what it could bring.

In those early days of the university, there was not only the figure of Prince Fouad who liked to be seen as an enlightened patron and a wise ruler, but there were also the European humanists Sheehi refers to. Several Orientalists were hired by Fouad to teach at the faculty of arts, and there were also administrators, like Gaston Maspero (1846-1916) whom Fouad entrusted with organizing the new faculty of arts. A renowned Egyptologist, professor at the Collège de France and member of the French Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, Gaston Camille Charles Maspero was also member of the University Administration Council. Fouad had turned to him to draw the blueprints for the new faculty.<sup>64</sup> Maspero submitted a detailed report of ten typed pages a year earlier, on February 26, 1910, with his design for the new faculty.<sup>65</sup> While not all these suggestions and courses were implemented due to financial restraints, the document is particularly useful as it explains the logic that went into the organization of the faculty.

Maspero made a case for dividing the nascent faculty along several binaries: ancient and modern sections, and each subsequently divided into eastern and western subsections.<sup>66</sup> He stated

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<sup>64</sup> Minutes of the Session of the Technical Committee of the Egyptian University, April 19, 1910. Prince Fouad to the Committee members, reprinted in Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 121-2.

<sup>65</sup> The Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres is dedicated to the humanities and was founded in 1663 as part of the Institut de France. Maspero died in his seat at the Académie before delivering a speech.

<sup>66</sup> "Partie Antique" with "Section Orientale" and "Section Occidentale," and "Partie Moderne" with "Section Orientale" and "Section Occidentale." DWQ/Abdin/0069-004481/Gaston Maspero/ Note sur l'Etablissement d'une Faculté des Lettres/ February 26, 1910.

that much of the European and Islamic civilizations had roots in the Greek and Roman civilizations. In Europe, he went on, classical studies had already become an important part of mainstream education and was no longer limited to amateur erudition. Egypt therefore needed to make classical studies the basis of its literary education as well, he argued. Such studies would include Greek and Latin languages, philology, literature, philosophy, archaeology and history. The eastern subsection, on the other hand, would include courses on the ancient Egyptian language and history, Semitic languages and their history, as well as the Persian language and its history.

For the western subsection of the modern section, Maspero did not hide his preference for giving more attention to French literature.<sup>67</sup> The way the courses were to be designed should reflect the status of each European language in Egypt, he thought. While admitting English language and literature had become important in Egypt since the British occupation, Maspero still believed preference should be given to Roman languages, especially French. Maspero proudly credited France with having initiated Egypt's contact with modern European life. Since then, he argued, French language and literature became more important than other European languages and literatures in Egypt.<sup>68</sup> He went even further and claimed that a "certain similarity (analogie) between the minds and intelligence of Egyptians and French have mightily contributed to protect France's educational role until these days."<sup>69</sup> He therefore recommended

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<sup>67</sup> Donald Reid shows that Maspero always defended French interests at the University against the British and even the Italians until his retirement in 1914. See Reid, *Cairo University*, 39-40.

<sup>68</sup> Here Maspero was not accurate, as Italian was the dominant European language used in Egypt before 1798 and during the early years of the rule of Muhammad Ali.

<sup>69</sup> "En réglant le programme de cette partie, il faut tenir compte des circonstances dans lesquelles l'Egypte moderne s'est mêlée à la vie européenne et des impulsions qu'elle a subies depuis un siècle. La France a été l'initiatrice : sa langue et sa littérature sont donc devenues la langue et la littérature d'élection et une certaine analogie d'esprit et d'intelligence qu'on remarque chez les Egyptiens et les Français a contribué puissamment à lui conserver son rôle d'éducatrice jusqu'à nos jours. La langue et la littérature anglaise exercent une influence capitale depuis un quart de siècle, et à côté d'elles mais à des degrés différents, les langues et les

that this subsection started with French and English language and literature. In the long run, however, courses should also cover the philology of Roman and Germanic languages, history of French, English, Italian and German literatures, history of modern Europe since the fall of the western Roman Empire, contemporary European history, as well as the history of European art and philosophy.

For the eastern subsection under the modern section, Maspero clarified that by eastern (oriental) he was only referring to the Islamic East (l'Orient Musulman) and not the Far East (l'Extrême-Orient). "This is not because," he went on, "there is no interest in knowing [the Far East], but because Egypt has always had such a little interaction with it, that it could, without much inconvenience, hold off studying it." The focus would be on the largest three Muslim populations: Arabs, Turks and Persians. The courses he proposed, therefore, were Arabic, Turkish and Persian philology, history of Arabic, Turkish and Persian literatures, the history of Arabs, Muslims, Muslim Egypt as well as Islamic art and philosophy. To confer legitimacy on his propositions, Maspero framed his design for the faculty of arts as responding to the present "needs of the country" (pour satisfaire aux besoins du pays).<sup>70</sup>

While highlighting the need for the faculty of arts to award diplomas to those who successfully completed their undergraduate and graduate studies, Maspero raised the issue of the university's lack of any official ties to the country's public or private secondary education institutions. The faculty would give two degrees: the equivalent of the French *License ès lettres* (Bachelor's Degree) and the *Doctorat ès lettres* (Doctor of Arts) of European universities. The former would be granted based on the student's achievement in chosen subjects. The bachelor's

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littératures de l'Italie et de l'Allemagne ont pris pied dans le pays." DWQ/Abdin/0069-004481/Gaston Maspero/ Note sur l'Etablissement d'une Faculté des Lettres/ February 26, 1910.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

degree exam would “allow the University Council to determine if the candidate had acquired the knowledge necessary or simply useful for the exercise of what is referred to as ‘liberal careers.’” The doctoral exam, however, would be “purely scientific” allowing students who wanted to dedicate their studies to aspects of literature or history to demonstrate their mastery of the field.

Maspero also predicted a dilemma that would trouble the national university for years and which became a main reason for turning it over to the ministry of public Instruction in 1925. Both degrees offered by the faculty of arts, warned Maspero, would have no official value unless the government recognized them and gave their holders access to public and governmental careers. He suggested that the university should invite the government to judge for itself the abilities and competencies of the university graduates.<sup>71</sup> He therefore proposed the creation of an examination committee half of which would be appointed by the government, while the other half would be academics from the university.<sup>72</sup>

### **From Azhar to University**

The new faculty of arts quickly made its impact felt, especially on its new and curious students. The university recruited students mostly from al-Azhar, Dār al-‘Ulūm and the School of Judges. Students who transferred from al-Azhar, like Taha Hussein, Aḥmad Amīn (1886-1954) and ‘Abd al-Wahāb Azzām (1895-1959) had no problem absorbing the new sciences. These Azharites were even praised by the university administration as the most “hardworking and engaged students.”<sup>73</sup> Many of these early students took up academic careers later, and became leading intellectuals in the country, just as the founders of the university had hoped. Like

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<sup>71</sup> “Je pense que le seul moyen d’obtenir cette faveur serait de fournir à l’Etat le moyen de contrôler par lui-même, les aptitudes et la science réelle des jeunes gens élevés dans nos cours.” Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004529/ Correspondences of Ahmed Fouad/ “Cours de l’année prochaine 1910-1911,” July 30, 1910.

these founders, the students were conscious of the novelty of the humanist education to which the new university dedicated itself and were impressed by the different learning experience. Not only were the subjects new and the teaching methods unfamiliar, but also foreign Orientalists were teaching them about Arab and Islamic history, although not without friction.<sup>74</sup>

Taha Hussein, Aḥmad Amīn and others had been frustrated with their learning experience at al-Azhar and were eager to try something different at the new university. Hussein compared both his experiences at al-Azhar then at the secular university in his autobiography, *The Days*. Initially, he was excited about leaving his village to go to Cairo and start his studies at the prestigious mosque. Referring to himself in the third person, he wrote: “It was [at al-Azhar] that he found rest and security. The fresh breeze that blew across the court of al-Azhar at the hour of morning prayer met him with a welcome and inspired him with a sense of security and hope.”<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, excitement quickly gave way to disappointment. Hussein was very displeased with the teaching method at al-Azhar. Studying any text at the time implied a superstructure of texts and interpretations. The sheikh would explain the main text (matn) in great detail with a strong focus on linguistic and rhetorical analyses, which Hussein believed distracted students from the main ideas. When done with the main text, the sheikh would move on to the commentary on the text (sharḥ), then the glosses (ḥashīyah) and finally the super commentary (taqrīr), with an underlying assumption that students had to memorize and comment on all these texts. Like

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<sup>74</sup> Reid mentions two such cases. The first was after Guidi’s comparison of the Syriac accounts of the story of the “People of the Cave” with the version in the Qur’an, after which Azharite students as well as those from Dār al-‘Ulūm protested. The second case was Santillana’s lectures about the Greek influence on Islamic theology, which also solicited a strong reaction from the students. See Reid, *Cairo University*, 58. Reid bases this on Ismā‘īl Ḥusayn’s account in *Majallat al-Tarbīyah al-Ḥadīthah* 10 (April 1937).

<sup>75</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 2, trans. Hilary Wayment (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 2001), 114.



Muḥammad ‘Abduh who had called without success for bypassing this superstructure of texts, Taha Hussein wanted to go back to the primary sources.

The boy sat beside the pillar, toying with the chat and listening to the sheikh on tradition. He understood him perfectly, and found nothing to criticize in his lesson except the cascade of names which he poured forth on his listeners in giving the source and authorities for each tradition. It was always ‘so-and-so tells us’ or ‘according to so-and-so.’ The boy could not see the point of these endless chains of names, or this tedious tracing of sources. He longed for the sheikh to have done with all this and come down to the tradition itself.<sup>76</sup>

In the midst of his frustration, Taha Hussein applied to study at the new university and was worried he would not get accepted because of his blindness.<sup>77</sup> While al-Azhar had always admitted blind students (where there was even a special riwāq or alley for the blind) the rules at the new institution were not clear. He was eventually admitted, but he expressed his surprise that students had to pay fees to buy an education. Students did not pay tuition fees at al-Azhar, and it was even customary to hand out free bread to poor students.<sup>78</sup> With regards to his blindness, the new system was not as flexible as al-Azhar. For example, to better regulate access to lectures, which had become popular and crowded, the university administration decided to only let in students with registration cards. As a result, Hussein was allowed in, but not the man who normally helped him to his seat and then waited for him outside the classroom to take him back home when the lecture was over. In *The Days*, Hussein remarked that had it not been for the help of his classmates, this small incident would have been the end of his studies.<sup>79</sup>

These initial frustrations aside, Taha Hussein was ecstatic with his new learning experience at the secular university. He described it as a constant celebration, a “knowledge

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<sup>76</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 2, 118.

<sup>77</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 3, trans. Kenneth Cragg (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 2001), 247.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 275-6.

feast.” While he and other students found their European professors’ Arabic accent peculiar, they were impressed with their teachers’ command of the language and their knowledge of the subject matter. His European and Egyptian professors dealt with the subject at hand directly, without referring to commentaries, super commentaries or glosses.

It impressed the newcomer, too, that the professor did not say when the study began: ‘The author – God have mercy on him – said...’ He broached the subject by speaking for himself, not reading from a book. What he said was clear and needed no explanation, being straightforward and lucid, and free of qanqalah [*sic*], or citation and counter-citation, obviating mere contention. How altogether strange and new it all was, exciting my mind and revolutionizing my whole way of thinking.<sup>80</sup>

And again:

There were Egyptian professors too, who added to [the university] appeal and its fascination enormously. Imprinted on my memory are recollections of a group of such men, who exercised a profound and long-standing influence on my career. They gave me a new awareness of life, a new zest for it, and a new awareness of the old and the new together. They turned my outlook round towards the future, to days ahead. They strengthened and established my Arab, Egyptian personality, in the context of all the wide learning brought to me by the orientalist which could easily have engrossed me totally in European values. But these Egyptian teachers enabled me to cling to a strong element of authentic eastern culture, and to hold together congenially a balanced harmony in the learning of both east and west.<sup>81</sup>

He also expressed his fascination with his new courses and showed off his new knowledge on ancient Egyptian history, for example, in front of his cousin studying at Dār al-‘Ulūm. Such a course had never been taught in Egypt before and he was proud to be at the new place that gave

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 248. Cragg uses qanqala, but the Arabic is “fanqala,” which Abdel Rashid Mahmoudi describes as a dialectical skill, from the Arabic “fanaqūlu” meaning: then we would say. Mahmoudi goes on to say that fanqala “stands for the Azhari form of dialectic involving objection and counter-objection. ‘If you say so and so, then would say such and such’.” Abdelrashid Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain’s Education: From the Azhar to the Sorbonne* (Richmond, Surrey [England]: Curzon, 1998), 38.

<sup>81</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 3, 282. In 1913, Taha came first in class, with a “30/30” in History of Arabic Literature, Arabic Literature, Arabic Philosophy, History of Philosophy Schools, and History of the Islamic Nations. In Geography and Ethnography, he got 28/30 but it was still the highest grade in his class. Cairo University Archives/B15/F452/Exam Results/April 1913 as quoted in Reid, *Cairo University*, 60-1.

him access to topics students in other institutions like al-Azhar had not heard about. He found the whole approach stimulating and refreshing.<sup>82</sup>

Years later, in 1958, Taha Hussein gave a eulogy for his old teacher, the famous Orientalist Enno Littman at the Arabic Language Academy. Littman had been member of the Arabic Language Academy since its creation in 1932. In this eulogy, Hussein remembered Littman's classes and how he managed to win his students' admiration and full attention. Hussein credited Littman with having introduced the study of Semitic languages to Egypt, which the students then saw as a major innovation in the field of Arabic literary studies.

It was unprecedented in the entire history of the Arabic language, since scientific study started in the late first hijri century until Littman arrived in Cairo to teach at the old Egyptian University, that an Arabist studied the old Semitic languages and compared between those languages and the Arabic language.<sup>83</sup>

Hussein remembered how Littman first taught the basics of some of these Semitic languages, like Hebrew, Aramaic and Abyssinian, so students could understand the comparisons he was going to make. Students responded favorably, Hussein went on, so much so that in Littman's farewell reception, some of his students composed a farewell poem entirely in Syriac and read it out to him. Through linguistic comparisons that Littman made between Arabic and various Semitic languages, Hussein said that students could finally understand many of the "secrets of the Arabic language." As an example, he said that during his studies at al-Azhar he had learnt that the letter *alif* in the past tense "qāla," as in many other verbs, changed to the letter *wāw* in the present tense "yaqūlu" (*alif munqalibah 'ala al-wāw*). He said he had never understood why this was the case until Littman taught them about the Abyssinian language, and how "qāla" in that language is pronounced "qwl," with a *wāw*. Only then could Hussein connect what he had

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<sup>82</sup> Reid, *Cairo University*, 58-9.

<sup>83</sup> Taha Hussein, "Al-Marḥūm al-ustādh innū litman" [The Late Professor Enno Littman], *Majallat Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabīyah* 14 (1962): 335-6. The eulogy was given on October 9, 1958.

learnt at al-Azhar with what Littman had just explained to them, solving the riddle of why the *alif* changed to a *wāw*. Similarly, many of the references in Syriac, which Hussein's sheikhs at al-Azhar had casually made without explaining what they meant, only made sense to him after Littman's classes. These classes were even more interesting in Hussein's view, because they were interactive. Littman would say a word from one of the Semitic languages and then ask the students to suggest the closest Arabic word to it. Hussein said he was one of the fastest students to make these linguistic connections.<sup>84</sup> In Littman's classes, Hussein felt he was learning something new and he enjoyed the teaching method.

The intellectuals and future professors at the university 'Abd al-Wahāb 'Azzām and Aḥmad Amīn, had very similar reactions. When Thomas Arnold lectured at the university, Azzām praised him for his willingness to admit to not having the answers to some of the students' questions, and for asking for their feedback on his lectures.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Amīn remembered his Azharite sheikh and expressed his dislike of the Azharite method of teaching.

[The sheikh] read the text, then the commentary, and I understood them. But then he soared, offering comments on and objections to the wording and answers to the objections, of which I understood nothing.<sup>86</sup>

The way the subject matter was approached and periodized at the secular university, however, was new and exciting for Amīn. He remarked how the idea of organizing Arabic literature into periods, examining these periods and the lives of the authors was all new, and had been unknown in Egypt before the Arabic literature courses started at the university.<sup>87</sup> Donald Reid quotes Amīn on his appreciation of the education offered at the university and how Amīn understood

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 336-7.

<sup>85</sup> 'Abd al-Wahāb Azzām, *Ṣaḥīfat al-Jāmi'ah al-Miṣrīyah* 2 (1931): 83-4. Cited in Reid, *Cairo University*, 60.

<sup>86</sup> Aḥmad Amīn, *My Life: The Autobiography of an Egyptian Scholar, Writer, and Cultural Leader*, trans. Issa Boulatta (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 45 and 52; cf. (by Reid) Aḥmad Amīn, *Ḥayātī* [My Life] (Cairo, 1961), 65 and 77. Quoted from Reid, *Cairo University*, 58-9.

<sup>87</sup> Amīn, *Ḥayātī*, 101. Cited in Reid, *Cairo University*, 59.

from his experience there that the mission of a university was to engage critically with existing knowledge and produce new one.

I saw [at the university] a new kind of education, which I had not known: thoroughness in research, depth in study, patience in referring to various sources, comparisons between what the Arabs and the Europeans said, and quite serious deductions from all that.

The difference between the university and the school lay in research... The school teaches the latest achievements in learning, while the university tries to discover the unknown, criticizes the achievements in learning, introduces arguments, replaces the old by the new, destroys one viewpoint and builds up another... This was what I understood in the first year I taught [or studied?] at the university... from foreign professors who had undertaken serious new researches in the individual fields; I understood from my association with some Orientalists at the university as I came to know what they were doing, and I understood from a few Egyptian professors who had adopted their plans and used their methods.<sup>88</sup>

Despite Hussein's critique of the teaching method at al-Azhar, it was there that he came under the influence of Sheikh Muḥammad 'Abduh and where he was introduced to Arabic literature and literary methods by his Sheikh 'Alī al-Marṣafī. In his work on Taha Hussein's education, Abd al-Rashid Mahmoudi has rightly warned against dismissing the training Taha Hussein received at al-Azhar. Mahmoudi argues that despite all the commentaries, super commentaries and glosses that frustrated Taha Hussein, it was through this rigorous training that he could discover the "primary sources of Arab creativity."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Amīn, *My Life*, 73, 149-50; cf. *Ḥayātī*, 109, 223-4. Quoted from Reid, *Cairo University*, 60.

<sup>89</sup> Abdelrashid Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain's Education: From the Azhar to the Sorbonne* (Richmond, Surrey [England]: Curzon, 1998), 18. Mahmoudi's full sentence is "It was precisely at the Azhar that Ṭāhā learnt to question the so-called "traditional" culture, and to discern beneath this layer of ossified tradition, the primary sources of Arab creativity." While Taha Hussein shared Muḥammad 'Abduh's wish to return to the primary sources, recent scholarship has shown that writers of such commentaries and supercommentaries were seriously engaging with the scholarship that came before them and were keeping the tradition alive through their own scholarly contributions in the form of commentaries and supercommentaries. I therefore disagree that it was an "ossified" tradition. See for example, Robert Wisnovsky's "The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Postclassical (ca. 1100-1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47, no. 1 (February 2004): 149-91. Wisnovsky explains that roughly half of the philosophical activity that happened during the post-classical Islamic intellectual history was in "some form of exegetical work," and disagrees with scholars who have dismissed this form of contribution as "evidence of decline or ossification."

Taha Hussein had started his studies at al-Azhar in 1902, only a few years before ‘Abduh resigned in 1905. Still, Pierre Cachia has shown that Hussein was deeply influenced by the famous reformer. Although Hussein only attended two of ‘Abduh’s lectures, he was introduced to ‘Abduh’s ideas in more detail through his readings and through Hussein’s Azharite brother and his brother’s friends who were close followers of ‘Abduh.<sup>90</sup> Writing years later for one of Egypt’s francophone periodicals, *Un Effort*, in 1934, Hussein talked about ‘Abduh, his teaching method and the strong impact his lectures had on his followers and his opponents alike. He described how students discussed ‘Abduh’s lecture repeatedly during the evening and the following day.<sup>91</sup>

[‘Abduh] used the most ancient and the most venerated of the classics as the basis of his teaching. The method was on the other hand quite new, representing a complete break with the Azharite scholastic tradition. He was deliberately and sometimes exaggeratedly negligent as regards everything connected with words, and extremely meticulous as regards everything connected with ideas. He took a close interest in anything which stimulated thought and reflection. He questioned his pupils and encouraged them to ask him questions, and then tried to make them answer, discussed their replies and in so doing opened up new horizons for them. He instilled in them an appreciation of reading and discussion, he made them love freedom of thought and taught them to express their opinions.<sup>92</sup>

Such a teaching method that gave pride of place to classical texts, and the professors who encouraged critical engagement with the tradition while developing ideas in dialog with their students, was what Taha Hussein experienced later at the secular university. For Taha Hussein, ‘Abduh legitimized this approach to learning and confirmed Hussein dislike for the Azharite traditional teaching method. “There is no doubt,” Taha Hussein went on in his French article, “that it was Sheikh Muḥammad ‘Abduh who gave Egypt its intellectual freedom.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre Cachia, *Taha Husayn: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance* (London: Luzac 1956), 50.

<sup>91</sup> Taha Hussein, “La grande figure du Cheikh Mohamed Abdo,” *Un Effort*, June 1934, 4. Translated by Abdelrashid Mahmoudi, and cited in Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain’s Education*, 28-9.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

It was also at al-Azhar that Taha Hussein came to study with Sheikh Sayyid ‘Alī al-Marṣafī (1862-1931), a figure whose intellectual influence Hussein continued to praise until the end of his life. Marṣafī was a close follower of ‘Abduh and taught Arabic literature, then considered an optional elective.<sup>94</sup> Based on Hussein’s account of his experience with Marṣafī in *The Days*, Mahmoudi devotes a chapter to Taha Hussein’s discovery of literature and literary methods in Marṣafī’s classes. Like ‘Abduh, Marṣafī chose to return to the early primary sources, especially the pre-Islamic *jāhilī* poetry, and used Abū Tammām’s *al-Ḥamāsah* among other classics as the main study texts. Marṣafī engaged directly with these early classics and criticized other Azharite sheikhs for their teaching methods and choice of textbooks.<sup>95</sup> Mahmoudi argues that Marṣafī not only encouraged students to participate in class discussions, but for Taha Hussein, Marṣafī also represented the free outspoken scholar. In Mahmoudi’s view, Taha Hussein made a connection between literature and freedom through the figure of Marṣafī, who showed Hussein that freedom for men of letters was a freedom based on “the possession of such moral and intellectual qualities as courage, breadth of culture, versatility and fluency.”<sup>96</sup> In his description of Marṣafī’s teaching method, Hussein leaves no doubt to the impact the sheikh had on him.

I know of nothing in the world which can exert so strong an influence for freedom, especially on the young, as literature, and above all literature as Sheikh Marṣafī taught it when he was explaining *al-Ḥamāsah* and later the *al-Kāmil* to his class. What then did this study consist in? Unfettered criticism of the poet, anthologist and commentator, not to mention the various philologists. Then the testing and exercise of taste by inquiry into the elements of beauty in literature: in prose and poetry, in general drift and detailed meaning, in rhyme and rhythm, and in the combination of individual words. Then experience of the up-to-date sensibility which was part of the atmosphere of his circle, and a constant sense of contrast between the gross taste and jaded wits of the Azhar and the delicacy and penetration of the ancients.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain’s Education*, 22-3 and 30-1

<sup>95</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 2, 115.

<sup>96</sup> Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain’s Education*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Days*, vol. 2, 217-8.

By reclaiming the freedom to critically engage with the canon, Marṣafī was following the example of the ancient *udabā'*, and his message resonated deeply with Taha Hussein marking his own intellectual trajectory.

Yet, as already discussed, 'Abduh's calls for the inclusion of a humanist education at al-Azhar were met with fierce opposition, leading to his resignation in 1905. Marṣafī was marginalized after the death of his mentor and his optional literature courses were not taken seriously. Learning at al-Azhar, as Timothy Mitchell has carefully shown, was organized around the practice of law, which can help us understand why Arabic literature was not seen as an important subject at the time. Even other subjects, such as Arabic grammar and morphology, were only studied as tools for studying the main subjects required for the study and practice of law.<sup>98</sup> The order of learning itself implicitly followed the logic of interpretation. Students knew they had to start by learning the Qur'an, then the ḥadīth, followed by studying commentaries and interpretations of the Qur'an, and then readings related to the ḥadīth such as biographies of the transmitters of ḥadīth. Only then could they move on to the principles of theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*) followed by legal interpretation (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Therefore, according to Mitchell, students did not even need an explicit syllabus.<sup>99</sup> So while al-Azhar seemed set in its proven ways and was resistant to the kind of education 'Abduh and Marṣafī were hoping to introduce, the secular university was built explicitly to provide such an education. For Taha Hussein, 'Abduh and Marṣafī were exceptional figures. Their ideas and teaching methods left their mark on him and on their other students. The authority and knowledge of the two important Azharite scholars

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<sup>98</sup> Mahmoudi, *Ṭāhā Ḥusain's Education*, 22-3.

<sup>99</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (London: University of California Press, 1991), 82-4. Mitchell concludes that this way of learning was "remarkably flexible and free of coercion... [It] was one of argumentation and dispute, not lecturing... Whatever their weaknesses, these methods made the teaching mosque of al-Azhar the oldest continuing center of scholarship and law in the world." Ibid.



legitimized and helped transition Hussein to the humanist education offered at the new university.

As he has amply shown in passages already quoted above from *The Days*, Hussein embarked on his new education at the university with excitement and enthusiasm. He went on to become the first student to receive a doctorate degree from the university in 1914. He then went on a scholarship to the Sorbonne for another doctorate after which he was hired as a professor in 1919 to teach classical Greek and Roman history. He was the first Egyptian to become dean of arts very briefly in 1928 and then in 1930 and again in 1936. For Taha Hussein's large reading public, he was more than a famous writer and intellectual: he was professor at the university. Tellingly, he was always referred to as Doctor Taha Hussein, and the university's "eldest son."<sup>100</sup> Although Taha Hussein was given the title of "Bey" in 1936 and "Pasha" in 1950, he was still referred to as Doctor Taha Hussein Bey or Doctor Taha Hussein Pasha. When these honorific titles were abolished after the regime change in 1952, he remained Doctor Taha Hussein.

### **From Private to State University**

In practice, however, the ambitious private initiative stumbled and the government took over. Although the contractual agreement between the private university and the ministry of public instruction was supposed to guarantee the university's independence, future conflicts – most notably Taha Hussein's case in 1932 in which he was forced to retire from the university when, as dean of arts, he refused the ministry's request to grant honorary doctorate degrees to

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<sup>100</sup> Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt, "Abū al-jāmi'ah Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid" [The Father of the University Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid], *al-Hilāl* (January 1951): 14-8 and Ḥasan al-Zayyāt also referred to Taha Hussein as the university's eldest son: "Al-ibn al-bikr li-l-jāmi'ah howa Ṭāhā Ḥusayn" [The eldest son of the university is Ṭāhā Ḥusayn]. Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, "Taḥīyah li-jāmi'at Fu'ād fī yūbīlahā al-fidḍy" [Salutation to Fouad University on its Silver Jubilee], *al-Risālah* (December 25, 1950).

supporters of the government – proved that this independence was not real.<sup>101</sup> Following his forced retirement, Taha Hussein himself wrote that “the university was somewhat independent, and now this independence has been erased. Education at the university was somewhat free, decided by faculty councils and the university council, but now everything is decided by the ministry of public instruction.” He also missed a time when academics refused to go to the undersecretary’s office at the ministry to discuss matters related to their university.<sup>102</sup> Appointing the minister of public instruction as the higher president of the university made it part of the ministry’s administration and rendered it vulnerable to ministerial politics. While initially it was up to the private university to interpret what it meant by “seeking knowledge for knowledge’s sake” and run its affairs as it saw fit, the takeover reinforced a model started by Muhammad Ali, in which the state had control over all Egyptian institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, while most historical accounts have focused on the financial difficulties the university had to deal with, the details of this struggle indicate that a major problem the university had to contend with was the marketability of its degrees. How was the university to recruit students interested in its mission of “seeking knowledge for knowledge’s sake” when students were not only unfamiliar with the humanist education the university was offering, but also its diplomas were not recognized by the state, making competition with the more practical higher colleges like medicine and engineering almost impossible?

The inability of the private university and its humanist education to take off as planned without government intervention must have shaped Taha Hussein’s outlook on the role the state had to play in supporting such a kind of education. Hussein witnessed this struggle first hand:

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<sup>101</sup> This incident will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>102</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-massā’: La‘ib” [The Evening Talk: Playing] *al-Kawkab*, May 22, 1933. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 351.

first as a student in Cairo (1908-1914), then as a doctoral student in France (1914-1918) – a mission from which he had to return briefly due to the severe financial crisis facing the university – then as a professor from 1919. More importantly, he was the first faculty member to join the University Council in 1922 at a crucial moment when the Council was debating the future of the entire project. This challenge must have confirmed his belief that a strong involvement of the state was necessary to take culture and the humanist education forward in any serious institutional way.

Reports from the Administrative Council of the private university reflect an anxiety over these concerns very early on. In the annual report for the academic year 1910-1911, for example, the faculty of arts was concerned that the number of university students had already declined considerably that year, and indicated that the reasons were both financial and intellectual. In this report, the faculty of arts admitted it was facing a challenge. It saw itself as the first institution of its kind in the Islamic world and that meant that its program of studies was new and demanded from students an intellectual effort that they were neither used to nor adequately prepared for. Secondary schooling, as came in the report, did not provide the necessary prerequisites for the courses the faculty was offering. In Egypt, for most, if not all, students, the report went on, the High School Certificate was the fastest means to securing an employment within the government or the private sector. Even though the government had agreed in principle to recognize the degrees offered by the university, still, the main worry was that the faculty of arts was offering a different kind of education. Even though the faculty thought highly of this humanist education, which “addresses the ideal needs of the mind (ne s’adresse et en tend principalement qu’à satisfaire des besoins idéals de l’esprit),” the faculty was aware that it would not be able to

compete with other higher colleges offering a more practical education, like medicine and engineering, with promising lucrative careers.<sup>103</sup>

The annual report for the following academic year (1911-1912) tried to remain positive with regards to where the university was headed in terms of improved organization, courses and hiring professors. Yet, funding was raised as an issue, and the report recommended contacting the university benefactors to remind them about the funds they had promised. The faculty of arts highlighted again the obvious decline in the number of applicants, mostly due to the wish of secondary school graduates to immediately start working with their High School Certificate, which was largely sufficient for that purpose. The only solution was for the ministry of public instruction to swiftly recognize the degrees offered by the faculty of arts.<sup>104</sup>

After the government agreed to grant the university an annual subsidy, the University Council seized the opportunity to thank the ministry and request again an official recognition of the university degrees. The letter explained that the university was ready with its qualified staff and organized faculties to offer studies far more superior to those offered by other schools already recognized by the ministry of public instruction. The council stressed that the university students acquired thorough knowledge at the university, which made them better qualified for filling government positions, and that priority should therefore be given to them over other graduates. In this note, the university admitted that a fairly large number of its students were not entirely dedicated “to [studying] science for the sake of science.”<sup>105</sup> Most of these students

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<sup>103</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Rapport présenté par le Conseil d'Administration de l'Université Egyptienne à l'Assemblée Générale du 25 Rabi Awwal (jeudi, 14 mars 1912)

<sup>104</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004479/ Report on the University in the academic year 1911-1912 to be presented to the General Assembly. That year the university had a total of 112 students (76 men and 36 women).

<sup>105</sup> “Nous ne nous dissimulons pas, en effet, qu'un assez grand nombre des étudiants de l'Université ne se consacrent pas uniquement à l'étude de la science pour la science et dans un but absolument désintéressé...”

expected that the knowledge they acquired at the university would help them secure future careers. A legal value, concluded the council in its letter, must be conferred upon the university degrees, otherwise students would lose interest in pursuing higher studies altogether, “to the great loss of the country.”<sup>106</sup>

It became clear to the university very early on that it had to consider the thorny question of practicality and how to “sell” its humanist education. Even *al-Hilāl* debated the kind of studies the university should devote itself to, whether natural or literary sciences.<sup>107</sup> After all, there were other higher colleges available to Egyptians, such as the schools of medicine and engineering, which had existed for decades. Moreover, the private French Law School, established in 1892, attracted aspiring politicians, dispensed prestigious degrees in law from the Sorbonne and targeted those who wanted to work in the Mixed Courts. Even government positions, as indicated above, required no more than the High School Certificate. The private university had to convince the public of the utility of its degrees and create a political will in favor of supporting its field of study. Yet, the ministry remained reluctant. In the session of Majlis al-Nuwwāb on April 19, 1924 the ministry of public instruction turned down another request by the university to officially recognize its degrees. The ministry announced that “[it] could not acknowledge the degrees offered by the university to its graduates in the desired way as long as the ministry was not involved in the supervision of the studies there.”<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, poor student enrolment encouraged voices skeptical about the utility of having such an institution all together. In a response draft to an article published in the pro-

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<sup>106</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Draft Letter from the Egyptian University Council to the minister of public instruction, January 1911.

<sup>107</sup> “Al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah wa-l-ta‘līm al-lāzim li-l-bilād” [The Egyptian University and the Required Education for the Country], *al-Hilāl* XVI, June 9, 1908, 516-20.

<sup>108</sup> Majlis Nuwwāb: Minutes of the Session of April 19, 1924, cited in Samiah Ibrāhīm, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-ahlīyah bayna al-nash‘ah wa-l-taṭawwur*, 140.

British *Egyptian Gazette*, the university had to defend itself. *The Gazette* had criticized the university and Fouad's autocratic management of the Administrative Council. The newspaper even wondered whether the entire project amounted to anything other than a "high school," especially with the dwindling number of students (The number of students had fallen from 201 in the academic year 1910-1911 to 103 in 1911-1912). The response draft cited *The Gazette's* conclusion in full

Whatever takes place the government will have to assume control. Private initiative is too weak, the sense of personal responsibility too underdeveloped, the social sense, if the term may be used, of Egyptians not sufficiently advanced to permit of individuals conducting an institution of this kind with success.

The university condemned the newspaper's call to put the university under government control and suggested there must be more constructive ways of encouraging such an important initiative, which it described as "the first enterprise in which Egypt has exhibited its enlightened patriotism." There was reason for continued optimism, as the university's response to *The Gazette* went on. It reminded the readers that the university was founded under the patronage of Khedive Abbas II and in response to a "patriotic impulse on the part of the whole Egyptian nation." Moreover, to reassure the public, the university explained that it received its money from waqfs and generous donations, in addition to an annual subsidy from the Egyptian government, which the university considered as proof the government was committed to the success of the project.<sup>109</sup> To reassure its benefactors, the response also included a detailed budget

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<sup>109</sup> "From its side, the government, to show its interest in the Egyptian University in Cairo, the first university on modern bases in the East (la première université à bases modernes en Orient), has inscribed in favor of the university in the annual state budget of 1911 a first annual subsidy of L.E. 2000." DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Université Egyptienne: Rapport de 1910-1911; présenté à Sir Eldon Gorst. It was at a university legislative council meeting on December 20, 1909 that Muḥammad 'Uluī (Eloui), member of the University Council, proposed that the council should ask the government for financial assistance: "given that it has opened its doors to all students, the university deserves to be helped." 'Uluī had already brought this to the government attention when discussing the previous budget, and the government had promised to look into it, but nothing had materialized yet. DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Subvention Gouvernementale/ Copie d'une

of the university refuting *The Gazette*'s claim that a large sum of money was lumped under "miscellaneous" in the annual budget report. The private university was fighting to show that its humanist education could survive, independently of the state. In what sounded like an appeal for support, the university insisted that for the project to succeed, it had to remain independent from the government.

The university must remain the independent national institution that its founders intended. It has not failed its task and it will continue to progress on the ways that are open to it... But its friends must understand that such a work cannot be improvised. They must remember that, even in the countries of the highest culture and unlimited resources a university does not come into existence all at once. Years and steady growth are necessary everywhere, and in Egypt the conditions are especially difficult.<sup>110</sup>

Yet, the decreasing number of students remained a chief concern and the university felt it had to justify itself, not just to *The Gazette* and the Egyptian public at large, but also to Eldon Gorst, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt from 1907 to 1911. In a copy of the University Administrative Council report (1910-1911) addressed to him, the university tried to justify the dwindling number of students saying the administration had decided it was time to become more selective with the admissions process and focus on developing its courses in Arabic.<sup>111</sup> The

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Lettre adressée en date du 21 décembre 1909 no. 64 par Son Altesse le Président du Conseil Législatif à Son Excellence le Président du Conseil des Ministres. This shows that from its inception, the university was on a very precarious ground, financially-speaking. In a letter dated February 20, 1910, the minister of public instruction, Sa'd Zaghlul, in response to the letter sent to him on February 5, 1910 requesting his opinion on the wish of the university legislative council to receive a government subsidy, responded very favorably. "J'ai l'honneur de vous informer que mon Département considère favorablement en principe l'idée d'accorder une subvention à la dite Université, et serait heureux de voir établir cette subvention sur des bases aussi larges que le permettront les ressources financières du Gouvernement." DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Subvention Gouvernementale/ Copie d'une Lettre du Ministère de l'Instruction, February 20, 1910.

<sup>110</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004481/ Notes on the University/1912/ The Egyptian University and The Egyptian Gazette. The response is neither signed nor dated, but the dossier is dated 1912, which would match the contents of the response and the details provided in it. The response to *The Egyptian Gazette* is written in English, but is clearly a translation from French.

<sup>111</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Université Egyptienne: Rapport de 1910-1911; présenté à Sir Eldon Gorst. The report indicated that the University would admit students with an Egyptian high school degree or its equivalent. It would also coordinate with the government to allow students from al-Azhar, Dār al-'Ulūm and the Judges' School to register at the new university.

number of students decreased, the report to Gorst went on, because the faculty of arts had decided to only admit the students who had the necessary academic prerequisites for its innovative program of studies.

If one was to take into consideration that by creating a superior literary and philosophical education, a subject matter that the all-practical Egyptian youth had little concern for so far, the university was taking upon itself to awaken and cultivate a new taste [for knowledge] in this youth, then one has to think that the number of the first students [to join] the faculty [of arts] remains satisfactory.<sup>112</sup>

Funding, too, remained a major challenge for the new private university. The historian ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Ibrāhīm al-Dusūqī al-Jumay‘ī argued that in retrospect the university could never have survived because of its poor financial situation. He explained that the university was forced to cut down on its expenditures due to the eruption of the First World War and cited as evidence the need in 1915 to shift campus from the old Gianaclis palace (now the old main campus of the American University in Cairo in Tahrir Square) to the smaller Muḥammad Ṣidqī palace on Falākī street in order to save on annual rent.<sup>113</sup> Because of the war, the ministry of waqfs reduced its support from L.E. 5000 to L.E. 2000, then to L.E. 1800 and finally to L.E. 700 in 1916. The ministry of public instruction, however, continued to pay its annual L.E. 2000. Due to the worsening economic situation in the country, only members of the University Council continued to pay their subscriptions and donations.<sup>114</sup> The University Council also had to decide

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<sup>112</sup>“Si l’on considère d’autre part qu’en créant des enseignements supérieures de littérature, et de philosophie, matière dont la jeunesse égyptienne, toute pratique, ne s’était guère préoccupée jusqu’ici, et que, l’Université entreprend d’éveiller et de cultiver en cette jeunesse un goût nouveau, on doit estimer que le nombre des premières étudiants de la Faculté demeure satisfaisant.” DWQ/Abdin/0069-004482/ Report of the Administration Council on the University/1912/ Université Egyptienne: Rapport de 1910-1911; présenté à Sir Eldon Gorst.

<sup>113</sup> From the report of the University Administration Council on the academic year 1914-5 to the General Assembly on June 17, 1915. Quoted in al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash’atuhā wā dawruhā fī al-mujtama’*, 37.

<sup>114</sup> From the report of the University Administration Council on the academic year 1916-7 to the General Assembly on October 15, 1917. Quoted in al-Jumay‘ī, *al-Jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash’atuhā wā dawruhā fī al-mujtama’*, 53. Reid cites the same numbers and ties the budget cut to the war as well. He adds, however, that it was a donation from Sultan Ḥusayn Kāmil that enabled the university to allow Taha Hussein



on the fate of the educational missions to Europe. Having to choose between stopping the courses at the university and recalling the students from Europe, the council opted for the latter. The council reasoned that stopping classes or shutting down university divisions would imply the end of the university itself.<sup>115</sup> Al-Jumay'ī adds that the private university had little success during its first years due to poor funding from the government and the diminishing donations from the nation's notables "wujahā' al-ummah" who turned away from supporting it. As a result, the professors of the university and the University Council discussed the worsening situation, and eventually decided that it would be better to hand the university over to the ministry of public instruction.<sup>116</sup>

Despite all these problems, the university had become a symbol for the national struggle. On the eve of the 1919 revolution, the University Council counted the following prestigious public figures: Sa'd Zaghlūl (vice-president and general secretary), Luṭfī al-Sayyid, 'Abd al-'Azīz Fahmī, Ḥusayn Rushdī (president and future prime minister) as well as four future prime ministers: Zaghlūl, 'Abd al-Khālīq Tharwat, Ismā'īl Ṣidqī, and Muḥammad Maḥmūd. Reid accurately concluded that "the council's distinguished membership reflected the importance of

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and other students of the academic missions to continue their studies in Europe. See Reid, *Cairo University*, 62-3, Budayr, *al-Amīr Aḥmad Fu'ād wa-nash'at al-jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah*, 200 and 273 and Taha Hussein, *The Days* vol. 3, 85-94.

<sup>115</sup> From the report of the University Administration Council on the academic year 1915-6 to the General Assembly on June 29, 1916. As quoted in al-Jumay'ī, *al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash'atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama'*, 53-4. In addition to the donation from Ḥusayn Kāmil, students were able to return to Europe after the ministry of waqfs raised the support to L.E. 2000. Furthermore, the university professors gave up a quarter of their salaries and some even taught without any remuneration. From the report of the University Administration Council on the academic year 1914-5 to the General Assembly on June 17, 1915. As quoted in al-Jumay'ī, *al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: nash'atuhā wa-dawruhā fī al-mujtama'*, 54-5.

<sup>116</sup> Al-Jumay'ī, *al-Jāmi'ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah: Nash'atuhā wā dawruhā fī al-mujtama'*, 58. The university no longer had the means to invite European professors to teach in Cairo and was forced to cut down on the educational missions in Europe. Cairo University Archives/ Folder Number 3 (A report from the professors of the faculty of arts raised to the University Administration Council). Quoted in Samiah Ibrāhīm, *al-Jāmi'ah al-ahlīyah bayna al-nash'ah wa-l-taṭawwur*, 138-9.

the struggling university as a national symbol.”<sup>117</sup> The solution was to preserve the symbol by rebranding it as a state university, which meant the end of its financial difficulties and the automatic recognition of its degrees. The old private university thus became the faculty of arts of the new university. In an explicatory memorandum on the proposed law for the creation of the new state university, the minister of public instruction clarified that

There existed in the country a university called the “Egyptian University,” created about fifteen years ago by subscriptions and donations from benefactors. As it has become an educational establishment not to be overlooked when studying the creation of a State University, the directors [of the private university] have agreed to transfer the existing university, with all its properties and equipment [to the state] in order to become the core of the faculty of arts of the new university, provided that the latter has an autonomous management as is the case with other universities.<sup>118</sup>

At the new university, the humanities would be taught next to the more practical sciences, medicine and law. Trying to remain faithful to the initial idea of the university as envisaged by its founders, all these faculties, the minister went on, “would focus on theoretical and philosophical studies.” He then reiterated the importance of the independence of the university

No university can grow and prosper if it does not have the freedom to organize its own educational system and if it is not independent of any outside management.<sup>119</sup>

Yet from that moment on, the university had the minister as its higher president, and over the years it would have to negotiate its independence vis-à-vis the ministry. As the university moved

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<sup>117</sup> Reid, *Cairo University*, 72.

<sup>118</sup> “Comme il existait dans le pays une Université dite « Université Egyptienne », fondée depuis une quinzaine d’année par des souscriptions et des dons offerts par des bienfaiteurs, et devenue un établissement scolaire qui ne devait pas être négligé au moment où la création d’une Université d’Etat était mise à l’étude ses administrateurs ont consenti à la céder au Gouvernement avec ses biens et son matériel pour former le noyau de la Faculté des Lettres dans la nouvelle Université pourvu que cette dernière ait une direction autonome à l’instar des autres universités.”

<sup>119</sup> “Aucune université ne saurait grandir et prospérer si elle ne possède pas la liberté d’organiser son propre système d’enseignement et si elle n’est pas indépendante de toute direction extérieure.” DWQ/Abdin/0069-004494/ The University and the Egyptian Government/ Note explicative sur le projet de décret-loi portant création de l’Université d’Etat, signed by the minister of public instruction, March 3, 1925. The minister stressed that the majority of members of the University council would be academics and not representatives from the ministry. The law creating the State University appeared in *al-Waqā’i’ al-Miṣrīyah* Year 52, Monday March 30, 1925, number 37.

to its new luxurious campus shown below in 1928, the total independence the university founders had hoped for their institution was something of the past.



## Conclusion

The private secular Egyptian University was created to provide a humanist education to Egyptians in Egypt, so they would not have to search for such an education abroad. The institution, celebrated by its founders as the first of its kind in the east, assigned itself the task of “reviving” the glorious classical Arab-Islamic *adab* by creating the modern Arab humanist scholar trained in modern research and teaching methods. The university founders believed that acquiring such training was essential to simultaneously engage with the classical tradition while bringing to the east the accomplishments of the western civilization. The private university was the first institution built explicitly for carrying out this mission, a mission that was already an integral part of the Nahdawi discourse. This private initiative then turned into the leading Egyptian state university and the model for other Egyptian and Arab state universities.

Taha Hussein, the first to be awarded a doctoral degree from the private university in 1914, became the prime example of the Arab humanist scholar the university founders had hoped for. With his solid religious training at al-Azhar combined with the secular training he received at the private university and then at the Sorbonne, he embarked on a lifelong engagement with classical *adab* – as a prolific writer, an academic at the faculty of arts, a member and then the president of the Arabic Language Academy. Moreover, “the university’s eldest son,” as he was repeatedly called, considered that the secular university was the mastermind for the changes he advocated for culture and education for Egyptians to achieve full independence and embark on a prosperous democratic life. He believed the secular university was the only institution capable of creating the nation’s intellectual leaders who could diagnose the country’s problems and offer adequate solutions. Yet, as the private university stumbled in its early years, it became clear that the humanist education the university was providing required a substantial and stable support from the state. How Taha Hussein sought to regulate that state role and ensure the stable operation of the university and other institutions of culture and education in Egypt’s new volatile multiparty system is the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### Democratizing Education: Taha Hussein, Institutions and Unstable Parliamentary Politics (1922-1952)

*Democracy wants people to get an education, which it believes is their right, and neither a gift nor a grant. Democracy considers that providing some stages of education to the people is a duty, ignoring which brings no good to the citizens. Democracy needs a long time, a huge effort, plenty of money and a stable comfortable peace necessary to build the required schools, prepare the teachers who need preparation, and build education on a solid basis that meets the standards put forward by all the experts of correct upbringing and the philosophers of pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>*

Taha Hussein

Taha Hussein believed the secular university was the only institution in Egypt capable of designing, implementing, and providing a primary and secondary education that was well suited for the needs of the nation. He argued that without such an education, no democracy or real independence could ever be achieved. Through its modern research and teaching methods the university would create the nation's intellectual leaders trained to critically engage with the past and face the challenges of the present. Using their skills and knowledge, these leaders, according to Taha Hussein, would articulate the problems facing the nation in precise terms and offer the right solutions. In this vision, free primary and secondary education provided what Taha Hussein described as the "soldiers," or the educated citizens who were aware of their rights and responsibilities and who were able to sustain and participate in a democratic life. For him, the battle for educational reform, long suppressed under the British occupation during which education was reduced to providing government offices with administrators, was a battle to be led by the secular university for the proper building of educational institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Taha Hussein, "Taba'āt al-ta'līm" [The Repercussions of Education], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 14, 1954. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyah min 1908-1967 (al-Ta'līm)* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's Heritage: Journal Articles from 1908 to 1967 (Education)], vol. 1 (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu'āṣir, 2010), 729. In my footnotes, I will refer to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* vol. 1 as TTH\_1.

The press was an important arena for this battle. Whether as member of government or as a critic of government policies, Taha Hussein exposed his ideas and responded to his own critics on the pages of widely read journals and periodicals. These debates raised serious questions about the role of the humanities, the kind of influence the state should have over culture and education, as well as why and how people should get an education. Examining such debates allows for fresh insights into the multiparty political system in parliamentary Egypt (1922-1952). By turning attention away from the triangular struggle of political power (the British, the palace and the political parties) and its failures (achieving a fuller independence and dealing with social injustice), these public debates show how Taha Hussein and others used the relatively free public sphere and the political parties as platforms to pitch their ideas on education, and persuade the public of the utility of their projects.

Taha Hussein's belief that educational reform led by the secular university required a substantial and steady support from the state posed a serious challenge for him. Egypt's post-independence (1922) multiparty political system was too volatile, and he repeatedly criticized the winning political party's customary reversal of the previous policies enacted by the defeated party. The rapid turnover of political power disrupted long-term policymaking, and parties were obsessed with short-term political gains. His solution for this problem was to propose committees and supreme councils run by technocrats. Transcending partisan politics and unrealistic election promises, these technocrats, Taha Hussein hoped, would be able to concentrate on drawing policies that targeted short and long-term goals, in addition to efficient coordination between the various institutions.

Despite Taha Hussein's many frustrations with the multiparty system, this chapter will show how it was an essential component of his vision for reform. His plan was to use the

democratic system in place, flawed as it was, to fix itself through education. While he called for a stronger state role in culture and education, his debates show how he implicitly expected this democratic system, new as it was in Egypt, to regulate that role. The checks and balances that he had in mind included an active and relatively-free press through which policymakers addressed and attempted to persuade the public, a commitment to transparency on the part of government officials, electoral campaigns that diagnosed and offered solutions to problems, a turnover of power among political parties, accountability, and more importantly, a democratically-elected parliament that represented the Egyptian people to whom all governments had to answer.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on archival material from the Egyptian National Archives (Dār Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah), Cairo University and Taha Hussein's private papers, in addition to his published articles between 1922 and 1960, this chapter shifts the focus from Taha Hussein the intellectual and university professor to Taha Hussein the civil servant actively negotiating and implementing his ideas for education and culture in Egypt.

### **Taha Hussein and the Supreme Council of the Universities**

In June 1950, the Egyptian Council of Ministers convened in the government headquarters in Bulkeley, Alexandria, as was customary during the summer months. During this meeting, the council approved a request from Dr. Taha Hussein, the minister of public instruction, to create the Supreme Council of the Universities (SCU) – al-Majlis al-a'la li-l-Jāmi'āt.<sup>3</sup> In his memorandum explaining the need for such a council, Taha Hussein called for a

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<sup>2</sup> Strong neoliberal voices in Egypt are now blaming free public education for having resulted in a serious deterioration of the standards of education in the country. These calls not only ignore the context in which the gratuity was decreed, but also the political and financial context in which this system had developed over the last 65 years. On February 24, 2016, the National Front for the Defense of Free Education (al-Jabhah al-Waṭanīyah li-l-Difā' 'an Majānīyat al-Ta'līm) was created to face what it described as a “fierce attack on the gratuity of education,” which it sees as a fundamental right for all citizens.

<sup>3</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057861/ Minutes of the Sessions of June 1950/ Minutes of the Session of June 25, 1950.



better coordination between the existing Egyptian universities: Fouad I (later Cairo University), Farouk I (later Alexandria University), Ibrahim Pasha (later Ain Shams University) and Muhammad Ali (later Assiut University).<sup>4</sup> With the recent increase in the number of universities (Farouk I was created in 1942, Muhammad Ali in 1949 and Ibrahim Pasha in 1950), Taha Hussein anticipated discrepancies to arise between them, as each university council was handling its own affairs separately. Such affairs included the organization of the programs of study, examinations, the evaluation and awarding of diplomas, the creation of various chairs as well as the appointment of faculty members. He argued that lack of coordination would result in a disparity in the value of the degrees the universities offered when these degrees were all issued by the same authority, which was the ministry of public instruction. Moreover, in terms of faculty members, Taha Hussein warned that if each university evaluated their credentials differently, then this could disrupt their seniority and promotions when they were transferred from one university to another. The Supreme Council of the Universities (SCU) would therefore be responsible for the overall standardization of all these policies and procedures.

Taha Hussein proposed that the SCU be composed of the minister of public instruction (as its president), the presidents of all universities, and the undersecretaries. Also, each dean would be invited to attend meetings related to his faculty. To maintain the existing power hierarchy – that is to say the minister as the higher president of all universities and the ultimate arbiter of policy – the SCU would only act as a consultation body mediating between each university council and the minister. Under the new law, each university council must seek the opinion of the SCU on all its decisions before these decisions could be submitted to the minister.

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<sup>4</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-056819/ Minutes of the Session of June 25, 1950/ “Memorandum for the Creation of a Supreme Council of the Egyptian Universities (A Memo on the Subject of the Project of Creating a Consultation Council for the Universities.”



The SCU could ask a university council to reconsider one or more of its decisions provided that there were justifications for such a request. The university council, however, was under no obligation to accept the SCU recommendations and could forward its decisions to the minister anyway. In such a case, however, the university council had to explain why the SCU recommendations were not taken into consideration.<sup>5</sup>

Less than a year later, however, Taha Hussein wrote an urgent memorandum to the Council of Ministers, addressed to Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, the Wafdist prime minister, in which he requested the annulment of the council's earlier decision in favor of creating the SCU. This was because the universities of Fouad I and Farouk I had informed Taha Hussein that they were against reporting to such a council. In his letter to the prime minister, Taha Hussein said that he decided to go with what he described as the rule of the majority and abolish the SCU.<sup>6</sup> In his own defense, Taha Hussein insisted that the Supreme Council of the Universities would not have posed any threat to the independence of the universities, "from near or far," as he said. He created the SCU, he argued, out of a basic interest, which was to coordinate between the existing universities that received their budget from the state. Furthermore, he said that technically, his proposal did not infringe on any of the laws regulating the work of these universities, as the State Council (Majlis al-Dawlah) had examined the text of his proposed law and did not report any legal infractions on existing laws. In this rare instance of Taha Hussein backing down, he asked

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Concerning faculty members, Taha Hussein wrote that the Supreme Council of the Universities should only deal with the appointment, promotion and transfer of full professors, as those, he argued, were the highest-ranking faculty members. The individual university councils would continue to handle matters related to all other professors according to their own regulations. In his memorandum, Taha Hussein gave an example of a precedent in which the organizational cadre of the judges was to be applied to the faculty members at both Fouad I and Farouk I Universities. A joint committee was created to coordinate between the two university councils, and both councils agreed to its recommendations. "The required coordination was thus accomplished," he wrote at the end of his memo.

<sup>6</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057066/ Minutes of the Pre-Session of June 3, 1951/ "Memorandum for the Annulment of the Supreme Council of the Universities."

the prime minister to personally expedite the annulment of the SCU by passing the motion around to all members of the Council instead of waiting for the next scheduled meeting. Clearly vexed, however, he said the SCU should be abolished so that “the universities can focus on their work and their students, and not worry about a debate that serves nobody.”<sup>7</sup>

The resistance to Taha Hussein’s SCU initiative did not only come from the universities. The press, too, got involved in the debate. Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt, a previous professor of law and twice minister of public instruction in the 1930s, tactfully expressed his disappointment with Taha Hussein’s decision.<sup>8</sup> In an article, which he wrote for *al-Hilāl*, he started by praising Taha Hussein, describing him as the “university’s eldest son” (ibn al-jāmi‘ah al-bikr), and that his “genius, open mindedness and imagination” had the most positive impact on the faculty of arts. Yet, Barakāt expressed his surprise that such an action that jeopardized the independence of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. After the regime change, law number 508 for the year 1954 stipulated the re-creation of the Supreme Council of the Universities. The first council session took place on October 2, 1954 after the purge of the universities (by which faculty considered a threat to the regime were fired). The president of Cairo University, Muḥammad Kamāl Mursī oversaw the first session. See the official web site of the Supreme Council of Universities: [http://www.scu.eun.eg/wps/portal/!ut/p/c1/hc\\_NDoIwDAfwZ-EJ1n1mV2acmy6A1gpczA6GLBEwxvj8YrgY11I7\\_LX5t6hFUw-FTr\\_DOPgb6hGrbgc6F6alaAAVcnBqmxvBOMtofmSTN8vuILJ9\\_uR9TUipASyhO6U1JyDF7LBQKcye5aTSZ-GIsxRoDEYYpd7IgNzzi4if\\_z\\_2RDzIz9ldU-ge69zUEG4ouTZI3X8P1hg!!/dl2/d1/L2dJQSEvUUt3QS9ZQnB3LzZfUjNROEhDNjMwMFVTNTBJQk5KUExJNDM0MDE/](http://www.scu.eun.eg/wps/portal/!ut/p/c1/hc_NDoIwDAfwZ-EJ1n1mV2acmy6A1gpczA6GLBEwxvj8YrgY11I7_LX5t6hFUw-FTr_DOPgb6hGrbgc6F6alaAAVcnBqmxvBOMtofmSTN8vuILJ9_uR9TUipASyhO6U1JyDF7LBQKcye5aTSZ-GIsxRoDEYYpd7IgNzzi4if_z_2RDzIz9ldU-ge69zUEG4ouTZI3X8P1hg!!/dl2/d1/L2dJQSEvUUt3QS9ZQnB3LzZfUjNROEhDNjMwMFVTNTBJQk5KUExJNDM0MDE/) [Last accessed: June 5, 2017]

In 1958, law number 184 stipulated that the president of the Supreme Council was to be the president of Cairo University, but in 1963 the minister of higher education (the ministry itself was created in 1961) was to automatically become the president of the Supreme Council of the Universities. In 1972, law number 49 was issued to reorganize the Egyptian universities. The law decided that all Egyptian universities had to comply with all decisions taken by the council. See Maḥmūd Munāwī, *Jāmi‘at al-qāhirah fī ‘īdihā al-mi’awī* [Cairo University on its Centennial Anniversary] (Giza: Al-Maktabah al-Akādīmīyah, 2007), 196-7.

<sup>8</sup> Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt, “Abū al-jāmi‘ah Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid” [The Father of the University Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid] *al-Hilāl* (January 1951): 14-8. Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt (1889-1972) was an Egyptian statesman, and minister of public instruction between January 1, 1930 to June 19, 1930 and from December 30, 1937 to April 26, 1938. He studied law in Egypt and France and was a professor of law before turning to politics. See *Mi’ā wa-sitūn ‘āman min al-ta’līm fī miṣr: Wuzarā’ al-ta’līm wa-abraz injāzātihim* (1837-1997) [One Hundred and Sixty Years of Education in Egypt: Ministers of Education and their Accomplishments (1837-1997)] (Cairo: Maṭbu‘āt Wizārat al-Tarbīyah wa-l-Ta’līm, 2000), 181-2. Ḥasan al-Zayyāt also referred to Taha Hussein as the university’s eldest son: “Al-ibn al-bikr li-l-jāmi‘ah howa Ṭāhā Ḥusayn” [The eldest son of the university is Ṭāhā Husayn]. Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, “Taḥīyah li-jāmi‘at Fu’ād fī yubīlihā al-fiḍḍy” [Salutation to Fouad University on its Silver Jubilee], *al-Risālah*, December 25, 1950.

universities could come from Taha Hussein who suffered greatly in 1932 under the hands of the ministry of public instruction, when it imposed its will and had him transferred despite objections from the university.

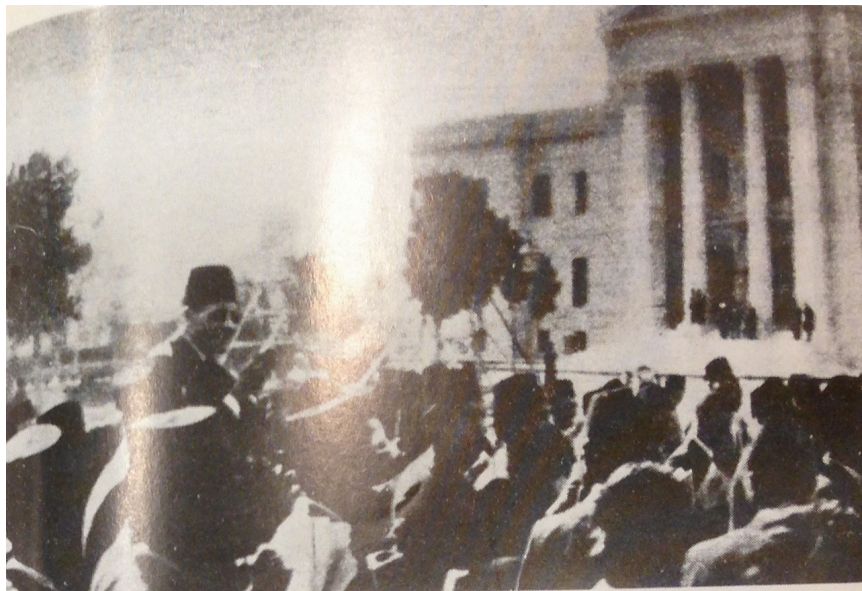
The infamous incident happened when the government, under the firm hand of Prime Minister Ismā'īl Ṣīdqī (famous for having replaced the 1923 constitution with an autocratic one in 1930 giving sweeping powers to the king), wanted the faculty of arts to confer honorary doctorates on some of its supporters. Taha Hussein, then dean of arts, refused and said it was up to the faculty council alone to decide on such matters. Although the government eventually got what it wanted through the faculty of law, the ceremony on February 27, 1932 did not go as planned. Sensing that most of the honorary degrees were being awarded to supporters of the current unpopular government and not to any members of the opposition parties (from the Wafd or the Liberal Constitutionalists), the students did not applaud. King Fouad and Ṣīdqī' were furious and blamed what happened on Taha Hussein.

Ḥilmī 'Issa, Ṣīdqī's minister of public instruction, retaliated in March 1932 by transferring Taha Hussein from the university to a junior position in the control of elementary education. Taha Hussein agreed to leave the deanship but refused to take on his new responsibilities. The government ignored the strong objections from the council of the faculty of arts, and paid no attention to the students' demonstrations demanding the reinstatement of their dean. Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, then president of the university, submitted his resignation protesting the ministry's decision, which he qualified as a serious attack on the independence of the university.<sup>9</sup> A month through this conflict, Taha Hussein was fired leaving him and his family in serious financial difficulties. It was not until the end of 1934 that Najīb al-Hilālī,

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<sup>9</sup> Luṭfī al-Sayyid submitted his resignation on March 9, which is now celebrated as the day of the independence of the Egyptian universities.

minister of public instruction in the cabinet of Prime Minister Muḥammad Nassīm, asked Taha Hussein to return to the university, and he is seen in the photography below carried by his students back to his office in December 1934.<sup>10</sup> The painful incident had turned him into a symbol of the autonomy of the university and its resistance to government autocracy.<sup>11</sup>



Barakāt, in what appeared to be an appeal to Taha Hussein (the minister) to remember the hardships Taha Hussein (the professor) had faced, called on Taha Hussein to implement more measures ensuring the independence of the universities. Each university, argued Barakāt, should have its own regulations, develop its own traditions and earn an academic standing among all other universities in Egypt and abroad, based on its own merit and academic rigor. The SCU,

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<sup>10</sup> The photograph is from Aḥmad ‘Ulabī, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Sīrat mukāfīh ‘anīd* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: The Biography of a Stubborn Combatant] (Beirut, Dār al-Farābī, 1990), 120, originally from *al-Muṣawwar*, November 20, 1964, 33.

<sup>11</sup> For the clash between Ṣidqī and Taha Hussein see Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 120-5, and Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, ed., “Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-istiqlāl al-jāmi’ah” [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the independence of the university], in *Mi’at ‘ām ‘ala al-jāmi’ah al-miṣrīyah* [The Egyptian University over One Hundred Years] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 109-24.

Barakāt warned, put the universities at the heart of the administration of the ministry of public instruction rendering their own system and administration vulnerable to political influence.

Nevertheless, Barakāt, in an attempt to explain Taha Hussein’s initiative, and possibly to give him an opportunity to reverse his decision without losing face, attributed Taha Hussein’s decision to his strong sense of social justice. Taha Hussein in Barakāt’s words was a “leader of social reform,” who always sensed people’s need for justice and felt their suffering. A “revolutionary man,” Barakāt continued, Taha Hussein wanted to impose his social reform and implement as many measures as possible to spread equality among people while he was in power as minister. Yet, Barakāt was worried that “[Taha Hussein] prefers reforms that were wider in scope rather than deep in impact.” Each approach, Barakāt concluded, had its merits, and only the days would tell which approach was better suited for the needs of the country.<sup>12</sup>

While Barakāt was surprised Taha Hussein was proposing the creation of a higher council that could jeopardize the autonomy of the universities instead of protecting it, this chapter will show how Hussein’s initiative was in line with his larger plan for educational reform in Egypt. Since the acquisition of the private university by the state in 1925, the Egyptian University, and all the other universities that were created later, received their budget from the state and reported to the minister of public instruction as their higher president. Expecting that sooner or later those state universities would have to coordinate and standardize their policies, and worried this coordination would be imposed from above by the ministry of public instruction, Hussein proposed the creation of the supreme council to handle this task. Recognizing the already-existing involvement of the state in running the universities, he hoped

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<sup>12</sup> Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt, “Abū al-jāmi‘ah Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 14-8.

such a council would ensure that academics remained in charge of the technical matters that concerned their universities.

### **Taha Hussein the Civil Servant**

By the time Taha Hussein proposed the creation of the Supreme Council of the Universities in 1950, he had already gained a wide experience working for the ministry of public instruction, on and off since 1939. He was directly exposed to politics, had to navigate a cumbersome and complex state bureaucracy, and was seriously involved in policymaking. Unlike many intellectuals of his generation, he was at the heart of the decision-making circles and his official duties, through his alliance with the popular Wafd party since the thirties, gave him the opportunity to negotiate and implement his ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Taha Hussein's career in government began when the Council of Ministers met on December 9, 1939 to discuss a memorandum in which the ministry of public instruction requested to appoint him as the first "controller of general culture" in Egypt. In a letter dated December 5, the ministry explained the need for such a new position. Besides overseeing education at its various stages, the ministry also saw itself as responsible for "the dissemination of culture in the country."<sup>14</sup> To better fulfill this mission, the ministry decided to create what it called a "general culture control," responsible for

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<sup>13</sup> The Wafd was Egypt's most popular and main nationalist political party until the end of the multiparty system after the military coup of 1952. On November 13, 1918, right after the end of the First World War, a delegation (wafd in Arabic) of notables led by Sa'd Zaghlul met the British High Commissioner in Cairo to demand an end to the British protectorate that had been declared in 1914 and to speak on behalf of the Egyptian nation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to make a case for Egypt's independence. Following Britain's unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence on February 28, 1922 and the beginning of parliamentary life, the Wafd became an official political party on April 26, 1924. After Zaghlul's death on August 23, 1927, the party was led by Mustafa al-Nahhas until the abolition of the political parties on January 16, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-054705/ The Session of December 9, 1939/ "Memorandum from the ministry of finance to the Council of Ministers regarding the appointment of Dr. Taha Hussein as supervisor of the General Culture Control."

Organizing the ministry's cultural efforts outside of the walls of schools; finding the means to encourage and supervise these [cultural] efforts; creating an intellectual cooperation within the country and abroad, studying matters related to scientific, literary and artistic conferences as well as supervising the [cultural] efforts of private (al-ḥurrah) associations concerned with the propagation of culture in the country.<sup>15</sup>

The ministry argued that the supervisor of this new control must possess high academic qualifications and long experience in the practice of cultural matters, and therefore decided to appoint: “Şāhib al-‘izzah Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, professor in the faculty of arts at the University of Fouad I, in charge of this control by means of delegation (intidāb) in addition to his work at the university.”<sup>16</sup> The reference to Taha Hussein's “long experience in cultural matters” not only referred to his career as a writer, but also as an influential critic in matters of education and culture. Moreover, Taha Hussein had just published his *Future of Culture in Egypt* a year earlier, a blueprint for the steps he believed Egypt should take to develop a strong cultural and educational system capable of protecting its newly acquired independence that followed the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty (1936) and the abolition of the Capitulations (1937). With the council's approval, Taha Hussein, then also dean of arts, effectively became Egypt's first minister of culture.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Before the creation of the General Culture Control, there was a supervisor of cultural affairs at the ministry of public instruction (murāqib al-shu'ūn al-thaqāfiyah), as indicated in the decision to promote Ḥasan Fāyiq Bey, the supervisor of cultural matters, to become the secretary general of the ministry. DWQ/0075-057758/ Minutes of the Sessions of November-December 1939/ Minutes of the Session of November 6, 1939. The creation of a division within the ministry of public instruction to take care of cultural affairs was proposed by the Prime Minister ‘Alī Māhir when discussing what was to be announced in presence of the King during the Throne Speech, which was to be delivered on November 18, 1939. He asked his minister of public instruction to address several issues “of the utmost importance” including the creation of a “Supreme Council of Education” to assist the minister with matters of general culture. (A Throne Speech was given at the beginning of the parliamentary cycle in the presence of the King and during which the various ministers explained their plans and projects for the year.) DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057757/ The Minutes of the Sessions of September-October 1939/ The Minutes of the Session of October 29, 1939.

<sup>17</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057763/ Minutes of the Sessions of September-December 1940/ Minutes of the Session of November 25, 1940. A year later, Hussein was also appointed as member of the consulting committee for the fine arts (al-lajnah al-istishārīyah li-l-funūn al-jamīlah) for three renewable years.



Taha Hussein continued to lead the control of general culture until May 1942 when the ministry of public instruction promoted him to become the technical advisor of the minister (al-mustashār al-fannī li-wazīr al-ma‘ārif).<sup>18</sup> He became responsible for all matters falling within the jurisdiction of the control of general culture, the control of fine arts as well as higher education. Furthermore, he had to give his opinion on all suggestions and technical projects related to educational plans, curricula, school systems, daily routines, textbooks, and the educational missions abroad.<sup>19</sup>

Although Taha Hussein never became member of the popular Wafd party, nor of any other political party for that matter, he enjoyed the regular support of the Wafd party leader, Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās. Naḥḥās endorsed Hussein’s calls for free education and Hussein was happy to work with the Wafd as he needed a political platform from which he could officially promote his ideas and implement them. Together with Najīb al-Hilālī, the Wafdist minister of public instruction, Taha Hussein made primary education free in 1944. Then when the Wafd got re-elected to government in 1950, Naḥḥās, shown in the photograph below holding Taha Hussein’s arm, asked Hussein to become his minister of public instruction.<sup>20</sup> Taha Hussein agreed but made his acceptance of the position conditional that his first decision would be making secondary and technical education free.<sup>21</sup> Important as free education was for Taha Hussein, however, his larger

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<sup>18</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057771/ Minutes of the Sessions of May-July 1942/ The Sessions of May 12, 14 and 16, 1942. The French title is “conseiller technique du ministre de l’instruction publique.”

<sup>19</sup> The responsibilities of this position were detailed in a letter signed by Najīb al-Hilālī, the minister of public instruction. Cairo University/Archives of the faculty of arts/Taha Hussein’s File/ “The ministry of public instruction ministerial decree number 5590,” May 26, 1942.

<sup>20</sup> The photograph is from Kamāl al-Mallākh, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Qāhir al-ḡalām* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn the Conqueror of Darkness] (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1973), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Taha Hussein was a vocal supporter of his friend, Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās. Hussein supported Naḥḥās when he signed the 1936 Egyptian-Anglo Treaty and when he abrogated the Treaty in 1951 after the negotiations with the British had come to a stalemate. When the Wafd got reelected in 1950, Taha Hussein declined at first the position of minister of public instruction fearing the reaction of other Wafdists since he was not member of the party. Naḥḥās refused Taha Hussein’s resignation and said this was a question of nation and not party: “Taha avait offert sa démission à Nahas qui la refusa, alléguant – et le lui écrivant – que ce n’était pas une question de



project for educational reform, as I will show below, depended on the secular university, and in particular its faculty of arts.



### **The Faculty of Arts: Here to Stay**

As explained in the previous chapter, the early years of the private university (1908-1925) saw the formulation of the mission statement of the faculty of arts, its long-term goals and overall organization, as well as recruiting new students, hiring professors, sending missions to Europe and even the creation of new textbooks. If it was relatively easy to find textbooks for English and French literature, for example, the university needed similar textbooks suitable for teaching Arabic literature, and such books did not exist. During the academic year 1909-1910, the university thus announced in the local newspapers that it was organizing a “textbook writing competition,” inviting men of literature to write a textbook specifically on Arabic Literature covering its main topics in some detail. Competitors had two years to submit their manuscripts, and the winning author was to receive a prize of L.E. 200. The university was to publish the

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parti, mais de Patrie.” Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec toi: De la France à l’Egypte: Une extraordinaire amour. Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2011), 213.

winning manuscript and give the author 200 copies. No doubt due to its novelty, the university expected complications, and announced that “if nobody wins the competition, it starts again for another period of two years. The monetary value of the prize stays the same, until the book has been created in the desired style.”<sup>22</sup>

To make its textbooks and lectures accessible, the new university set an important objective. It needed to get the public acquainted with its mission and make a name for itself. It organized public lectures touching on various topics, some of which were open to women.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it paid special attention to publishing the coursework of its professors and making these works accessible in public bookshops. In 1929 Robert Blum, one of Egypt’s francophone journalists, attributed the rising number of lectures, literary and artistic clubs in the capital to the university, which in his view, shifted the cultural weight in Egypt from Alexandria to Cairo.<sup>24</sup> Deans, professors and students animated and were regularly invited to the important cultural events taking place in Cairo, including those organized by the elitist francophone literary and artistic circles. The photograph below shows one such event organized by two literary groups,

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<sup>22</sup> “Second Annual Report 1909-10,” republished in *al-Jāmi‘ah al-ahlīyah (1908-1925): ṣafahāt min dhākirat al-ṣahāfah* [The National University (1908-1925): Pages from the Old Press] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2010), 103.

<sup>23</sup> In the academic year 1911-2, the university administration was glad to have increased the number of lectures offered to women in Arabic, “whose topics were chosen to suit the situation of Egyptian women, hoping they would get the benefit [they need to] bring them success in life and make a good living, as mothers are the first schools and the most capable of improving ethics and inculcating virtues in the soul. (taqwīm al-akhlāq wa-ghars al-faḍā’il fī al-nufūs).” Lectures in French for women discussed morality and raising children, while lectures in Arabic focused on ancient Egyptian history, the history of Islam in Egypt, the French wars and famous women in all these historical periods, e.g. the history of Egyptian queens. There were also lectures on home economics. DWQ/Abdin/0069-004479/ “Report on the University in the academic year 1911-1912 to be presented to the General Assembly.” These lectures were stopped in 1912-3, however. The reason given in the annual report was that these courses would stop “until we have been successful in putting a system for the campaign that we follow [in the Women’s Section] so it is suitable for the needs of Egyptian Women.” “Fifth Annual Report 1912-3,” republished in *al-Jāmi‘ah al-ahlīyah (1908-1925)*, 171. Historian Laṭīfah Sālim has argued, however, that the section was closed due to a male opposition to offering such a kind of education to women. See Laṭīfah Sālim, “al-Mar’ah fī rīḥāb al-jāmi‘ah” [The Woman at the University], in *Mi‘at ‘ām ‘ala al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah*, ed. Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2011), 44. For more on the “Women’s Section,” also see Donald Reid, *Cairo University*, 51-6.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Blum, “La Mode des conférences,” *Images*, December 12, 1931, 5.

the Amis de la culture française en Egypte and the Essayistes, to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Goethe.<sup>25</sup> Taha Hussein can be seen sitting next to his wife in the second row wearing his familiar dark glasses. The university had quickly become the core of the country's modern intellectual elite.



Interestingly, for people at the time, the university came to mean the faculty of arts. As dean of arts in 1932, Taha Hussein gave an interview to *al-Muṣawwar* in which he explained that when the old Egyptian University was created, there was only the faculty of arts and people retained that connection. Such an association, he went on, continued in their minds due to the faculty's long tradition of public lectures, accepting auditors, and the active involvement of its professors in the cultural life of the country with their books and articles.<sup>26</sup> For many people, he was proud to say, the university was the faculty of arts.

<sup>25</sup> The photograph was published in the weekly francophone magazine *Images* on April 16, 1932. The gathering itself took place at the Continental-Savoy hotel in downtown Cairo on April 7, 1932.

<sup>26</sup> During the academic year 1911-2, for example, the university published the coursework of faculty members in Arabic including, *The History of Literature or the Life of the Arabic Language*, by Ḥifnī Nāṣif in two volumes, *Physics* by Ismā'īl Ḥasānayn in two volumes, *History of Astronomy in the Arab Lands* by Nellino in three volumes, *History of the Islamic Nations* by Muḥammad al-Khuḍarī in four volumes, *Arabic Philosophy and Morality* by Ṣultān Muḥammad in two volumes, *Urban Planning* (al-Bayān fī takhtīṭ al-buldān) by Ismā'īl Ra'fat; in English: *Shakespeare and his Age*, by Ch. Sisson; in French: *Cours d'économie politique*, by

Taha Hussein was also vocal about the role the faculty of arts was playing in the country, and argued that only the faculty was capable of leading Egypt on the path towards its proper awakening (Nahda) to attain the modern “civilization” it was seeking. In the interview, he expressed his disappointment with those who did not take the faculty and its mission seriously. Although its impact on Egyptians had been huge, he argued that its message remained largely misunderstood. People still did not accurately understand what the faculty of arts was about, he said. On one hand, he went on, some questioned the utility of the faculty in the first place. These people argued that compared to other faculties like medicine and science, the faculty of arts was a luxury, concerning itself with matters that “people only need in their free time.” Such a critique, he lamented, could even be heard in the corridors of the ministry of public instruction and the ministry of finance. Critics from both ministries, he said were “always ready to cut the wings of the faculty of arts and belittle it.”<sup>27</sup> On another hand, he explained, some people had too many expectations and were disappointed that so far, the faculty of arts had not, in Hussein’s words, “turned the Egyptian life upside down and created miracles.” These critics, he argued, would never expect such miracles from the faculties of medicine, science or law, but when it came to the faculty of arts everybody was an expert.<sup>28</sup> People, Taha Hussein continued, needed to understand that the faculty of arts was a faculty just like any other faculty in terms of rigor and method: “What is taught at the faculty of arts is not a common venture accessible to everyone. It is a science, like any other science, which has its proper methodology and doctrine.” Such

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German Martin in four volumes, *Le théâtre en France au XIX siècle* by M. A. Pauphilet in four volumes, and *La femme aux différentes époques de l'histoire* in four volumes and *Psychologie et morale féminines* by A. Couvreur in four volumes. These publications were made available not only at the university but also in public bookshops, like al-Ma‘ārif and Hilāl Bookshops on Faggalah street. The price of these publications ranged between 12 and 40 piasters per publication. DWQ/Abdin/0069-004479/ “Report on the University in the academic year 1911-1912 to be presented to the General Assembly.”

<sup>27</sup> Taha Hussein, “Kullīyat al-ādāb” [The Faculty of Arts], *al-Muṣawwar*, March 4, 1932. Republished in TTH\_1, 314.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

methods and approaches required proper training, Taha Hussein insisted: “If you were a poet or a writer, this would not make you a professor of literature, just like understanding a history book would not be enough to make you a historian. Even if you were a historian, that would still not be enough to make you a professor of history. Being a philosopher does not make you a professor of philosophy.”<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps Egypt’s historian Shafīq Ghurbāl (1894-1961) was a good example of the professional academic Taha Hussein had in mind: one who had the right credentials and the proper training. Graduating from the Higher Teacher’s College in 1915, Ghurbāl went on a scholarship to England for his bachelor’s degree, and then worked under the supervision of Arnold Toynbee for his master’s degree. He returned to Egypt and started teaching at the university in 1928, becoming the first Egyptian professor of modern history, and then dean of arts. In 1945, he founded the Royal Historical Society. The historian Anthony Gorman describes Ghurbāl as “the key figure in putting modern Egyptian history on a firm academic footing.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in his book on the history of Egyptian historiography, Yoav Di-Capua shows how Ghurbāl and his students were the first Egyptian researchers to seriously explore and engage with the Egyptian archives. Cooperation with archivists, careful scrutiny of primary sources, and extensive footnoting was a mark of their professionalism. Their rigorous methods distinguished them from other historians who wrote history but did not mention their sources or did not document how they came to their findings.<sup>31</sup> Despite his fame, Egypt’s nationalist historian ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Rāfi‘ī (1889-1966) lacked such new academic credentials and in Ghurbāl’s view,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth-Century Egypt: Contesting the Nation* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 196-9.



al-Rāfi‘ī relied too much on secondary sources, especially periodicals. Due to their profound disagreement over how to write history, Ghurbāl and his students banned al-Rāfi‘ī from the Royal Historical Society.<sup>32</sup> “By the early 1940s,” Di-Capua says, “Ghurbāl and his disciples had vouchsafed for themselves the task of gatekeepers, ensuring that no despised amateur historian would ever inadvertently slip in.”<sup>33</sup> Ghurbāl used to ask his first-year history students to write an essay discussing whether history was an art or a science.<sup>34</sup> While the popular question still gets debated in classrooms today, for Ghurbāl the answer was obvious: history was a science committed to an objective truth, which was to be found in the archives. While Di-Capua and others rightly conclude that Ghurbāl’s role as the “doyen of Egyptian historiography” could not be denied, this role should not be dissociated from the institution of the faculty of arts as a whole. It was at the faculty of arts that history students were prepared, using the required methods and techniques, for their role as gatekeepers of the Arab past.

Taha Hussein did not exclude women from this rigorous intellectual training at the faculty of arts.<sup>35</sup> There is the famous case of his student and protégée, Suhayr al-Qalamāwī (1911-1997) who was denied admission into the faculty of science, by its British Dean. Taha Hussein, however, set a precedent by allowing Qalamāwī and several other female students into his faculty of arts in 1929.<sup>36</sup> In his decision, Hussein relied on the university law, which allowed

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>35</sup> Taha Hussein’s wife, Suzanne, was friends with Huda Sha‘rāwī, and was on the board of the Egyptian Feminist Union. See Bahija Sidki Rashid, et al., *The Egyptian Feminist Union*, (Cairo: 1963), cited in Donald Reid, *Cairo University*, 104. Taha Hussein himself lectured at the Egyptian Feminist Union headquarters, and was appointed to the Union’s formal advisory committee when it was created in 1929, along with others like Ḥusayn Haykal, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid and Muṣṭafa ‘Abd al-Rāziq. See Samia Sharawi Lanfranchi, *Casting off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi, Egypt’s First Feminist* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012), 202 and 175.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Suhayr al-Qalamāwī by Donald M. Reid, Cairo, February 16, 1983. Cited in Donald Reid, *Cairo University*, 105-6.

the admission of Egyptians into its various faculties. He interpreted this law to mean all Egyptians, whether male or female.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as Qalamāwī herself later explained, Taha Hussein had set certain rules for the admission of students into the Arabic language department, which he manipulated later to allow her and others into the faculty. He had stipulated that students needed the Egyptian high school certificate, or its “equivalent” to be admitted. Qalamāwī explains that when Hussein wrote down this condition, he had in mind the Azharite certificate because he wanted to allow Azharite students into the faculty without irritating al-Azhar. As this condition was intentionally vague, he used it to admit Qalamāwī as she did not have the Egyptian high school certificate, but had graduated from the American College for girls in Cairo.<sup>38</sup> Qalamāwī, shown in the photograph below when she was a student, was among the first women to graduate from the university in 1933 with a degree in Arabic literature. She then became a graduate assistant in 1937, and upon finishing her Ph.D. in 1941 she became assistant professor. A few years later, Qalamāwī became head of the Arabic Language Department.<sup>39</sup>



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<sup>37</sup> Lāṭīfah Sālīm, “al-Mar’ah fī rīḥāb al-jāmi‘ah”, 46.

<sup>38</sup> Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, preface to Sāmiḥ Kurayyim, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī ma ‘ārikihi al-adabīyah wa-l-fikrīyah* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in his Literary and Intellectual Battles] (Cairo: Majallat al-Idhā‘ah wa-l-Tilīfīzyūn), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Reid, *Cairo University*, 108-9. The photograph is from Kamāl al-Mallākh, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Qāhir al-zalām*, 184.

Upon her graduation in 1933, Taha Hussein wrote an article to congratulate her and the other first female graduates by name, like Fāṭimah Sālīm (who had majored in Greek and Roman literature), Zuhairah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Fāṭimah Fahmī (Philosophy and Sociology), and Na‘īmah al-Ayūbī (Law). He congratulated Egypt and the Egyptian woman for what he described as a “victory,” and congratulated the Egyptian University for having made this victory possible.<sup>40</sup>

What a major event this is for our Egyptian intellectual and social life. What a great victory this is for those who promote our awakening and those who work for the liberation of the Egyptian women and making her the equal of the Egyptian man in rights and duties. What a great hope this event inspires in Egyptians, so they can see themselves as the equals of other advanced nations, in which knowledge is not assigned to one group and not another, and in which culture is not monopolized by one gender (jins) and not another, and in which man does not reserve to himself the means for excellence and power.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, in 1937, Taha Hussein stood firmly in support of continued coeducation at the university. The crisis erupted when some students from the faculty of law wrote to Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid requesting the separation of male and female students, and forcing female students to wear uniforms. Azharite scholars led by Sheikh al-Azhar Muḥammad Muṣṭafa al-Marāghī supported these law students, and Azharite students threatened to march on the Egyptian University if these demands were not met. While Luṭfī al-Sayyid was cautious and said in his statement to the press that he was studying the memo, Taha Hussein, then dean of arts, came out in defense of coeducation at the university.<sup>42</sup> He said he did not know of any text in the Qur’an or in the sunnah of the Prophet that forbade boys and girls from attending classes together in the presence of a professor who taught them science, literature or art. In his view, the university

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<sup>40</sup> Taha Hussein, “Fawz” [Victory], *Kawkab al-Sharq*, June 26, 1933. Republished in TTH\_1, 380.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Male and female students attended the same classes together, but the front benches were reserved for female students.



therefore was not overstepping any boundaries or rules. He went on to say that nothing happened at the university to justify such a polemic when professors, families and university administrators were all pleased with the way classes and social life at the university was going. Life in Egypt had changed, he continued, and even if boys and girls were separated at the university, they would continue to see each other in other places and other venues. The implications of the calls to end coeducation, he said, would be to build universities dedicated for girls, an idea which he dismissed as impractical, not only for the time and the complicated logistics such a project would entail, but also due to lack of funds, which could be put to better use even if they were available.<sup>43</sup> In another article, he accused politicians of fuelling this debate to undermine the Wafd government, which was actively negotiating the end of the Capitulations and joining the League of Nations.<sup>44</sup> A few days later, crowds of students from the faculties of arts and law organized a demonstration in support of Taha Hussein. They carried him over their shoulders and cheered: “Long live the free dean! Long live freedom of expression! With Taha to the end! The law school salutes you, Taha!” The students asked Hussein to address them, and he improvised a speech, which he ended with an advice for students to return calmly to their work as the academic year was coming to an end and he would not want to see their efforts wasted:

Let our rules be as follows. The faculty of arts wants to be the source of good taste and proper behaviour, and to be the mind that transcends petty problems. We want to honor our past and make use of our present, to preserve our dignity and protect our independence, so return blessed to your studies.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Ta‘līm al-dīnī wa-ikhtilāṭ al-jinsayn fī kulīyāt al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah” [Religious Education and Co-education at the Egyptian University], *al-Miṣrī*, March 10, 1937. Republished in TTH\_1, 434-6.

<sup>44</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ayna kānat hadhihī al-ghīrah fī al-‘uhūd al-sābiqah?” [Where was this Zeal in the Previous Epochs?] *al-Miṣrī*, March 13, 1937. Republished in TTH\_1, 439.

<sup>45</sup> “Muzāharāt al-jāmi‘īn fī ḥaram al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah” [Academics Demonstrating at the University], *al-Miṣrī*, March 17, 1937. Republished in TTH\_1, 449.

By allowing the admission of female students into the faculty of arts, and standing up to defend their right to coeducation, historian Laṭīfah Sālim has argued that Hussein, supported by Luṭfī al-Sayyid, was able to ensure that the university remained open to female students once and for all.<sup>46</sup>

In the same *Muṣawwar* interview previously mentioned, Taha Hussein reiterated the purpose for which the faculty was created, and it was the same purpose decided earlier by its founders. The faculty of arts, he reminded his readers, was created “to revive the Egyptian mind and give it the fertile power necessary to live, to love life and understand it [...]. This [revival] will happen when we have the Egyptian who understands, appreciates and loves what distinguishes us as human beings: the aspiration to the highest ideals of literature, science and art.” He repeated that if Egypt was to become a modern nation, only the faculty of arts could achieve this transformation. “Egypt will rise if the mental differences between its sons are gone, so they can understand things in a closer way, judge them in a similar manner, and share a sense of feeling and appreciation,” he said.<sup>47</sup> Only the faculty of arts with its professors, students and graduates could design the education required to achieve such a goal.

Five years later, again as dean of arts, Taha Hussein gave another interview to *al-Muqtaṭaf* in which he reiterated the goals he knew were the purpose for which the faculty of arts was created in the first place.

What I hope and what I am working on is for the faculty of arts to accomplish three goals. First: the revival of our Egyptian and Arab past; Second: to strengthen a clear and strong connection between us and western civilization; Third: to show Europe what it needs to know about our right predisposition for rich intellectual life and to contribute to the advancement of human civilization.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Laṭīfah Sālim, “al-Mar’ah fī rīḥāb al-jāmi‘ah,” 47.

<sup>47</sup> Taha Hussein, “Kullīyat al-ādāb” [The Faculty of Arts], *al-Muṣawwar*, March 4, 1932. Republished in TTH\_1, 315-6.

<sup>48</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey ‘ann kullīyat al-ādāb” [The Statement of Dr. Taha Hussein Bey on the Faculty of Arts], *al-Muqtaṭaf*, January 1937. Republished in TTH\_1, 431.

He was especially proud of his faculty and what it had accomplished up until that point in the Egyptian intellectual life. Referring to the knowledge produced in the faculty, he said, “I am yet to see any other school in the entire East that has accomplished as much as we did in such a short period of time.” As an example, he cited Aḥmad Amīn’s *Fajr al-Islām* [The Dawn of Islam], (1928) and *Ḍuḥa al-Islām* [The Forenoon of Islam] (1933–1936), which he wrote on the Islamic intellectual life in the first and second hijri centuries, and described Amīn’s work as the best history ever written on this topic. “Had Amīn not worked in the faculty of arts,” Hussein continued, he would not have written such a masterpiece that the previous centuries were unable to produce.”<sup>49</sup> The list of such works was long, according to Hussein. The faculty, he went on, was the first institution to translate the works of Faust, Hermann, Dortier and Goethe into Arabic directly from German. The faculty had participated actively in the general literary movement, and he gave the example of the millennial celebration of the Abbasid poet al-Mutannabī for which the faculty dedicated a week of events and produced two books on the poet, one by ‘Abd al-Wahāb Azzām (*Dhikra Abī al-Ṭayyib ba’d al-f ‘ām*, 1936) and another by Taha Hussein himself (*Ma’a al-Mutanabbī*, 1936).<sup>50</sup> Referring to Azzām’s other famous work, Taha Hussein went on to say that the faculty was perhaps the first to introduce Egyptians to *The Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi’s Persian epic “The Book of Kings,” which the faculty revised and published in Arabic (munaqaḥah). The faculty also represented Egypt abroad in various academic conferences that included the Orientalists’ conferences, history of religions as well as geography and populations

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>50</sup> Azzām studied at al-Azhar then at the School of Judges before earning a degree in literature and philosophy from the old Egyptian University. He then got a master’s degree in Persian literature from SOAS in London in 1927, and a doctorate from the Egyptian University in 1932 on *The Shahnameh*. He became dean of arts at Fouad I University in 1945 and was asked by Saudi Arabia to create Riyadh University (later Ibn Sa‘ūd University). He was its first president from 1957 until his death in 1959.

conferences. This was in addition to all the books, articles, and dissertations produced by professors and students. All of these accomplishments, concluded Taha Hussein, had a tremendous impact on the intellectual life in Egypt, especially, “in matters of perception and judgement.”<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Hussein was particularly proud that the faculty was responsible for having involved Egyptians for the first time in the field of archaeology and excavations.<sup>52</sup> He had created the Institute of Egyptian and Islamic Archaeology in the academic year 1930-1931 to expand the existing archaeology section created by the ministry of public instruction when it took over the university in 1925.<sup>53</sup> The institute offered bachelor, master and doctoral degrees in Egyptian and Islamic archaeology. In the 1933-1934 report, the institute was credited for having undertaken important digs in the Guizah area as well as Touna el Goubal, yielding some “real treasures” that were being thoroughly studied at the institute and on which several theses were written. A fourth pyramid built in the honor of Queen Khent Kawes was discovered in Guizah, and at Tounet el Goubal an old Greek city was discovered as well.<sup>54</sup>

As dean of arts, Hussein also created the Institute of Oriental Languages and Literatures. The institute had three sections: one for Semitic languages, a second for Islamic languages and a third for Arabic dialects. The Semitic languages included Acadian, Canaanite, Aramaic and southern Semitic. The Islamic languages included Persian, Turkish and Urdu in addition to other Islamic languages not classified as Semitic. Old and modern Arabic dialects in various regions

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>52</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey, ‘amīd al-ādāb ‘ann kullīyat al-ādāb,” *al-Muqataṭaf*, January 1937. Republished in TTH\_1, 428.

<sup>53</sup> Cairo University/Faculty of Arts Archives/ Faculty Meetings/ “Minutes of November 27, 1939.”

<sup>54</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004610/ Memorandum on the Egyptian University/ “Note: Université Egyptienne 1933-34.”

and provinces were taught in the third section.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Taha Hussein credited the Geography Department for having written the first scientific works in Arabic on geography.<sup>56</sup> The department also carried out research in the prehistoric site discovered in Maadi south of Cairo, with the hope of shedding more light on the ancient Egyptian civilization.<sup>57</sup> The faculty of arts was the first to organize student trips to Iraq, Greater Syria and Iran. A mission to Yemen resulted in important geological studies, and brought back a hundred and fifty carvings that were to become the thesis topic of one of the doctoral students, in addition to recordings of the various dialects used in southern Yemen.<sup>58</sup>

In one of his much later articles in 1959, Taha Hussein reminisced, almost nostalgically, about the early days of the university. He had not forgotten and was reminding the younger generations of what the faculty of arts stood for and why it was important. It was not a surprise that he repeated the mission of the private university and its faculty of arts already discussed. He said back in those early days it was a dream to see Egypt freed from colonialism, and such freedom was never going to happen until people's minds had been freed as well. Creating the university, he explained, replaced a limited education that only prepared Egyptians for administrative work in government offices with the faculty of arts, offering them a new kind of knowledge. This new education, he went on, opened the horizon for them. They could learn

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<sup>55</sup> The duration of studies at the institute was three years, and only students with a bachelor's degree from the Arabic Language Department or its equivalent were admitted. Those who graduated from the Institute could proceed, if they wanted, to pursue their doctoral degree without the need for a master's degree. DWQ/Abdin/0069-004500/ Documents Pertaining to the university and the ministry of public instruction/ The Egyptian University Administration Council: Minutes of the Session of August 28, 1938/ "Faculty of arts: Decree Project for the Creation of an Institute for Oriental Languages and Literatures."

<sup>56</sup> Taha Hussein, "Ḥadīth al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey, 'amīd al-ādāb 'ann kullīyat al-ādāb," 428. For the development of the social sciences in Egypt, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004610/ Memorandum on the Egyptian University/ "Note: Université Egyptienne 1933-34."

<sup>58</sup> Taha Hussein, "Ḥadīth al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey 'ann kullīyat al-ādāb," 428.

about the old Egyptian civilization and its great monuments. The faculty of arts opened “the gates” not only to the origins of the Arab civilization but also to foreign literatures. He credited this early period of the university, with its anxious excited students, the missions to Europe, young professors, and the new subject matter, with having produced a new generation of Egyptians, who with the 1919 revolution became responsible for what he described as an intellectual awakening that Egypt had never experienced before.<sup>59</sup> Taha Hussein was not ambiguous about the role of his faculty of arts. For him, Egypt owed its modern intellectual awakening to the faculty of arts, its professors, graduates and students.

### **Backlash against the Faculty of Arts**

Taha Hussein explained that such an unprecedented intellectual awakening materialized in an intellectual freedom that encouraged thinkers and writers to engage with taboos, and subject them to inquiry unhindered either by “the highly conservative restrictions or the limitations of fear from the oppression of the powerful.” Giving a concrete example for such a kind of work, Taha Hussein credited the university with having encouraged ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq (1888-1966) to write about the foundations of government in Islam in *al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm* [Islam and the Principles of Governing] (1925), in which he argued, that Islam did not advocate the caliphate in particular as a form of government and that it was up to Muslims to decide on the form that suited their needs.<sup>60</sup> The book was severely criticized and ‘Abd al-Rāziq lost his position as a scholar and a jurist at al-Azhar. In this interview, Taha Hussein did not refer to himself, nevertheless he was the author of a book that caused one of the biggest polemics in Egypt’s modern history. *Fī al-shi‘r al-jāhili* [On Pre-Islamic Poetry] (1926) was a collection of

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<sup>59</sup> Taha Hussein, “Athār al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīmah fī ḥayāt miṣr al-ḥadīthah” [The Influence of the Old Egyptian University on Modern Egyptian Life], *Waṭanī*, January 25, 1959. Republished in TTH\_1, 763-4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 764.

lectures that he had given at the faculty of arts in which he doubted the authenticity of these poems and called for subjecting them to more rigorous research methods. Following the tradition of the faculty he published this collection later as a book. As a result, al-Azhar demanded Hussein's dismissal from the university and the withdrawal of the book. The affair was even debated in parliament. The university, represented by its President Luṭfī al-Sayyid, supported Taha Hussein who still had to withdraw the book. He removed the offensive passages and republished it a year later under a different title: *Fī al-adab al-jāhilī* [On Pre-Islamic Literature].

The aggressive reception of both these books was not simply a reaction to the ideas they put forward, and which partisan politics only made worse. It was above all a condemnation of the faculty of arts, a rejection of its methodology and an objection to the new scholarship it was producing. The Marxist critic Ghālī Shukrī (1935-1998) interviewed Taha Hussein shortly before his death and asked him whether choosing to write about Islamic topics reflected a “crisis of liberalism” in the thirties. Hussein did not hide his surprise that his books on pre-Islamic poetry and the Islamīyāt, in general, were interpreted as such. “Was it our holy duty to leave [these topics] to the Orientalists?” he asked. “There are distinguished scholars among the Orientalists, but science is not their monopoly and is not limited to them. We should have the priority over them when [studying] our own history (naḥnu awla bi-tarīkhinā minhum).” He saw himself and his generation as having broken into the scholars’ den by applying modern research methods to the history of the heroes of Islam.<sup>61</sup> For Hussein, the institution that encouraged and showed the way to producing critical scholarship was the faculty of arts.

The reaction of the writer and poet Muṣṭafa Sādiq al-Rāfi‘ī (1880-1937), one of Taha Hussein’s fiercest critics and adversaries, is a good example of the backlash against the faculty of

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<sup>61</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā yabqa min Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?* [What Remains of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn?] (Beirut: Dār al-Muṭawassit, 1974), 62-4.

arts. Shortly after Hussein's book came out, Rāfi'ī published a long article in which he was gravely concerned, not only about the book and its content, but also about what the university as a whole was doing and how Arabic literature was being taught within its walls. For Rāfi'ī, Hussein's book, what Hussein proposed to teach and Hussein himself as a product of that system, were all part of a dangerous novelty that was the secular university. Addressing Aḥmad Luṭfi al-Sayyid, the president of the university, Rāfi'ī accused the new institution, that had just been acquired by the state, of providing a platform for Taha Hussein and his likes to attack what Rāfi'ī described as the "constants" (al-thawābit).

We would like to understand how increasing the responsibilities of the university should happen. Should parliament order the burning of the Qur'an to increase the influence of the idea that the Qur'an is a created text (kitāb mawḍū') tainted by Arab superstitions as you teach at the university? Tell me, mister president, don't you know and you are the president of the university, that even after all the 'ulamā' have complained and the public has been dismayed, that Taha Hussein has informed his students that the literature classes the following year will focus on "studying the Qur'an as a literary text?" Could the likes of Taha Hussein [ever be allowed to] study the Qur'an except in this despicable university (al-jāmi'ah al-mamqūtah), which appears before parliament enchained in the wrath of God and the nation, [and yet] force parliament to recognize its (symbolic) identity and accept the widening of its responsibilities?<sup>62</sup>

In 1927, undeterred by the attacks on his book, and firm in his belief that the faculty of arts was the only institution capable of achieving the required Nahda, Taha Hussein called for the annexation of Dār al-'Ulūm and the Higher School for Teachers to the faculty. Again, such a call raised a heated debate. Letters of indignation appeared on the pages of journals and newspapers. Ahmad Yūsuf Badr, for example, accused Taha Hussein of despising the past and everything that

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<sup>62</sup> Muṣṭafā Sādiq al-Rāfi'ī, "al-Adab al-'arabī fī al-jāmi'ah" [Arabic Literature at the University], *Kawkab al-Sharq*, July 28, 1926. Republished in TTH\_1, 278-9. Luṭfi al-Sayyid had been defending the university before parliament and argued that the polemic over Taha Hussein's book happened during the first year after the state acquisition of the university, which should be seen as a trial period, and that parliament that hailed the creation of the university a year before, should not hesitate this year to endorse the university's symbolic identity and increase its responsibilities. Rāfi'ī was responding to al-Sayyid.



came from it, like Dār al-‘Ulūm.<sup>63</sup> Fāyid al-‘Amrūsī wrote saying that if Hussein was in love with his university (mughram bi jāmi‘atak), others were equally proud of Dār al-‘Ulūm, and were ready to protect and spread the Arabic language.<sup>64</sup> Maḥmūd Ghunaym accused Taha Hussein of harbouring ill feelings for Dār al-‘Ulūm, because, in Ghunaym’s words, it was Dār al-‘Ulūm that stood up to Hussein’s book, *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*, and tore it apart, “showing the public its little worth and unveiled the curtain on its many errors.” Again, Ghunaym pointed his finger at what he considered to be the real danger: the institution of the university that produced Taha Hussein and people like him.

Regarding the university, I repeat that its atmosphere suited the mood of the doctor [Taha Hussein]. There, within its walls, he found a place for himself and his actions, and used its faculty of arts as a little colony that took on his colors and adapted itself to his whims.<sup>65</sup>

Ghunaym then went on accusing Taha Hussein of wanting to destroy Dār al-‘Ulūm and annexing the Higher School for Teachers to provide more job opportunities for his university graduates. Ghunaym did not hide his wish for the university to disappear altogether: “[It] is still in the formation phase and whose fate only God knows.”<sup>66</sup>

Yet, the university survived, and as an old man reflecting on its struggles, Taha Hussein was happy to note that the Egyptian University had managed to prove itself and became an integral part of Egyptian intellectual life. Now, he stated, neither the people nor the state could imagine modern Egypt without it. The university became a state university and expanded to include all the higher schools. Within 50 years of its creation, Egypt had three other universities

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<sup>63</sup> Aḥmad Yūsuf Badr, “Dār al-‘Ulūm wa-l-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn” [Dār al-‘Ulūm and Doctor Ṭāhā Ḥusayn], Republished in TTH\_1, 286.

<sup>64</sup> Fāyid al-‘Amrūsī, “al-Adab al-‘Arabī fī al-jāmi‘ah” [Arabic Literature at the University], *Kawkab al-Sharq*, March 17, 1927. Republished in TTH\_1, 287-8.

<sup>65</sup> Maḥmūd Ghunaym, “Dār al-‘Ulūm,” *al-Akḥbār*, March 17, 1927. Republished in TTH\_1, 291. Ghunaym signs his article with Maḥmūd Ghunaym of Dār al-‘Ulūm.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

in Alexandria, Ain Shams and Assiut. “The alumni from these universities now control all aspects of Egyptian life [...] And look, can you find a single Arab country in the East or the West, which does not have an Egyptian university graduate doing some kind of rich work there?”<sup>67</sup> Taha Hussein had witnessed the transformation of his faculty and the university as a whole into a robust institution whose existence would never be questioned again. Moreover, in time, the responsibility of its professors grew and their expertise was regularly sought, not only by the ministry of public instruction, but also by other ministries in Egypt, and in the Arab world. The university was there to stay.

Over time, the faculty of arts became involved in directing the general educational policy in the country by providing expert opinion to the various committees created for that purpose by the ministry of public instruction, in addition to writing or approving textbooks and curricula for secondary schools.<sup>68</sup> Books written and edited by faculty members continued not only to be sold in public bookshops, but they were also regularly assigned in high schools. For example, in 1937 the ministry of public instruction decided to assign *Naqd al-nathr* [Criticism of Prose] by Abī al-Faraj Qudāmah ibn Ja‘far al-Kātib al-Baghdādī, revised and edited (ḥaqqaqahū wa-‘allaqa ‘ala ḥawāshīh) by Taha Hussein and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-‘Abbādī (1892-1956), to high school students during the academic year 1937-8. Taha Hussein and al-‘Abbādī were consulted on how to convert the book into a textbook, and Taha Hussein suggested the expansion of existing explanations and commentaries (shurūḥ wa-ta‘līqāt) to make it more suitable for students.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Taha Hussein, “Athār al-jāmi‘ah al-miṣrīyah al-qadīma fī ḥayāt miṣr al-ḥadīthah,” 764-5.

<sup>68</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey ‘ann kullīyat al-ādāb,” 431.

<sup>69</sup> Cairo University/Archives of the faculty of arts/Taha Hussein’s File/ “Letter from the assistant undersecretary of the ministry of public instruction to Taha Hussein,” September 30, 1937 and Cairo University/Faculty of Arts Archives/Taha Hussein’s File/ “Letter from Taha Hussein to the undersecretary of the ministry of public instruction,” November 20, 1937.

The book was published by the government press, al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Amirīyah in 1941: *Naqd al-nathr aw kitāb al-bayān* by Qudāmah ibn Ja‘far al-Kātib al-Baghdādī abū al-Faraj, prefaced by Taha Hussein (32 pages) and

Professors from the faculty of arts were also regularly asked to form committees to write the final examinations for the Arabic language.<sup>70</sup>

By 1938, al-Azhar itself was requesting professors from the university to be delegated to teach on its premises. As dean, Taha Hussein had to decide on these delegations. While he never turned down al-Azhar, he and other deans were worried about the rising number of such requests from al-Azhar and other institutions, and the disruption these temporary transfers of professors were causing to the university. In 1938, for example, al-Azhar needed professors from the faculty of arts to teach logic, ḥadīth, history, and pedagogy (tarbīyah) in the faculty of the Principles of Religion, as well as a professor to teach philology in the faculty of Arabic language.<sup>71</sup> The faculty of arts proposed to assist al-Azhar with hiring its own permanent professors.<sup>72</sup>

Far from the early days when the university diplomas were not recognized by the state, university professors had become the experts. For example, upon the creation of an administrative council to oversee all matters related to the Institute of Education (for males and females), the minister of public instruction decided to include both the deans of arts and sciences on the board of directors, signaling the importance of their opinion and feedback on the training of teachers.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, professors of Arabic Literature at the Egyptian University automatically

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revised by ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-‘Abbādī (19 pages) (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Amirīyah in Būlaq, 1941). Initially it had been published by the Egyptian University, and then by Dār al-Kutub in 1933.

<sup>70</sup> Cairo University/Archives of the faculty of arts /Taha Hussein’s File/ “Letter from the undersecretary of the ministry of public instruction to Taha Hussein,” July 19, 1938. The undersecretary was informing Taha Hussein that due to time constraints and the need to revise reading books for secondary schools in time for the beginning of the school year, that ‘Alī al-Jārim was to join the committee already composed of Taha Hussein (Dean of Arts), Aḥmad Amīn, and Muḥammad Aḥmad Jād al-Mawla.

<sup>71</sup> DWQ/Abdin/0069-004477/Papers relevant to education/ January 22, 1909 - April 12, 1939/ “Agenda for the Session of March 22, 1938 of the University Administration Council”

<sup>72</sup> Cairo University/Faculty of Arts Archives/Faculty Meetings/ “Minutes of the Session of January 2, 1940.”

<sup>73</sup> Cairo University/Faculty of Arts Archives/Taha Hussein’s File/ “Memorandum from the ministry of public instruction regarding the formation of an Administrative Council for the Institute of Education for male teachers after the merger with the Institute of Education for female teachers,” August 4, 1936. This was later

became members of the Supreme Council of the National Library (Dār al-kutub al-miṣrīyah) by virtue of their position.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, the problem of teaching the humanities persisted as the faculty of arts had to compete with other faculties over recruiting the best students. Although its degrees had been recognized by the state, many students still favored faculties with more secure and better-remunerated careers. One of the faculty meetings in 1939, for example, revolved around admissions. The University Council had asked the faculty of arts to admit a large number of students who had been refused by the top faculties like medicine and engineering. The Dean Shafīq Ghurbāl voiced his deep concern, arguing that forcing the faculty to accept students who did not want to study the arts in the first place would only harm the faculty and the students themselves. If they only joined the faculty of arts because no other faculty wanted them, then, he argued, it would take them a long time before they could psychologically accept this field of studies. “The harm in that is obvious,” he warned.<sup>75</sup>

Taha Hussein was present in these meetings and must have discussed these problems informally with his colleagues as well. He examined students’ applications and interviewed some of them before admission.<sup>76</sup> He could see how some of the brightest students chose a career in

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approved by the Council of Ministers on August 9, 1936. Taha Hussein was officially informed of becoming a board member of the aforementioned council in a letter from the General Secretary of the University on September 16, 1936.

<sup>74</sup> Cairo University/Archives of the faculty of Arts /Taha Hussein’s File/ “Letter from Dār al-Kutub to the president of the Egyptian University,” February 8, 1938. In this letter, signed by Bahīy al-Dīn Barakāt, minister of public instruction and president of the Higher Council of Dār al-Kutub, was informing the acting president of the Egyptian University that according to article 12 of law number 69 for the year 1937 (which reorganized Dār al-Kutub) the professor of Arabic Literature at the Egyptian University was appointed member of the Supreme Council of Dār al-Kutub. Barakāt was informing the President that since Taha Hussein was Professor of Arabic Literature then he had become automatically member of the Supreme Council of Dār al-Kutub.

<sup>75</sup> Cairo University/Archives of the faculty of Arts/Faculty Meetings/ “Minutes of the Session of October 23, 1939.”

<sup>76</sup> For example, Taha Hussein interviewed Naguib Mahfouz before admitting him into the Philosophy Department.

the sciences, and that many disappointed ones came to the arts after being turned away from the top faculties. He knew all too well since his early days at the private university that studying the humanities and the careers such a program of studies promised did not attract many students. He was convinced the humanities and the educational system required strong and stable state support. Yet, Egypt's new parliamentary system was unstable, and partisan politics undermined policymaking. The following section shows the ways in which Taha Hussein tried to overcome this problem, and how he implicitly expected this parliamentary system to hold the state accountable and regulate its role in culture and education.

### **Checks and Balances: Taha Hussein and Egypt's Parliamentary System**

As a public intellectual who wrote for the most widely distributed newspapers and journals of his time, Taha Hussein discussed his ideas on education and made a case for them in various articles addressed to the Egyptian public. In those articles, he also responded to his critics and critiqued his own adversaries. This section looks at some of these debates on education and culture. While most accounts of Egypt's parliamentary period (1922-1952) have focused on partisan politics and their negative impact on the political struggle for complete independence and social injustice, this section shifts the focus to education and how Taha Hussein negotiated the implementation of his official measures within an unstable multiparty system.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> For more on the period before 1952, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), Māriyūs Kāmil Dīb, *al-Siyāsah al-ḥizbīyah fī miṣr: Al-Wafd wa-khuṣūmuh, 1919-1939* [Party Politics in Egypt: The Wafd and its Rivals, 1919-1939] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Abḥāth al-'Arabīyah; Miṣr: Dār al-Bayādir, 1987), Israel Gerhsoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Ellis Goldberg, *Tinker, Tailor, and Textile Worker: Class and Politics in Egypt, 1930-1952* (Berkeley: CA: University of California Press, 1986) and Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954* (London: Tauris, 1988).

To overcome the instability of Egypt's relatively new parliamentary system, Taha Hussein called for the creation of technical councils run by technocrats with experience in primary, secondary and higher education. Sheltered from the rapid turnover of political power, these technocrats would be able to concentrate on long-term policymaking and better coordination between the various educational institutions. The minister of public instruction was to remain the supreme leader of all these councils and serve as the link between them and parliament. As the official representative of the Egyptian people, parliament would review and approve their recommendations.

Despite his frustration with partisan politics, Taha Hussein predicated the proper functioning of these councils, and the educational institutions in general, on the existence of a functioning parliamentary multiparty system. He repeatedly criticized the way partisan politics obsessed with short-term political gains were destructive to proper educational planning and how they undermined the political system as a whole. He believed nevertheless that it was only a matter of time before democracy and responsible party politics would prevail. For him, educating Egyptians was the only means towards attaining this goal. He based his optimism on his experience in the ministry of public instruction and his realization (from the sheer number of school applications) that people in growing numbers wanted to educate their children. He insisted that it was the duty of a responsible democratic government to respond to people's needs and make such a free and accessible education a priority. Moreover, Taha Hussein's experience as a civil servant can help us read his persistent calls for free education differently. He was not simply another Nahdawi intellectual trying to impose free education from above, but was responding to what he believed was a public demand, and which he successfully managed to translate into the necessary political will.

There were specific moments when Hussein was particularly optimistic. During the rule of the popular Wafd government (1942-4 and 1950-2) he thought that democracy was gaining ground, as the government was responsive to calls for free education. When other parties came to power, he continued his outspoken criticism of their reluctance to provide free education on the pages of newspapers. Interestingly, he reserved direct criticism for his local audience in Egypt. When speaking to Arab or foreign correspondents, he took a step back and qualified these debates as healthy negotiations between varying points of view within a democratic system whose outcome would benefit not only Egypt but also the other Arab countries.

This section, therefore, focuses on the considerable attention Taha Hussein paid to educational reform as a means to creating a proper democratic life in Egypt. This analysis supports Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's observation that the "centrality of political accountability, the rule of law, and the importance of political representation in Nahda thought is not acknowledged enough, yet these principles are among its leitmotifs." Without referring to Taha Hussein in particular, she explains that this political critique, which runs through Nahda writings and which continued in Arab thought as a whole during the twentieth century, was eclipsed by a major anxiety over "cultural authenticity," especially in the 60s and 70s.<sup>78</sup> In line with Kassab, I argue that for Taha Hussein, the battle for education and the battle for democracy were one and the same.

With Egypt's nominal independence from Great Britain in 1922, the adoption of the constitution in 1923 and the start of parliamentary life in 1924, Taha Hussein was aware that this new democratic experience was unfolding under difficult circumstances. In his view, not only was Egypt's independence incomplete, but strategically the nation also had to demonstrate to the

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 24.

colonial powers that it deserved it.<sup>79</sup> He argued Egypt was being watched and judged, not only by “our friends” the English, as he liked to say, but also by the international community. When the Capitulations were abrogated in 1937 after signing the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, Taha Hussein wrote again, in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), that Europeans in generals, and the English in particular, were carefully monitoring the situation in Egypt to see if it could handle its independence and the responsibilities that came with it.<sup>80</sup>

Writing from France in 1924, Taha Hussein made a comparison between the parliamentary elections that took place in France in May 1924 and those that had taken place in Egypt four months earlier. Common between the two, he argued, were the “beautiful promises” and “shiny hopes” of the election campaigns and how the winning parties, in France and in Egypt, neither thought their promises through nor considered how feasible their implementation would be, leading to post-election confusion and disappointment. If the winning party in France had accomplished more than the winning party in Egypt, Taha Hussein continued with his analysis, the explanation was simple

France is truly independent. It is not occupied by the English and does not care about any foreign control. Therefore, its government has more freedom than the Egyptian government. If the Egyptian parliament and the Egyptian government had the same independence and actual sovereignty enjoyed by the French parliament and the French government, then who knows what the Egyptian parliament and the Egyptian government would do with its friends and foes...

Inspired by the French opposition who did not shy away from criticizing the French government and kept a watchful eye on its performance, Taha Hussein said he considered it as his duty to do

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<sup>79</sup> Under this unilateral declaration of independence on February 28, 1922, the British Government announced the termination of its protectorate over Egypt. Britain, however, also announced that the following four items would be settled in the future, and until then, the British government would be responsible for them: the security of the communications of the British Empire in Egypt, the defense of Egypt against foreign aggression, the protection of foreign interests and the foreign communities living in Egypt, and the Sudan.

<sup>80</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, al-Majmū‘ah al-Kāmilah, vol. 9 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1973), 12-4.



the same in Egypt despite Egypt's sensitivity to criticism given its nascent constitutional life. What the two countries shared, he went on, was that the majority in both parliaments did not possess enough knowledge. Such lack of knowledge, in his view, manifested itself in their poor understanding of current problems and proposing "empty words" whose meaning they did not grasp as solutions. Only higher education could fix this serious lack of knowledge, and he finished this article by warning: "Woe to a country governed by the semi-educated."<sup>81</sup>

Since those early days of democratic life, Taha Hussein made it clear that he believed the battle for true democracy was one about education and its reform. Institutionally, he was convinced that the ministry of public Instruction was in dire need of reform itself, and he wrote a series of articles about the problems facing the ministry and how to address them. The ministry of public instruction, he argued in one of his articles in 1923, was incapable of ridding itself of the British influence over its policies any time soon.

The men of the [ministry of] public instruction have undertaken a specific line of work and thought, which they cannot go beyond to anything else. They are used to a special educational policy chartered by Dunlop, so it will not be easy for them, in fact it will not be possible for them, to replace this policy with another no matter how much the circumstances and the times have changed.<sup>82</sup>

The infamous educational policy in question was the one imposed by Lord Cromer and his inspector of education, Douglas Dunlop, which restricted access to education by inscribing fees, limiting the mission of education to supplying government offices with the required employees, and focusing on elementary education at the expense of higher education. Taha Hussein criticized the ministry for not rethinking its philosophy of education after the country's independence. What was education and what should education do to form the people? These

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<sup>81</sup> Taha Hussein, "Yawmān" [Two Days], *al-Siyāṣah*, August 25, 1924. Republished in TTH\_1, 263-9.

<sup>82</sup> Taha Hussein, "Fī wizārat al-ma'ārif: Al-'Abath bi-l-'ilm wa-l-mu'alimīn" [In the Ministry of Public Instruction: Messing with Education and Teachers], *al-Siyāṣah*, July 31, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 168.

were the questions he hoped the ministry would reconsider. But these reconsiderations never came. Instead, as Taha Hussein continued to lament well into the thirties, the ministry dismissed those who raised questions about Egyptian culture – what it was, what it should be and what it depended on – as merely theorizing “in the air.”<sup>83</sup>

Egypt, Hussein argued, had known two educational policies. The first was a national policy adopted before the British occupation, which tried to expand both elementary and higher education. The second was decreed by the British and favored elementary education only. The new policy, he said, must be inspired by the former. At the height of the problems facing the private university already discussed in the previous chapter, Taha Hussein wrote that there was no reform without a solid investment in higher education. Only higher education, he said, could design and spread elementary education in the right way.

Spreading elementary education does not mean spreading reading, writing and arithmetic, but it is much more difficult and complicated. It needs minds that can understand and appreciate the Egyptian environment, its psychology, its needs and aspirations, and find a way of adapting all this to elementary education that we want to spread in the country. It is not easy to understand all these matters, only those who have received solid higher education, and managed, thanks to this kind of education, to understand the many groups of people and appreciate their different needs and various aspirations, only they can imagine what elementary education should be like and spread it correctly. The basis of education in Egypt is not elementary education. Higher education is the basis of the entire Egyptian awakening (*assās al-naḥḍah al-miṣrīyah kuliḥā*). A wise educational policy is one that ensures the university is created first and before anything else. [...] A democracy that stands on elementary education alone is standing on a weak basis (*assās wāḥī*) and cannot deal with the calamities and the horrors (*al-khuṭūb wa-l-ahwāl*) which face political systems.<sup>84</sup>

Hussein warned that the ministry of public instruction itself lacked this necessary knowledge and was incapable of either doing the required studies or offering the needed solutions to the problems facing the country. Even parliament, which he insisted should get

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<sup>83</sup> Taha Hussein, “Thaqāfah” [Culture], *al-Siyāsah*, July 25, 1932. Republished in TTH\_1, 326.

<sup>84</sup> Taha Hussein, “Siyāsāt al-ta‘līm” [Educational Policies], *al-Siyāsah*, November 2, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 194.

involved in educational policies, lacked the technical knowledge required to make the right decisions.<sup>85</sup> Instead, he pushed for the creation of technical councils where knowledgeable technocrats would decide on such matters. In 1923, Taha Hussein was pleased with the new minister of public instruction, Zakī Abū al-Sa‘ūd, for having created a “technical office” at the ministry that he could consult on technical matters related to policies and procedures. “Technical matters should be referred to technical people, and those who supervise education should be knowledgeable about education,” Taha Hussein wrote. The minister’s initiative, in Taha Hussein’s opinion, was also helpful in decentralizing power too much of which remained concentrated in the minister’s hands since the time of the British administration. According to Taha Hussein, while the ministry agreed in theory that education in Egypt was in dire need for reform, its approach was tainted by centralization. By centralization, Hussein meant that the ministry had a monopoly over identifying problems, offering solutions and making decisions. The ministry refused to involve anyone in the important task of reform except inspectors and high officials of the ministry itself, who were little or never involved in actual teaching on the ground. Committees, he went on, should be composed of specialists, especially teachers, who were familiar with the students and their needs, who were aware of the actual problems and had effective solutions to propose. The ministry avoided consulting with teachers, because, in his view, the ministry believed, that by asking teachers for their opinion and getting them involved in decision-making, it was “raising their status and recognizing their standing.” The ministry, he lamented, expected teachers to work while steering away from any critical or creative thinking reserving such thinking only for the central administration.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Taha Hussein, “Fī wizārat al-ma‘ārif: Al-‘Abath bi-l-‘ilm wa-l-mu‘alimīn,” 169-70. Aḥmad Zakī Abū al-Sa‘ūd was minister of public instruction between August 12, 1923 and August 27, 1924. The “technical office” was responsible for coordinating between the various educational divisions of the

Yet, despite his pleasure with Abū al-Sa‘ūd’s technical office initiative, Hussein argued it was not enough, for the technical office should be expanded to include more technical experts. Hussein reminded his readers that Egypt had already known a Supreme Council of Education (Majlis al-Ma‘ārif al-A‘la), which existed before the British occupation, and he called for putting something similar into place, adapted to the needs of the time. He also laid down his vision for such a council, a vision that he implemented later as minister in 1951. He believed the council should not rely on higher members of government, but should count on those who possessed the real technical hands-on experience, i.e. the teachers. Teachers, he insisted, should feel involved in policy and decision-making. This would come with another result, “of the highest impact,” as he believed that “teachers will feel their dignity, and they will know that they are not just employees, conscripts or tools run by a higher-ranking employee. They will become critical thinking minds that decide [on important educational matters] in the Supreme Council of Education.”<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, he wanted all levels of education to be represented in this council: elementary, primary, secondary, and higher education as well. Interestingly, too, Taha Hussein called for benefitting from the experience of foreign schools operating in Egypt, and turning to

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ministry, studying propositions, projects, regulations and curricula and preparing for the re-creation of the Supreme Council of Education. It was Abū al-Sa‘ūd who followed on the project of acquiring the private university and using it as the core for the new state university. He was replaced by Muḥammad Saīd from January 28, 1924 to October 24, 1924 in Sa‘d Zaghlūl’s first and last cabinet (January 28 to November 24, 1924). See *Mi‘ā wa-sitūn ‘āman min al-ta‘līm fī miṣr: Wuzarā’ al-ta‘līm wa-abraz injāzātihim (1837-1997)*, 147-8.

Zakī Abū al-Sa‘ūd met with Taha Hussein in November 1923 to discuss the question of the struggling private university. The minister asked Taha Hussein for his opinion on making the private Egyptian University the core of the new State University as he feared that if there was a competition between the two universities that the state university would easily win, and he would feel sorry to see the national project of the private university threatened. Hussein said it was feasible, provided that the university remained independent and that the ministry recognized its diplomas. Understanding that the ministry should be involved somehow in the affairs of the university, Taha supported the idea of a University Council in which the ministry would be represented. Taha Hussein, “Inda al-wazīr” [With the Minister], *al-Siyāsah*, November 5, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 219-20.

<sup>87</sup> Taha Hussein, “Tanzīm al-ta‘līm” [Organizing Education], *al-Siyāsah*, September 18, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 200-1.

their French, American and Italian supervisors, whether in secular or missionary schools, for advice. “[The education offered in these schools],” he wrote, “is an education that we do not doubt is good. Its excellence and utility is a result of the adeptness of those who run and supervise it.”<sup>88</sup>

Turning to technical experts in a given field was a powerful and appealing idea, very much part of Taha Hussein’s moment. Timothy Mitchell has explored the ways in which the “rule of experts” enforced its control over social and political life in modern Egypt. He argued that in the twentieth century, techno-science became the politics of choice for national development and modernization. According to Mitchell, such politics of techno-science, with its apparent efficiency and accuracy, “claimed to bring the expertise of modern engineering, technology and social science to improve the defects of nature, to transform peasant agriculture, to repair the ills of society, and to fix the economy.”<sup>89</sup> For Taha Hussein, reforming education in Egypt required this form of modern expertise, which the politicians and administrators of the ministry of public instruction did not possess. The technocrats he had in mind, and which he would appoint himself when he became minister of public instruction, were not only university-trained but also had the technical experience on the ground, such as teachers.

By proposing to create these councils, Hussein made it clear that he was not challenging the authority of the minister of public instruction. “We are not asking the minister to give up

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002), 15. Mitchell argues that the practices that would later become the social sciences, such as statistics, enumerating and map-making, and which must be seen as belonging to the history of colonialism, do not necessarily produce more accurate knowledge than previous forms of governmental practice. As an example, he uses the map, which is a simplified representation of a physical reality that, in his words, “erases and hides the contested, political, representational nature of the world it portrays, in the same action with which it denies its own (shrinking) physicality.” Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 117. The achievement of statistical knowledge, according to Mitchell is in the displacement of knowledge from the field to the office for example: “What is new is the site, and the forms and calculation and decision that can take place at this new site.” See Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 116.

some of his power to a person in particular, but to [give some of this power to] independent technical administrations. He would remain their supreme authority, and become the link between them and parliament,” Hussein said.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he asked Abū al-Sa‘ūd to enforce the ties between the ministry of public instruction and the public opinion. Taha Hussein expected the minister to keep the public informed, through clear communiqués about what the ministry was working on and what its plans for the future were. Such transparency would allow people to give their feedback and follow what the ministry was doing.<sup>91</sup>

While Zakī Abū al-Sa‘ūd agreed with Taha on the importance of having a technical office and reorganizing the Supreme Council of Education to include all levels of education, the Saadist government that replaced Abū al-Sa‘ūd did not.<sup>92</sup> In an early example of partisan politics that undermined Taha Hussein’s reform efforts, the Saadists, in Taha Hussein’s words, “paralyzed” Abū al-Sa‘ūd’s technical office by assigning its duties to the undersecretary of the ministry and its general secretary. This, in Hussein’s word, effectively ended Abū al-Sa‘ūd’s attempt to decentralize policy and decision-making.<sup>93</sup> He criticized the Saadists and said the absence of the council implied that the ministry was monopolizing again the planning of education in Egypt.

Technical councils had another major utility for Taha Hussein. Having such councils, he argued in another article, would ensure the stability of the educational system and keep it safe from partisan politics and the rapid change of governments.<sup>94</sup> In this way, technocrats could concentrate on the short and long-term planning. In the meantime, he continued to call on the

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<sup>90</sup> Taha Hussein, “Tanẓīm al-ta‘līm,” 205.

<sup>91</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥarakat al-iṣlāḥ” [The Reform Movement], *al-Siyāsa*, October 10, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 209.

<sup>92</sup> Taha Hussein, “‘Inda al-wazīr” [With the Minister], *al-Siyāsa*, November 5, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 221.

<sup>93</sup> Taha Hussein, “‘Inda al-wazīr” [With the Minister], *al-Siyāsa*, August 24, 1924. Republished in TTH\_1, 259.

<sup>94</sup> Taha Hussein, “Tanẓīm al-ta‘līm,” 205.

ministers of public instruction to focus more on education and less on politics. In 1932, for example, he wrote criticizing the politicization of the ministry, and argued that politics exists in the ministry in all “shapes and forms.” Using his usual sarcasm, he said “there is a particular science in the ministry of public instruction, a kind of politics aiming at creating publicity for the government and providing evidence that people love it and prefer it to the opposition.” As an example, he said that visits of the minister to various schools and institutes were programmed well in advance so that speeches and poems of praise were given and duly reported to the press. Moreover, he warned that employees were discriminated against based on their political affiliation. An employee could suffer because previously he was a Wafdist or a Liberal Constitutionalist.<sup>95</sup>

In another article, he raised again the issue of partisan politics and how teachers were being manipulated for short-term political gains. He was calling on the ministry of public instruction and parliament to attend to the situation of teachers of compulsory education (al-ta‘līm al-ilzāmī) and provide them with a comfortable stable life. He lamented that the ministry was only using them as a source of political propaganda, without offering real solutions to their problems. Caring for those teachers in a genuine way, he said, was to care for the entire Egyptian people, given the intimate relationship they have with the young generations that they bring up. Ensuring that they had a comfortable life would ensure in turn that they would be raising a confident optimistic generation. “We say this,” he concluded, “and we are sincere, for this is in Egypt’s best interest. We are convinced that education, no matter its level, should remain above political parties and their political disputes.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-yawm: Taḥqīq” [Today’s Talk: Investigation], *al-Siyāṣah*, July 17, 1932. Republished in TTH\_1, 319.

<sup>96</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-massā’: Inṣāf” [Evening Talk: Equity], *Kawkab al-Sharq*, June 6, 1933. Republished in TTH\_1, 373.

Yet, Taha Hussein remained optimistic despite these problems, which he believed the Egypt's new democratic experiment would eventually fix. Democracy in his view was the basis for political life in Egypt and would be recognized as such sooner or later. He declared that he was confident democracy would eventually win in Egypt despite what he referred to as the "conservative forces" because "the nature of things is that democracy envelops everything," he said.<sup>97</sup> Excited about Egypt's new parliamentary life Taha Hussein wrote in 1923: "We expect a lot of good from parliament." Referring to independence that brought the constitution and parliamentary life, he said these new circumstances in Egypt made it the duty of all Egyptians to voice their opinions about the problems they saw with the educational system and their reservations about the way the ministry of public instruction functioned in order to keep the public informed. When parliament, which he equated with the Egyptian people, realized how deficient the ministry was in preparing the ground for "the life of an independent democratic nation," as he described it, Taha Hussein was sure parliament would do the necessary to repair the ministry's ways.<sup>98</sup>

In more concrete terms, for Taha Hussein, the presence of an elected parliament meant that no important changes in educational policies should be implemented without parliament's approval. This implied that the public had the right to a certain transparency on the part of government officials through the press and official communiqués. Accordingly, Taha Hussein expected a departure from the earlier decision-making mechanism, which took place behind closed government doors. In a series of articles criticizing what Taha Hussein described as the mystery surrounding a proposed plan to merge the Judges' School – Madrasat al-Qaḍā' al-Shar'ī

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<sup>97</sup> "Ṭabī'at al-ashyā' taqḍī an ya'tī al-nizām al-dimuqrāṭī 'la kul shay'" Taha Hussein, "Ḥadīth al-Massā': Tawassu'" [Evening Talk: Expansion], *Kawkab al-Sharq*, April 5, 1933. Republished in TTH\_1, 345.

<sup>98</sup> Taha Hussein, "Fī wizārat al-ma'ārif: Al-'Abath bi-l-'ilm wa-l-mu'alimīn" *al-Siyāsah*, 168.



– with al-Azhar, Taha Hussein called on the government to issue a clear statement detailing its plans for the school, so that “the fears of Azharites, judges, and those who cared about the interest of Azharites and judges, are laid to rest.” Defending the right of the traditional educational institutions to the same transparency as the new institutions, he said the government should only study and prepare the project, but not proceed with it until the new parliamentary cycle. Reforming al-Azhar and the School of Judges was not a “state secret,” argued Taha Hussein but a matter that affected education. The clearer the plan and the more it was debated, the better the results would be. Thinking about reforming al-Azhar, closing down the School of Judges or narrowing down its scope would have a huge impact on the entire justice system, Taha Hussein went on, and “people have the right to know [...] The constitution has returned this right to them [...] It is their right to worry, [it is their right] to demand an official statement from the government, and to wait for parliament [to have its say].”<sup>99</sup>

Working with the Wafd as technical advisor to the minister of public instruction, Taha Hussein made primary education free in 1944. After this success, he gave a speech in which he framed the decision as a necessary stride towards democracy. He again made the link between democracy and education very explicit and explained how the university was crucial in making the link viable.

Democracy enables people to recognize their need for justice, truth and ambition. I don't think that people can discover any of that if they are ignorant. Therefore, I am not exaggerating when I say that democracy does not hate anything as much as it hates ignorance, and does not like anything as much as it likes science and knowledge.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḥadīth al-yawm: Al-Azhar wa-madrasat al-qaḍā’ al-shar‘ī” [Today’s Talk: Al-Azhar and the School of Judges], *al-Siyāsah*, July 20, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 164-6, and Taha Hussein, “Madrasat al-qaḍā’ al-shar‘ī” [The School of Judges], *al-Siyāsah*, August 26, 1923. Republished in TTH\_1, 177.

<sup>100</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Dimuqrāṭīyah laysat illā al-‘ilm wa-l-ma‘rifah” [Democracy is Nothing but Science and Knowledge], *al-Wafd al-Maṣrī*, June 9, 1944. Republished in TTH\_1, 535.

If democracy was the means by which people understood and articulated their need for justice and truth, then democracy was in fact nothing but science and knowledge, he insisted.<sup>101</sup>

Refuting the anxiety about foreign influence, he drew on the Islamic past and used the specific historical cases of “the rebellion of the Zanj” in the second hijri century and the “rebellion of the Qaramitians” in the late third and fourth hijri centuries, to persuade his readers that it was the transfer of knowledge – science, *adab* and arts from foreign languages into Arabic that precipitated these revolts.<sup>102</sup>

Within this relationship between democracy and knowledge, he identified the relation between the university and democracy as “the relation between mind and body, the relation between the mastermind (al-‘aql al-mudabbir) and the material that needs to be managed.” He declared he was against those who wanted to limit access to university education to only a select few. He disagreed with those who believed that higher education was a luxury that should be dispensed to the people cautiously so it did not raise their expectations or give them the wrong ideas. He said such thinking was dangerous for democracy, which called for equal opportunities for all citizens. Whether university education was good or bad, it should not be restricted to a privileged few, he insisted. “University education,” he went on, “provides [the country with] the thinking minds capable of organizing other types of education and raising its level.” Making primary education free was therefore just the beginning, he announced, and secondary and higher education should follow, thus indicating from 1944 his long-term goals for free education in all its stages. Calls to limit access to university education in favor of primary and secondary education, warned Taha Hussein, were made by those who wanted their country to have “neither

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>102</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ḍamā’ir al-shu‘ūb” [Peoples’ Conscience], *al-Mujallad*, December 9, 1945. Republished in TTH\_1, 572-3.

a head nor a mind.” Access to university education should be based on merit and not to be monopolized by those who had money or power.<sup>103</sup>

In this speech Taha Hussein was optimistic and used the people’s clamor for education as an indicator that democracy was gaining ground in Egypt. He argued that democracy made it clear to the people that they needed an education: “As soon as democracy arrived and settled in Egypt, it began to give its fruits. People’s conscience has now been revealed to them and they have now realized their dire need to learn, and to learn incessantly.”<sup>104</sup> While these calls could be mistaken for a populist propaganda for his policies, Taha Hussein in fact spoke out of professional experience. His career in the ministry had given him a bird’s eye view over school admissions and access to applications by poor parents whose children had to be turned away from schools because they could not afford tuition fees or because there were not enough classrooms. While in the ministry, he used these figures to give out more scholarships to poor children, and to build a case for the importance of free primary education.<sup>105</sup> He saw this as a

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<sup>103</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Dimuqrāṭīyah laysat illā al-‘ilm wa-l-ma‘rifah,” 535-40.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>105</sup> For example, the Minister Najīb al-Hilālī requested in October 1942 to increase the percentage of scholarships offered to poor students. The law stipulated that scholarships were handed out to 10% of the newly admitted students, and he had managed to increase scholarships for the already registered students from 1% to 3% on September 15, 1942. In the new request, Hilālī was making a case for increasing again the percentage of scholarships offered to registered students from 3% to 10%: “Current circumstances have made it impossible for many parents to meet the required tuition fees and thus their girls and boys are now liable to dismissal from schools and cutting them off from education. [...] It should be indicated here that primary education in most civilized countries, and even secondary education in England, France and Turkey, is for free. [...] There are also countries like Iraq where the gratuity percentage in primary and secondary schools is almost 30%, while Egypt has not reached any worthy number despite all the efforts spent in increasing the percentage of scholarships.” DWQ/Council of Ministers/Minutes of the Session of October 26, 1942, and for the increase from 1% to 3%: DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057772/Minutes of the Sessions of August-September 1942/Minutes of the Session of September 15, 1942.

Hilālī made another request to increase the percentage of scholarships by 5% on December 2, 1942, saying that the previous increase had not been enough, and given how the public had reacted favorably to the previous increase he was requesting the Council’s approval for more scholarships. DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-055365/Minutes of the Session of December 2, 1942. Then on February 10, 1943, he made yet another request for another increase by 3%. He argued that the ministry had exhausted the given 15% but there were still thousands of students unable to pay their tuition fees despite warnings of dismissal, which, al-Hilālī argued,

sign that democracy was doing well in Egypt because people in more numbers understood that it was their right to get an education and to demand that right. It was the duty of any democratically elected government, in Taha Hussein's view, to respond to people's demands and meet them.

Taha Hussein remained committed to the idea that free accessible education was a right. In 1953, he resigned from a committee for educational policies because the committee decided to re-introduce examination fees for preparatory and secondary education. He objected to what he saw as a decision that would "take back a right the people had won." His advice was to build more schools, institutes and universities, for nothing, he argued, could stop the people's desire for education.

Realistically, the number of students will continue to rise, while ideally [for officials and pedagogy experts] it should decrease until God shows us the right path [...] Those who find that path will not want to go against nature and get into a conflict with the logic of life. They will not turn away people who wish to get an education, and turn away from light the people who have come to seek it [...] Let [intellectuals and leaders] advise the people, without controlling them or forcing them into what they do not want. People want to get an education. People want to go to secondary and technical schools, and to universities. So, let's provide them with the education that they seek...<sup>106</sup>

Leaders and intellectuals had to consider what the people wanted. Instead of the familiar Nahdawi trope by which elites called for educating the masses, Taha Hussein wrote that it was "[the people who] want to be educated (al-sha'b yurīdu an yata'allam)." <sup>107</sup>

### **A Democratic Debate on Education**

Within the framework of this multiparty system, Taha Hussein searched for a platform from which he could implement his ideas on education. Al-Wafd, under the leadership of

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"destabilized the students psychologically, distracted them from their lessons, and embarrassed them and their parents." DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-055402/Minutes of the Session of February 10, 1943.

<sup>106</sup> Taha Hussein, "Fī al-ta'lim" [On Education], *al-Ahrām*, April 6, 1953. Republished in TTH\_1, 716-7.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 717.

Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, shared Hussein’s views on the importance of providing free universal education. Al-Wafd appointed him as technical advisor to the minister of public instruction in 1942, and Taha Hussein started working immediately. He gave a statement to *al-Maṣrī*, in which he said that increasing the percentage of students benefiting from free education was only natural given that the need for such an increase was real. “True democracy,” he went on, should facilitate all matters to the people, especially those related to education. Referring to the Wafdist government in place led by Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās as the “people’s ministry,” he said that together with the current parliament, the cabinet represented the Egyptian democracy led by the king, and only such a democracy could realize the people’s needs. He also hinted at his larger goal, which was to make all primary education free, because, as he highlighted, despite the increase in the percentage of scholarships, “thousands of other applications” were being refused each year.<sup>108</sup>

Taha Hussein was optimistic about working with the Wafd. In a speech he gave in the presence of Naḥḥās and other ministers during an event organized by teachers of compulsory education who wished to honor Najīb al-Hilālī, the minister of public instruction, Taha Hussein described the event as “historic.” He said it was the first time the president of the government attended an event organized by the compulsory education teachers. He then described his speech as one about education in “the fine democratic time in which we now live.”<sup>109</sup> He addressed the prime minister and the other ministers saying

You and your friends serve the people and do not bestow upon them; you give yourselves, your efforts and your minds to the people without condescension and without thinking that you are doing them a favor. Instead you believe that it is a right that the

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<sup>108</sup> Taha Hussein, “Taṣrīḥāt hāmmah li-l-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn” [Important Statements by Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn], *al-Maṣrī*, December 21, 1942. Republished in TTH\_1, 493.

<sup>109</sup> Taha Hussein, “Kalimat al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey fī iḥtifāl al-mu‘alimīn al-ilzamīyyin bi-takrīm wazīr al-ma‘ārif” [The Statement of Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn during the Celebration Honoring the Minister of Public Instruction by the Teachers of Compulsory Education], *al-Wafd al-Maṣrī*, May 9, 1943. Republished in TTH\_1, 504.

people have over you and you do it because you are the people's servants, nothing more and nothing less. (Applause) <sup>110</sup>

In another speech, he congratulated the Wafd government again for having realized that the Egyptian nation was entitled to proper education and to a life of justice and fairness. Such a realization, he went on, materialized in the government's commitment to fulfilling the needs of schoolteachers and for strengthening the independence of the justice system. He jokingly added that he was using such laudatory terms reluctantly because he never liked to praise ministers, a comment which made his audience laugh given his reputation as a severe critic of the government. <sup>111</sup>

While Taha Hussein considered it was a healthy sign of democratic rule that people were seeking education, he also tried to persuade the government that providing education to the people was an important basis for proper governance. The people were making a legitimate demand, which any democratically elected government should address. In a speech that he gave at the Royal Geographical Society, he addressed the country's statesmen as well as students from the Egyptian University and al-Azhar. He made references to Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle *Politics* and Arab philosophers such as Ibn Khaldun to argue that they all made the same argument and could not imagine any reform without sufficient attention to education. Providing education to the people, Taha Hussein insisted, was the duty of the state, something that started to happen after the French Revolution. Since the First World War, he went on, education became a global matter for which international conferences were organized. "Education has become the accepted norm," he insisted. With 80% illiteracy rate, however, Egypt was still far from the norm, but

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 503. Interestingly, the audience reception was recorded in the transcript of the speech.

<sup>111</sup> Taha Hussein, "Khuṭbat al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey fī iḥtifāl al-mu'alimīn bi-takrīm wazīr al-ma'ārif" [The Speech by Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn during the Celebration Honoring the Minister of Public Instruction by the Teachers], *al-Maṣrī*, June 26, 1943. Republished in TTH\_1, 515.

after the war, and with the rule of democracy and constitutional life, there was a good chance for Egypt, he said. The question was no longer whether education should be provided to the masses or not, but rather “how do we learn? And what are the means to achieving this end?”<sup>112</sup>

Taha Hussein was effectively calling for a new contract between the state and the Egyptian people urging the people to see the *raison d'être* of the state as attending to their needs. Speaking in favor of teachers who went on strike to ask for better salaries, Taha Hussein argued that the state was created to give people their rights back. If the state failed to deliver those rights, he went on, then “the state has no rights over the people and the people should no longer have to obey it!” He called on Egyptians to accept this as one of the cornerstones of their lives, without which their lives would never improve. “Egyptians would not be qualified for freedom, independence or dignity unless these priorities have become part of their hearts and minds and mixed with their blood, and have become the basis for their lives when they speak and when they act,” he wrote.<sup>113</sup> Taha Hussein was telling Egyptians that if they wanted an education they could afford and if teachers were asking for better salaries, then it was the duty of the state to meet those demands. In this new contract, the state existed to make people’s lives better, and people should tell the state how they thought this could happen. Education, from Hussein’s perspective, not only made people aware of their duties and responsibilities, but also of their rights, especially their right to hold the state accountable and measure its performance by how better it was making their lives.

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<sup>112</sup> Taha Hussein, “Duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn yaqūl: Al-Ta‘līm ḥaqq iktasabahu al-sha‘b wa-lā yastaṭī‘ ayy farḍ ann yaslubahu minh” [Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn says: Education is a Right the People have won, and Nobody could Deprive the People of it], *al-Wafd al-Maṣrī*, January 14, 1944. Republished in TTH\_1, 533.

<sup>113</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ha’ulā’ al-mu‘alimūn al-muḍribūn!” [Those Teachers on Strike!], *al-Muṣawwar*, April 11, 1947. Republished in TTH\_1, 590.

Taha Hussein's calls for education to become free did not go unchallenged, however. His nemesis in this debate was Ismā'īl al-Qabbānī (1898-1963), who feared the impact of the rapid implementation of such a policy on the standard of education offered by the government. This came to be known as "the quality vs. the quantity" debate (*ma'rakat al-kamm wa-l-kayf*). Qabbānī, future minister of education between 1952 and 1954, based this position on his analysis of the actual capabilities of the ministry of public instruction in terms of number of schools and qualified teachers. Moreover, he used pedagogical studies that advocated a limited number of students in classrooms, for example, and he was against rushing into the creation of schools that did not meet the right requirements in terms of buildings, playgrounds, laboratories...etc. When free primary education was announced in 1944, he criticized the Wafd, and argued that the government should have unified the two streams of primary education (primary and elementary) instead.<sup>114</sup> He also opposed the Wafd's attempts to make secondary education free, saying that in a country like Egypt with an illiteracy rate of 80%, the government should give more priority to spreading and reforming elementary education instead of secondary education.<sup>115</sup> Qabbānī published his ideas and gave lectures at various venues to get his opinions heard. Furthermore, non-Wafd governments between 1944 and 1950 were in favor of his educational policies. He was close to the famous jurist 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Sanhūrī (1895-1971) who became minister of public instruction after the Wafd left power in 1944.

Taha Hussein, however, refused to accept the limited number of schools and instructors as insurmountable obstacles. In this debate, he comes across as an idealist insisting on a grand

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<sup>114</sup> As will be discussed in chapter four in more detail, elementary education had always been free and was based on the old *kuttāb* system. Only students who finished their primary education proper (not the elementary stream) were qualified to proceed to secondary and later higher education. See Ismā'īl Maḥmūd al-Qabbānī, *Dirāsāt fī tanẓīm al-ta'lim bi-miṣr* [Studies on Organizing Education in Egypt] (Cairo: Makatabat al-Nahdah, 1958), 108.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



vision without thinking too carefully about its practical implications. He used several analogies to make his point, which continue to circulate in literature and in general articles. Perhaps the most famous is his assertion that “Education is an absolute necessity, like water and air. It should not be bought and sold. It should be free, and it should be made available to all who desire it.” He also compared people’s dire need for education to a village whose inhabitants were asked to stop drinking until filtered water could be delivered to them. Another was a village on fire, and the mayor asking the people not to put out the fire until professional firemen arrived. Such, argued Taha Hussein, was the approach taken by governments which followed “pedagogical methods as they were inscribed in books,” as he said, in fighting ignorance.<sup>116</sup> In the same interview, Taha Hussein voiced his discontent with Sanhūrī’s decision to draw a new educational policy limiting the number of students benefitting from free primary education instead of the one put in place by the previous Wafd government (1942-1944).<sup>117</sup> He warned the current minister against following such pedagogical methods and going against the “spirit of the constitution”

The current minister should realize that the Wafdist minister drew a policy that was approved by parliament. He was exercising his legitimate power when he was drawing his policy and parliament was exercising its constitutional power when it approved his policy. The constitutional way would be for the current minister to draw his new policy and present it to parliament so that parliament decides whether to put it in place of the Wafdist policy.<sup>118</sup>

Taha Hussein advised the current government against listening to the dictates of an “elegant pedagogy” that wanted everything to go in strict adherence to instructions prescribed by books even when such instructions contradicted what the “Egyptian life wanted,” as he said. What

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<sup>116</sup> Taha Hussein, “Dimuqrāṭīyat al-ta’līm bayna al-wafd wa-l-ḥukūmāt al-ukhra” [Democratizing Education between the Wafd and the Other Governments], *al-Wafd al-Maṣrī*, June 7, 1945. Republished in TTH\_1, 550.

<sup>117</sup> Sanhūrī was minister of public instruction from January 15, 1945 to February 15, 1946 and from December 9, 1946 to February 27, 1949.

<sup>118</sup> Taha Hussein, “Dimuqrāṭīyat al-ta’līm bayna al-wafd wa-l-ḥukūmāt al-ukhra,” 551.

Egyptian life wanted, he went on, was for the entire Egyptian people to get an education.<sup>119</sup>

When the Wafd left power in 1944, Taha Hussein lost his position as technical advisor to the minister of public instruction. He was interviewed in 1945 and he defended the Wafd policies that had made primary education free. He explained that complaints about the limited number of schools, large classrooms and insufficient number of teachers were nothing new. The problem, he explained, started with independence when the British were no longer in control of education, and people's demand for education surpassed what the government could offer. What distinguished the Wafd government from other governments, he argued, was that the Wafd refused to give in to these limitations.<sup>120</sup>

Historian Misako Ikeda has argued that Hussein's criticism of the non-Wafd policies between 1944 and 1950, and his "water and air" discourse, were very effective in turning the public against the government.<sup>121</sup> Sanhūrī, for example, wanted to charge students for lunch and books, and the minister that followed him, Muḥammad Ḥasan al-ʿAshmāwī, wanted students to also pay for stationery, healthcare, sports, activities and exam fees. As a result, Ikeda explains, other critics, like the writer and educator Muḥammad Farīd Abū Ḥadīd (1893-1967), joined Taha Hussein in denouncing the new policies, and Abū Ḥadīd expressed unequivocally the power of Hussein's discourse over the public

Some of my respected friends introduced a wonderful innovation about education in their writing and then in their speech: as with water and air, one should not deprive one who seeks education or shut the door in his face. If the Ministry of Education prevents one student, it would be just depriving him of water and leaving his stomach burned or keeping him from air and letting his breath stop. I truly believe that this innovation is novel, witty, amiable, and pleasant. One is pleased to listen to it and is delighted to speak about it. No sooner did people read what these respected friends wrote than they snatched

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<sup>119</sup> Taha Hussein, "al-Nuṣḥ al-dā'i" [Advice Lost], *al-Balāgh*, June 7, 1945. Republished in TTH\_1, 556-7.

<sup>120</sup> Taha Hussein, "Dimuqrāṭīyat al-ta'līm bayna al-wafd wa-l-ḥukūmat al-ukhra," 549.

<sup>121</sup> Misako Ikeda, "Toward the Democratization of Public Education: The Debate in Late Parliamentary Egypt, 1943-52," in *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Barak Salmoni and Amy Johnson (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press), 218-48.

it, reproduced it and repeated it over and over. It has become like a popular song or a beautiful story, or like a well-known proverb about which people do not ask where it is from or who is credited with creating it.<sup>122</sup>

In the face of public pressure, the government was forced to modify its policy and exempt students who could not pay the fees for books, exams and stationery. After replacing ‘Ashmāwī, Sanhūrī was questioned in parliament by the Wafdist deputy Muḥammad Ḥanafī al-Sharīf who warned him against the confusion caused by the ministry’s indecision about tuition fees for primary education.<sup>123</sup> Ikeda concludes that because of this resistance, the new fees were dropped altogether, except for an optional monthly ten piasters for extracurricular activities.<sup>124</sup>

In this way, Taha Hussein continued to defend the people’s right for free education despite the attacks on the Wafd policies of 1942-1944 until the Wafd was re-elected in 1950. A couple of months before the elections, Taha Hussein predicted the Wafd’s landslide victory and declared that the Wafd was ready to take on the task of free education just like it had done in 1944. Furthermore, it was ready to enforce a new policy for free secondary education and bear the consequences of such policies in front of parliament and the Egyptian people. The Wafd was ready because it had a “magic wand,” he said.

The magic wand is that Wafdists love the people and the people love Wafdists. Wafdists speak and the people listen to what they say. Wafdists call and people respond to their call. [...] Wafdists see themselves as servants to the people and not their masters.<sup>125</sup>

When the Wafd returned to power in 1950, and Taha Hussein decided to make secondary and technical education free, he declared to *al-Nidā’* newspaper that any school that sent a student home because he or she had not paid the fees, would see its headmaster fired immediately for

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<sup>122</sup> Muḥammad Farīd Abū Ḥadīd, “The Story of Water and Air,” *al-Thaqāfah* 569, November 21, 1949, 5-6. Cited in Ikeda, “Toward the Democratization of Public Education,” 237. I am using Ikeda’s translation here.

<sup>123</sup> Ikeda, “Toward the Democratization of Public Education,” 234.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Ḥaqq al-Murr” [The Bitter Right], *al-Ahrām*, October 28, 1949. Republished in TTH\_1, 640.

having refused to comply with a direct instruction from the minister of public instruction:

“Gratuity is a commitment that the people’s government (al-ḥukūmah al-sha‘bīyah) has committed to in front of parliament, and it is now enforceable by law.”<sup>126</sup>

Taha Hussein’s decision was well received and encouraged by the Prime Minister Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās and Taha Hussein’s colleagues. In a rather unusual procedure, the minutes of meeting of the Council of Ministers in Bulkeley, Alexandria on October 15, 1950, started with a paragraph marking for the record the council’s appreciation of the efforts of Taha Hussein in admitting a large number of students to schools and universities during the academic year 1950-1951.

When examining item number 70 with regards to the correspondences from the ministry of public instruction, including its report on the state of admissions in the different schools on the beginning of the school year on the seventh of this month, the council has decided to thank and congratulate His Excellency Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, the minister of public instruction, on the incredible effort that his Excellency has done concerning the admission of students into schools and universities and facilitating education to all Egyptians. This is to be published in the various newspapers and to be broadcasted from the [Cairo] Radio.<sup>127</sup>

Other critics of course, raised their voice in alarm. In an article published in 1951, the author (with the pseudonym ‘Arrāf) compared Taha Hussein to Sanhūrī. The journalist commented and elaborated on Taha Hussein’s response to a question in one of the press conferences, in which he was asked to compare between his policies and those of Sanhūrī’s. Hussein replied

I cannot say that Sanhūrī Pasha is a lesser nationalist than I am, but he has his way of understanding education. Sanhūrī Pasha might be more prudent, while I am more injudicious.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey yaqūl” [Dr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey Says], *al-Nidā’*, February 28, 1950. Republished in TTH\_1, 646.

<sup>127</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057863/Minutes of the Sessions of September and October 1950/Minutes of the Session of October 15, 1950.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Arrāf, “Al-Sanhūrī wa-Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī al-mīzan” [Al-Sanhūrī and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn on the Balance], *al-Assās*, July 12, 1951. Republished in TTH\_1, 699.

The journalist, who did not hide his distaste for what he described as reckless Wafdist policies, made a list of Sanhūrī's decisions and declared that he was in favor of such careful measured policies whose purpose was the general good. A case in point was Sanhūrī's decision, discussed above, to regulate the gratuity of primary education that Taha Hussein had introduced in 1944, by making such an education free but only for students who deserved it. Only students who got 60% of the total marks or above and who were fourteen years old or younger were offered the gratuity.<sup>129</sup>

In response to criticism, and for the public to hear his official evaluation of the gratuity experience that had raised such important concerns, Taha Hussein gave a press conference at the Supreme Council of Education in June 1951. He started by thanking both the supporting and the opposition press for helping make the task possible, especially the latter for its criticism, which forced the ministry to rethink its policies and avoid mistakes. "I hope the supporting press joins the opposition, for we need the criticism much more than we need the praise," he said. The gratuity was a success, declared the minister, "but I will not say it was an outstanding success, only that it was a good success," he continued. Although all students who applied for secondary and technical schools were accepted, the same could not be said for primary schools and kindergartens due to the limited number of schools.<sup>130</sup>

As minister of public instruction, Taha Hussein re-organized the Supreme Council of Education, just as he had planned to do in 1923 in order to help restructure the ministry and give it the required technical expertise. In March 1951, the Council of Ministers approved his

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 700.

<sup>130</sup> Taha Hussein, "Ḥadīth lī wazīr al-ma'ārif" [A Statement by the Minister of Public Instruction], *al-Assās*, June 7, 1951. Republished TTH\_1, 691.

proposal to reorganize the structure of the council and its membership rules.<sup>131</sup> In his memorandum, Taha Hussein wrote that the Council would continue to be consulted in all matters related to

General educational policy; study plans, examinations and other laws pertaining to education; the creation of educational institutes and their establishments; and any educational matter on which the minister of public instruction wishes to consult the Council.

Taha Hussein, however, decided the council would also look into referring teachers and employees of grade five and above to the Disciplinary Board, as well as the appeals issued by that board, so that teachers felt they were being consulted on such important matters. Likewise, in support of his earlier ideas calling for getting teachers involved in decision making, he decided that ten of the council members would be teachers of various subjects, while the Egyptian universities would also be represented by eight members: the four presidents of the existing Egyptian universities and four professors from the four universities chosen by each university council. Based on their direct experience in classrooms, he argued that teachers were better qualified than anybody else to speak for the students, their needs and the needs of the educational system as a whole.<sup>132</sup> On April 19, 1951, the new council met for the first time under the leadership of Taha Hussein and formed several committees: a committee for elementary and primary education, secondary education, technical education, general culture, teachers, and a permanent committee composed of the presidents of the other five committees and who would be responsible for offering advice to the ministry.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057867/Minutes of the Sessions of February and March 1951/Minutes of the Session of March 18, 1951.

<sup>132</sup> DWQ/Council of Ministers/0075-057867/Minutes of the Session of March 11, 1951/ "Memorandum for the Reorganization of the Supreme Council of Education."

<sup>133</sup> Taha Hussein, "Linaj'al al-ta'līm ba'īdan 'an al-khuṣūmah" [Let Us Keep Education Away from Animosity], *al-Ahrām*, April 20, 1951. Republished in TTH\_1, 683. Taha Hussein proposed these changes to the structure of the Supreme Council that had been organized by the laws creating the Council and describing

The details of this public debate over free education show that it should not be reduced to the quantity-quality binary. While Taha Hussein never wavered in his calls for free education until he managed to provide it in 1944 and then in 1950, he was simultaneously calling for a change in state bureaucracy and rethinking its priorities in order to meet this challenge. He believed the Egyptian government had the means to provide such an education and should adapt its spending to the people's needs and not the other way around. What he sought was the political will to enact these changes, and the Wafd was willing to work with him. For example, he called on the ministry of finance to revise its definition of "the budget." If the problem was not having enough resources, then taxes should be imposed, he insisted. "The budget," he argued, "is not about the ministry of finance balancing figures every year, but balancing taxes and the facilities that people need." "Egypt," he went on, "will not calm down until there is an elementary school in every village, and a primary and secondary school in every city; [not until there are] technical practical schools covering the needs of every province, and enough universities to educate the youth without overcrowding their faculties."<sup>134</sup> In another article he again called on the government to revise its definition of the budget. He argued that the government only saw the budget in terms of expenditure and revenue. Instead, he said, the government should use the budget to balance between its expenditure and what the people needed. Having no deficit might be good for the government, and the ministry of finance "would be satisfied with itself," he said, but such satisfaction meant nothing for "the poor, the hungry and the ignorant" whose satisfaction depended on providing what was necessary for them to ward off "hunger, illness and ignorance." The budget, he went on, was a matter of policy put in place for the protection of

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its structure in 1940, 1945 and 1948. Taha Hussein also created the Teachers Syndicate in 1951, and was elected by its members as its first president.

<sup>134</sup> Taha Hussein, "Birnāmaj" [A Program], *al-Ahrām*, November 7, 1949. Republished in TTH\_1, 644.

people's rights and not a simple mathematical operation for balancing what came into the state coffers and what went out.<sup>135</sup> Addressing people's urgent needs required serious rethinking of state bureaucracy in order to take them into account. Officials, he argued, must find the resources to finance people's needs and give them priority. As an example, he said the government had spent 12 million Egyptian pounds on the army alone, when it could have spent some of this money on public education.<sup>136</sup> It is interesting that such budget figures were made available to the public allowing Taha Hussein to call for a better redistribution of the state annual budget. Hussein considered that the Egyptian state had the financial means to build new schools and train enough teachers, but the question was how the state was spending its money. Obviously for him, spending on schools had to become a priority.

Again, after the 1948 war in Palestine, Taha Hussein was critical of the money going to the army when only a fraction of that was required by the ministry of public instruction to carry out its projects. "Egypt has spent a lot of resources to have a strong army. Egypt should know, however, that a strong army needs to protect a strong nation and a strong nation is one that is composed of educated and not ignorant people, composed of healthy and not sick people, and composed of those whose lives were made easier and not made difficult."<sup>137</sup> In another article, again referring to the recent war in Palestine and admitting the importance of responding to foreign threats that made it crucial to have a strong army, he warned against assigning millions of pounds to the army in the annual budget at the expense of other important vital facilities, including education. "What concerns me here is that the military does not overshadow the other facilities, for Egypt's need to ward off enemy attacks is not more [urgent] than warding off the

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<sup>135</sup> Taha Hussein, Untitled, *al-Ahrām*, July 11, 1949. Republished in TTH\_1, 625.

<sup>136</sup> Taha Hussein, "Nadwat al-Hilāl: Mashākil al-shabāb, kayfa naḥiluhā?" [Al-Hilāl's Seminar: How Do We Solve the Problems of the Youth?], *al-Hilāl*, January 1948. Republished in TTH\_1, 620.

<sup>137</sup> Taha Hussein, "Birnāmaj," 644.



resident enemy of poverty, ignorance and illness. Poor, ignorant and ill people cannot build a strong army.” He used what was published in *al-Ahrām* in the summer of 1949 about the ministry of public instruction requiring approximately a million pounds in order to address the needs of its teachers and schools. While the ministry was promised this funding from the government in instalments over five years, tens of millions of pounds had been assigned to the military. “Is this serious or a joke!” (Ajaddun hadhā am muzāḥ!) Taha Hussein exclaimed.<sup>138</sup>

For Taha Hussein throughout these debates, a democratic life was only a means to an end, the end being a better life for Egyptians. In a very sarcastic article Taha Hussein attacked intellectuals and politicians who, without shame as he said, blamed Egyptians for their ignorance, which led to the spread of the cholera epidemic in 1947. He described those arguments as offensive and mockingly referred to those who made them as “intellectuals and semi-intellectuals, politicians and semi-politicians and masters and semi-masters.” He then explained what he thought the purpose of a democratic system was. Those who blamed the people for ignorance and poverty, he argued, should realize that the independence, the constitution and the power to rule were only the means to providing the people “with a happy life that has some grace, pride and prosperity.” He called on all political parties to change their methods and focus on eradicating ignorance, poverty and illness from society, “when in power and when out of power,” he stressed.<sup>139</sup>

Taking a step back as an adversary in this heated debate over free education, Taha Hussein spoke in the name of the Egyptian ministry of public instruction in front of Arab delegations invited to Alexandria in the summer of 1950 to attend the second Arab Conference

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<sup>138</sup> Taha Hussein, Untitled, *al-Ahrām*, July 11, 1949. Republished in TTH\_1, 626-7.

<sup>139</sup> Taha Hussein, “Nadhīr!” [A Warning!], *Musāmarāt al-Jayb*, November 2, 1947. Republished in TTH\_1, 592-6.

on Culture. He thanked the delegations for having elected him as president to lead the conference and for choosing to meet in Egypt. He did not need to welcome them to Egypt, he said, because nobody needed to be welcomed to his own home. While pleading for the freedom and independence of all Arab countries, he reiterated a familiar message. He called on the delegations to attend to the educational and cultural needs of their countries, for no freedom or independence, he urged them, could be achieved without culture and education. Fortunately, he went on, the conference was taking place in Egypt where important changes were taking place and free education had just been decreed for all educational stages, except higher education. As for the debate over free education and whether the gratuity was a viable option or not, Taha Hussein described it as an “Egyptian experiment” that he hoped would be useful for the other Arab countries, with all its problems and difficulties

The differences over the gratuity, its validity or invalidity are differences based on sincerity and devotion, and wanting what is best for Egypt. Each side of the debate has its reasons and proofs. Free education is not something we have learnt from Europe, but it is a return to our past in the early days of Islam, or even to the early days of modern Egypt. We have not come to know rented education (*al-ta‘līm al-ma’jūr*) until we came into contact with Europe.<sup>140</sup>

To make a stronger argument for free education, Taha Hussein drew on the history of the traditional educational system, whether at the *kuttāb* or al-Azhar, where students did not have to pay fees for their education. Decades earlier, he did not hide his surprise when he went to the secular university and discovered he had to pay money in order to learn. He even reminisced on how al-Azhar used to hand out bread for free to help poor students. For him, free education was not something Egypt was learning from Europe, on the contrary, it was a return to a practice that existed for centuries and which continued until the early days of modern Egypt. In front of the

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<sup>140</sup> Taha Hussein, “*Iftitāḥ mu’tamar al-thaqāfah al-‘arābī al-thānī-Kalimat al-iftitāḥ: Khuṭbat wazīr al-ma’ārif*” [The Inauguration of the Second Arab Conference on Culture: The Inauguration Speech by the Minister of Public Instruction], *al-Assās*, August 23, 1950. Republished in TTH\_1, 653.

Arab delegations meeting in Alexandria, Hussein was proud of the steps taken towards democratizing education, which despite all the difficulties and strong resistance, happened through a democratic process that, he believed, eventually gave the people what they wanted. It was a moment of triumph for what Taha Hussein described as an “Egyptian experiment,” and which he wanted to share with other Arab countries in the common fight for freedom and independence, including the territories under French control in North Africa as was shown in chapter one. For Hussein, Egypt’s leadership was based on its strong cultural institutions operating within a parliamentary system that had the interests of the Egyptian people at heart.

## **Conclusion**

For Taha Hussein, the battle for a full indisputable independence in Egypt was both cultural and political. He believed such a battle should be organized along the lines of state-funded institutions that ensured, through free accessible education, that Egyptians knew what rights the state owed them and what duties they owed their nation. The secular university, with its modern subject matter, teaching and research methods, was to provide the thinkers, the teachers and the technocrats required for this project. Struggling against a British legacy that centralized all power in the hands of the minister of public instruction, and having to face the detrimental impact of the infamous partisan politics of the parliamentary era (1922-1952), Taha Hussein called for the creation of supreme councils whose responsibility was to oversee the work of educational institutions and provide expert opinion for decision makers. Although these councils were to continue working under the authority of the minister of public instruction, they offered a more stable platform for the study, coordination and recommendation of policies, with a firm eye on the long-term goals and interests of the country. Over time, Hussein hoped these councils would accumulate enough legitimacy and become important centers of power that the

successive governments would have to reckon with. Run by experienced technocrats with the right credentials and expertise, these councils would offer solutions to the challenges culture and education were facing. Although the final decision rested with the minister of public instruction, he would have to take the recommendations of these councils seriously.

This chapter has explored not only the context in which Taha Hussein developed and negotiated his ideas for the creation of supreme councils and for the implementation of free education, but also the conditions under which he expected the system of free education to unfold and these institutions to run. Disappointed as he was with partisan politics, he believed a parliamentary system remained the best guarantor for the success of his ideas on the long run. If there was reason for Taha Hussein's optimism, it was his faith that democracy was gaining ground in Egypt, and that his project for educational reform would expedite this process. His critique of his adversaries and his frustrations with politics gave way to a sense of pride and accomplishment when speaking to Arab and foreign audiences about an "Egyptian experiment" that managed, democratically, to democratize primary, secondary and technical education and made them accessible to all Egyptians irrespective of their social class. His cooperation with the popular Wafd government of 1942-1944 and 1950-1952 marked the peak of this optimism. He interpreted the Egyptian people's clamor for education as their demand for a democratic life, and their understanding of the benefits such a life could bring them. He celebrated the election and re-election of the Wafd as the victory of a political will that responded to the people, and he celebrated the people who wanted an education: "al-sha'b yurīdu an 'yata'allam," as he said.

These councils and free education continued after the regime change in 1952, which raises questions about the presumed rupture between parliamentary and Nasserite Egypt. This continuity shows that in many ways Nasserite Egypt was built on Taha Hussein's reforms.

Recognizing the already-existing power of the minister of public instruction as the higher president of all these universities, Hussein believed a strong state role was necessary and he hoped Egypt's parliamentary system would keep such a role in check. In that way, Taha Hussein did not think that creating the Supreme Council of the Universities compromised the autonomy of the universities. He saw it as the means for knowledgeable academics to think about and decide on the policies they believed were necessary for their universities before the minister of public instruction made his decisions. Yet, as the regime changed in 1952 the context in which this and other councils had developed changed considerably, as will be shown in the last chapter.

Furthermore, the debate on education in parliamentary Egypt shows that Taha Hussein and his colleagues negotiated their ideas and tried to *persuade* the public of the utility of their projects on the pages of widely read and relatively free newspapers and journals. They chose the political platforms that best supported their ideas, had access to state annual budget figures, and understood government revenues and expenditures, including army allocations. These informed debates helped shape public opinion and decide elections results, which in turn enforced some political accountability allowing for an evaluation of government performance and how these educational institutions were to run. At the same time, however, one wonders if Taha Hussein was not too idealistic and uncompromising with his vision for universal free education. Even if he believed that the Egyptian state at the time had the financial means to invest in education, he must have known that money and grand statements alone were not enough and that time, long-term planning and committed support from the state were required to build the required schools and train the necessary teachers. His hope that a functioning parliamentary system would make the state revise its priorities, and consider education as important an investment as the military, remains an unfulfilled dream to this day.

## Chapter Four

### Democratizing the Language: Taha Hussein and Diversifying Authority over Classical Arabic

*I think you all agree that if there was one thing that should unite our true sincere efforts to elevate science and literature, and to accomplish Arab unity for real and not for mockery, it would be for the government, the Arabic Language Academy, and the various organizations, to work together in order to make the writing of the language and the learning of its grammar easier, so that the Arabic language becomes more accessible, and becomes a language the youth can learn and the teachers can teach.<sup>1</sup>*

Taha Hussein

Since the early Nahda, language reform has been a main concern in the Arab-speaking world. As the language of the holy Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings, classical Arabic is intimately tied to religion, and proposing changes to the language has always resulted in intense debate. While the Nahdawis agreed that something had to be done about the language so it could meet the challenges of their time, they disagreed over the exact reforms to take and how to carry them out. In an imposing colonial context, classical Arabic had come under attack and was accused of being incapable of keeping up with the scientific achievements taking place in Europe. Some Nahdawi reformers even called for the replacement of classical Arabic with the various spoken dialects, while others advocated Latinizing the Arabic script following the example of the Turkish Republic in 1928.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taha Hussein, "Mushkilat al-i'rāb" [The Problem of Case Endings], *Majallat Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabīyah* 11 (1959): 100. This is from the transcription of a lecture that Hussein gave on January 7, 1955. The lecture was organized by the Arabic Language Academy and attended by members of the academy and other guests including scientists, littérateurs and university professors.

<sup>2</sup> Debates over language reform were not specific to the Arab-Islamic world. For example, starting in the second half of the eighteenth century, Greek intellectuals also engaged with similar questions over the proper form the modern Greek language should take so it was somewhere between Ancient Greek, with its prestigious history and links to the past, and Demotic Greek, the language spoken by the people. This resulted in "Katharevousa," which was a form of modern Greek that developed in the early nineteenth century and was used primarily for literary and official purposes until it was replaced by Demotic Greek by an act of Parliament in 1976. For the history of Greek language debates and the creation of the modern Greek national identity see Peter Mackridge, *Language and National Identity in Greece, 1766-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

For Taha Hussein, doing away with classical Arabic was out of the question. Not only did he fiercely defend the language against its critics, praising its richness, precision and potential for responding to the needs of the time, but he also refused to endorse any artistic or literary expression in colloquial Arabic. He insisted that new cultural contributions must be made in classical Arabic in order to build on and enrich the existing centuries-old heritage. As explained in the previous two chapters, engaging with the classical Arab-Islamic thought was at the heart of his oeuvre, and keeping classical Arabic alive was essential for engaging with that tradition. He believed such a critical engagement was necessary for “reviving” the classical culture and ensuring its continuity. Yet, like other Nahdawis, he was convinced the language was facing dire challenges. He repeatedly voiced his fear that if these challenges were ignored, then the classical language faced the danger of being relegated to religious matters and monopolized by “men of religion” as he described them.

To encourage access to and build on the accomplishments of the classical period, which included not only the religious canon, but also *adab*, Hussein called for making classical Arabic more accessible. As education was no longer limited to a select few, he argued that the language, too, had to be “democratized,” as he said, and brought closer to the people. To reach this end he insisted on simplifying grammar rules and finding ways of making the Arabic writing a more accurate reflection of the correct pronunciation. While he acknowledged al-Azhar’s role in preserving the language and Arabic sciences over the centuries, he believed that the venerable

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2009). The famous linguist Charles Ferguson used both Greek and Arabic as examples of “diglossia,” a term which he developed to describe a complex sociolinguistic situation, in which two forms of the same language coexist, and the usage of each form depends on the social setting and function. See Charles Ferguson, “Diglossia,” *Word* 15 (1959): 325-40. Peter Mackridge takes an issue with Ferguson’s binary and argues that in the Greek case, the situation was never that simple, and argues that “diglossia is as much a matter of speakers’ perceptions (including the labels used) as of the actual sociolinguistic situation, which is always more messy; actual language used in Greece covered a continuum of linguistic registers ranging from ‘pure’ demotic to ‘extreme’ katharevousa, with hybrid varieties in between.” Mackridge, *Language and National Identity in Greece*, 29.

mosque did not possess the expertise required to deal with the pressing tasks of coining new terminologies, engaging in comparative linguistic studies, creating modern dictionaries, designing new teaching methods and training language teachers in these new ways. For Hussein, the faculty of arts was the only institution capable of providing such necessary training and taking on these serious responsibilities. Working closely with the university, and created explicitly to attend to the dangers facing the language was the Arabic Language Academy. Founded in 1932, the Cairo academy was to become an authority over classical Arabic as it brought together language experts from the university, al-Azhar, Dār al-‘Ulūm, as well as writers and journalists. Unsurprisingly, Taha Hussein became a member of the academy, and quickly made simplifying grammar and writing one of the academy’s main tasks. He was elected president of the academy in 1963, and attended its meetings regularly until his death in 1973.

Using primary sources from the Egyptian National Archives, Dār Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, reports from the ministry of education, the language academy periodical, Taha Hussein’s books, articles and private papers, as well as secondary sources on the Nahda, and the history of the Arabic language and education in modern Egypt, this chapter looks at Taha Hussein’s efforts to diversify authority over classical Arabic. While in these endeavors Hussein did not try to completely marginalize al-Azhar, he nevertheless challenged its monopoly over the language. He insisted that the revered institution was too set in its ways to deal with what he considered to be serious challenges facing the classical language in modern times, especially as education became universal and more people were complaining about the difficulty of learning the language.

Besides exploring Hussein’s efforts to protect classical Arabic as a vehicle of knowledge production and making it more accessible, the chapter also looks at Taha Hussein’s ministerial



decision in 1951 to abolish traditional elementary education – the remnant of the old *kuttābs* – and merge it into the primary education system. With Taha Hussein’s decision, modern state curricula became responsible for teaching classical Arabic in all Egyptian primary schools. Through rigorous work at the university and the academy, Hussein and others tried to change the way classical Arabic was taught in these schools, bring it closer to the people and find ways for bridging the gap between spoken and written Arabic. Moreover, his decision allowed all students, irrespective of their social class, to receive the same state education that potentially opened their way to secondary and higher education, which until then had been foreclosed to elementary school graduates. Hussein was not only trying to eradicate a source of social stigma, but he was also responding to persistent calls by nationalists and pedagogues to challenge and reverse British educational policies that had hindered the transformation of these *kuttābs* into modern state schools.

As mastering classical Arabic remains a difficult challenge for Egyptians today, however, the chapter also tries to look at the *kuttāb* on its own terms in an effort to understand how for centuries it managed successfully to prepare students for their future higher studies at al-Azhar and other *madāris* in the classical tongue. While the verses students had painstakingly memorized at the *kuttāb* only made sense to them later, this chapter suggests that by entrusting the Qur’an to children’s memory at a very young age, they were able to master the accurate pronunciation of all the words of classical Arabic’s most important text, along with their correct case endings. This form of early-age memorization was how the old system of learning, through the *kuttāb*, managed to break students into a language they did not speak in daily life, but the mastery of which was essential for any form of scholarly contribution.

## Modern Times, a Modern Language?

Language reform was a central preoccupation of the Nahda, and Nahdawi debates over the role of the Arabic language, its history, capabilities and suitability for undertaking what these intellectuals considered to be essential social and political reforms were a defining feature of this movement. Many of the founders of widely read journals in Egypt and Lebanon since the second half of the nineteenth century were themselves Nahdawi figures who discussed the status of the language, its syntax, semantics and writing style on the pages of their periodicals. These included, for example, Buṭruṣ al-Bustānī (*al-Jinān*), Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī (*al-Ḍiyā'*), Jurjī Zaydān (*al-Hilāl*), Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf (*al-Muqataṭaf*) and others.<sup>3</sup> As the anthropologist Niloofar Haeri has pointed out, it is difficult to put an accurate date on when these efforts to modernize the language began. As she states, modern Egyptian state institutions created under Muhammad Ali (r. 1805-1848), the work of various Arab writers and intellectuals, numerous social movements and linguistic debates all contributed to these efforts.<sup>4</sup> Accelerated by a closer contact with Europe, many changes were taking place in the world of these Nahdawi figures, and they were faced with a plethora of new European terms, ideas and technologies that they believed were necessary for the Arab-Muslim world to understand and put into effective use. Understandably, integrating these terms into the language became a priority.

Scholars refer to Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī (1847-1906) as the archetype of the Nahdawi language purist who was perturbed by the way the Arabic language was changing and being used in the new journalistic medium. He hailed language as “the mirror of the conditions of a community

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian John Gully, “Arabic Linguistic Issues and Controversies of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 42, no. 1 (1997): 76-7. Cited in Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 9.

and the image of its civilization,” and appointed himself as the Arabic language watchdog.<sup>5</sup> He published many articles in his periodical *al-Ḍiyāʾ* that he later grouped in his book *Lughat al-jarāʾid* [*The Language of Newspapers*, 1901] in which he fiercely attacked his colleagues for using inaccurate words, wrong meanings and infelicitous writing styles. As these journals and periodicals were increasing in number and claiming wide readership, he feared they were spreading linguistic mistakes and leading to the eventual corruption of the language. He argued that his critique of incorrect language usage was the first step to protect its purity and called for standardizing the language by referring to important classical canonical works, such as, al-Zamakhsharī’s (1074-1144).<sup>6</sup>

In Egypt, the French invasion (1798-1801) and the British occupation (1882-1956) had an important impact on the perception of classical Arabic in the country. Unlike the French aggressive efforts to impose the French language in the Maghreb, the British in Egypt did not try to eliminate classical Arabic. Yet, as Haeri points out, using English and French in most higher education and in parts of state bureaucracy became detrimental to the development of classical Arabic and undermined its image

Colonial rule and its consequences weakened the image of Arabic as a “perfect” language. It continued to be viewed as a “miracle” but also somewhat paradoxically as “backward” in comparison to English and French. Unlike the latter, Arabic was perceived as a language unfit and unequipped for dealing with the modern world, with the progress of science and advances in technology.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Isa M. Saba, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī* (Beirut, 1955), 83. Cited in Anwar Chejne, *The Arabic Language: Its Role in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 113-4. As Patel points out, Yāzījī’s articles initiated a series of works on the purification of the language: *Kitāb lisān ghuṣn lubnān fī intiqād al-lughah al-‘aṣrīyah* [The Book on the Tongue of the Branch of Lebanon Concerning the Critique of the Contemporary Language], by Shakir Shuqayr in 1891, *al-Dalīl ila murādif al-‘āmmī wa-l-dakhīl* [Guide to Synonyms of Colloquial and Foreign Words] by Rashid Shahīn ‘Aṭīyah in 1899, *Maghālīṭ al-kuttāb wa-manāhij al-ṣawāb* [The Errors of Writers and the Correct Methods] by Jurjī Junān al-Bulsī in 1913, *Tadhkirat al-kātib* [The Writer’s Reminder] by As‘ad Dāghir in 1923, and *Kitāb al-mundhir* by Ibrāhīm al-Mundhir in 1927. See Gully, “Arabic Linguistic Issues,” 102-3 and Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 117-8.

<sup>7</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 80.

Thus, intellectuals, educators and bureaucrats became preoccupied with what they saw as “deficiencies” in classical Arabic, considering it to be “too literary and flowery.”<sup>8</sup> The underlying assumption in these discussions was that the language had to become easier and more succinct in order to disseminate effectively the new ideas, as well as the important scientific and technological terms coming from Europe. While most of these thinkers debated how to respond to these new challenges while simultaneously protecting the integrity of the language, some proposed more controversial measures such as the adoption of the colloquial language or the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet.

Salāmah Mūsa (1887-1958) was an influential intellectual who espoused both measures. In his *al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah wa-l-lughah al-‘arabīyah* [Modern Rhetoric and the Arabic Language], he argued that “at the core of calling for [having] a modern language was the call for [living] a modern life.”<sup>9</sup> Such a modern language, in his view, would never materialize as long as the written language taught in schools remained separate from society and radically different from the spoken language.<sup>10</sup> He went on to describe the Arabic language as a “dead language” that could not express the ideas used in scientific fields, such as “biology, chemistry, psychology and hygiene.” He added that it was a dead language even as far as Arabic literature was concerned, since this literature was written in a language that millions of Egyptians could not understand. It was not a “people’s literature” as he described it.<sup>11</sup>

Famous for his Fabianism, Mūsa used socialism as a way of arguing that the colloquial was the language of the people and should therefore be recognized as the language of the

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<sup>8</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Salāmah Mūsa, *al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah wa-l-lughah al-‘arabīyah* [Modern Rhetoric and the Arabic Language] (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Aṣrīyah, 1953): hā’.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 62.

country. He reproached the famous intellectual ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, for criticizing what Mūsa believed were socialist calls for adopting the spoken language, or ‘ammīyah. Mūsa explained that such socialist calls emanated from a commitment to the people and a respect for the language they used in their daily lives, not that of the forefathers (al-salaf).<sup>12</sup> These socialists, as Mūsa called them, were forward-looking (mustaqbaliyūn), when al-‘Aqqād and the grand majority of Egyptian writers, Mūsa lamented, were only looking to the past (salafiyūn).<sup>13</sup> He accused graduates from Dār al-‘Ulūm of opposing calls for developing the language because of what he described as their “narrow-mindedness” in addition to their wish to maintain their economic situation which depended on keeping the language in, what Mūsa described as, “its current ossified state.”<sup>14</sup> Language and literature, Mūsa argued, were social phenomena that could be understood using a society’s economic situation. As Europe was an industrial society, he explained, its language and literature were modern and forward-looking. Egypt on the other hand was still an agrarian society whose farming methods, Mūsa went on, had not changed in hundreds of years, and this was reflected in its language and literature. “Stability in the economic system resulted in the ossification of the linguistic and literary systems,” he insisted.<sup>15</sup> Mūsa was

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., hā’. The preface was written in 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., wāw.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., zāy.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 92-3. The debate over adopting the colloquial as a written language continues to spark controversy today. As Haeri has remarked, however, such calls are fewer compared to the 1920s and 1930s. Haeri explains that those who still think colloquial should receive more attention are hesitant to speak out in fear of being labeled “leftists, or supporters of colonialism, or against Islam or Arabism.” Moreover, and echoing some of Mūsa’s thoughts sixty years earlier, the famous intellectual Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim whom Haeri interviewed in the summer of 1996, said that most poets writing in ‘ammīyah, or colloquial Egyptian, like Ṣalāḥ Jahīn, ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Abnūdī and Fu’ād Ḥijāzī, were all leftists or progressives who were active in the Marxist movement. Al-‘Ālim also described classical Arabic as the “the language of the powerful” and “not related to the interests of the people.” Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 134-7. For a recent study that deals with Mūsa and socialism, see Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the making of global radicalism, 1860-1914*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Haeri asks an important question, which is whether Egyptians own classical Arabic or if they are only its custodians, and hence cannot really change it. The thrust of her argument is that more room should be given for colloquial Egyptian and using it in written discourses. Officially at least, many people are excluded from the domain of writing because of their unease in writing in classical Arabic. Yasir Suleiman, however, takes

unequivocal about his belief that Egypt's situation would not improve until the language problem had been resolved, even if that meant doing away with classical Arabic altogether.

Adopting colloquial was, and remains to this day, a highly controversial issue. Scholars, like Abdel Aziz al-Kumi, Yusuf Qazma Khuri, Niloofar Haeri and Yasir Suleiman trace such calls back to the 1880s. Haeri refers to a debate that started when an article published in the periodical *al-Muqtaṭaf* in November 1881 called for writing the sciences in colloquial Arabic. *Al-Muqtaṭaf* argued that the reason for the progress of Europeans was that the various sciences, like algebra, philosophy and biology were written in the languages Europeans spoke, while in Egypt the written and spoken languages were different leading to what the journal described as Egypt's "backwardness." *Al-Ahrām* quickly responded by warning against the detrimental impact of spoken languages, which the *Ahrām* editors believed had been subjected to "distortion and decay" and warned that spoken languages were an imminent threat to classical Arabic, as dialects weakened the language and could even lead to its loss of form.<sup>16</sup>

Adding to the controversy was William Wilcox' support for using the colloquial. A British irrigation officer, Wilcox became an editor of a magazine called *al-Azhar* in 1893 and he encouraged Egyptian engineers to submit articles in Egyptian Arabic. He also gave speeches in

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issue with Haeri's argument, and says the presence of what Haeri calls, Modern Standard Arabic, is testimony that even classical Arabic changes according to the needs of the time. Suleiman's focus is on language and identity and sees that cutting out classical Arabic would have dangerous consequences. However, neither Haeri, who focuses on classical Arabic as a "sacred language" that religion has both kept alive and restricted its development, nor Suleiman who focuses on identity, has explored the link between classical Arabic and classical adab, which was a major concern for Taha Hussein as this chapter will show.

<sup>16</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 82-4, and 'Abd al-'Azīz Sāmī al-Kūmī, *al-Ṣahāfah al-islāmīyah fī miṣr fī al-Qarn al-tāsi* 'ashar [The Islamic Press in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century] (Mansurah, Egypt: Dār al-Wafā li-l-Ṭibā'ah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1992), 212, cited in Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 84. The debate was also covered in Yūsuf Qazma Khūrī, *Najāḥ al-ummah al-'arabīyah fī lughatiha al-aṣliyah* [The Success of the Arab Nation in its Original Language] (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥamrah, 1991), 35-65, cited in Yasir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: The Cambridge University Press), 47.

which he praised the use of the spoken language.<sup>17</sup> Yasir Suleiman has argued that Wilcox was one of several European thinkers who supported such a shift from classical to colloquial Arabic and the adoption of the Roman alphabet. He claims that Wilcox took this position for political reasons that supported the colonial agenda.<sup>18</sup> According to Suleiman, such Orientalists included de Lacy Evans O’Leary in his work *Colloquial Arabic* (1872), K. Vollers in *The Modern Egyptian Dialect of Arabic: A Grammar with Exercises, Reading lessons and Glossaries* (1895), Francis Newman in his book, *Handbook of Modern Arabic: Consisting of Practical Grammar with Numerous Examples, Dialogues, and Newspaper Extracts in a European Type* (1895), and Seldon Willmore in *The Spoken Arabic of Egypt* (1901).<sup>19</sup> As Haeri points out, this colonial encouragement of the spoken language led to an intense politicization of the debate. “To this day,” she explains, “these and similar stories about Wilcox are mentioned as examples of how the ‘invitation to ‘ammīyah’ was an explicit policy of British colonialism to weaken Egyptians and Arabs in general.”<sup>20</sup>

Besides Salāmah Mūsa, reforming the language was a major concern for many other intellectuals. Qāsim Amīn and Aḥmad Amīn both called for doing away with the case endings

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<sup>17</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Suleiman uses the work of these orientalist to substantiate an argument put forward by the Egyptian historian Naffūsah Zakarīyā Sa‘īd in her book, *Tārīkh al-da‘wah ila al-‘ammīyah wa-athārihā fī miṣr* [The History of the Call for Using the Colloquial and its Consequences in Egypt] (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1964), in which she argued that such calls for replacing classical Arabic with colloquial were the work of Europeans for colonial political ends. See Suleiman, *A War of Words*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Suleiman, *A War of Words*, 62-72.

<sup>20</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 84. Suleiman explains that Arab intellectuals who support the various dialects are sometimes considered to be continuing the work of Orientalists and colonialists, and sometimes their calls are interpreted according to their religious or political backgrounds. For example, Suleiman shows that Umar Farrukh accused Sa‘īd ‘Aql and Anīs Frayḥah of supporting the Lebanese dialect because of their Christian background. (Suleiman, *A War of Words*, 73-4). Similarly, in Egypt, Salāmah Mūsa and Luwīs ‘Awaḍ were accused of supporting Egyptian colloquial because they were Christians. ‘Abbās al-‘Aqqād opposed Mūsa’s appointment to the Arabic Language Academy because of the latter’s negative view of classical Arabic, while ‘Awaḍ’s book *Muqadimmah fī fiqh al-lughah al-‘arabīyah* [Introduction to Arabic Philology] (1980) was banned. (Suleiman, *A War of Words*, 78-80).

(al-i‘rāb) and ignoring the short vowel associated with the last letter (taskīn).<sup>21</sup> Although Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid opposed using Egyptian Arabic in artistic and literary creation, he called for bringing classical Arabic closer to the spoken language, and referred to this kind of Arabic as the “Egyptian language.”<sup>22</sup> Mūsa fully embraced a call by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī for the adoption of the Latin alphabet, a move that, according to Mūsa, implied stopping the use of the case endings (i‘rāb) in order to simplify the spelling of Arabic words in Latin letters. Such a measure, Mūsa went on, if implemented “would take Egypt where Turkey is today, where the [Latin] script has closed the doors on the past and opened the gates to the future.”<sup>23</sup>

Unthinkable as it may seem today, Latinizing the Arabic alphabet was a serious proposition. It came from ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī Pasha (1870-1951), who had all the credentials to be taken seriously. He was a prominent judge, lawyer and once president of the Court of Cassation, the highest judicial authority in the country. As a politician, his name was familiar and respected since he accompanied Sa‘d Zaghlūl in 1918 as part of the Egyptian delegation that went to London and Paris to make Egypt’s case for independence. He studied the European constitutions and was on the committee that wrote Egypt’s 1923 constitution after the independence in 1922. Furthermore, Fahmī was appointed as full member of Fouad I Language Academy in 1940, and it was at the academy that he submitted his Latinization proposal in order to be examined by other academy members, including Taha Hussein.

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<sup>21</sup> Mūsa, *al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah*, 90. Haeri defines case endings as “short vowels that are indicated orthographically with diacritics placed above and below letters,” Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Suleiman, *A War of Words*, 80-1. Mūsa explained that both Luṭfī al-Sayyid and Bahīy al-Dīn Barākāt were both trying to reform the language, Mūsa, *al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Mūsa, *al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah*, 99. The Turkish Republic adopted the Latin script in 1928. Anīs Frayḥah, Professor of Arabic at the American University of Beirut also supported ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī’s call. See Anwar Chejne, *The Arabic Language*, 158.



## Classical Arabic: Whose is it?

In her work on the political and cultural implications of the divide between Egyptian and classical Arabic, Haeri probes into the efforts done to “modernize” classical Arabic. She raises thought provoking questions about how this has intersected with politics and official policies, including the question of authority.<sup>24</sup> She asks who has the authority to make changes to the classical language, and whether Egyptians (who are the focus of her work), and Arabs in general, “own” the language or are just its “custodians.”<sup>25</sup> She raises the question of state institutions and the role they play in challenging the authority of the religious establishment, which she sees as the traditional custodian of the language of the holy Qur’an and the rich religious canon. The state role, in her view, started when Muhammad Ali opened new institutions of learning associated with his modern army. Creating new textbooks and translating the required teaching material from European languages began to transform the way classical Arabic was being used.<sup>26</sup> While state institutions continue to influence the contemporary usage of classical Arabic through college degrees, textbooks, publishing houses and the overall control of the media, Haeri believes the state does not claim to have full authority over the language as these institutions themselves always evoke classical Arabic as the language of the Qur’an and Islam.<sup>27</sup>

To give an example of where state authority over classical Arabic is lacking, Haeri refers to three language correctors (*muṣaḥḥiḥūn*) whom she interviewed. They told her that instead of using grammar books written more recently by non-religious scholars, they still refer to classical texts on grammar from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries such as *Sharḥ qaṭr al-nada* by Ibn

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<sup>24</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. Based on her ethnographical work, however, Haeri shows how this public education does not cultivate in the students a “fondness for reading and writing,” and concludes that classical Arabic “appears quite beyond the reach of ‘ordinary’ people.” *Ibid.*, 121-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Hishām (1359), *Sharḥ Ibn ‘Aqīl* (1367), and al-Ashmūnī (1494). For Haeri, continued reliance on such classical references, which enjoy a prestige that surpasses by far any of the new grammars not only in al-Azhar but also in state universities, is an indication that the state does not have full authority over the language, which as she ironically points out, is the official language of the country according to the constitution.<sup>28</sup> Haeri therefore concludes that the state never managed to claim complete authority of the language and still has to fight for it.<sup>29</sup> Yet, what the state has successfully managed to do, according to Haeri, is to diversify the gatekeepers of the language through a form of mediation, or “appropriation”

[These appropriations] take place at the level of institutions, in the figure of text regulators and on the level of the language itself. The diversification of the gatekeepers of a form, through a variety of means, including the changing curricula of study and control over the creation of different professionals, is a kind of appropriation. In this case, appropriation signifies processes that alter or diversify the legitimate gatekeepers of any given form, and of its domains of use.<sup>30</sup>

Given the anthropological nature of her work, Haeri does not examine the history of these “appropriations” or how they rolled out in detail. In fact, she reproaches historians and political scientists for only paying lip service to the role classical Arabic has played in the cultural and political life in the modern Arab world and calls for undertaking historical research that examines the social and political processes that influenced classical Arabic.<sup>31</sup>

While Haeri rightly points out the impact of Muhammad Ali’s modern institutions of learning, such as engineering, medicine and law, on classical Arabic and its development, these were institutions that taught practical subjects. As shown in the previous chapters, another modern institution of learning that had an immediate and more direct impact on classical Arabic

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 66-7.

was the faculty of arts. The faculty was explicitly created for the study of the Arabic language, its sciences and literature, among other subjects. While Haeri's fieldwork and pertinent questions reveal how classical Arabic is strongly tied to religion, for the founders of the university, and for Taha Hussein after that, classical Arabic and the classical tradition were not only limited to religion.<sup>32</sup> If the language was to be protected and adapted to modern times, that was because it was the language of the classical Arab-Islamic heritage in its *entirety*, including not only the religious canon but also *adab* for example.

In *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, Taha Hussein called on the state to implement the necessary measures for the proper training of Arabic language teachers and relying on language experts to simplify the complex language rules and make them more accessible. He advised against resisting these proposed reforms, for without them, he warned that, "[we] face the dreadful prospect of classical Arabic becoming, whether we want it or not, a religious language, and the sole possession of the men of religion."<sup>33</sup> Haeri finds it ironic that Taha Hussein put the verb "becoming" in the future, "as if," she explains, "in the preceding centuries this had not been the case."<sup>34</sup> Yet, with his larger understanding of what the classical tradition was, Hussein's fear should rather be understood as fear of a possible rupture with the Arab-Islamic heritage, access to which would then be restricted to men of religion, who, by training and vocation, would not necessarily wish to engage with other aspects of that tradition, like *adab*.

For Taha Hussein, classical Arabic was not just a language of religion. Consequently, he argued that it belonged to those who used it, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Haeri concludes that "in the 'tastes and contexts' of the 'socially-charged' life of classical Arabic, religion dominates." Ibid., 17.

<sup>33</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1974), 298. I am using Haeri's translation here.

<sup>34</sup> Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 291.

[The Arabic language] belongs to all the nations and generations who speak it. Every individual from these people is free to use this language the way an owner uses it, as long as the conditions that govern this usage have been met.<sup>36</sup>

He explained that he could not understand why al-Azhar wished to monopolize the language and resist reform efforts when historically the sciences of the Arabic language had been developed before the creation of al-Azhar itself. None of the grammarians who codified the rules of the language, he went on, were Azharites and most of those grammarians were not men of religion to begin with.<sup>37</sup> He acknowledged, however, that al-Azhar had safeguarded the language and its sciences for centuries, and invited Azharites to join in all efforts done to develop these sciences. Yet, he warned against al-Azhar monopolizing such endeavors at the expense of other institutions.<sup>38</sup> He criticized specialists in education who were afraid to voice in public their belief that al-Azhar was ill-equipped to supervise the language in the country or meet the challenges the language was then facing. He believed al-Azhar was not willing to branch out from its established canon, not even to consult other old references if they were not part of its curriculum.<sup>39</sup> For Hussein simplifying grammar and the writing, revising the teaching methods and the choice of literary texts in schools demanded enough knowledge of the history of other languages, how foreign languages, ancient and modern, had developed, as well as comparing Arabic to other Semitic languages. He believed al-Azhar lacked such knowledge.<sup>40</sup> To make his

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 292-3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Hussein uses strong language to make his point: "Al-Azhar knows nothing about the development of foreign languages, old and new. It hardly even knows anything about those languages and is completely ignorant in Semitic languages. Al-Azhar hardly goes beyond its known barren books to the books the ancients wrote on the Arabic language, its literature and sciences. And despite all this, it wants to supervise the sciences of the Arabic language, prevent its reform and monopolize its teaching, and finds among officials those who pretend to agree with it, not because they believe this would actually benefit the language, or that going against the wishes of al-Azhar is to infringe on religion, but because they are afraid [to be accused of going against religion] or they desire [al-Azhar's support in the name of religion]." Ibid., 293-4.

argument, he reminded his readers about al-Azhar's resistance to the introduction of the study of Arabic literature and how he and those who attended the lessons of Sheikh Marṣafī were subjected to "criticism, ridicule and mockery." He also reminded readers how Muḥammad 'Abduh was attacked and the sincerity of his beliefs questioned when he tried to introduce the modern sciences to the curriculum.<sup>41</sup>

Keeping the classical language alive, relevant and accessible was vital for the founders of the university and for Taha Hussein. One of their contributions, born out of the Nahdawi discourse for reform, was the creation of the faculty of arts. In their view, the faculty was to study the language, not only as an instrumental subject required for the study of law as was the case at al-Azhar, but as a subject in and of itself.<sup>42</sup> The faculty was to assess the problems facing the language and its needs, study its grammar, literature and history, examine its origin and relationship to other Semitic languages and think about its development, teaching and learning in comparison to modern European languages as well.

### **A Royal Language Academy**

If the faculty of arts was to provide the latest teaching and training methods, experts in the language from the university and elsewhere were to meet in another institution that was created explicitly for protecting the integrity of the language while proposing and examining solutions for the challenges it was facing. This was the Royal Language Academy, or al-Majma' al-Malakī li-l-Lughah al-'Arabīyah. Like the Egyptian University, the academy was born out of a Nahdawi discourse that pushed for an active engagement with both the classical tradition and modern European accomplishments to achieve what was considered to be a much-needed

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>42</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Muḥammad 'Abduh introduced the study of literature to the curriculum but only as an elective that students did not have to study and were not examined in.

reform. Like the university, which was created on a private initiative and then became a state university, several individual attempts to build a language institution finally materialized in the creation of the Royal Language Academy in 1932, which became part of the ministry of public instruction. Like the university, the academy's first members included some of the Orientalists who lectured at the university, and similar to the university, the academy was renamed to Fouad I Academy for the Arabic Language in 1938. Due to Taha Hussein's crisis in 1932 with Fouad and his minister of public instruction already discussed, Hussein was excluded from the academy until 1940. As soon as he joined, however, he quickly made his influence felt. He helped modify the mission of the academy, redefined the priority of its activities and energetically participated regularly in its discussions and activities until the end of his life. He was elected vice-president on October 10, 1960 and was eventually elected president of the academy on May 13, 1963 after the death of Luṭfī al-Sayyid. Hussein remained president until his own death on October 28, 1973.

Early members of the academy saw their institution as the latest addition to a long list of prestigious academies that had brought together likeminded scholars over the centuries to discuss knowledge and science. In one of the first academy meetings, Maṣṣūr Fahmī (1886-1959), dean of the faculty of arts, spoke to his fellow members about the history of world academies and the many efforts to create an academy in Cairo in modern times.<sup>43</sup> He traced these circles of learning and thought, as he described them, back to Athens, Alexandria, Basrah, Kufah, Baghdad, Fatimid Cairo, Arab Spain, Florence, and finally Paris, whose academy was constantly evoked by Fahmī and others as the role model for the academy in Cairo. "French academies whether scientific,

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<sup>43</sup> Maṣṣūr Fahmī, dean of arts, was one of the first to be appointed to the new academy in 1933. He was the editor of its periodical and was elected to be its secretary (kātib al-sirr) until his death on May 11, 1959. On that day, upon arriving to the academy, the driver opened the car door for Fahmī only to discover he had passed away on the way to the academy.

literary, linguistic and artistic,” he said, “have maintained the form in which they had been created in the late eighteenth century, and they remain the model to follow in the creation of academies in all countries.”<sup>44</sup> By creating the Royal Academy, Fahmī seemed to be proudly saying, modern Cairo was reclaiming its rightful place among these illustrious ancient and modern cities. Paying tribute to Khedive Ismail, King Fouad’s father, Fahmī, said that the Khedive was the first modern patron of the Arabic language. He financially encouraged the Bustanīs to write their encyclopedia and supported their chief, Buṭrus, so he could write his dictionary *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*. Then in the late nineteenth century, several attempts to organize formal and informal discussions devoted to the Arabic language took place in Cairo. Local dignitaries keen on *adab*, like Luṭfī Sālim and Sheikh al-Bakrī, met informally to exchange ideas on philosophy, language and literature.<sup>45</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh was interested in the idea of establishing a language academy on the lines of the existing European academies, and in 1892 he joined the meetings taking place at Sheikh al-Bakrī’s.<sup>46</sup> Al-Bakrī and his circle discussed the idea of writing a new dictionary for the language and creating an academy entirely devoted to the Arabic language.<sup>47</sup> A decade later, graduates from Dār al-‘Ulūm led by Ḥifnī Nāṣif, who would later lecture at the new university, created a group of their own in which they tried to find Arabic equivalents to the foreign words already in circulation, and they published their findings in their own journal.<sup>48</sup> They also organized a seminar in 1908 on Arabized and foreign words, which lasted for two weeks and ended with another call for the creation of an official language

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<sup>44</sup> Manṣūr Fahmī, “Tārīkh al-majāmi‘” [The History of the Academies], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934): 173.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 174-5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibrāhīm Bayūmī Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid” [The Obituary of Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 16 (1963): 118.

<sup>47</sup> Fahmī, “Tārīkh al-majāmi‘,” 174-5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

academy.<sup>49</sup> Other figures, like Aḥmad Ḥishmat, Idrīs Rāghib, and Ismā‘īl ‘Āṣim also tried to create similar groups. Āṣim’s group met under the leadership of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar for almost two years until the eruption of the 1919 revolution.<sup>50</sup>

According to another academy member, Ibrāhīm Bayūmī Madkūr (1902-1996), the key figure behind the creation of the official language academy was Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid. As discussed previously, al-Sayyid was Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s student and one of the founders of the Egyptian University.<sup>51</sup> In several articles in his journal, *al-Jarīdah*, al-Sayyid called for reforming the language and developing it so it reflected the changes taking place in society. He was worried about the differences between written and spoken Arabic and called for bringing them closer together by introducing colloquial words into written Arabic and simplifying grammar and writing to make the written language more accessible to the general public. After he was appointed director of the National Library (Dār al-Kutub), he created an organization in 1916 to look into linguistic matters, which he called the Dār al-Kutub Academy (Majma‘ Dār al-Kutub). He hoped it would become a private institution on the lines of the Académie Française when it was first established. The academy met eleven times in the season of 1917-1918 and seven times in the following year before its meetings stopped due to the 1919 revolution. The private academy met briefly again in 1925, and al-Sayyid tried to transform it into a state institution when he became minister of public instruction. He drafted a project for that purpose, which became the blueprint for the decree that was used later for the creation of the official

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<sup>49</sup> Ibrāhīm Bayūmī Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 118.

<sup>50</sup> Fahmī, “Tārīkh al-majāmi‘,” 174-5.

<sup>51</sup> Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 118. Madkūr became president of the academy in 1974 following the death of Taha Hussein.



Royal Academy in 1932. The academy became part of the ministry of public instruction, however, and did not have the full autonomy al-Sayyid had initially hoped for.<sup>52</sup>

Fouad I, patron of the Egyptian University as already discussed, also became the patron of the academy when he asked the ministry of public instruction to create an institution entirely devoted to the Arabic language, its literature and sciences. The rhetoric used to celebrate the creation of the academy was, predictably, very similar to the one that had hailed the creation of the Egyptian university twenty-four years earlier. According to the founders of the academy, it would be another institution dedicated to seeking knowledge and bringing together people who had the interests of the Arabic language at heart. Maṣṣūr Fahmī, in his early speech before other academy members, made the explicit link between the academy and the university, saying it was a link that would not go unnoticed on the “perceptive observer.” Both institutions, according to Fahmī, shared the same “spirit” in the form of a belief that knowledge was a right for all people, regardless of their race or religion. Such a spirit, Fahmī explained, encouraged the academy to invite both Arab and Western scholars, who cared for the language and appreciated its *adab*, so they could share their knowledge and unite their efforts. Such scholars, he emphasized, understood the importance of the language and realized that “serving the language was to serve knowledge itself.”<sup>53</sup>

The rhetoric was just one of the many similarities between the academy and the Egyptian University. As was the case with the university, the mission of the academy, initially drafted by al-Sayyid, had the watermark of the same Nahdawi discourse that prized Arabic as the language

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<sup>52</sup> Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 119-20. For Dār al-Kutub Academy, al-Sayyid wanted to have 28 members, 25 Arabs, an Iranian, a Syriac and a Hebraic. Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 118. Al-Sayyid was not appointed to the Royal Language Academy until 1940. He was elected by the academy members as president in April 1941, but the official appointment never came until March 1945. Madkūr believes it was for political reasons. Madkūr, “Ta’bīn Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid,” 119-20.

<sup>53</sup> Fahmī, “Tārikh al-majāmi‘,” 175-6.

of both the old and the new. It was the language of a glorious classical Arab-Islamic culture that modern society had to protect and root itself in. It was a rich flexible language more than capable of integrating and responding to the many challenges taking place in a rapidly changing world. In the royal decree for its creation on December 13, 1932, the academy was set up explicitly to

Maintain the integrity of the Arabic language; to adapt it to the demands of the progress in sciences and arts, and generally to make it suitable for the needs of life in modern times, and this through deciding in dictionaries or special glossaries and other means, what words and structures should be used and what should be avoided.<sup>54</sup>

The academy would invite university professors, sheikhs from al-Azhar and Dār al-‘Ulūm, well-established writers, journalists and intellectuals from Egypt, the Arab world and Europe to implement this mission. Using familiar Nahdawi tropes already seen during the creation of the Egyptian University, Muḥammad Tawfīq Rif‘at, the president of the academy, reiterated in his opening speech the significant role Egypt’s modern institutions, including the academy, were playing in the revival of classical culture

The East is shaking off its dust of lethargy and is working to revive its immortal glory and recover its old honor, and has found in Egypt the best example... The Arabic language is the strongest tie that has linked Egypt to these faraway peoples.<sup>55</sup>

In more concrete terms, to carry out its mission, the academy was to replace foreign and colloquial words with correct Arabic words using the standard methods that had been used by grammarians for centuries like qīyās (analogy), ishtiqaq (derivation), and majāz (metaphor). If unsuccessful, then ta‘rīb (Arabization) of foreign words would be used.<sup>56</sup> The academy was to

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<sup>54</sup> “Marsūm bi-inshā’ majma‘ malakī li-l-lughah al-‘arabīyah” [A Decree for the Creation of a Royal Language Academy for the Arabic Language], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934): 6.

<sup>55</sup> “Kalimat Muḥammad Tawfīq Rif‘at ra’īs al-majma‘” [Speech by Muḥammad Tawfīq Rif‘at, President of the Academy], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 4-5 (Third session was between December 18, 1937 and January 27, 1938. The delay in publication was due to the eruption of the Second World War and the backlog that ensued).

<sup>56</sup> “Lā’ihah li-majma‘ al-lughah al-‘arabīyah al-malakī” [Regulations of the Royal Language Academy for the Arabic Language], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934): 22.

produce a historical dictionary for the language, and publish regularly on the etymology of words as well as their changing meaning and connotations. It would also study the various dialects used in Egypt and other Arab countries. Like the state university that had the minister of public instruction as its higher president, the academy was to receive systematic funding and support from the state. As part of the ministry of public instruction, the academy was also obliged to undertake any research necessary for the development of the language as decided by the minister of public instruction.<sup>57</sup> The minister was to approve the academy's annual budget and its acceptance of donations, as well as endorse its internal regulations. Officials from the ministry would manage the academy's finances and the Council of Ministers would decide on hiring the necessary employees, as well as the allowances and bonuses for academy members.<sup>58</sup> Contrary to Luṭfi al-Sayyid's initial plans, the academy was born as a division of the ministry, tied to it both financially and politically.

Among the first academy members tasked with these duties were Maṣṣūr Fahmī, who was the dean of arts at the Egyptian University, Aḥmad al-ʿAwāmī and ʿAlī al-Jārim, the inspectors of the Arabic language at the ministry of public instruction, and the well-known Orientalists H.A.R. Gibb (London School for Oriental Languages), A. Fischer (Leipzig University), A. Nallino (Rome University), L. Massignon (Paris University), A. J. Wensinck (Leiden University) and M. Littmann (Tubingen University). Nallino, Massignon and Littmann had all taught at the Egyptian University. Al-Azhar was represented by Sheikh Ibrāhīm Ḥamrūsh, who was the sheikh of the faculty of the Arabic language at al-Azhar, and sheikh Muḥammad al-Khidr Ḥusayn, a professor at the faculty of religious sciences. Sheikh Aḥmad ʿAlī al-Iskandarī, professor of Arabic, represented Dār al-ʿUlūm. Other members included Egypt's

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<sup>57</sup> "Marsūm bi-inshā' majma' malakī li-l-lughah al-ʿarabīyah," 6-7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 10-1.

Chief Rabbi Ḥāīm Naḥūm, the journalist Fāris Nimr, the notable Syrian scholar Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, Father Anastase-Marie the Carmelite, and the Tunisian scholar Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Wahāb.<sup>59</sup> Muḥammad Tawfiq Rif‘at was elected president of the academy on March 1, 1934, and he can be seen in the photograph below seated to the right of the minister of public instruction, Ḥilmī ‘Issa, and surrounded by other academy members in June 1934.<sup>60</sup>



The Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Muḥammad al-Marāghī was invited to attend the inauguration ceremony of the third and fourth sessions, and joined the academy as full member in 1940.<sup>61</sup>

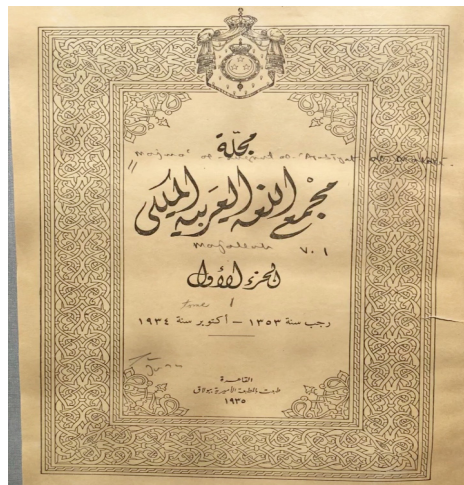
In terms of disseminating the work of the academy, the decree stipulated that the ministry of public instruction was to use its own printing houses to publish the academy periodical, the

<sup>59</sup> “Marsūm bi-ta‘īyn al-a‘dā’ al-‘āmilīn li-majma‘ al-lughah al-‘arabīyah” [Decree Appointing Full Members to the Arabic Language Academy], October 6, 1933 *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934): 12.

<sup>60</sup> “Qarārāt al-majma‘: Al-Qarārāt al-idārīyah” [The Academy Decisions: Administration], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934): 28. Among the decisions taken was the creation of the following committees to immediately start working: Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, Biology and Medicine, Social Sciences and Philosophy, Belles-Lettres and Fine Arts, Dictionaries, Dialects, the Library, the Budget, and the General Principles. Ibid., 29-33. Photograph Source: *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 1 (October 1934).

<sup>61</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 3 (October 1936): 1 and *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 3. “Ta‘dīl marsūm inshā’ al-majma‘: marsūm bi-ta‘īyn a‘dā’ judud” [Amendment to the Decree Creating the Academy: Appointing New Members], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 174.

cover of the first issue of which is shown below, and other publications, like dictionaries. The academy's decisions were to be broadcast to the public and its recommendations were to be used in government offices, especially in education and school textbooks.<sup>62</sup> As early as 1938, the academy sent a list of 2,400 new terms recorded and approved by its various committees to the ministry of public instruction. The ministry was to publish and circulate these words among teachers and writers in order to standardize the spelling of these terms and put an end to the confusion arising from arbitrary usage.<sup>63</sup> To regulate its interaction with the public, the academy created what it called the "Committee for General Issues," which became responsible for interfacing with the public and circulating everyday terms approved by the academy in its efforts to replace foreign and colloquial words.<sup>64</sup> The academy was also to contact various ministries and chambers of commerce, and send delegates to investigate incorrect usage of Arabic words and expressions in these various organizations. To maximize its reach, lists of correct words were also to be published in newspapers and magazines, and the owners of these newspapers would be encouraged to use them in their publications.<sup>65</sup>



<sup>62</sup> "Marsūm bi-inshā' majma' malakī li-l-lughah al-'arabīyah," 10-1.

<sup>63</sup> *Majallat Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 86.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

## Taha Hussein Joins the Academy

The political reasons that stopped Luṭfī al-Sayyid from joining the academy when it first opened its doors may well have been the same reasons that delayed the appointment of Taha Hussein as full academy member as well. When Fouad and his minister of public instruction, Ḥilmī ‘Issa, created the academy officially in December 1932, this was at the height of their university crisis with Hussein. As previously discussed, the problem escalated when Taha Hussein refused to comply with Fouad and ‘Issa’s wishes to confer honorary doctorate degrees upon government supporters. Luṭfī al-Sayyid, then president of the university, stood by his dean of arts, Taha Hussein, and submitted his resignation in protest of the ministry’s decision to transfer Hussein from the university. It is very likely that both al-Sayyid and Hussein were excluded from the academy for that reason. Their appointment had to wait until Fouad’s death and the issuance of a decree on November 25, 1940, inviting a new group of intellectuals to join the academy as full members. The new members included Taha Hussein (who was by then also the controller of general culture), Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Ḥusayn Haykal, Muṣṭafa ‘Abd al-Rāziq, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī (who later proposed the Latinization of the alphabet), ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, Aḥmad Amīn and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Muḥammad Muṣṭafa al-Marāghī.<sup>66</sup>

Like his influence at the Egyptian University, Hussein quickly left his mark on the academy, its mission and activities. One of his first measures was to revise the regulations of the academy to give it more autonomy. Muḥammad Tawfīq Rif‘at, president of the academy, welcomed the new members in 1940, and explicitly thanked Taha Hussein and the jurist ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Sanhūrī for the changes they had made to the academy regulations, which in Rif‘at’s

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<sup>66</sup> “Ta‘dīl marsūm inshā’ al-majma’: marsūm bi-ta‘īn a‘ḍā’ judud,” 174.



view, allowed the academy to better carry out its mission.<sup>67</sup> Rifʿat did not specify what the changes were. Yet, comparing the new regulations to the old ones of 1932 reveal that Hussein and Sanhūrī tried to give more power to academy members. According to the new regulations, the number of members increased from 20 to 30, and the Council of Ministers no longer decided which employees were to be hired to work at the academy. Moreover, from then on, academy employees would only report to the academy president.

Another measure that was clearly the work of Taha Hussein was the creation of what was called “the academy office.” In line with his ideas already discussed in the previous chapter in favor of creating technical councils that worked as independently as possible from the minister so they were sheltered from the partisan politics of the ministry of public instruction, the new academy regulations stipulated the creation of such an office. It was to be composed of the president of the academy, the undersecretary of the ministry of public instruction, and four academy members who were to be chosen by the minister of public instruction from a list of eight members elected by the academy. The academy office became responsible for preparing the annual budget (done previously by the ministry), appointing academy employees, their supervision, promotion and transfer, in addition to other tasks assigned to the office by members of the academy.<sup>68</sup>

In this way, while respecting that the academy was a state institution receiving its budget from the state and presided over by the minister of public instruction, Taha Hussein used his

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<sup>67</sup> Muḥammad Tawfīq Rifʿat, “The Inauguration Speech to the seventh academy session” (December 3, 1940 to April 22, 1941),” *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah* 5 (1948): 180.

<sup>68</sup> “Marsūm bi-taʿdīl baʿḍ aḥkām al-marsūm al-ṣādir bi-inshāʾ majmaʿ Fuʾād al-awwal li-l-lughah al-ʿArabīyah” [Amendment to the Decree Creating Fouad I Arabic Language Academy], *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah* 5 (1948): 171-3. Taha Hussein was elected and then appointed member of this office on December 19, 1940, along with Maṣṣūr Fahmī, Aḥmad Amīn and Ibrāhīm Ḥamrūsh. *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah* 5 (1948): 178.

authority as controller of general culture at the ministry to give more power to the academy members. Creating the academy office was in line with his vision that technocrats should be in charge of as much policy and budget planning as possible.<sup>69</sup> In his view, this would enhance the independence of the academy and its research, while keeping its members sheltered from the politics of the ministry and its administrators who lacked the knowledge necessary to engage with the challenges facing the language.

In terms of the academy activities, Taha Hussein quickly raised two issues that the academy took on and which became the subject of much discussion and debate for years. He believed the academy members, with their expertise and interest in the language, must find ways to promote *adab* and literary production in general, as well as design ways to render classical Arabic more accessible to the general public. Following the recommendations of Taha Hussein, who was the controller of general culture, Ḥusayn Haykal, then minister of public instruction, issued a decree on February 6, 1941 assigning these two new tasks to the academy.

According to this decree, the academy became responsible for encouraging writers to compete over, what the decree described as, “excellent literary production.”<sup>70</sup> Taha Hussein turned over a literary competition, which was initially organized by the ministry of public instruction, to the academy, and explained that it had become the responsibility of the Arabic

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<sup>69</sup> In 1955, law number 434 was issued to re-organize the academy, and in that law, the academy office changed name to become the “academy board” or *Majlis Idārat al-Majmaʿ*, which was to be composed of the president, the undersecretary of the ministry of education, the undersecretary of the ministry of economy and finance, the secretary of the academy, and three academy members to be elected by the academy council (the academy council was composed of the Egyptian members for a period of three years). *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah* 8 (1955): hāʾ, wāw and zāy. Interestingly, the new law stipulated that the academy was to become an independent organization, not part of the ministry of public instruction, but the same law indicated that the minister of education was to remain the higher president of the academy. *Ibid.*, hāʾ.

<sup>70</sup> “Decree to simplify the writing and the rules, and to encourage modern literary production, February 6, 1941,” *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyah* 5 (1948): 179.



Language Academy from then on to handle such kinds of competitions.<sup>71</sup> A special committee for literature was created to handle this assignment, and was tasked with finding ways to encourage literary production. It was called the “Literature Committee” or “Lajnat al-Adab.”<sup>72</sup> The committee included some of the most well-known names at the time: Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Ḥusayn Haykal, Taha Hussein, Aḥmad Amīn, ‘Alī al-Jārim, ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, Maḥmūd Taymūr and Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī. For the first literary competition, Hussein forwarded sixty-six novels to the academy so that the literature committee could review them. Among the five novels that were eventually shortlisted for the prize were *Malak min shu‘ā* by ‘Adil Kāmil, *Kifāh Ṭibah* by Najīb Maḥfuz and *Wā Islāmāh* by ‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr. Although the committee decided that none of the novels deserved the first prize, it recommended the five novels for publication. The authors, however, had to first integrate the comments of the committee and fix what the committee described as “instances of incorrect language usage.”<sup>73</sup>

Encouraged by the new literature competition, the famous Egyptian nationalist and leader of the feminist movement, Huda Sha‘rāwī, created another competition in 1943, which she placed under the supervision of the academy. She called it “Farouk I Prize for Arabic poetry and the Egyptian Story,” and donated 100 pounds annually for it. Similarly, the editor-in-chief of *al-Ahrām*, Antūn al-Jimayil allocated 50 pounds for another prize to be awarded by the academy to the best study on the history of translation in Egypt during the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Awarding literary prizes continued, and Taha Hussein was happy to note that the majority of awards for literary research were going to university graduates like Suhayr al-Qalamāwī and Salīm Ḥasan.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> “Musābaqat wizārat al-ma‘ārif li-l-qīṣṣah al-miṣrīyah” [The Egyptian Novel Competition], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 209-10. The letter was dated March 7, 1942.

<sup>72</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 5 (1948): 179.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-13.

<sup>74</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 6 (1951): 58.

<sup>75</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 7 (1953): 58. (Session 17: October 14, 1946 to May 26, 1947)

In the late fifties, the academy started honoring some of the well-established names in the literary field, and Taha Hussein was the first to receive the academy appreciation prize for literature. Luṭfī al-Sayyid received the prize for the social sciences, and Muṣṭafa Nazīf for the sciences. The following year the prize for literature went to ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād.<sup>76</sup>

The second task was for members of the academy to consider how to make classical Arabic easier to teach and to learn. They were to focus on finding ways to make writing Arabic easier, and simplify the rules of grammar and morphology. Hussein had already talked about the importance of both these measures in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938). Similarly, some ministers of public instruction, like Bahīy al-Dīn Barākāt, had expressed their concern about the difficulties encountered by teachers and students in Arabic language classes. To deal with this task, an academy committee was created to verify that none of the proposed solutions infringed in any way upon the well-established principles guiding the correct usage of the language. The committee was called the “Principles Committee” (Lajnat al-Usūl). A sub-committee for the simplification of grammar was chosen from members of the Principles Committee, and included Taha Hussein, Aḥmad Amīn, and ‘Alī al-Jārim. Barākāt asked the committee to investigate possible solutions and indicate what changes it believed were necessary to address this problem.<sup>77</sup>

It was in the context of the work done to simplify the grammar rules and the writing of the language, that on May 3, 1943, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī proposed the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with Latin letters. He argued such a measure would ensure the language was written and pronounced correctly. Fahmī’s proposition was referred to the Principles Committee and the

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<sup>76</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 12 (1960): 322.

<sup>77</sup> “Qarārāt mu’tamar al-majma‘ fī taysīr qawā‘id al-lughah al-‘Arabīyah (February and March 1945)” [The Academy Conference Decisions on Simplifying the Grammar Rules of the Arabic Language], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 6 (1951): 180. The letter was dated March 7, 1942.

academy decided to publish his suggestion in 1944 to get the public's feedback.<sup>78</sup> Taha Hussein firmly opposed Fahmī's proposal from the start, both during academy meetings and openly in the press. Latinizing the alphabet would have dealt a blow to what Hussein was trying to do.

Engaging with the classical Arab-Islamic tradition clearly demanded an advanced command of classical Arabic, and he believed that the integration of modern European accomplishments had to happen in classical Arabic as well so that the required continuity with the past would take place. In that way, European ideas would be integrated into the already rich tradition of Arab-Islamic culture without overwhelming that tradition. Changing the Arabic script would have alienated the people from the past and would have restricted access to the classical tradition to a select few. In *The Future of Culture of Egypt*, Hussein explained that Egyptians taught and learned Arabic because it was their national language. By national language he explained that Arabic was not only the language of religion, or merely the means for communication in society, or even just a tool for thinking and feeling, but the Arabic language also "transfers the heritage of our forefathers to us, and it receives from us the heritage that it shall deliver to the future generations."<sup>79</sup> He could not accept the adoption of the Latin alphabet.

### **Democratizing Classical Arabic**

Taha Hussein must have seen such radical propositions for language reform, like Fahmī's and the Turkish example, as adding more to the challenges facing the language. As shown in the first chapter, Hussein was particularly aware of the colonial measures to undermine classical Arabic and the French aggressive efforts to make French the language of education and culture

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<sup>78</sup> Salāmah Mūsa must have written his book *Al-Balāghah al-‘aṣrīyah*, which I have mentioned earlier, in response to Fahmī's suggestion and the public debate that followed.

<sup>79</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 288-9.

as well as politics and administration in North Africa, especially Algeria.<sup>80</sup> He was also responding to the calls for the adoption of ‘ammīyah by Salāmah Mūsa and others. His condemnation of any literary or artistic creation in ‘ammīyah and his fierce defense of classical Arabic must be read as a reaction to what he considered to be threats facing the language, the language which constituted the cornerstone of his oeuvre.<sup>81</sup> He clarified this, saying

The Arabic language that I want to be taught at school in the best and most complete way is the classical language, and nothing else. It is the language of the holy Qur’an and the venerable ḥadīth. It is the language of what the ancients have left to us in poetry and prose, in science, literature and philosophy. I would like the conservatives in general, and the Azharites in particular, to know that I am the farthest from those who consider that the colloquial could function as a tool for understanding or for communication, or as a means to accomplish what our mental life needs. Since my youth, I have resisted [such a call] as much as I could, and I think have been largely successful in this resistance. I will continue to resist it as long as I live, and as long as I could resist. For I cannot imagine renouncing on that great heritage that the classical Arabic language has preserved for us, and because I have never believed that the colloquial has the features or characteristics that make it qualify as a language. I see it and will continue to see it as a dialect among dialects, that has been corrupted in many of its forms, and that it [has the potential to] dissolve into classical Arabic if we give it enough attention, by raising the people, through culture and education, and by bringing classical Arabic closer [to them] through reform and making [classical Arabic] easier, so that the [classical and the colloquial] could meet without difficulty or effort or corruption.<sup>82</sup>

Hussein’s eye was always on the classical heritage and ensuring continued access to it. Men of religion, as he liked to call them, would always be trained in the classical language, as it is the language of the Qur’an and the religious tradition. Their training at al-Azhar, as Timothy Mitchell had shown, was primarily to help them understand what was necessary for the

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<sup>80</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i-‘rāb,” 93.

<sup>81</sup> For example, in an article Taha Hussein criticized the Egyptianization of a French play, which he attended at the Opera House, because it was performed in the colloquial. “I have to admit, that I grew very impatient with the story and the opera as soon as I heard part of the dialogue, for the entire performance was in the colloquial, and people know that I grow impatient with the colloquial when it is used as a tool for artistic creation, and I hate it if a writer depended on it unless there was an urgent need or absolute necessity.” Taha Hussein, “Tamṣīr” [Egyptianization], *Majallatī*, December 15, 1934. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyah min 1908-1967 (al-Ta’līm)*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu‘āṣir, 2010), 407.

<sup>82</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 297-8.

interpretation of the law. For them, studying the language or its literature was therefore not a goal in itself. When Hussein warned against their monopoly of the language, his concern was the rest of the classical heritage, in which the religious establishment would not necessarily – and one could add, did not have to – be interested. As such, it was not simply a fear of or animosity towards men of religion, but rather a wish to ensure the tradition as a whole was made accessible to more people.

In one of Hussein's long and lesser-known lectures, which he gave in January 1955 in front of various intellectuals and specialists in the language from both the academy and the university, Hussein reiterated where he stood regarding the question of classical Arabic and the problems it was facing. In this lecture entitled, "The Problem of al-i'rāb," or what usually gets translated as "case endings," Hussein started by saying that the title of the lecture was forced upon him, and that he feared such a title might confuse his audience. He described the word *i'rāb* as a "very scary word" and reminded those present in the hall that, as students, all of them including himself, feared that word. To lessen the psychological impact of the word *i'rāb* and as a segue into his main argument in which he tried to show that attempts to simplify grammar were admissible because grammar was not the language, he said that he preferred to return the word to its original meaning as explained in dictionaries. In these old references *i'rāb* meant "to speak clearly and eloquently like the Arabs used to when they expressed (yu'ribūn 'an) themselves."<sup>83</sup> Yet, he went on, expressing oneself as the Arabs did was never easy, and people in various Arab countries always faced problems when they tried to do so, whether in writing or in speech. As a result, many of them found refuge in the colloquial, which according to Taha Hussein, "did not require study, research, determining the case endings, or any of these problems facing anybody

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<sup>83</sup> Taha Hussein, "Mushkilat al-i'rāb," 90.

who tries to use classical Arabic.”<sup>84</sup> The calls for replacing classical Arabic with the colloquial and using colloquial for literary expression, Hussein went on, were therefore not new. The academy, he added, was specifically built in order to “preserve the integrity of classical Arabic and enable this language to adapt itself to the various times in which it lives, and to face modern civilization without fear...”<sup>85</sup> The problem in his view was not in the case endings per se, which were an integral part of the language and should be preserved, but in the complex way existing grammar books explained the rules that governed how these endings should be used, and how these rules were taught independently when students should learn and deduce them from engaging fully-vocalized literary texts. He lamented that some Arabic-speakers were turning their back to the language and were calling on others to do the same. Such people, Hussein argued, were ignoring how strong and flexible the language was, how well it had adapted itself to the “cultures of Greece, Persia and India,” and how easily it was currently doing the same with “the culture and knowledge that the European and American civilizations were bringing.”<sup>86</sup> If members of the language academy believed in the language, Hussein went on, and did not need to be convinced of its “power, flexibility and capacity for resistance,” their duty was to convince the others.<sup>87</sup> He argued that the “challenges facing the language [today] are very dangerous, and are not devoid of difficulty, yet the difficulty does not come from the language itself, but from its owners.”<sup>88</sup>

Hussein believed that people’s command of the language was seriously lacking. Earlier on, he had reiterated to the president of the Egyptian University his concern that students were

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 94.

not benefitting from the huge efforts done to teach them the Arabic language and its literature.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, he wrote to the minister of public instruction not hiding his dismay at the level of fluency of young men and women in the language

Experiments have shown that our youths are the farthest they could be from an average command of their language, not to mention fluency in it, the fluency that allows them to maneuver it the way someone who owns their language can, [someone who] is in control of its minute intimate details. After a lot of effort spent on this language – four years in primary school and five years in secondary school, [young men and women] reach the university or the higher colleges and they are incapable of representing their views and their thoughts in the correct way – whether in writing, speech or in conversation, not to mention representing these views and thoughts in wonderful poetry or beautiful artistic prose.<sup>90</sup>

Although in the same report to the minister Taha Hussein praised the younger generation for having introduced the art of the novel to Arabic literature, he pointed out that these writers' command of the language was not laudable. Despite what he described as their acute sense of observation and their attention to the details of this new art, he warned that it had to respect the language and the rules that governed its correct usage: "Without respecting the characteristics of the Arabic language and its literature, [...], the beautiful imagery, the exquisite style, and the correct language necessary for any literature, this new art will only be a colloquial art destined for mortality."<sup>91</sup>

Softening his tone when talking about those who were calling for the adoption of the colloquial, Hussein argued that it was the fault of the way Arabic was being taught in schools, with its complex grammar rules and poor choice of literary texts. He believed such teaching methods failed to attract students and came between them and appreciating the language. He did not undermine the danger of such calls, however, and warned that if people started turning to the

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<sup>89</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft from Taha Hussein to the president of the Egyptian University (no date).

<sup>90</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft from Taha Hussein to the minister of public instruction (no date).

<sup>91</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft (no date).

colloquial, then a day would come when Egyptians would need to translate what the Iraqis and Syrians were writing, and the Iraqis and Syrians would not understand what the Egyptians were writing.<sup>92</sup> “And I don’t think,” he concluded, “that any lover of the Arabs, of Arab life and its history, of the Qur’an that the centuries have inherited, or of this colossal heritage, could possibly find appealing the absurdity that is being proposed.”<sup>93</sup>

Over many years, Taha Hussein and others tried to solve this problem, believing that something had to be done to make classical Arabic more accessible. Hussein’s calls focused on simplifying the grammar and the writing as well as providing better training for language teachers. He hoped that eventually people would feel more comfortable in classical Arabic and find it easier to consult and engage with the classical tradition. One of the issues he raised was how grammar was being taught in schools. Instead of teaching grammar through interesting texts that engaged students and spoke to them about their modern lives, grammar was taught separately in the form of dry rules that students found convoluted and unappealing. He was against teaching grammar as if it was an end in itself

Grammar in school textbooks should shake off that inherited disconnect which comes to it because it is presented [to the students] as rules that are separate from the language and far from its literature. [Grammar is] taught as if it is the end when it is only a means. Students would stomach it if it was connected to proper words, was derived from [those words], and taught as a means to understanding and appreciating good taste...<sup>94</sup>

As for reforming the writing, he wanted to make it easier and ensure it was a better reflection of the accurate pronunciation of the words. Arabic is mostly written using only consonants, while short vowels (*al-tashkīl*), which indicate correct pronunciation and decide the case endings based on the role of the word in the sentence, are usually not added except in the Qur’an. Hussein was

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<sup>92</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 99.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>94</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft (no date).



therefore pushing to find a solution that would incorporate this tashkīl into the actual writing so that the texts were fully vocalized.<sup>95</sup> In his view, such accessible precise vocalization of classical Arabic would help people avoid making mistakes when reading or writing.<sup>96</sup>

I want the writing to be an honest accurate representation of the pronunciation, not to represent some of [what is pronounced] and not the rest, not to represent half the term (al-lafẓ) and canceling the other half. I want writing to represent what we call the letters and what we call the vocalization (al-ḥarakāt) in a way that is complete on one hand and easy, quick and economical in time, effort and money on another hand.<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, due to the absence of the short vowels, Taha Hussein explained, readers first had to understand the text and see what each word was doing in the sentence to be able to use the right short vowels and read it correctly. “We should read in order to understand,” he said, “not understand in order to read.” Properly vocalized texts, he insisted, are necessary so that readers could focus on reading, understanding and thinking deeply about the text.<sup>98</sup> With the way grammar was being taught, and how the language was being written, students suffered.

This year I read some of the students’ answers on one of the exams of the special division of the high school certificate. What I read was odd to the point that it filled me with anger and irritation. I saw how the grammar and rhetoric lessons corrupt the taste of young people, in the expressions they use, the imagery, the formulation of terms, and how they relate words to meaning. [Students] say words without fully understanding them, and repeat sentences that they had learnt by heart from their teacher. The teacher did not understand those sentences when he dictated them, and students did not understand those sentences when they heard them. And we did not understand those sentences when we graded them.<sup>99</sup>

With his reforms, Hussein was convinced the academy would strengthen classical Arabic, not weaken it, and enrich people’s knowledge of its vocabulary. He said he would continue to resist calls for the Latinization of the alphabet or the adoption of the colloquial, but he said that such

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<sup>95</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft from Taha Hussein to the minister of public instruction (no date).

<sup>96</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 307.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>98</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 95.

<sup>99</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 313-5.

resistance would be futile if serious measures were not taken to make the language accessible, otherwise, he warned, people would turn away from the classical tongue altogether.<sup>100</sup>

Regarding the training of Arabic language teachers, Taha Hussein pushed hard for the faculties of arts and sciences at the Egyptian University to take on the responsibility of training teachers in general, and the Arabic language teachers in particular. After receiving their training at the university in the disciplines in which they wished to teach, he wanted teachers to spend time at the institute for teachers to learn more about teaching and pedagogy.<sup>101</sup> He therefore wanted this institute, which was created in 1929, to be annexed to the university as well. The ministry of public instruction refused, however, as it did not want to relinquish complete control over the teachers who would teach in its schools later.<sup>102</sup>

As far as teachers of the Arabic language were concerned, Taha Hussein believed that the faculty of arts should be the only institution responsible for their training in the language. In a report that he wrote in 1935 after the annexation of the veterinary school and the schools of engineering, agriculture and commerce to the university, Hussein called for the annexation of Dār al-‘Ulūm to the university as well, and argued that Dār al-‘Ulūm should have been the first of these higher colleges to join the university.<sup>103</sup> In his view, some Arabic language teachers should be trained in Semitic languages, while others should know Islamic and European languages, so that collectively they would gain a better understanding of Arabic literature as well as other literatures. He believed such a comparative approach would allow teachers to better understand the current needs of the language and how to make it, and its *adab*, more accessible and appealing to the youth. Only the university, he insisted, had the technical means to provide

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<sup>100</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 309-10.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 327-8.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 331 and 336.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 360.

such training, in terms of teaching methods and materials, especially given its strong ties with the academic life in Europe, and the university's young age which made it less burdened by the traditions that other institutions in Egypt, like al-Azhar and Dār al-'Ulūm, had to deal with. For all those reasons, according to Taha Hussein, the university was more capable of assessing the needs of the language and its literature and could attend to those needs. The "way" of the university, he argued, was to "preserve the old heritage without being paralyzed by it or forcing it to ossify; [its mission was] to nourish [the old heritage] with the new so the heritage could live, grow and be active."<sup>104</sup> By annexing Dār al-'Ulūm, Hussein believed he would be liberating it from both the ministry of public instruction and its bureaucracy, and from al-Azhar as well.<sup>105</sup> Sensing the ministry's reluctance to annex Dār al-'Ulūm to the university, he suggested that Dār al-'Ulūm became an independent higher institute specialized in training Arabic language teachers. However, he doubted this would happen, saying that the university itself had not accomplished that independence the way that it should.<sup>106</sup>

What I do not understand, and cannot rationalize, is how the ministry of public instruction relinquished the schools of agriculture, commerce, engineering and veterinary medicine, and abolished the division for higher education and then hold on to these two schools (Dār al-'Ulūm and the Institute for Teachers). Nor do I understand or rationalize [what is being said] that the ministry is giving these two schools an independence that is similar to the independence enjoyed by the university, and then keep them and not annex them to the university.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, he was against al-Azhar's wish to start training Arabic language teachers. He explained that al-Azhar had a "critical religious mission" and should not have to worry about supplying language teachers to state schools. Given its mission, he went on, al-Azhar was by definition obliged to be conservative and extremely careful about introducing any changes.

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<sup>104</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 363-5.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, Hussein cautioned against the power exerted by al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars (Hay'at kibār al-‘ulamā’) over Azharites and warned that if that council decided to excommunicate one of the Azharite teachers, then the minister of public instruction would be forced to remove that teacher from his position, thus compromising both the power of the state and the academic intellectual freedom.<sup>108</sup>

By reforming how the language was being taught, Taha Hussein wanted to democratize classical Arabic. After having made education universal, and compulsory in some of its stages, he believed that simplifying grammar rules had also become an obligation. For him democratizing education meant democratizing the language as well. He saw finding ways to make the language accessible as a duty.<sup>109</sup>

If the writing and the grammar have been made easier, and if teachers have taught literature and the language well, in a way that is adapted to the minds of the youth, by selecting [texts] that agree with the modern taste, if all this is done well – and as you know education has been made universal – I have no doubt that one day not far from now, a day [whose date] I will not specify as people like to specify everything these days, that day will come when strong life will have returned to the language, and it has become not just the language of the intellectuals, or just the language of literature, but the language of the intellectuals and the language of literature which the entire people can understand.<sup>110</sup>

For Taha Hussein, a better command of the language would not only allow the entire people to understand the intellectuals and the Arabic literature of the day, but they would also gain access to the entire classical *adab* tradition, the cornerstone of his oeuvre.

Rendering classical *adab* more accessible was crucial to Taha Hussein, and he tried to do so in many of his books. Perhaps the most famous attempt in that direction was a series of articles that he published in 1924, first in *al-Jihād* and *al-Siyāsah*. He then grouped these articles

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<sup>108</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 366-7.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>110</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 99.

in his classic, *Ḥadīth al-arba‘ā’* [The Wednesday Talk], in three volumes. In this work, Hussein tried to help contemporary readers understand and appreciate old pre-Islamic poetry, or the “old *adab*” as he called it. He admitted that the language of that heritage was unfamiliar, and that dictionaries and language references were complex and not easy to use. When readers could find nothing in the modern library to help them understand this “unwilling literature” (*adab nāfir*), as Hussein called it, especially when some of it was forced on them at school pushing them, as he said, further away from that literature and from school itself, readers turned to European literatures instead, which they found simpler and more accessible.<sup>111</sup> This old literature, he insisted, however, must remain alive in modern times

We do not want this old literature to remain today what it was before, for we neither like the old simply because it is old, nor do we long for [the old] out of sentiments of passion and nostalgia. We like the old literature [because we want it] to be the underpinning (*quwām*) of culture, and a food for thought, because [this old literature] is the basis of the Arab culture. It is the chief element (*muqawwim*) of our personality, the achiever of our nationhood, our guardian against dissolving into the foreign, and what helps us know who we are.<sup>112</sup>

*Ḥadīth al-arba‘ā’* as this series of articles was called, was born out of Hussein’s wish to involve contemporary readers in literary discussions that helped them appreciate the classical literary canon. His work, as he argued, was to prove to the reader that those who claimed the old literature had become obsolete, irrelevant or “dead” made such a claim out of “ignorance.”<sup>113</sup> So, week after week, he selected and analyzed poetry from the pre-Islamic era, followed by the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, and ended with modern poetry. He also reviewed new literary works and responded to his readers and critics, like Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī.

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<sup>111</sup> Taha Hussein, *Ḥadīth al-arba‘ā’* [Wednesday Talk], al-Majmu‘ah al-Kāmilah, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnāni, 1974), 15-6.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 20.

Interestingly, Hussein was not only against literary or artistic expression in the vernacular, but he did not condone writing in foreign languages either, especially in French as some of Egypt's francophone writers were doing at the time. In his review of a book written in French, *L'Egypte dans mon miroir*, by the Egyptian francophone writer, Jeanne Arcache, Hussein complimented the writer on her book and on her command of the French language, which, according to Hussein, made it difficult for any reader to think French was not her mother tongue. The likes of Arcache in Egypt at the time, Hussein went on, were not a few. He described them as Egyptian men and women who were totally proficient in French and used that language in literary creation, whether in poetry or prose. "I do not know if this is good or bad," he admitted. He explained that those writers were honest translators of how Egyptians thought and felt. They were "successful ambassadors" as he called them. Yet, as they wrote in French, they deprived their fellow Egyptians of their literary accomplishments, and the Arabic language itself was deprived of their creativity

When [these Egyptians] write or compose in a foreign language they deprive Egyptians and easterners in general who are not fluent in foreign languages of the fruits of their effort. They even deprive the Arabic language itself of their efforts. Instead, they give these efforts to people who may not actually need them.<sup>114</sup>

Writing this review in 1935, Hussein argued that the state was to blame for not having protected the Arabic language enough, and for not teaching it properly. The state was also to blame for having ignored building schools for so long forcing parents to send their children to foreign schools.<sup>115</sup> He found Arcache's book so valuable and full of Egyptian imagery worthy of

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<sup>114</sup> Taha Hussein, "Kitāb ākhar 'an miṣr bi-qalam al-ānisah Jann Arqash" [Another Book on Egypt by Ms. Jeanne Arcache], *Majallaty* 7 (March 1, 1935): 614.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 614-5. Taha Hussein sent his own children Amina (1918-1988) and Moenis (1921-1995) to French schools in Cairo, and the shortage of schools at the time could have been a reason for that choice. The mother, Suzanne, must have also preferred sending her children to French schools. In an interview with Taha Hussein's granddaughter, Sawsan, she explained to me that her grandmother Suzanne wanted to send Sawsan and her

admiration, as he said, that he could not but feel sorry that the majority of Egyptians would not be able to share his enjoyment of the book.<sup>116</sup>

### **Getting the Work of the Academy Out There**

Despite the efforts of the academy to simplify grammar rules and the writing, Taha Hussein did not hide his disappointment with the result. He explained in 1955 that the academy had tried hard, but was unlucky delivering the work it had done to the people. In terms of simplifying the writing, he said the academy did not receive enough cooperation to implement its recommendations in a way that would make them useful, and called for taking these recommendations more seriously. In one of the rare instances in which Hussein admitted his inability to assist in an endeavor related to the language, he implicitly referred to his blindness when he asked his audience not to question him on how to simplify the writing. “Do not ask me how to make the writing easier,” he implored.<sup>117</sup> For years, the academy had examined various propositions for changing the writing, including ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fahmī’s. In 1947, an open competition was announced in the newspapers with a 1,000-pound prize to be awarded to the best proposal for simplifying the Arabic writing, and members of the academy were not allowed to participate. The committee received over 200 proposals and studying these proposals carried on until May 1952. Eventually, however, the committee decided that none of the proposals

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siblings to French schools, while Taha Hussein advised his daughter Amina to send them to public schools. Interview with Sawsan El-Zayyat, Cairo, October 20, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 615.

<sup>117</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 95. In the transcription of the lecture, this sentence, “Wa-lā tas’alūnī anā ‘an taysīr al-kitābah kaifa yakūn,” is in a separate paragraph. Reading this line, initially, I thought Hussein was excluding himself from the task because of his displeasure with how it was being handled, as sometimes he refused further discussions on certain issues if he was vexed. Most likely, however, he was referring to his blindness here.

represented a workable solution, cancelled the prize and called for further studies.<sup>118</sup> Finally in 1956, the academy participated in a committee organized by the cultural division of the Arab League to which representatives from various Arab countries had also been invited. Collectively it was decided to drop the question of finding ways to simplify writing by hand and focus instead on standardizing writing in print, especially in school textbooks to ensure students learned the correct pronunciation.<sup>119</sup>

In terms of the grammar, Hussein accused those who monopolized the language and its grammar of having resisted the efforts of the academy to simplify it. “Those who monopolize grammar, or those who monopolize the Arabic language, have decided, amongst themselves one day, that reforming the grammar would be a corruption of the Qur’an.”<sup>120</sup> He said he could not understand why such a link was made between grammar and the Qur’an

When the Qur’an came down, Arabic grammar did not exist. When the Qur’an was recited during the first half of the first century, grammar did not exist. Grammar was created afterwards, and so, it did not accompany the Qur’an. The Qur’an had existed without grammar.<sup>121</sup>

Hussein explained that classical grammarians put down grammar rules, and then described already-existing words or case endings that did not match their rules as exceptions. Nothing, he

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<sup>118</sup> *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 9 (1957): 283-5. The committee received more proposals however, and met in 1955 to study them, and in the meantime the Cultural Division of the Arab League created a committee for the same purpose. Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, *Majma‘ al-lughah al-‘arabīyah fī thalāthīn ‘āmān, 1932-1962, māḍīh wa-ḥādiruh* [The Arabic Language Academy in Thirty Years: Its Past and Present] (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Amīriyah, 1964), 87.

<sup>120</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 98.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. In *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, Hussein referred again to his love of grammar and his wish for the specialists in the language and its literature to study it carefully and in depth, but that it should not weigh on the majority of students. Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 311.

Patel has referred to other serious attempts to simplify grammar that were also met with resistance: Jirmānus Farḥāt’s *Baḥṭh al-maṭālib* (1707) and Fāris al-Shidyāq’s *Ghunyat al-ṭālib wa-munyat al-rāghib* (1872) in which he tried to offer abridgements of the classical grammar books. Patel also mentions the Andalusian scholar, Ibn Maḍḍā’ al-Qurṭubī (d. 1194) who was the first to start what Patel describes as the “unpopular drive towards simplification” of grammar in his book *al-Raḍḍ ‘ala al-nuḥah* [Refutation of the Grammarians]. See Patel, *The Arab Nahdah*, 108-9.



insisted, forbade the creation of a new simplified grammar that codified the rules of the language without changing it. He admitted that the Arabic grammar was one of the closest Arabic sciences to his heart as he “finds pleasure in reading difficult grammar books, despite the philosophy and the complexity that characterize them.” But if he and other language specialists liked to read and study such complex works, it would be “foolish” as he described it, to subject hundreds of thousands of young men and women to learning the existing grammar, with its “problems, difficulty and convolution.”<sup>122</sup> Only with a simplified grammar, he said, could the youth learn the language “with ease and without violence.”<sup>123</sup> In *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, Hussein had made a similar call for simplifying the grammar so that students would not be burdened with its philosophy, and argued that only language specialists needed to go into such expansive details.<sup>124</sup> As he explained in one of his reports to the minister of public instruction, he believed it was silly to teach grammar the way it was taught a thousand years ago in Basrah and Kufah.<sup>125</sup> The reluctance to modify this ancient teaching method, according to Taha Hussein, was a result of an erroneous assumption that grammar *was* the language, and that grammar should not be touched given that it was the language of the Qur’an and the ḥadīth and that it should be preserved. He argued that the language itself had developed and changed several times over the course of its history without having any impact on the Qur’an or the ḥadīth.<sup>126</sup>

Taha Hussein was disappointed because the academy had submitted its recommendations for the simplification of grammar in 1944 to the ministry of public instruction, but these reports,

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<sup>122</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i’rāb,” 98-9.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>124</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 311.

<sup>125</sup> Private Papers/Report Draft from Taha Hussein to the minister of public instruction (no date).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. In another report draft to the undersecretary of the ministry of public instruction, Hussein believed the modified and simplified Arabic Language curriculum could be ready without delay for the school year 1935-6, so one could assume the first report was written prior to 1935. Private Papers/Report Draft from Taha Hussein to the undersecretary of the minister of public instruction (no date).

complained Taha Hussein in 1955, were still “asleep” in the drawers of the ministry waiting to be taken into consideration.<sup>127</sup> According to Ibrāhīm Madkūr, who succeeded Hussein as president of the academy, these recommendations were more than enough to facilitate the learning and teaching of grammar and morphology. Madkūr lamented how the ministry did not follow through with rolling out the new curriculum in state schools.<sup>128</sup> He noted how enthusiastic Hussein had been about this task and how he offered to write the new grammar book himself.<sup>129</sup>

The lack of cooperation from the ministry of public instruction was not the only difficulty facing the academy. Members of the academy in this early formative period realized they had to agree first amongst themselves on how to carry out their duties. For example, they had to decide not only on the methods to use for the creation of new terms, but also on how to disseminate their work to the public. Regarding technical questions, Ibrāhīm Madkūr explained that it was not until 1949 that members of the academy had settled to some extent on what to do with the new words in circulation. The academy decided that its duty was to record the terms scientists and specialists were using in their respective fields, in addition to words from the colloquial that had their origin in classical Arabic. Then the respective committees were to decide on the equivalent correct terms for them. This included the Arabization of foreign words if the experts could not agree on equivalent terms from the language itself.<sup>130</sup> Part of the problem the academy faced with coining new terms, according to Madkūr, was the lack of specialized literary and

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<sup>127</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mushkilat al-i‘rāb,” 102.

<sup>128</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “al-Majma‘ fī rub‘ qarn” [The Academy in Twenty-five Years], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 15 (1962): 115-9 and “a-Majma‘ fī khidmat al-lughah al-‘Arabīyah” [The Academy in the Service of the Arabic Language], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 22 (1967): 23-4.

<sup>129</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Tāhā Ḥusayn mukāfiḥan” [Tāhā Ḥusayn a Fighter], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 33 (May 1974): 256.

<sup>130</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Majma‘ al-lughah al-‘Arabīyah fī aḥad ‘ashar ‘āman” [The Arabic Language Academy in Eleven Years], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 8 (1955): 12. (Session 16: October 10, 1949 to May 29, 1950)

scientific academies, like the ones operating in France and which worked closely with the Académie Française to standardize scientific terminology.<sup>131</sup>

While the academy could propose various changes to the language – on condition that none of these changes broke any of the standard rules governing correct language usage – it did not have the authority to impose its recommendations, and did not seek to do so either. Madkūr states that members of the academy deliberated on what to do with the various terms that they approved, published or sent to various organizations. Should writers and researchers be forced to use these terms? “Fortunately,” Madkūr went on, “[the academy] firmly opposed such an idea, and left writers and researchers free to decide for themselves.” By approving certain terms and not others, members of the academy believed that the academy was giving more legitimacy to the correct terms, and this, its members judged, was enough.<sup>132</sup>

Other problems had a more direct impact on widening the gap between the academy’s recommendations and the general public. Publishing these recommendations, as well as the academy conference proceedings and its periodical, was a major concern. Forced to rely on the state printing press (al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Amīriyah) through the ministry of public instruction, the academy was not free to publish systematically or on time. The Second World War and the lack of printing paper only made matters worse and resulted in a severe backlog.<sup>133</sup> As a result, the academy had to publish its periodical sometimes years after the actual meetings had taken place, and its work was therefore not made available to the public in a consistent manner. Taha Hussein pushed repeatedly for the academy to have its own printing press, but he was unsuccessful.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Majma‘ al-lughah al-‘arabīyah fī aḥad ‘ashar ‘āman,” 13.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Taha Hussein mukāfiḥan,” 256.

Furthermore, Madkūr admitted that within the academy, addressing the various issues that came up took a long time and resulted in extended debates. He identified two opposing currents within the academy: “one of them is protective of the past and holds on to it, and the other is driven toward the new and is proud of it.” As a result, Madkūr explained that decisions were often postponed and sometimes the same issue was brought up more than once, especially as the number of academy members increased. Still, Madkūr praised those debates, the rigor that went into them and the academy members who fully understood that they were deciding on the future of the language. He described these long discussions as “the way to uncover the truth, and the means to connect the present with the past, moderately, without excess or exaggeration.”<sup>135</sup>

Summarizing the accomplishments of the academy from its creation until 1965, a few years before Taha Hussein’s death, Ibrāhīm Madkūr explained that the academy had taken over fifty decisions in its effort to standardize the Arabization (ta‘rīb) of foreign terms and the derivation (ishtiqaq) of new ones. Regarding terminology, the academy published 3,500 new terms in 1942, then 9,590 terms in 1957 and 2,357 terms in 1960. This in addition to various dictionaries, including *al-Mu‘jam al-Waṣīt*, written along the lines of *La Petite Larousse*, and which appeared in its full version in 1960. Several volumes from a dictionary for the words in the Qur’an had also found their way to the printing press.<sup>136</sup> Taha Hussein had had many discussions with Sheikh al-Azhar al-Marāghī to have the dictionary of the Qur’an sorted historically.<sup>137</sup> The academy also published several volumes of philosophical, geographical and geological dictionaries.<sup>138</sup> In 1946, the academy decided to start writing a grand dictionary for

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<sup>135</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Majma‘ al-lughah al-‘arabīyah fī ‘aḥad ‘ashar ‘āman,” 15.

<sup>136</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “al-Majma‘ fī rub‘ qarn,” 115-9 and “al-Majma‘ fī khidmat al-lughah al-‘arabīyah,” 23-4.

<sup>137</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “Taha Hussein mukāfiḥan,” 256.

<sup>138</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, “al-Majma‘ fī rub‘ qarn,” 115-9 and “al-Majma‘ fī khidmat al-lughah al-‘arabīyah,” 23-4.

the Arabic language.<sup>139</sup> In 1948, Taha Hussein was appointed as the rapporteur responsible for creating the model the academy was to adopt for this dictionary.<sup>140</sup> Hussein, according to Madkūr, spent years studying and carefully revising this model before submitting it in 500 pages for the feedback of the members of the academy in 1956.<sup>141</sup> Hussein insisted on attending the academy meetings, even after his health had deteriorated and he had to be carried in and out of the academy, as shown in the photograph below.<sup>142</sup>



### **Taha Hussein and the End of the Kuttāb System**

In the remaining sections, this chapter looks at Taha Hussein's role in abolishing an older system of learning that provided a very different kind of language training and successfully

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> *Majallat Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabīyah* 7 (1953): 181-3. (Session 14: October 6, 1947 to May 31, 1948)

<sup>141</sup> Ibrāhīm Madkūr, "Taha Hussein mukāfiḥan," 256, "al-Majma' fī rub' qarn," 115-9 and "al-Majma' fī khidmat al-lughah al-'arabīyah," 23-4.

<sup>142</sup> The photograph is from Kamāl al-Mallākh, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Qāhir al-ẓalām* [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn the Conqueror of Darkness] (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1973), 241. His wife Suzanne can be seen in the background.

prepared students for their future higher studies at al-Azhar and other madāris. For centuries, Egyptian children learned to read and write, and memorized the holy Qur'an at the kuttāb. Memorizing the entire Qur'an and being able to recite it without making a single pronunciation mistake was not an easy task that only a few managed to accomplish. As they went on to pursue their higher studies, students learned the meaning of the verses they had memorized as children, in addition to the Arabic grammar and other sciences. In the nineteenth century, these kuttābs started to lose their importance amidst strong calls to replace them with modern schools that taught modern subjects and carefully supervised students' health. Such calls gained more and more ground, and the kuttābs gradually came under state supervision. Eventually, Taha Hussein integrated them into the state primary education system.

On June 7, 1951, Taha Hussein, who was then minister of public instruction, submitted to the Prime Minister Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās, forty copies of a project for a decree restructuring the entire system of primary education in Egypt. In line with his belief already discussed in the previous chapter that knowledgeable technocrats must assess the long-term impact of new policies on education, he had obtained the approval of the Supreme Council of Education on his new project before he submitted it to Naḥḥās. Parliament was to then ratify it so it could come into effect. The proposed law abolished the difference between elementary education and the more prestigious primary education, a division that education experts in Egypt had been trying to bridge since 1867. Students of elementary schools, or the former kuttābs, would finally receive the same education as their colleagues in state primary schools. After this law, nothing in theory would stop them from pursuing their secondary and higher education. Similarly, nothing would hinder the state from using the centuries-old extensive network of old kuttābs from dispensing a unified national curriculum to students in the most remote Egyptian villages.

In his proposed law, Taha Hussein argued that it only made sense to have an elementary education when it was free while other students had to pay fees in kindergarten and primary schools. With the establishment of the gratuity in primary and secondary education in 1944 and 1950 respectively, he argued that there was no need for keeping a separate stream for elementary education. Elementary education comprised students from the age of five to twelve, thus overlapping with kindergarten (from ages five to eight) and primary education (from ages seven to eleven and above).<sup>143</sup> It made no sense, he went on, to continue to have more than one system of education with different characteristics and different objectives, especially when elementary schools continued to bear the stigma of “poverty, backwardness, narrow-mindedness and coming between students and high-quality education (al-ta‘līm al-rāqī).”<sup>144</sup> He was thus proposing to merge both systems into a compulsory six-year primary education system.<sup>145</sup>

Earlier in 1950 and in preparation for this decision, Taha Hussein had moved the authority over the provincial councils that supervised elementary schools from the ministry of interior to the ministry of public instruction.<sup>146</sup> These councils oversaw the financing and running of elementary schools in the provinces. He still allowed the provinces some control over the schools, for example, by proposing to create committees responsible for elementary education in each educational zone as they were called, which were to be chaired by the controller of the zone and include three members known for their interest in education and culture, also from the zone itself so they would be familiar with its schools and students. The committee would prepare the

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<sup>143</sup> As organized by law number 46 for the year 1933.

<sup>144</sup> DWQ/MW/0075-057071/Minutes of the Session of June 17, 1951/ “Memorandum for a Law Organizing Primary Education (Projet de loi relatif à l’organisation de l’enseignement primaire).”

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. As elementary school students started learning a foreign language after their colleagues in primary schools, the ministry decided not to teach foreign languages until the fifth year of primary education when students were ten years of age.

<sup>146</sup> Law number 108 for the year 1950.



budget, recommend areas in which to build new schools, and investigate the state of these facilities. The new law gave the minister of public instruction the power to appoint headmasters and teachers, organize their transfer and approve their promotions through committees created for these purposes. Priority would be given to teachers from the same areas to spare them the difficulty of moving.<sup>147</sup> To understand the significance of the law proposed by Taha Hussein, the following section of the chapter situates his decision in the context of repeated nationalist calls for regulating elementary education dating back to the reign of Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-1879).

### **Nationalist Historiography on Elementary Education**

Egyptian nationalists and education experts had been calling for providing a national education for all young Egyptians throughout the country, a measure that they saw as a necessary rectification to the existing modern educational system, introduced by Muhammad Ali to provide

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<sup>147</sup> DWQ/MW/0075-057071/Minutes of the Session of 17 June 1951/ “Memorandum for a Law Organizing Primary Education.”

In his effort to give all students equal access to education, Hussein also proposed a new law to reorganize secondary education to bridge the gap between secondary schools and technical schools. In his memorandum, the minister argued that despite passing their primary school exams, secondary schools attracted the better caliber students providing them with the education required for higher education. Technical schools, however, whether commercial, agricultural or industrial, only provided the technical training required for these professions denying advanced students the possibility of continuing their education in various universities and institutes. The law, therefore, proposed unifying the curriculum as much as possible in the first two years of secondary education, henceforth called the preparatory education, after which students can continue with their secondary education or go to technical schools depending on their grades and performance. Students could thus shift from one track to the other without complications, and both tracks would receive similar curricula and basic subjects on general culture. Ideally, the minister added, he would like to have secondary schools large enough to accommodate both tracks in the same building, as was the case in large cities abroad, but the lack of facilities and the difficulty of setting up workshops and green fields made the idea unfeasible. In technical schools, the remaining three years of secondary education would still include a “fair level of cultural education” so students could maintain a level of education that was not too far from their colleagues in secondary schools. Should they wish to continue their higher education, and should their grades allow it, they would only need a year or two of secondary education before they could apply for higher education. The new law also ensured that the same curriculum would apply in both schools for boys and girls, where the latter, until then, had an extra sixth year “to lighten the burden on the girls and make room for home economics and needlework.” In the new system, secondary education would allow for this kind of training for girls “who wish to prepare themselves for motherhood and are not inclined to continue higher education,” while in the boys’ sections there would be subjects dealing with handicrafts and horticulture. DWQ/MW/0075-057071/Minutes of the Session of June 17, 1951/ “Memorandum on Project for a Law Organizing Secondary Education (Projet de loi relatif à l’organisation de l’enseignement secondaire).”



his army machine with the necessary technicians. The Egyptian historiography on education reflected this opinion, and saw a unified national education as a prerequisite for any successful modernization. In 1945 for example, the nationalist historian Shafīq Ghurbāl described the existing system as an “inverted pyramid that started with the top without creating the proper base.”<sup>148</sup> In his preface to one of the most thorough works of reference on the history of modern education in Egypt, *Tārīkh al-ta‘līm fī miṣr min nihāyat ḥukm Muḥammad ‘Alī ila awā’il ḥukm Tawfīq (1848-1882)* by his student Aḥmad ‘Izzat ‘Abd al-Karīm, Ghurbāl hailed Muhammad Ali’s efforts in introducing a modern European system of education to Egypt. Yet, Ghurbāl argued that it was not a national educational system in the proper sense of the word, as it did not seek to educate the masses. He believed that providing mass national education was the biggest challenge facing education in Egypt.<sup>149</sup> In a similar vein, ‘Abd al-Karīm argued that Egypt’s elitist educational system as introduced by Muhammad Ali was vulnerable and unstable, and described it as “uneasy, suspended in the air without being rooted in the Egyptian soil.”<sup>150</sup>

The historian Yoav di-Capua has shown in *The Gatekeepers of the Arab Past* how the Egyptian academic school of history had fully adopted the “founder’s paradigm.” The academy was working within a framework that regarded Muhammad Ali as the founder of the modern Egyptian state and who ushered the country into modernity. Although both Ghurbāl and ‘Abd al-Karīm were critical of the “inverted pyramid,” they did not question the underlying assumption imposed by Muhammad Ali which defined the importance of education only in terms of its utility to the state. Their focus was therefore on how essential primary education was for the

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<sup>148</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, Aḥmad ‘Izzat, *Tārīkh al-ta‘līm fī miṣr min nihāyat ḥukm Muḥammad ‘Alī ila awā’il ḥukm Tawfīq (1848-1882)* [The History of Education in Egypt from the End of the Reign of Muhammad Ali to the Beginning of the Reign of Tawfīq (1848-1882)] (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Naṣr, 1945), mīm.

<sup>149</sup> (Al-ta‘līm al-qawmī al-sha‘bī) Ibid., mīm, sīn and nūn.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta‘līm*, vol. 1, 5.

creation of ideal citizens who were conscious of their rights and aware of their national duties. Rather than expanding the discussion to raise questions about what education could and should do, for the individual for example, their focus was on nation building. As such, the old *kuttāb* had no place in the new system of education. It did not teach the required modern subjects and did not prepare students for secondary and higher education the way the state primary education did. In their view, the *kuttāb* had to go.

This nationalist historiography depicted the struggle to eradicate the *kuttāb* as a long bitter one. Historians like ‘Abd al-Karīm highlighted how several attempts were made to transform the *kuttābs* into state primary schools and how the British occupation brought these attempts to a standstill. ‘Abd al-Karīm credited Rifā‘ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873) and Adham Pasha, the general inspector for schools under Said Pasha (r. 1854-1863) with making the first serious attempt to educate the masses, as he described it. In 1855, they submitted a proposal to Said to create ten national schools fully funded and supervised by the government on an experimental basis. These schools would be open to all students living in the country, whether “Turks or Arabs,” as came in the proposal, regardless of their age or wealth, with the condition that “their bodies and clothes are clean and the students are free from repulsive diseases.”<sup>151</sup> Although this proposal did not have any impact on education during Said’s reign, ‘Abd al-Karīm hailed it as having “defined the rules upon which the future of education and culture in Egypt was built.”<sup>152</sup> Among these defining rules was the necessity of reforming the educational system in place, that is to say al-Azhar and the *kuttābs*, to accommodate a growing and necessary contact with Europe. National schools, as stipulated in the proposal, were to be responsible for

Acquiring human knowledge that leads to the prosperity existing in foreign countries, such as the sciences, the arts, some arithmetic, engineering, geography, histories, and also

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<sup>151</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta‘līm*, vol. 3, 8.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta‘līm*, vol. 1, 177.

languages such as Arabic, Turkish and Persian and the like, the ignorance of which is now considered to be a deficiency given the contact the Egyptian people have with other peoples and the connected relations between the government, other states and religions as well as the commercial transactions, especially as this is increasing both in magnitude and in strength.<sup>153</sup>

For the first time, the government was to get involved in running the *kuttābs*, which until then were organized and funded entirely by the people themselves and through *waqfs* (religious endowments). The government was to supervise the *kuttābs* and introduce the necessary reform (*iṣlāḥ*) in “all of them as much as possible.”<sup>154</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm saw Ṭaḥṭāwī’s proposal as having set the principle that it was the government’s duty (*farḍ ‘ayn*) to assume this role. In his proposal, Ṭaḥṭāwī likened this role to that of a father whose obligation was to get involved and help his children whether they were rich or poor. In Ṭaḥṭāwī’s view, the rich had the financial means but ignored how they could help their children prosper, while the poor lacked the necessary financial means too.<sup>155</sup> These principles came into a stronger effect under Ismail (r. 1863-1879) who ordered the construction of primary schools in the provincial capitals, but most of these schools were not finished during his time.<sup>156</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm argued that Khedive Ismail himself was taken back by the magnitude of the project, and questioned whether he should not rely instead on the extensive network of *kuttābs* already in place throughout the entire country.<sup>157</sup>

The first concrete official measures taken to bring the *kuttābs* under government control dated back to the famous regulations of Rajab 10, 1274 or November 7, 1868, regulations that were created by another famous reformer, ‘Alī Mubārak (1823-1893) and approved by a committee that included Ṭaḥṭāwī. The law was considered the first detailed attempt by the state

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<sup>153</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol. 3, 5.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>156</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol. 2, no. 1, 37-8.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 38-9.

to organize primary education in Egypt including state education offered in its schools established on a modern European model (*al-ta'lim al-amīrī*) and the *kuttābs* (*al-ta'lim al-ahlī*). These regulations suggested that like the *kuttābs*, primary schools should also rely on funding from waqfs and the people themselves, while the state was only to provide technical assistance in terms of buildings, curricula, teachers and regular inspection. Although only concerned with primary education, the principle that the government should extend its control and supervision to all institutions of learning and unify their curriculum so that “methods of learning become one and the same, useful and good,” can be traced to these regulations of 1868.<sup>158</sup>

The *kuttābs*, according to ‘Alī Mubārak, needed serious reform. He described them as “crumbling bones” (*‘izām ramīmah*) and argued that they were disorganized and offered a dismal education as the rulers had ignored them for years. “It was impossible to leave them the way they are,” he concluded.<sup>159</sup> Yet these regulations did not change much in the way the *kuttābs* were run. Elementary arithmetic was added to the curriculum and books taught in the *kuttāb* had to be approved by *Diwān al-Madāris*. Teachers, or the *mu’adibīn* as they were called, were henceforth expected to know basic arithmetic and had to be licensed to teach by the *dīwan*. Government inspection was limited to verifying the cleanliness of the *kuttābs* and ensuring the regularity of the learning process.<sup>160</sup> Yet even implementing these simple changes was not easy. The Rajab regulations did not specify how the villages were to fund their *kuttābs*, so the necessary funds were lacking, and finding qualified *mu’adibīn* who knew arithmetic was a major obstacle.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol. 2, no. 1, 55.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 62. ‘Abd al-Karīm highlighted that the funding problem had been recently resolved by creating the Provincial Councils that became responsible for collecting the necessary funds, and by creating the training divisions necessary for the *fuqahā’* and the *‘urafā’*, and then the schools for elementary teachers to provide the required *mu’adibīn*. See ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol 2., no. 1, 62. Taha Hussein brought these provincial councils under the control of the ministry of public instruction in 1951 as explained above.

The next milestone before the stop that the British occupation imposed on efforts to educate the masses was a commission put into place by ‘Alī Ibrāhīm, the minister (nāzir) of instruction in 1880. ‘Abd al-Karīm saw this commission as having laid the basis for all educational reform and pedagogical studies that followed.<sup>162</sup> Preoccupied by the same concern as his predecessors, ‘Alī Ibrāhīm measured the success of any educational reform by its success in reaching out to the masses. He believed such an education should “give them a sense of their national rights and their duties toward themselves, their families and toward the government.” Although the Rajab regulations recognized the importance of bringing the kuttābs under the control of the government, these regulations failed to introduce any real changes to the kuttāb system. The Commission, on the other hand, proposed changing the kuttābs into primary schools, which would take on the students and the teachers from the old kuttābs and then abolish them. Funding this new system would come from a special tax imposed on the people in addition to further assistance from the government.<sup>163</sup>

The government continued, however, to focus on creating primary schools to provide its bureaucracy with the necessary administrators. All attention was on preparing the buildings, the teachers and the curriculum, while the kuttābs hardly changed, and their role became limited to fighting illiteracy. “Compared to primary education,” concluded ‘Abd al-Karīm, “elementary education is weaker and poorer in buildings, teaching, furniture and everything.”<sup>164</sup> Even in its report, the Commission highlighted that it found the teaching technique at the kuttāb “defective,” as much time was wasted repeating the same lesson to each student individually.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol. 2, no. 1, 88.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 85-8.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 346-7.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 332.

‘Abd al-Karīm distinguished between the Rajab regulations of 1867 and the Commission in 1880 in that the former only attempted to regulate the existing institutions, whereas the latter proposed a new system altogether based on the two existing ones, the state schools and the kuttābs. He also saw the Commission as more “national” in its vision, in the sense that it imposed a tax by which the people became involved in financing the education of their children. The Commission also insisted that part of the government budget must be spent on education.<sup>166</sup> This initiative was stalled, however, due to the unstable political situation in the end of 1881, which was followed by the British occupation in 1882.<sup>167</sup>

The British policies during the occupation from 1882 until Britain’s unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922 only aggravated national concerns over elementary education. The official version of the history of education in Egypt, as published by the ministry of education, views the closing down of state schools by British officials as an attempt to “thwart

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 339-40.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 85-8. The Commission proposed to convert the kuttābs into primary schools of third and second degrees depending on the needs of the villages and the number of students. Schools of the third degree (enseignement primaire du degré inférieur) would be composed of one classroom with a maximum of sixty students, one faqīh, and one ‘arīf as well if the number of students exceeded forty. Students would be taught the Qur’an, reading, writing, elementary arithmetic, elementary information on Egyptian geography, hygiene and physical education. Each village with a population between two and five thousand inhabitants was to get such a school. Schools of second degree would teach roughly the same subjects, have two classrooms with the number of students not exceeding one hundred and ten. Each markaz capital (sub regional capital) or a town with population of five to ten thousand would get a school of the second degree. Finally, schools of the first degree (enseignement primaire du degré supérieur) would prepare their students for preparatory schools (madāris tajhizīyah). They would learn measurements, sketching, agriculture and natural history in areas where people farmed the land, and lessons in commerce, bookkeeping and economics for the areas where people worked more in commerce. Students were not to exceed two hundred students. Such a school would have a head teacher, four teachers, and the required number of ‘arīfs and servants. They were to be built in Cairo, provincial capitals, marākiz and all provincial cities, with a school for every ten thousand inhabitants. The Commission hoped that with every new primary school that opened, a kuttāb would close down. Teachers from the old kuttāb would get the priority when hiring for the new schools provided they proved they could teach the new material. They would be encouraged to attend the school for teachers to complete their training and earn their degrees. ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Tārīkh al-ta’līm*, vol. 2, no. 1, 333-5.

national education using the debt crisis as a pretext.”<sup>168</sup> Closing down existing schools, assigning a limited annual budget to education, introducing expensive fees in primary and secondary schools, as well as using English as a language of instruction to the detriment of Arabic, became the hallmarks of the British educational policy in Egypt.<sup>169</sup> In *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882-1914*, Robert Tignor showed that by 1892 the only remaining higher schools were the training schools for teachers, the military, the police, and the schools of law, medicine and engineering. School fees discouraged enrolment into primary and secondary schools.<sup>170</sup> If in 1881, 70% of students received financial support from the government, by 1892, 73% of students were paying for all their expenses themselves.<sup>171</sup> Based on their experience in

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<sup>168</sup> Wizārat al-Tarbīyah wa-l-Ta‘līm, *Mi‘ah wa-sitūn ‘āman min al-ta‘līm fī miṣr: Wuzarā’ al-ta‘līm wa-abraz injāzātihim (1837-1997)* [One Hundred and Sixty Years of Education in Egypt: Ministers of Education and their Accomplishments (1837-1997)] (Cairo: Maṭbu‘āt Wizārat al-Tarbīyah wa-l-Ta‘līm, 2000), 11.

<sup>169</sup> In 1885, the budget for the ministry of public instruction was fixed at 70,000 Egyptian Pounds per year. See Lord Cromer, Annual Report for 1903, HCSP, Egypt No. 1 (1904), vol. CXI, cd. 1951, quoted in Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882-1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1966, 322. Although the English and French languages were taught at schools under Ismail, most subjects were taught in Arabic. French was more popular than English, and if Arabic was seen as unsuitable for teaching certain subjects, those were taught in French. As English became more important in matters of bureaucracy, there was more demand for teaching English in Egyptian schools. See Cromer, *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (New York, 1910), 103, quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 325. The British argued Arabic as a language was “imprecise” and did not have the necessary vocabulary, especially for the sciences. They were glad to replace Arabic by English wherever possible, and the program to install English as the first language in government schools came to a fruition in 1900 when many courses were taught in English in primary schools, and all subjects except Arabic and some mathematics were taught in English or French in secondary schools. See Aḥmad Shafīq, *Mudhakkarātī fī niṣf qarn*, vol. 2, part 1 (Cairo: 1936), 88, quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 325-6.

<sup>170</sup> Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt*, 322.

<sup>171</sup> Lord Cromer, Annual Report for 1901, HCSP, Egypt, No. 1, (1902), vol. CXXX, cd. 1012, quoted in Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt*, 324.

Tignor argues that Cromer changed the educational policies started by Muhammad Ali and Ismail, which ensured that the state funded the schools, in order to use the money to finance more profitable sectors of the economy (such as measures to increase cotton production) as well as other areas in the educational system such as teacher training colleges and the kuttābs. Cromer was in favor of limiting the number of graduates getting into the government administration. This approach, according to Tignor, came out of Cromer’s personal belief in a laissez-faire liberal philosophy, which did not consider funding education as part of a government’s responsibility. Cromer’s policies, concludes Tignor, allowed the wealthier classes to monopolize education and government positions. See Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 324-5.

In her article, “Competing, Overlapping, and Contradictory Agendas: Egyptian Education under British Occupation, 1882-1922,” Mona Russell investigated how the official narrative on education had pitted nationalists against the British in a struggle for educating the masses. She picks up on Tignor’s idea that the

India, the first British Consul General in Egypt, Sir Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer), and other British officials feared education would only encourage anti-British nationalist sentiments. Tignor quoted Cromer who confided in one of his colleagues that “Whatever we do, education must produce its natural results, and one of these natural results, both in India and in Egypt, will be the wish to get rid of the foreigner.”<sup>172</sup> The old religious educational system, however, did not pose such a threat. In 1898, the British administration set up a program to bring the *kuttābs* under government inspection and receive government subsidies in return. Under this agreement, the *kuttābs* were also to start teaching reading, writing and basic arithmetic under directives from the government. Cromer wanted mass education in Egypt to consist of “the three R’s in the vernacular language, nothing more.”<sup>173</sup> Under this program government inspection would keep an eye on the subjects taught as well as the cleanliness of the *kuttābs*. The number of schools under government inspection rose from 301 with 7,536 students to 4,432 with 15,6542 students between 1898 and 1906.<sup>174</sup> Given the scarcity of well-trained teachers capable of teaching the new proposed subjects, the program was not very successful, and only a fraction of the country’s

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British policies appealed to rich Egyptians and claims that these policies “met the needs of wealthy Egyptians as much as it did the British.” She finds it “natural that these Egyptians would work with the British to improve the transportation-communication infrastructure, expand agricultural output, and favor foreign business interests at the expense of social, educational, and welfare services for the masses.” Mona Russell, “Competing, Overlapping, and Contradictory Agendas: Egyptian Education Under British Occupation, 1882-1922,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 21, no. 1-2, 2001: 51.

Nevertheless, there was an exponential rise in the number of schools after the 1922 independence, which reflects a genuine interest on the part of the elite and ruling classes in making state education more accessible. Similarly, the creation of the Egyptian University in 1908 was the work of the elite with the blessing of the ruling classes too, which was in direct opposition to the British policies. Ironically, Russell finishes her article by saying that: “Clearly, Egyptians of all classes viewed education as a path to a brighter future, both for individuals and for the country as a whole.” See Russell, “Competing, Overlapping and Contradictory Agendas,” 57.

<sup>172</sup> Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 320. Quoted from Cromer to Gorst, March 12, 1908, The Cromer Papers, PRO, FO 633/14.

<sup>173</sup> Cromer to A. G. Fremantle, December 17, 1896, Cromer Papers, PRO, FO 633/8, quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 329-30.

<sup>174</sup> Lord Cromer, Annual Report for 1906, HCSP, Egypt, No. 1 (1907), vol. c, cd. 3394, quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 330.



kuttābs came under that new system.<sup>175</sup> Cromer continued to favor the kuttābs, however, and wrote in his 1902 annual report that his first policy regarding education in Egypt was to make elementary education accessible to as many people as possible through the kuttābs.<sup>176</sup> Adding insult to injury, the British decided in 1916 to transform the kuttābs into free elementary schools for the poor. To the dismay of nationalists, instead of expanding the state schooling system and trying to incorporate the kuttābs into that system as recommended by the Commission in 1880, the British deeply hindered the former and encouraged the latter.

Following Egypt's nominal independence of 1922 and re-establishing the Egyptian government's control over education, reversing all or some of these British policies became the main goal for successive Egyptian governments. These efforts culminated in Taha Hussein's decision to unify the two streams of primary education, and re-introducing free pre-university education. Even Taha Hussein's nemesis in the ministry of public instruction, the pedagogue and Egypt's first minister of education after the coup of 1952, Ismā'īl al-Qabbānī, also agreed on the importance of unifying the two streams of primary education. In fact, he credited himself with having been the first to make such a call in order to remove the social stigma associated with elementary schools, which divided the country into two classes, one that had power and wealth (whose children went to primary schools) while the other was poor and subdued (and could only send their children to elementary schools).<sup>177</sup> Moreover, as a pedagogue, he argued that children should not have to memorize words that they did not understand. Citing other European pedagogues like the British John Adams, Qabbānī believed that children in their early years of

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<sup>175</sup> Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 330.

<sup>176</sup> Lord Cromer, Annual Report for 1902, HCSP, Egypt, No. 1 (1903), vol. LXXXVII, cd. 1529, quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt*, 322.

<sup>177</sup> Ismā'īl al-Qabbānī, *Dirāsāt fī tanẓīm al-ta' līm bi-miṣr* [Studies on Organizing Education in Egypt] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣrīyah, 1958), 13.

education needed more exposure to sensory experiences. Instead, elementary schools, he lamented, only offered these six- and seven-year-old children words and symbols (alfāz wa-rumūz) which they had no way of understanding.<sup>178</sup> He denied all accusations that he was calling for stopping the teaching of the Qur'an altogether, and explained that on the contrary, he believed that any moral education should be based on religion. Yet, the religious education he had in mind was very different from what was being offered in elementary schools relying on children having to memorize words from the Qur'an, which they did not understand. In his view, the way the curriculum was set up in elementary schools implied that children had to spend an hour or an hour and a half every day memorizing these words that made no sense to them

Yes, the curriculum suggests teaching the verses which the students can understand, but I don't know how a five- or six-year-old child can understand the Qur'an no matter how much it is interpreted for him. [Teachers] can explain words to him with words, but they cannot make him understand those high values, when his experiences and what he has accumulated provide no elements with which he could understand them. Aren't Qur'anic meanings the apex of wisdom? How can a child begin his mental life with the end after which there is no end? Where is all this from the sensory observation his mind needs?<sup>179</sup>

### **The Kuttāb: A More Generous Reading?**

Among the few scholars who tried to offer a more sympathetic reading of the kuttāb was James Heyworth-Dunne in his well-known work *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt*, which he published in 1939. In this important empirical work, Heyworth-Dunne used archival material from Abdin Palace (later moved to the Egyptian National Archives) in addition to material from Dār al-Kutub (the Egyptian National Library) to offer a thorough survey of the system of modern education in Egypt.<sup>180</sup> While Dunne accepted the necessity of

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>180</sup> At the time he published his book, Heyworth-Dunne was Senior Lecturer in Arabic at the School of Oriental Studies in London, and his work was one of the very few that were critical of the European cultural intervention in Egypt.

introducing a modern educational system in Egypt, he tried to understand the centuries-old Islamic system of learning, including the kuttāb, on its own terms.

Heyworth-Dunne argued that kuttābs fulfilled the function for which they existed as dictated by what Egyptians expected from an elementary education at the time

The system gave the young student all he was expected to know, namely, the recitation of the Kor'an by heart, the recitation of prayers and the correct performance of the movements that went with them. The method of memorizing the Kor'an introduced the student to the system in use in the more advanced circles of education, the basis of which was the memorizing of certain compendiums (matn—pl. mutun); it also familiarized him with the classical tongue, without, of course, giving him any working knowledge of that language.<sup>181</sup>

According to Heyworth-Dunne, the faqīh, or the kuttāb master, made sure, sometimes together with the 'arīf, or the monitor, that the students learnt the holy text by heart, and were able to recite it without making a single pronunciation mistake.<sup>182</sup> Through this task they were also able to learn to read and write. Studying the meaning of the text itself as well as its grammatical analysis were taught at a later stage. Once they left the kuttāb, the students who intended to become sheikhs carried on with their studies at al-Azhar or one of the madāris. Others became apprentices if they were to become part of a trade or commerce.<sup>183</sup> Using a range of sources, mostly al-Jabartī's chronicles, but also the *Description de l'Egypte* and Edward Lane's the albeit classic Orientalist work *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Heyworth-Dunne showed that during the eighteenth century the kuttābs relied almost entirely on waqfs. In such

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<sup>181</sup> Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 6.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 2. The faqīh was a very interesting figure, and Heyworth-Dunne argued that until the eighteenth century the faqīh enjoyed a privileged social status as he was entrusted with educating the young in addition to the various services that he performed in society such as reciting the Qur'an in important events, providing amulets against the evil eye and giving advice, especially to women, on finding husbands, questions of sterility...etc. See Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 5 and 6. The 'arīf, or the monitor, helped the faqīh with his duties and sometimes took the place of the faqīh after the latter's death, or left to become a faqīh at another kuttāb. See Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 3.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 6.

cases the kuttāb was part of a mosque, a sabīl (a drinking-water fountain), a ḥawḍ (water for cattle), or simply a separate room run by a faqīh.<sup>184</sup> Although it is difficult to establish with certainty the number of kuttābs throughout Egypt in the nineteenth century, Heyworth-Dunne quoted *Le Progrès Égyptien* of September 26, 1868, which, speaking of kuttābs, said

These schools are very numerous in Egypt and every village that is slightly populated has its own kuttāb. [...] Once, teachers had been assigned to some kuttābs, a number of which had been richly endowed in order to spread knowledge of Arabic as much as possible. But the various vicissitudes that have befallen the country, combined with the avarice and greed of waqf managers, have succeeded almost everywhere, in putting an end to this earlier comfort.<sup>185</sup>

In his examination of the old educational system, Heyworth-Dunne agreed with other historians writing at the time that learning in Egypt in the eighteenth century was in a state of “decadence” compared to previous, more glorious, days. His explanation was that the Ottoman conquest reduced Egypt to the status of a province obliged to pay a hefty annual tribute to Constantinople.<sup>186</sup> Then he departed from this Eurocentric narrative, which exaggerated the state of decline crediting Napoleon and Muhammad Ali with waking Egypt from its “slumber.” He relied mainly on al-Jabartī to get a better sense of that system of learning during the period directly preceding the arrival of the French in 1798. Jabartī mentioned for example that Cairo had twenty madāris and twenty mosque-schools. Teaching work was carried out in institutions in many other towns as well: Assiut, Birma, Damietta, Dusuq, Faiyum, Girga, Mahallah, Mansurah, Manuf, Rosetta, Tahta and Tanta, while the cities of Alexandria, Gizah, Qalyub, Qena, Qus, Manfalut also provided educational facilities beyond the kuttābs.<sup>187</sup> Dunne used Jabartī’s information to make an inventory of the learning centers, including the madāris and mosque-

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>185</sup> *Le Progrès Égyptien* 13 (September 26, 1868). Cited in Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 4.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>187</sup> Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 19 and 20.

schools. He was careful to mention that the sketch he drew of these institutions and the important scholars associated with them was not conclusive, as Jabartī mentioned them only in passing and never intended to enumerate all existing schools. Yet, Dunne believed that these numbers alone

Show that the Muslim community was not lacking in educational centers and that the system which had been handed down was maintained at a standard compatible with the political and economic standard of the time.<sup>188</sup>

Moreover, Dunne used Jabartī as a reliable source to find out about the new schools and mosques that were built in the eighteenth century, and again by their number, Dunne showed that the old habit by which the rulers and the rich funded the building of such institutions of learning continued right until the French occupation.<sup>189</sup> He was able to conclude that building new schools and mosques had not disappeared, and he went on to argue that the rapid decline of these institutions did not start until the first decade of the nineteenth century. Such a reading is important as it helps us account for dozens of testimonies from reformers, like Taha Hussein, who criticized the status of the kuttābs and the madāris as they found them in the nineteenth century.

Using these old sources, like Jabartī, Heyworth-Dunne gave interesting details about the problems these institutions of learning started to face with the arrival of Napoleon. During the three years of French occupation (1798-1801) Jabartī stopped giving accounts of the ‘ulama who died, and focused instead on those who were executed by the French or those who escaped from Cairo to the provinces. Madrasah life was disorganized and Heyworth-Dunne quoted Edward Lane who said that “learning was in a much more flourishing state in Cairo before the entrance of the French army than it has been of late years. It suffered severely from this invasion; not

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

through direct oppression but in consequence of the panic which this event occasioned, and the troubles by which it was followed.”<sup>190</sup>

Moreover, Muhammad Ali’s ascent to power in 1805 did not allow that system to reorganize itself. Asked by the Ottoman Sultan Maḥmūd II to quell the Wahhabi revolt in Arabia in 1811, Muhammad Ali ordered the confiscation of waqf property in Egypt, including the waqfs supporting al-Azhar and other mosques.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, all schools created by Muhammad Ali were directly or indirectly connected to supplying men or services to his army.<sup>192</sup> In addition to al-Azhar, which supplied students for the non-military schools, Heyworth-Dunne believed that young Egyptians recruited into these schools came primarily from the kuttābs. He referred to an order issued on August 7, 1829 to some functionaries in Upper Egypt to supply ten young men from the kuttābs to study in the dockyards at Alexandria. The order specified that the students had to “between the ages of ten and twenty, sound of limbs and had to know how to read and write.”<sup>193</sup> Egyptians, according to Heyworth-Dunne, understood how these higher schools were directly related to Muhammad Ali’s army and its abhorrent methods of conscription.<sup>194</sup> Consequently, parents refrained from sending their children to the kuttābs fearing they might be sent into state schools. Moreover, Muhammad Ali dealt another blow to that system by confiscating all the waqfs that had been accumulating over the centuries to finance that old system of learning.<sup>195</sup> The consecutive wars led by the Muhammad Ali, the misery that ensued

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<sup>190</sup> Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 101.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. Heyworth-Dunne commented that all contemporary writers condemned these conscription methods and quoted Clot Bey who described that system of conscription as “en effet vicieux, inhumain, déplorable.” Clot Bey, op cite, II/255. For an excellent source on Muhammad Ali’s army, its conscription methods and their impact on the people, see Khaled Fahmy’s *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>195</sup> Heyworth-Dunne, *History of Education*, 153.

and the general disorganization of social life must have also contributed to the disarray of the schools. The old religious school, concluded Heyworth-Dunne, never recovered from these blows and never regained its former position in society.<sup>196</sup>

In another rich account of how students studied at the *kuttāb*, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Jawwād, who was a teacher at the institute of teachers for girls, described his lively experience as a child in his village *kuttāb*. Born in 1887, two years before Taha Hussein, he described *kuttāb* life prior to 1898 when the ministry of public instruction began to interfere in running these schools.<sup>197</sup> The author’s elaborate description of the curriculum, the material the students used, the disciplinary methods, as well as how the *faqīh* and ‘*arīf* were paid, portray a certain fondness of that early system, albeit colored by a certain nostalgia for his village childhood. He did not hide his pride in a system that, despite its simplicity and meager resources, produced some of modern Egypt’s most gifted intellectuals and officials, Ṭahtāwī, ‘Alī Mubārak, Sa‘d Zaghlūl, Aḥmad Ḥishmat and others.<sup>198</sup>

‘Abd al-Jawwād recounted his life in the village *kuttāb* as he experienced it in Kafr Ḥurayn seventy miles to the north of Cairo. He described how the village was divided into various quarters each of which was referred to as a *naḥīyah*, protected by a gate that was closed at night. Each *naḥīyah* had its own *maḍyafah* and a *kuttāb*, indicating that in some villages there were more than one *kuttāb*.<sup>199</sup> Village children could choose their *kuttāb* even if it was not in their own *naḥīyah* depending on the *kuttāb*’s reputation. The reputation came from the attention the *naḥīyah* lavished on it, as well as the reputation of the *kuttāb*’s *faqīh* and how devoted he was

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>197</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Jawwād, *Fī kuttāb al-qarīyah* [In the Village Kuttāb] (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘ārif, 1939), 16. The ministry changed their names from *maktab* to *kuttāb* in 1913. In 1916, it started calling them elementary schools, and renamed the *faqīh* as president and the ‘*arīf* as teacher. Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

to his students. The author's village had four other kuttābs, which were all joined together later to create the village state school.<sup>200</sup> Some parents sent their sons to the kuttāb hoping that one day they would be able to recite the Qur'an in the kuttāb, in weddings or funerals, or to pass around people's houses during certain days of the week for that purpose. Other parents hoped their sons would avoid army conscription, as those who memorized the Qur'an were exempt from serving in the army. Others wanted their children to acquire the prestige associated with knowing the Qur'an by heart, to be called sheikhs and lead people in prayers, or continue their education at al-Azhar or al-Aḥmadī Mosque in Tanta.<sup>201</sup> After the kuttāb, some children went to improve their handwriting with a calligrapher so they could write court petitions, letters or contracts for people, or even work in book editing and publishing. On average, it took five or six years to memorize the Qur'an.<sup>202</sup>

The author's kuttāb was composed of one large room in the house of the faqīh. It was furnished very simply: two or three small mats for the faqīh, the 'arīf and some of the richer children. The others sat on the floor, which was cleaned every morning. The kuttāb had no windows and the light came through the door. There was no washroom in the house, and the children had to use the washroom attached to the mosque if the mosque was near enough, otherwise they relieved themselves in the fields or next to the heaps of manure. The author states that like most school children, he would have preferred to play in the fields with the other children instead of going to school: "It was the prison to which children were driven every day. Or if you will, it was the 'Kaaba' to which they went on pilgrimage against their wish."<sup>203</sup> He described how most of the kids sat on the floor, moving their heads back and forth with their

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 20-3.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 44-6.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 48-9.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 23.



backs bent, indifferent to the dust that attached itself to their clothes, or to the ink that covered their fingers and their clothes as they wiped their slates clean. The children were weak, mal-nourished and pale.<sup>204</sup>

Despite this very humble arrangement, the author mentioned that his village kuttāb was in a much better situation than others, especially in Upper Egypt, where Taha Hussein's own kuttāb was. He quoted the following from a report on the condition of most kuttābs in Upper Egypt submitted to the general secretary of the ministry of public instruction in 1899

Some of [these kuttābs] are nothing but small shacks, without proper ventilation. The roofs are so low it is difficult to stand up or to go inside through the door without too much bending over. Some of them are nothing but small planks in front of house entrances, while others are held in the yards of small houses, which students share with the family of the faqīh. These rooms are unhealthy; they are not aired and they do not receive enough light. Others are in mosques whose washrooms harm the children's health.<sup>205</sup>

In his kuttāb, however, the author and other children enjoyed collecting wood for the fire in winter to keep them warm, and in summer they met in the upper floor of the faqīh's house, which received more light and where the breeze was cooler. A siesta was carefully observed in those hot summer days during which the faqīh forbade any movement, talk or even whisper.<sup>206</sup>

The author then goes into fascinating detail about his daily routine. His parents woke him up before dawn. He washed his face, had breakfast, and very reluctantly made his way to the kuttāb, carrying his copy of the Qur'an in a small bag. In his hand or in his pocket he would take his daily snack: a pastry, a loaf of bread or a piece of fruit.<sup>207</sup> The Qur'an itself was never used for memorizing new texts, but only to revise the parts he had already finished. He copied new

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>205</sup> From a report from the inspector of education, Ḥusayn Rushdī Pasha, to the general secretary of the ministry of public instruction, January 26, 1899, the Bulac Edition, page 29. Quoted in 'Abd al-Jawwād, *fī kuttāb al-qarīyah*, 29-30.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 32-3.

verses from his Qur'an on both sides of a tin or a wooden slate, which, like all other students, he had to keep for that purpose. Once he had memorized these verses, he would wipe the slate to make room for more verses. These slates, along with the pen and the inkbottle, were carefully stowed in a bag hung on the wall, or directly in a small hole in the wall. Tin slates were less expensive than the wooden ones, which were painted in white, red or yellow and had colored patterns on the top. They also had a small handle so the children could have a firmer grip on them. When it was time to replace a wooden slate because it was too old, or its colors had faded, the faqīh would give it to a new student or a poor one. Instead of using their hands to wipe their slates, some students used balls of cotton or wool. As for pens, they were usually tubes made from sugarcane stalks, while the inkbottles were prepared from cooked mud. The ink itself was nothing but solidified soot dissolved in water. To dry the ink, the students would wave the slates in the air or stand under the sun. Out of respect for the holy verses, rarely would they put dust on the tablet to absorb the extra ink.<sup>208</sup>

The ultimate goal of every student was to memorize the Qur'an correctly without making any mistakes in pronunciation, although not all students managed to achieve that ambitious goal.<sup>209</sup> For the new students to be able to copy the verses onto their slates, they first had to learn how to read and write, usually with the help of better and older students. New students would therefore not sit with the faqīh to correct their pronunciation or test their memorization until they had first learned to read and write.<sup>210</sup> A new student had fun during those first days at the kuttāb, where he was only expected to repeat the pronunciation of the alphabet, some words and some easy verses. He did not sit directly with the faqīh, but was entrusted to an older student who read

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 35-42.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 43-4.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 47.

some of the short verses to him. The faqīh then gave him an old slate or asked his parents for money to buy him one. Then the spelling lessons would begin with the ‘arīf or one of the good students. This started by memorizing the alphabet, and when that was done, the student learnt which letters were dotted and which were not. Writing these letters on the slate would then start by spelling out each letter, e.g. alif as alif, lām and fā’. The student was then ready for copying out the verses, beginning with the short chapters followed by the longer ones, i.e. from the end of the Qur’an until he reached half of it, that is with surat al-Kahf or surat Ṭāhā. With that the student would have finished the “lower half” as it was called, the purpose of which was to learn how to memorize and pronounce properly, but not to entrust it all to memory just yet. Upon finishing the lower half, the faqīh expected his reward from the student’s parents. After that, the student was ready to memorize the “upper half” of the Qur’an all the way to surat al-Baqarah. This was a much tougher exercise, as the student was expected to remember all the parts that he had memorized, so here the learning process consisted of learning new verses and reciting the old ones. Finishing the “upper half” was another occasion to celebrate, “al-Khitām al-Saghīr,” as it was called and for which the faqīh got another reward. Then the student would return to the “lower half” from surat al-Anbiyā’ or surat al-Kahf, all the way to surat al-Nāss, a much easier task given that the student had already memorized them at an earlier stage. Successful memorization of the “lower half” while always making sure the student had retained the “upper half” meant the student had accomplished “al-Khitām al-Kabīr,” and had finished the Qur’an. The proud faqīh would ask for a whole pound, a new set of clothes, pastries, ghee, milk, cheese and honey as a reward.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 56-68.

Nature dictated the rhythm and length of the kuttāb lessons. A school day started at dawn, no matter what time the sun rose – be it at five or seven o’clock, and finished at the time of the ‘Aṣr prayers – be it at three or four in the afternoon. The children at the kuttāb understood this system on their own. They followed the sunrays as they fell on the walls or on the floor, and even panicked when these sunrays announced the end of the school day, so they rushed to finish their work to escape punishment by the faqīh or the ‘arīf.<sup>212</sup> To take attendance, the faqīh would call out the children’s names, from his memory, and those who were constantly late or absent were punished – usually by beating them with a stick.<sup>213</sup>

The next day started by revising what had already been memorized and repeating it in front of the faqīh or the ‘arīf. The student erased his slate only after having been instructed to do so by the faqīh or the ‘arīf, using a familiar instruction: “imsaḥ,” that is to say “erase.” The student would then be assigned a new set of verses to be copied from the Qur’an. The faqīh or the ‘arīf verified the verses to make sure they had been copied correctly, and the slate was hung on the wall right before lunchtime, triggered by the call: “‘allaq” or “suspend.” Lunch break went on for about an hour, and those who lived close to the faqīh’s house returned to their homes to eat, while those who lived farther away would have their lunch at the kuttāb. After lunch, recitation of some of the already memorized verses would start, a step referred to as “tathbīt”, or “confirmation.” Then the students started memorizing the new verses they had copied onto their slates. The new verses were then recited in front of the faqīh or the ‘arīf before going home, a step known as “ḥifẓ awwalī” or “taksīr,” that is to say “elementary memorization” or “breakage.”

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 69-71.

<sup>213</sup> The author wrote an entire section on discipline and punishment. He said that nothing brought more fear to a child’s heart than seeing one of his parents at the kuttāb complaining to the faqīh about his behavior. Parents, according to the author, revered the faqīh. Ibid., 105-6.

Wrapping up to go home was a collective action, and students who had already finished their work would help the ones lagging behind so that everyone could go home at the same time.<sup>214</sup>

Kuttāb students did not pass all their time copying and memorizing, however. Sometimes the children would help the faqīh's wife to prepare flour, bake or clean the house. Sometimes the villagers would come to the kuttāb and borrow the children to help them in various chores like stirring cooked mud to make bricks, peel sugarcane and use the peel to cover rooftops, or help with harvesting cotton. Children also learnt how to sew clothes, make baskets...etc. The author pointed out that although inspectors from the ministry of public instruction urged the faqīh to stop these kinds of non-scholarly activities, later the ministry itself added these skills to the official school curriculum. As for the children, they welcomed these activities that would take them away from the kuttāb and its regular chores.<sup>215</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has tried to consider the kuttāb on its own terms as a cornerstone in an educational system that had developed over centuries and which met the social and intellectual expectations of the time. The stress on memorization, the lack of critical learning and the material state of the kuttāb in the late nineteenth century, and more importantly, the inability of the kuttāb to integrate seamlessly into a growing powerful system of national education were all reasons that led to discarding these schools and transforming them into modern primary schools. Yet, for centuries the kuttāb was the preliminary stage of an old educational system, which

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 69-78. After the author finished his training at the kuttāb and went to the Aḥmadī mosque in Tanta, the ministry of public instruction started a program to improve the quality of education in the kuttābs. In 1897, a regulation added the following subjects to the kuttāb training: the Arabic language (reading and dictation), handwriting (riq'ah, thuluth and naskh), as well as arithmetic (the four main operations). In the same year, the ministry decided that any faqīh or 'arīf must pass an exam before they could teach in any of the kuttābs under its supervision. In 1903, the ministry made it possible for them to attend the teachers' schools to qualify officially for teaching. In 1910, the faqīh and the 'arīf were replaced by regular teachers. Ibid., 148.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 50-3.

valorized the mastery of classical Arabic as a prerequisite for any kind of intellectual contribution. As the chapter has tried to show, entrusting the entire Qur'an to a child's memory was not an easy task, a process that took years, the successful end of which was worthy of family pride and an occasion for celebration. Besides the religious accomplishment of having memorized Islam's most holy book, it was also a major language accomplishment, for the Qur'an was also the single most important classical Arabic text, al-mu'jizah, or the miracle.

The numerous Azharites who made important intellectual contributions over the centuries, including a long list of reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all went through the kuttāb stage. The students who went on from the kuttāb to al-Azhar, having learned to read and write and having in their minds thousands of classical Arabic words and structures, were then able to master the syntax and grammar of classical Arabic, which were necessary for any serious study of the Qur'an, the ḥadīth, theology and legal interpretation. Even Nahdawis, like Taha Hussein himself, praised this old system of learning, with al-Azhar at its top, for having safeguarded the language and its sciences. Furthermore, reports from the new Egyptian University, for example, show that students who came from al-Azhar had no problem absorbing the new sciences, and were among the best-performing students at the new university.

Regarding the more recent, but still very limited, studies on the kuttāb, the contemporary scholar of education, Helen Boyle, has shown in her work on Qur'anic schools in Morocco that scholarship has generally tended to dismiss such schools for their use of corporal punishment and memorization.<sup>216</sup> Nefissa Zerdoumi, for example, characterizes Qur'anic education as "a purely mechanical, monotonous form of study in which nothing is likely to arouse [the child's] interest. The school thus tends to curb his intellectual and moral activity at the precise moment when it

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<sup>216</sup> Helen Boyle, *Quranic Schools: Agents of Preservation and Change* (New York; London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 13.

should be developing rapidly.”<sup>217</sup> Yet, other recent work on contemporary kuttābs in Morocco has questioned whether this system of memorization is as detrimental as has been previously thought. Daniel Wagner, for instance, uses evidence from his work with the Morocco Literacy Project to suggest that prior memorization actually helps reading acquisition in Arabic. He also suggests that reciting passages without having to decode them is beneficial for children who have trouble with reading fluently.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, in terms of classical Arabic, those who memorize the Qur’an with the correct pronunciation and case endings find it easier to learn the grammar rules. As Haeri’s recent fieldwork has illustrated, people still believe that mastering the classical tongue requires memorizing the Qur’an by heart, and some parents are keen that their children learn chapters from the Qur’an before or during primary school.<sup>219</sup>

This chapter has also shown that by appropriating the kuttāb, the state laid its hands on an important segment of that old system of education. Through this appropriation, state curricula became responsible for teaching students classical Arabic, a difficult enterprise given that the spoken and written languages were different. Unlike the kuttāb, public schools in all their stages were open to children of both sexes, Muslims and non-Muslims. Responding to these difficulties, Taha Hussein and others proposed what they believed were much-needed changes to the way the language was taught in public schools. Their goal was to make the language more accessible to an increasing number of young men and women getting educated and relieve them of the difficulty associated with learning classical Arabic, the official language of the country.

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<sup>217</sup> Nefissa Zerdoumi, *Enfants d’hier, l’éducation de l’enfant en milieu traditionnel Algérien* (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1970), 196. Cited in Helen Boyle, *Quranic Schools*, 13.

<sup>218</sup> Daniel A. Wagner, “Rediscovering Rote: Some Cognitive and Pedagogical Preliminaries,” in *Human Assessment and Cultural Factors*, ed. S. H. Irvine and J. W. Berry (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 187. Cited in Helen Boyle, *Quranic*, 20.

<sup>219</sup> Most of those Haeri interviewed related to classical Arabic as the language of the Qur’an. They indicated they were encouraged to learn the Qur’an by heart out of their parents’ love for the language: “If you want to learn the Arabic language well, you must know the Qur’an.” Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 48.

Furthermore, the chapter has emphasized that for Taha Hussein, classical Arabic was the link between the past and the present, and much of his oeuvre revolved around ensuring that it remained vibrant and accessible to future generations of Egyptians and Arabs. He considered it would be an irreparable loss if the language became restricted to the religious domain, because for him the Arab-Islamic heritage was not restricted to religion. He saw the language not only as the means to engaging with that classical tradition in the larger sense, but also as the means by which recent generations could build on and enrich that tradition. He was therefore categorically against any literary or artistic expression in the colloquial, even when he admitted, and fully understood, that the colloquial was easier to use. Arguing that the language, and the heritage it gave access to, belonged to the people, his work at the academy was to bring classical Arabic closer to them, or to democratize the language as he liked to say.

Taha Hussein's focus on the people was not new. Besides his battle for universal education, we also saw his keenness on keeping the public informed about important ministerial decisions. Similarly, the Arabic Language Academy in its early days was eager to get the public involved in its debates through publications and competitions. Before making any changes to the language, Hussein advised the ministry of public instruction not take any suggestions into account until they had been broadcast to the public in Egypt and abroad for scrutiny, study and feedback. Even if a proposed reform had been approved, he was against assigning it immediately to students in textbooks. Instead, he hoped it would first get published for the general and professional feedback. Only then could the ministry start to consider integrating those changes in school textbooks.<sup>220</sup> Even before joining the academy, Hussein had asked the minister of public instruction Bahīy al-Dīn Barākāt to invite various people, through a general competition, to

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<sup>220</sup> Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture*, 304.



submit their ideas on reforming the language instead of assigning that task to one of the committees at the ministry of public instruction as was customary. Such a committee, he told Barākāt, should be formed to review the submitted proposals.<sup>221</sup>

In practice, however, rolling out the results of these efforts proved difficult. As Niloofar Haeri has recently concluded, “both the very authority of Classical Arabic and lack of good public education hamper mass literacy in the official language.”<sup>222</sup> This chapter has tried to show that authority and political will were needed to change the way classical Arabic was being taught in schools. For many reasons, the changes recommended by Taha Hussein and others through their work at the university and the language academy were not implemented in the way they had hoped. The academy remained tied to the ministry of public instruction in terms of budget and politics, and neither had the means nor sought the authority to impose its recommendations. Technical reasons to do with the language made it difficult for academy members to agree on a workable solution that made the writing correspond more accurately to the correct pronunciation in the full way Hussein and his colleagues had envisaged. Moreover, there was not enough political will on the part of the successive ministries of public instruction to challenge al-Azhar’s monopoly over the language and adopt a more simplified version of grammar fully integrated in engaging literary texts. While the kuttābs were abolished because nationalists deemed them too “backward,” the state was not able to effectively replace them with a working modern system.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>223</sup> Teaching classical Arabic in Egyptian schools remains a difficult endeavor. Haeri remarks how “Every time I asked about what specifically people found difficult [about grammar], they would give examples of problems with case endings. It is difficult to exaggerate Egyptians’ attention to and fear of the case system. There is an ever present and an all-pervasive consciousness about them.” Haeri, *Sacred Language Ordinary People*, 42. Decades after Hussein’s death, Haeri asked one of the women why studying grammar was so unpopular. The woman replied: “It was difficult because we were being taught in a very convoluted [mi’a’ad] way. There was beating, there was anger. We were supposed to memorize the rules [il-qawaa’id] so that when we come to write we [would] write correctly and when we come to speak, we [would] speak correctly.” Ibid., 40.

## Chapter Five

### Wind of Change: The Marginalization of Taha Hussein and His Project (1952-1970)

*Allow me to be free. Allow me to be free in the widest and deepest possible meaning of that word. And rest assured that even if you spoke your minds and said that you would not give me this freedom, then my response to you would be very simple. I will be free whether you accept it or not.*<sup>1</sup>

Taha Hussein on “committed literature”

In the early hours of July 23, 1952, the Free Officers seized power in Egypt, and sent King Farouk into exile three days later. Over the course of the following decade, the military coup, carried out by junior officers without exact goals, became a revolution from above that transformed Egyptian society and changed the old political order. In their grand majority, Egyptians supported the coup and hoped the new regime would succeed where the old one had failed. By 1954, land reform laws and signing an evacuation treaty with Great Britain reassured Egyptians that their longstanding demands for social justice and full independence were being addressed. Yet, also by the end of 1954, outlawing all political parties, revoking press licenses, abrogating the 1923 constitution and suppressing political opponents made it clear that the officers were not keen on sharing power with civilians. In a few years, Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser had consolidated his power, and until his death in 1970 he was an important hero of anti-colonial struggle and the unrivaled leader of Pan-Arabism.

Taha Hussein welcomed the army coup d’état and cheered the end of the monarchy as the dawn of a new era of freedom, social justice and real independence. Predicting that the revolution would change not only Egypt but also the neighboring Arab countries, he repeatedly compared the Egyptian revolution to the French revolution in the ideals it sought and the impact

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<sup>1</sup> Taha Hussein, “al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣah” [A Writer Writes for the Elite], *al-Ādāb* 5 (May 1955): 9.

he hoped it would have. He supported the overall guiding principles of the revolution and called for a swift return to parliamentary life. Although he remained a vocal supporter of Nasser's anti-colonial foreign policy, Hussein chose not to comment publicly on most of Nasser's domestic policies. Such unusual silence on the part of an intellectual who had shaped, written and commented regularly on local politics for decades could not have gone unnoticed by those in power, or on the younger generation of writers and intellectuals who supported those new policies. Moreover, by refusing to condone calls for "literature for life" or "committed literature" as it was called by younger writers who hoped to use literature as a means of social reform, Taha Hussein alienated himself from the younger generation.

While Hussein's silence spoke of his disapproval of, or at least his disinterest in, the domestic policies of the new regime, this chapter shows that Hussein gave the young officers clear advice in private on where he thought the country should go, and that the Revolutionary Council knew exactly what his views were. He made those beliefs clear in the constitution he and others drafted between December 1952 and August 1954 in which they called for an immediate adoption of a parliamentary system and the end of military rule. The decision of the Revolutionary Council to ignore that constitution and not even publish it for review was a clear indication very early on that Hussein and the young officers had parted ways.

Nevertheless, rapidly escalating political events including the attempt on Nasser's life in October 1954, the Czech arms deal crisis in 1955 and then the tripartite aggression against Egypt following the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, convinced Taha Hussein that the newly acquired independence following the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954 was on very shaky grounds. During that period of great political instability, Hussein chose to fully support Nasser in his fight against the colonial powers. Hussein saw that the situation called for firm unity behind

the young leader and not dissent if that independence was to survive. He wrote prolifically during that period praising Nasser and his courage while deploring the arrogance and double standards of the western powers, especially France, which spoke in the name of freedom but denied that same freedom to their colonies and violently suppressed their attempts to achieve independence. As this struggle grew stronger in the fifties and early sixties, Hussein saw the colonial powers lose all moral ground in the Middle East and the Third World in general.

On the local scene, although it became increasingly difficult for Taha Hussein and others to speak publicly in favor of a return to parliamentary democracy or defending individual freedoms, Hussein used literary debates as an outlet to voice his opinions. Refusing what he believed were ideological restrictions imposed on Egyptian intellectuals, he used the debate on committed literature to claim freedom for writers and artists in general, warning repeatedly against an overt politicization of literature and calls for aligning it with official ideologies. Nevertheless, his critique was not taken seriously. Not only was he seen as part of an older generation whose failure to address problems in pre-revolutionary Egypt had precipitated the intervention of the army in 1952, but also his measured words were marginalized by a powerful anti-colonial revolutionary discourse that left no real space for any serious intellectual opposition. This official discourse monopolized speaking in the name of the people, vilified the West, and dismissed “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” in favor of the more practical sciences that were of more immediate benefit for the national struggle.

Drawing on archival material from the Egyptian National Archives (Dār al-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah DWQ), the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMAE), Taha Hussein’s published articles between 1952 and 1962, literary debates, as well as texts on the revolution by Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and his close friend the journalist Muḥammad Ḥasanayn

Haykal, this chapter narrates how Taha Hussein responded to the army coup and its impact, not only on politics, but also on the role of literature and the intellectuals. I will show that the marginalization of Taha Hussein and his project for culture and education in Egypt was a result of two radically different readings of the success of the 1952 coup. While Taha Hussein believed that the people's support for the army stemmed from the education and culture he and his generation had created between 1919 and 1952, the army leaders and younger writers believed Hussein's generation had failed to bring real change to the people. Combined with persistent colonial intervention in Egyptian and Arab affairs in the fifties and sixties, and the suppression of all serious political opposition, it became impossible for Hussein to promote his project of critical thinking in which he called for a natural synthesis of the classical Arab-Islamic tradition and European cultural accomplishments.

### **Not a Coup, but a Revolution**

Upon learning that the army had taken control of the country, Taha Hussein, then summering in Italy, passed out from the excitement.<sup>2</sup> Writing for the daily *al-Ahrām* from Italy a few days later, he did not hide his happiness, and declared that with the coup, "Egypt had found itself."<sup>3</sup> He justified the coup by saying that the army intervened because civilians wanted to put an end to widespread corruption but were unable to. He therefore saw the military intervention as a response to a public demand. Without referring directly to the 1948 defeat in Palestine, he believed the army itself had already tasted the dangerous impact of such corruption.

Since the army has the right to safeguard the nation from the external enemy, then it also has the right to safeguard it from the internal enemy. Corruption within our borders

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<sup>2</sup> Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, preface to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyah min 1908-1967 (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-thawrat yūliū)* [Ṭāhā Husayn's Heritage: Journal Articles from 1908 to 1967 (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the July Revolution)], vol. 6 (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu'āṣir, 2006), 20. In my footnotes I will refer to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* vol. 6 as TTH\_6.

<sup>3</sup> Taha Hussein, "Ṣūrah" [An Image], *al-Ahrām*, August 2, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 45.

subjects the army itself to an immense danger, something the army has already tasted before. It has been patient but more patience would have been considered cowardice and an accommodation of humiliation.<sup>4</sup>

In a second article, also written in Italy, he was proud of the army, which without violence had managed to accomplish its mission, depose King Farouk and send him to exile on July 26, 1952.

In this article, he was the first to call what happened a revolution and not a coup.

Egypt has set an example to the entire modern world with its *revolution*, which has combined an elegant respectful calmness with an unwavering resolution. It has destroyed oppression and sent a king to his exile without spilling a drop of blood, all while being patient, careful and wisely cautious.<sup>5</sup> [My italics]

Furthermore, Hussein was very optimistic about the impact the revolution was going to have on Egypt and its neighbors. He believed that Egypt's revolution represented in the "East," what the French revolution represented in the "West." Egypt's revolution was even more impressive since it was a "white revolution," as he said, and did not result in the killing of millions of people, as was the case in France.<sup>6</sup> He expressed his support for the six principles of the revolution, which were to liberate the country from colonialism and its agents, liquidate feudalism, eliminate the control of capital, establish social justice, create a strong national army and lay the foundations for a proper democratic life.<sup>7</sup> Hussein saw the revolution as a glorious moment in Egyptian history and he saluted the calm and calculated tone of the General Commander Muḥammad Najīb (1901-1984) who was in charge of the coup and the government.

I would like to note that I have read reports in the papers reiterating what the general commander and the prime minister have said, and I only saw good in them. I do not disapprove of anything that came in these reports, big or small, because they do not accuse, gloat, call for revenge or try to set anyone up. [What they said] explained the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>5</sup> Taha Hussein, "Min ba'īd" [From Afar], *al-Balāgh*, August 5, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>7</sup> Taha Hussein, "Nisyān al-nafs" [Forgetting Oneself], *al-Balāgh*, August 25, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 54.

principles of the revolution as well as the people's expectations, and revealed the plan of the army and the government to achieve those expectations.<sup>8</sup>

Taha Hussein had a very specific understanding of why the people embraced the army movement the way they did, and how their reaction transformed what happened in July 1952 from a coup into a revolution. This understanding of his, as will be shown below in more detail, was diametrically opposed to how the leaders of the army read the situation, or at least how they explained it to the people. Whereas army leaders dismissed the contributions of Egyptian intellectuals before the revolution, Hussein saw the Egyptian revolution as the culmination of a culture that he and others had worked hard for decades to produce in educational institutions, and on the pages of books and periodicals. He believed this culture and knowledge made the people aware of their rights and motivated them to support the army that promised to give them those rights back. He argued that literature had paved the way for and created the revolution, as it showed the people what their lives should be like and made them understand the values of justice and equality that should dominate those lives.<sup>9</sup> Despite many differences between the French and Egyptian revolutions, he believed there were some similarities. In France, according to Taha Hussein, people had read about freedom, equality, and fraternity in books written by philosophers and litterateurs. Those who could not read, learnt about those values from people who could. Finding that their actual lives lagged behind the ideals they had learned about, the French rebelled against a system they believed was unjust.<sup>10</sup> Egyptians did the same in 1952.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 54. Muḥammad Najīb was Egypt's first president, from the declaration of the Republic on June 18, 1953 until Nasser put him under house arrest on November 14, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> Taha Hussein, "Adab al-thawrah" [The Literature of the Revolution], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, October 23, 1954. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥafīyah min 1908-1967 (al-Islāmīyāt wa-l-naqd al-adabī)* [Ṭāhā Husayn's Heritage: Journal Articles from 1908 to 1967 (The Islāmīyāt and Literary Criticism)], vol. 2 (Al-Qāhirah: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu'āṣir, 2007), 437.

<sup>10</sup> Taha Hussein, "Min ba'īd: thawratunā" [From Afar: Our Revolution], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, July 17, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 128-9.

We compared what we had revived from our old and the new we had taken from Europe to the life we were leading and the systems we were following. We abhorred what we were in, and tried to change this obnoxious life for one that was better. The army allowed us to do that, and it should have done so because it is composed of our sons and brothers, who suffer as much as we do and hope for the [same] dignity that we all hope for. The army had the power that allowed it to liberate the people, so it did not neglect them when it got the chance, and God crowned its efforts with success.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, for Taha Hussein, the people's response to the coup was a direct result of the culture he and others had been developing, and the project he had been advocating based on a critical synthesis of the old and the new. Readers of Taha Hussein at the time would have understood his words in connection with his career as a professor, civil servant and writer. They would have understood that he was referring to the university, its role and that of its professors and graduates. They would have also understood that with his references to the philosophers and the litterateurs, he was giving the nod to Egyptian writers and intellectuals, and the culture they had created over the decades.

Convinced that it was culture and education that created the revolution, Hussein wanted the new regime to strengthen the system of higher education. Seeking inspiration again from the French revolution, he argued that just as revolutionaries could spread their ideals in France, Europe and the world by supporting scientific research, disseminating knowledge and creating a "thinking free elite," he was calling on the new Egyptian regime to do the same. He insisted that this new elite should come from all walks of life and not be limited to any social class.<sup>12</sup>

Warning against the semi-educated who relied on what he called "easy knowledge" coming from newspapers and periodicals, he advised the government to rely on the advice of the "people who have devoted themselves to knowledge, excelled in it, and are producing more of it."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>13</sup> Taha Hussein, "Min ba'īd: thawratunā" [From Afar: Our Revolution], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 1, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 134.



In the summer of 1954, Hussein reminded the army leaders that if the old regime had failed to protect the people from poverty, ignorance and illness, then the revolution must find ways to do so. He advised them to seek advice from Egypt's "intelligent insightful elite" to eradicate those problems.<sup>14</sup> Faithful to the university and his understanding of its role, he wanted the new government to pay attention to secondary, technical and university education. Fighting illiteracy was not enough, he insisted, and the revolution had to promote higher education to create the leaders who understood the problems facing the nation and who had been trained to offer adequate solutions. Referring to higher education, he wrote

This kind of education is Egypt's only way for the formation of an elite that will lead us to glory. Let Egyptians beware the day when illiteracy has disappeared from society but competent capable leaders have become a few. Then the nation will look, and it will find that all its sons know their rights, but do not appreciate their duties, they will see their hopes but will not know how to reach them, they will want what is good, and will not find those who can lead them to it.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Selective Silence?**

Despite his general optimism in those early days that followed the coup, Taha Hussein remained cautious. He criticized the existing political parties for not laying their petty differences aside, and asked them to stop distracting the government with what he considered to be inconsequential arguments. According to him, it was time for the parties to focus instead on proposing political and social reforms, as well as suggesting concrete ways to limit land ownership, work on a better distribution of wealth, deal with unemployment and side with the poor.<sup>16</sup> He also remained critical of the government out of his conviction that an intellectual should guide and show the way. For example, he declared that he was against the government's

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<sup>14</sup> Taha Hussein, "Thawratunā min ba'īd" [Our Revolution from Afar], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, July 16, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 123.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>16</sup> Taha Hussein, "Hazar wa-jad," *al-Ahrām*, September 6, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 65.

decision to abolish the existing constitution on December 10, 1952, without having adopted a new one first. Yet, he was careful in the same article to state his faith in the General Commander, Muḥammad Najīb, and his promise to safeguard Egyptians' rights until the new constitution was put in place.<sup>17</sup>

Hussein also called on all intellectuals to turn their full attention to the new constitution that was being drafted and what it should accomplish. He asked them to clarify to the Egyptian people what rights the new constitution should guarantee for them, and advise the rulers on what the constitution should and should not include.<sup>18</sup> As for those writing it, he believed they should be selected based on their expert knowledge of constitutions and their awareness of what the people's rights and expectations were. He called for finishing the new constitution quickly and without delay.<sup>19</sup> He also asked for a quick referendum to decide whether Egypt was to remain a monarchy or whether the republic should be declared so that the constitution committee could start working according to the result. He did not hide his preference for a republican system, saying that in the early days of Islam, Muslims did not follow in the footsteps of the Persians and the Romans and did not adopt hereditary rule.<sup>20</sup> He also repeated his call for redefining the relationship between Egyptians and the state, a call that he had made earlier in the forties as previously discussed, and which he hoped Egypt's new life, as he called it, would incorporate.

Egyptians must know that [legitimate] rule comes from them and does not descend upon them. They must know that rulers are servants not masters. [Rulers are] appointed by the people so they could carry out political and social tasks for the people.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Taha Hussein, "Thumma mādhā?" [Then What?], *al-Ahrām*, December 13, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 67-8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69. Emphasizing how crucial that moment was for the future of the country, Taha Hussein finished this article with a prayer. "I hope," he said, "that God protects Egypt from blunders, foolishness and mistakes, and show it the right path." Ibid., 71

By the end of December 1952, Taha Hussein expressed his concern that the various campaigns denigrating pre-revolutionary Egypt were excessive, and he warned against overpromises of reform and change. Responding to critics of the educational system who dismissed decades of work in an area that he knew all too well, he argued that education, like any other domain in Egypt, had its problems but it also had its successes. “If education had been pure evil,” he said, “Egypt would not have been able to live on that education until today. But Egypt has lived, developed and made wide steps forward.”<sup>22</sup> Such continuous criticism, he warned, had a negative impact on the students as it shook their faith in the educational system as a whole and in their own self-confidence as well. Students, he argued, should not be reading in various newspapers that they were not learning or benefitting by going to school or university.<sup>23</sup> He was worried that people wanted to see immediate results when any change needed time and careful planning. He reminded those in charge, especially the leaders of the revolution and the prime minister that just like the French revolution took a long time to accomplish its objectives, the Egyptian revolution needed time as well.<sup>24</sup>

Until the summer of 1954, Taha Hussein responded to the coup of 1952 with unmistakable enthusiasm. He commented regularly on various events and gave his opinion on where the country should be heading. He believed that at such a critical moment in Egyptian history, it was his role, and that of other intellectuals, to offer sincere advice and try to shed light on the way forward.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the first time Taha Hussein let a major event pass by without any comment was the Revolutionary Council’s decision to disband all political parties on January 16,

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<sup>22</sup> Taha Hussein, “Bayna al-riḍā wa-l-ṣukḥ” [Between Contentment and Discontent], *al-Ahrām*, December 27, 1952. Republished in TTH\_6, 72.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Taha Hussein, “Min ba‘īd: thawratunā” [From Afar: Our Revolution], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, July 14, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 115-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

1953. His unusual silence could have been attributed to his sympathies for al-Wafd with which he had collaborated for years, in addition to his close friendship with the Wafd president, Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās. As explained earlier, however, Hussein was not a member of the Wafd despite being its minister of public instruction in its last government between 1950 and 1952. This first silence, so untypical of Taha Hussein, was only the beginning of a series of silences.

As the historian, Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq has observed, Hussein remained silent when Nasser published his *The Philosophy of the Revolution* in 1954, in which he explained the reasons that led to the intervention of the army in 1952, such as the corruption of the monarchy and the various political parties, and his own aspirations to lead the people.<sup>26</sup> Given Hussein's interest and investment in social and political reforms since the early 1920s, and his deep optimism about the regime change, he must have read Nasser's work and must have had an opinion on the new leader's vision for the country, but Hussein chose not to comment. He did not react, either, when the constitution he had worked on for a year and half was ignored and replaced in 1956 with a different one.<sup>27</sup> Hussein was also silent when Nasser created his populist organizations, the Liberation Rally in 1953, the National Union in 1957 and finally the Arab Socialist Union in 1962 to fill the political void left by the end of the multiparty system.<sup>28</sup> Although Hussein did not condemn Egypt's union with Syria in 1958, he confided to one of the ministers that the union had happened "too soon."<sup>29</sup> Finally, al-Shalq describes another silence

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<sup>26</sup> Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, preface to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 35. Al-Shalq also says that Hussein did not comment on the principles of the revolution, but as shown above, Hussein praised these principles in one of his early articles. See footnote 9.

<sup>27</sup> I explain the story of Taha Hussein's involvement in writing this never realized liberal constitution later in the chapter in a section on "Redefining the Role of the Intellectual."

<sup>28</sup> As Joel Gordon has argued, through this system of centralized mass parties, Nasser "refined a system that maintained rigid control of the polity behind a face of popular participation." See Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 197.

<sup>29</sup> Taha Hussein, "Baṭar" [Ungratefulness], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, October 7, 1961. Republished in TTH\_6, 249.

on the part of Taha Hussein, when he neither responded to the socialist decrees nationalizing the press and private property in 1961 nor to the crisis of intellectuals, also in 1961, during which the regime's spokesperson, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal (not to be confused with Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal) accused Egyptian intellectuals of not supporting the revolution enough. One could also add that Taha Hussein did not comment on the house arrest imposed in 1954 on the first President, Muḥammad Najīb, when, contrary to the wishes of Nasser and other revolutionary officers, Najīb insisted on carrying out free elections and the return of the army to its barracks. Hussein did not react either to the purges that followed ousting Najīb, which targeted journalists, university professors and judges seen as inimical to the regime. Such violent clampdown on the opposition must have convinced Taha Hussein that he had to become strategic about what to write and when to voice his disapproval. To be able to continue to write, and probably out of concern for his own safety and that of his family's, he understood that he had to avoid direct criticism of the government.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In his book, *'Awdat al-wa'y* [The Return of Consciousness], Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm questioned the silence of his generation of thinkers and intellectuals, including Taha Hussein, in the face of the domestic abuses under Nasser. Writing in 1972, two years after Nasser's death, he admitted that he knew about the purges and about the torture of academics. As an example, he mentioned the brother of the famous writer 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī (1920-1987), who was acquitted of smuggling funds abroad, only to be taken by the *mukhābarāt* (intelligence services) and brutally tortured to the point that his family and friends could not recognize him afterwards. Al-Ḥakīm also spoke of another well-known incident in which the famous jurist and head of the State Council 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Sanhūrī was beaten and humiliated without any reaction from his colleagues. See Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *'Awdat al-wa'y* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1974), 107-8. In his book, al-Ḥakīm thinks that he and his generation "lost consciousness" in front of all the bright promises the new regime was making, and were hoping the abuses would soon stop. In his view, their consciousness "returned" only after the crushing defeat of 1967. The intellectual Luwīs 'Awaḍ took issue with al-Ḥakīm's assessment, and argued instead that "consciousness" was never lost and people knew exactly what was happening, but, in 'Awaḍ's view, al-Ḥakīm, like most Egyptians followed the regime uncritically hoping that Nasser's authoritarianism would yield the fruits the charismatic leader had been promising. Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Aqni'at al-nāṣirīyah al-sab'ah: munāqashat Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wa-Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal* [The Seven Masks of Nasserism: Debating with Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal] (1976; Cairo: Markaz al-Maḥrusah, 2014), 38. Interestingly, neither al-Ḥakīm nor 'Awaḍ admitted to having been intimidated themselves by the physical torture or the imprisonment of many journalists and intellectuals at the time. Yet, in response to Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal who attacked al-Ḥakīm's book and accused al-Ḥakīm of cowardice for having waited until Nasser's death to speak out, al-Ḥakīm replied: "I noticed that mister Haykal, who defends 'Abd al-Nāṣir, answered his own question when he described those who criticize 'Abd al-Nāṣir today as weak and scared ghosts. This is

Nevertheless, in matters of foreign policy Hussein was not silent. On the contrary, he continued to share his observations and analyses with fervor on the pages of *al-Jumhūrīyah*, the regime's newly-created daily. As observed by the Egyptian writer and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, by the early months of 1955 the revolution had entered a new phase in which foreign affairs dominated.<sup>31</sup> Taha Hussein praised this transformation, hailed Nasser's foreign policy, and frequently celebrated the young leader whom Hussein believed was proving Egypt could finally stand up to the West. Hussein sided with Nasser and criticized the Baghdad Pact in 1955 arguing it was a colonial ruse to keep Arab countries under control.<sup>32</sup> He praised Nasser and his participation in the Bandung Conference, also in 1955, which ensured that Egypt would have its own foreign policy independent of the major powers in the west or the east.<sup>33</sup> Commenting on angry western reactions to Nasser's arms deal with Czechoslovakia in 1955, or what came to be known as the Czech arms crisis, Hussein wrote

And what is strange about the reaction of the free world, as it likes to call itself, is that it wants to keep Egypt in a situation that only the subservient would accept. [This free world] confirms to Egypt that it is free, independent and noble, and no one should interfere in its affairs from near or from far. [This free world] confirms all this, and [yet] refuses to sell Egypt the arms that it needs, and forbids it to buy these arms from anybody else. [Yet] on its borders, [this free world] has created its puppet that it calls Israel, giving

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true. But do weak and scared ghosts exist except in an atmosphere of fear and terror?" Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *'Awdat al-wa'y*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, February 7, 1955, 3. Cited in Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement*, 196.

<sup>32</sup> Taha Hussein, "Bayna al-jadd wa-l-la'ib" [Between Seriousness and Levity], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, April 2, 1955. Republished in TTH\_6, 186 and "Khā'ifūn mukhawifūn" [Terrified and Terrifying], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 30, 1955. Republished in TTH\_6, 179-82. Known as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the Baghdad Pact was formed in 1955 and included Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran and the United Kingdom. According to this agreement, these countries were committed to cooperation and mutual protection.

<sup>33</sup> Taha Hussein, "Mawqif" [A Stand], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, May 7, 1955. Republished in TTH\_6, 187. Taking place in Bandung, Indonesia, between April 18 and 24, 1955, this conference grouped twenty-nine, mostly newly independent, countries from Africa and Asia. An important step towards the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, the conference was organized to promote economic and cultural cooperation among those countries and stand up to colonialism.

it enough power and strength to entice it to aggression, tyranny and injustice, and encourage it to domineer and bully.<sup>34</sup>

While he hailed Nasser for going through with the arms deal, Hussein warned of a possible confrontation with the West and of dangerous consequences for Egypt and its independence. On one hand, he argued that Nasser's insistence on purchasing the much-needed arms proved to the West that Egyptians were finally "adults" and would no longer accept submission to western wishes. On another hand, this confrontation, according to Hussein, proved the West's ill-intentions towards Egypt, and predicted – accurately, for in a year the Suez Crisis would break out – that Egyptians would soon have to stand up and fight to protect their independence.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, in a series of articles that spanned the fifties and early sixties, Hussein lashed out at the colonial powers, especially France, for their arrogance and violent suppression of independence movements in Africa and Asia. In August 1954, he wrote that France did not learn from its deplorable tragedy in Indochina and was dealing with North Africa with the same shortsightedness and arrogance. France, he went on, was choosing to ignore the way in which it was forced to leave Syria and Lebanon, and how a stronger colonial power like Great Britain had to listen to India, Pakistan and other countries and gave them their independence.<sup>36</sup> Against French accusations that Nasser was turning Tunisians and Moroccans against France, Hussein defended Egypt's foreign policy, as well as the Egyptian press and the Egyptian radio channel, *Ṣawt al-ʿArab*, (Radio of the Arabs), which actively supported the independence of the three North African countries. The French, Hussein said, should accept that weak countries had become stronger, and should therefore accept criticism from the Egyptian press the same way

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<sup>34</sup> Taha Hussein, "Mawqif" [A Stand], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, October 6, 1955. Republished in TTH\_6, 205.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>36</sup> Taha Hussein, "Faransā wa-l-islām" [France and Islam], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 24, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 146-7.

they accepted criticism from the press in other European countries, like Russia, the UK and Italy.<sup>37</sup> In another article, he reminded the French government, and its prime minister Mendès France, that Egypt had supported France when it was under German occupation, received De Gaulle with open arms and offered its radio, the same radio that Mendès France was then complaining about, so that “the voice of Free France was broadcast from two cities, London and Cairo.”<sup>38</sup> Nothing, he warned, would stop Egypt from supporting Tunisians and Moroccans in their rightful demands.<sup>39</sup>

Not only will Egypt continue to support Tunisians and Moroccans, but it will also support the Algerians in their demand for independence, even if France continues to claim that Algeria is part of France. Egypt does not believe in invasion. Algerians are not part of France, and France is not Algerian in anything (laysat minhum fi shay’).<sup>40</sup>

Writing in March 1956, Hussein was happy Morocco had gained its independence, and Sultan Muḥammad V had safely returned to his country from exile. He was also happy that Tunisia had gained some of its independence, and that Jordan refused to join the Baghdad Pact. He saw all these changes taking place in the Arab world as consequences of the Egyptian revolution, which he had hoped would impact the region the same way the French revolution had done in Europe. The war of independence was then raging in Algeria, and he predicted that the Algerians would not stop until their country had gained its full independence from France, and until France “had forgotten,” as he said, “this silly myth, which it used as an excuse for more

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<sup>37</sup> Taha Hussein, “Iḥtijāj” [Protest], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, September 1, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 150-3.

<sup>38</sup> Taha Hussein, “Wa-law” [And Even if], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, October 1, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 156. Taha Hussein received De Gaulle when he came to Cairo in April 1941 at the Cairo Radio station where Hussein oversaw the broadcasts of “France libre.” Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec toi: De la France à l’Egypte: Un extraordinaire amour Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2011), 164.

<sup>39</sup> Taha Hussein, “Iḥtijāj,” 150-3.

<sup>40</sup> Taha Hussein, “Wa-law,” 159.



than a century, claiming that Algeria was part of the French homeland. It claimed so to itself [and yet] refused to give the people of Algeria the rights the French enjoyed.”<sup>41</sup>

Taha Hussein was proud of Nasser’s foreign policy, which in Hussein’s view, gave Egypt confidence and allowed it to deal with other countries, including the major powers, on equal footing without fear or hesitation. This confidence, he wrote in an article in the spring of 1956, was not just based on words, but also on action.<sup>42</sup> The western powers, he insisted, were lying when they said they refused to supply Egypt with weapons to maintain peace in the region, because while they refused to help Egypt acquire the means to defend itself, they continued to supply Israel with arms at will. Egypt, under Nasser, Hussein went on, was not only responding to western manipulation with strong honest words, but it also managed to obtain the necessary arms from Czechoslovakia.<sup>43</sup> He was ecstatic that Egypt was finally making its own decisions even when these decisions went against the wishes of foreign powers, and he gave Egypt’s recent recognition of communist China as an example.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, the French Embassy in Cairo translated many of these articles that Hussein wrote for *al-Jumhūrīyah* and sent them to the Quai d’Orsay. In one report, for example, the French Chargé d’Affaires described these articles as not only irritating but also “profoundly hurtful” coming from somebody like Taha Hussein, who was traditionally seen as a friend of France and its culture.<sup>45</sup> In another report that accompanied the translation of another of Hussein’s articles, the French Ambassador tried to explain Taha Hussein’s violent criticism of

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<sup>41</sup> Taha Hussein, “Irādat sha‘b” [A People’s Will], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 5, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 222-4.

<sup>42</sup> Taha Hussein, “Lughatān” [Two Languages], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, May 18, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 234-7.

<sup>43</sup> Taha Hussein does not refer directly to Czechoslovakia in this article, but he was clearly talking about the Czech arms deal.

<sup>44</sup> Taha Hussein, “Lughatān,” 235.

<sup>45</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431.1948-1959/1952-1961/ Letter from the Chargé d’Affaires of France to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mendès France, “On the Subject of Taha Hussein’s Article,” November 26, 1954.

the French politics in North Africa. Referring to Taha Hussein's French wife and his son who taught French literature at Cairo University, the ambassador argued that given Egypt's new anti-colonial foreign policy, Taha Hussein was trying to distance himself from France and preserve his chances of returning to power.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, Taha Hussein was speaking from his own experience, and not just as an observer. Although he did not refer to his own conflict with the French over his wish to create an institute of Arabic and Islamic studies in North Africa a few years earlier as already discussed in the first chapter, he remembered what his own negotiations with them were like.

We used to see ourselves as lesser than they were and less powerful. We did not have the same power as they did [...] This used to force us to think, reconsider and worry about consequences. [We] held ourselves accountable to every word even before we had said or written it. This awakened their greed, empowered them and lured them into controlling our facilities, establishments and our future.<sup>47</sup>

In his articles on Egyptian foreign policy under Nasser, Hussein left no doubt that he fully supported the Egyptian leader in all his confrontations with the colonial powers. The revolution, Hussein stressed, had managed to unite Egyptians behind Nasser allowing Egypt to face those powers. He described this as a unique success in Egypt's modern history.

We now know how to stand up when in conflict with [the foreigner], how to face his tricky flattering language with our honest clear language, how to face his hidden disguised action with our honest visible action, how to face his doubt in our faith and his hesitation [to believe in] our perseverance. This has given our foreign policy a success that it had not seen at any time in our modern history.<sup>48</sup>

### **The British Are Leaving, Finally**

For Taha Hussein, signing the evacuation treaty with the British on October 19, 1954 was an extraordinary achievement. It was a success that came after long and painful negotiations for

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<sup>46</sup> AMAE/Relations Culturelles 1945-1961/431.1948-1959/1952-1961/ Letter from the French Ambassador to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Antoine Pinay, "On the Subject of Taha Hussein's Article," October 7, 1955.

<sup>47</sup> Taha Hussein, "Lughatān," 234.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 235.

full independence since 1922. As previously discussed, Taha Hussein had placed high hopes on the 1936 treaty and his enthusiasm was reflected in *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, in which he wrote down his vision for how Egypt was to prove, through strong efficient institutions of culture and education, that it could handle the responsibilities of its independence. Yet, the 1936 treaty, just like unilateral British declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922, proved to be another disappointment. Nothing serious was done to deal with widespread social injustice, and the British still controlled the Suez Canal and intervened in Egyptian politics at will. This was blatantly demonstrated in the incident of February 4, 1942, whereby, in a glaring breach of sovereignty, British tanks besieged King Farouk in Abdin palace in Cairo forcing him to appoint the cabinet they thought was necessary to stabilize the country during the Second World War.

After the end of the war, lengthy negotiations with the British resumed, only to fail then start again, further destabilizing the country and fueling the already divisive partisan politics. The historian Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot describes these Anglo-Egyptian negotiations as having become “the cancer of Egyptian politics.”<sup>49</sup> Dealing with these negotiations became the center of political life in the country and the public measured the performance of the various cabinets against the success of those negotiations. Massive demonstrations put the various Egyptian governments under pressure, and the public demanded nothing less than an immediate withdrawal of all British troops from the country. Yet the British, according to Taha Hussein, neither took these negotiations seriously nor intended to leave the country. He believed the negotiations were a game that they had invented to prolong the occupation and serve their own interests. Writing in May 1953 as the new regime started another round of negotiations with the British, Hussein, understandably, was full of doubt.

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<sup>49</sup> Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 145.

I am surprised Egyptians have not yet gotten bored with these negotiations, which were invented by the British when they ended their protectorate and [continue] until now. This, despite all what we have heard [from them] so far on the subject and which we have memorized by heart. We have gained nothing from these negotiations but divisions, differences, hatred, jealousy and corruption.<sup>50</sup>

Besides, Hussein had been an insider on many of these negotiations that carried on until the last Wafd government under Nahḥās in January 1952. As explained earlier, Hussein was part of that cabinet, which, upon failing to reach any convincing results with the British, abrogated the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in October 1951, declaring illegal the presence of the British troops in Egypt. This famous decision was followed by guerrilla warfare by the fedayeen against British targets in the Canal Zone, and a period of instability and extreme apprehension ensued. From October 28, 1951, every meeting at the Council of Ministers started by Fuʿād Sirāj al-Dīn, the minister of interior, briefing his colleagues, including Taha Hussein, on the escalating tensions and the reprisals of British forces against Egyptian civilians and public facilities.<sup>51</sup>

Ironically right before this violence began, Hussein had been reporting to his colleagues on the positive results of the changes he was making in education. Just as political events were about to dominate the discussions, the records of the Council of Ministers show various ministers congratulating Taha Hussein on the success of his educational policies and on his reports in which he announced for example, that he was proud his ministry was able to admit more students to primary schools than the previous year, and did not turn away a single student from secondary and technical education due to the large number of schools the ministry was able to build in

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<sup>50</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Ḥadīth al-muʿād” [The Repeated Talk], *al-Ahrām*, May 1, 1953. Republished in TTH\_6, 86.

<sup>51</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057873/Sessions of October and November 1951/Session of October 28, 1951. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal mentioned one of these incidents in his memoirs, whereby the British forces decided to destroy the village of Kafr ʿAbduh close to the city of Suez because the fedayeen were hiding in the village and trying to destroy the water plant nearby. The Egyptian police tried to stop the British forces but they could not. See Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Mudhakarāt fī al-siyāsah al-miṣrīyah* [My Memoirs on Egyptian Politics], vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1990), 311.

record time.<sup>52</sup> Also during those last days of the Wafd cabinet, Hussein was glad Parliament had approved his request to create Egypt's first syndicate for teachers on November 3, 1951.<sup>53</sup>

Politics, however, soon took over the center stage and his term in office was cut short.

Two weeks after announcing the creation of the Teachers' Syndicate, violence erupted in the Canal city of Ismailia on November 17 and 18. The British forces killed eight policemen and wounded eighteen more. On November 25, 1951, the Council decided to educate the sons and daughters of the killed and wounded policemen for free until their graduation from university, and assigned L.E. 8,000 for their families. In response to these events, Taha Hussein requested the Council's approval to fire 72 British employees working for the ministry of public instruction.<sup>54</sup> The Council not only approved Taha Hussein's request, but also decided to fire all British employees working in other government ministries and public offices.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the Council decided that the government would step in and train the militias fighting in the canal

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<sup>52</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057873/Sessions of October and November 1951/Session of October 28, 1951.

<sup>53</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057873/Sessions of October and November 1951/Session of November 8, 1951.

<sup>54</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057873/Sessions of October and November 1951/Session of November 25, 1951.

Literature and memoirs evoke the disappearance of British and French teachers from Egyptian schools after the 1956 aggression. This shows that the first to use this measure was Taha Hussein. See for example Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America, A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999) and Robert Solé, *L'Egypte Passion Française* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057874/Sessions of December 1951/Session of December 9, 1951. It was also decided, upon the request of Taha Hussein, that the respective ministries would pay the cost of the relocation of the British teachers back to their country, in addition to a three-month severance pay. (DWQ-MW-0075-057874/Sessions of December 1951/Session of December 9, 1951.) Due to this decision, the British teachers attacked Taha Hussein on the pages of *The Egyptian Gazette* after he left the ministry. Taha Hussein replied asking why they lacked the courage and waited to attack him only when he had left office. He insisted that neither he nor the Council of Ministers was at fault, but it was the fault of the British officers in the Canal Zone, "who behaved in a manner unacceptable in the twentieth century," as he said. He also explained that he wanted to protect order in schools and the universities, as he feared the reaction of students angry over what had happened in the Canal. Finally, given these teachers' "high sense of justice," as he sarcastically said, he suggested that upon their return to England they should write to "Mister Churchill or whoever else who was in charge," and protest against not just what happened to them, but against what happened to the Egyptian people. 'Abbās Khidr, "Ḥamlah injilīzīyah 'ala al-duktūr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bāshā" [An English Campaign against Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Pasha], *al-Risālah*, March 10, 1952, 283. Khidr finished his report on the debate in the *Gazette* by saying, "The truth of the matter is this: Doctor Taha Hussein Pasha was Egyptian, so the English got angry."

officially.<sup>56</sup> In December the Council assigned L.E. 500,000 to help relocate the Egyptian laborers working in British camps in the Canal Zone.<sup>57</sup> In protest against British retaliations against civilians, the Egyptian Ambassador to the UK was recalled, the Egyptian Engineering Office in London was relocated to Switzerland and a new law was to be issued criminalizing all forms of “cooperation or dealings with any foreign military force in the country.”<sup>58</sup>

This instability escalated further on January 25, 1952, when the British forces raided a police station in Ismailia killing scores of police officers.<sup>59</sup> When the news reached Cairo, demonstrations broke out denouncing the occupation and the British show of force in Ismailia. These demonstrations deteriorated into uncontrollable riots resulting in the famous Cairo Fire on January 26, 1952, or Black Saturday as it came to be called. Taha Hussein and the other ministers met at the house of Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥās at 7 PM on the same day for three hours to discuss the events. They agreed to declare Martial Law and placed Naḥḥās in charge of these exceptional powers as regulated by the Law number 15 for the year 1923. Taha Hussein suspended work in all schools, institutes and universities until further notice.<sup>60</sup> The next day, King Farouk dismissed Naḥḥās and his government, including Taha Hussein. Numerous successive cabinets between January and the coup in July 1952 were unable to restore calm to a country that was boiling with rage and uncertainty about the future.

Taha Hussein, therefore, knew the history of the negotiations with the British all too well. Their failure, the abrogation of the treaty in 1951 and the British violence in the Canal Zone

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<sup>56</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057873/Sessions of October and November 1951/Session of November 25, 1951.

<sup>57</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057874/Sessions of December 1951/Session of December 2, 1951.

<sup>58</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057874/Sessions of December 1951/Session of December 23, 1951.

<sup>59</sup> The number of officers killed varies according to various sources. Haykal mentioned that more than 80 policemen were killed. See Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Mudhakarāti fī al-siyāsah al-miṣrīyah*, 311. January 25, is celebrated annually as the national police day. In 2011, decrying the police brutality of the postcolonial state, demonstrators went out on that day, and put an end to Husnī Mubārak’s long reign (1981-2011) on February 11.

<sup>60</sup> DWQ-MW-0075-057875/Sessions of January and February 1952/Session of January 26, 1952.

threw the country into chaos and brought his government career to an end. In his 1954 article on the negotiations, he was warning the young officers about the danger of these negotiations. He insisted the only solution was a show of unity by all Egyptians behind their leaders, standing firm in front of the British and accepting nothing short of complete withdrawal of all British troops from the country.<sup>61</sup> Hussein was apprehensive. He wanted a departure from the old school of thought – led by Muḥammad ‘Abduh in the late nineteenth century and adopted by Egypt’s moderate parties like al-Ummah and al-Wafd – calling for a measured cooperation with the British and earning independence through reforms and negotiations.

One can therefore imagine Taha Hussein’s reaction when Nasser signed the evacuation treaty, which announced that the last British soldier was to leave Egypt in twenty months. Hussein wrote an article saying that after those twenty months, on that “promised day,” as he said,

Time will turn back to what it was twenty-six centuries ago, when Egypt was free in the widest possible meaning of freedom, dignified, in the most accurate and truthful sense of the word, independent in the most correct and deepest meaning of independence, [when it was] in control of its own affairs, and the power [was] only in the hands of its sons, not shared by any foreigner, from near or far. Back to a time, when Egypt decided, alone, on all its matters, and did not have to refer to any distant capital, in the depths of the land of the Persians, Greeks or Romans, or in the land of the Arabs or in Damascus or Baghdad.<sup>62</sup>

Egypt was finally independent. The revolution, according to Hussein, managed to accomplish much in two years. It forced the British to give Egypt its independence, abolished the monarchy, and created a republic that was to return power to the people. Regarding the Sudan, he said that by signing an agreement with Britain in February 1953, the new regime could establish a transitional period of self-government (which led to the independence of the Sudan in January

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<sup>61</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Ḥadīth al-mu‘ād,” 86-9.

<sup>62</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Yawm al-maw‘ūd” [The Promised Day], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 6, 1954. Republished in TTH\_6, 137.

1956). By doing so, he believed the revolution solved the problem of the Sudan and gave the country back to its people while removing an important obstacle that had complicated negotiations between the Egyptians and the British for decades. In Egypt, the new government adopted the much-awaited land reform laws, and ended what Taha Hussein described as “class differences while ensuring that Egypt’s wealth was no longer monopolized by a select few.”<sup>63</sup> The revolution managed to put to an end to divisive partisan politics, strengthened the country and rebuilt its foreign policy.<sup>64</sup> Hussein cheered the revolution and those behind it, for in two years they succeeded where all others had failed.

### **Not the Time for Internal Dissent**

Yet, as the British forces were still in Egypt, Hussein believed the situation demanded caution, unity, and support for the new leaders. During the months leading to the evacuation treaty, he was worried the British would use any instability in the country as a pretext to stall negotiations or postpone the actual evacuation of their forces from the Suez Canal. In March 1954, for example, Hussein denounced the hunger strike organized by the feminist Durīyah Shafīq (1908-1975) and her supporters, which gained much coverage by local and international media. Shafīq was disappointed women were not represented on the committee put in place to write the new constitution, and she decided to act at this politically volatile moment to put pressure on the government and obtain a written promise that the new constitution would give Egyptian women the right to vote.<sup>65</sup> So, on March 12, Shafīq took to the Press Syndicate, refused to leave, and was quickly joined by other high-profile Egyptian women. While Shafīq received

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<sup>63</sup> Taha Hussein, “Al-Yawm al-maw‘ūd,” 138-9.

<sup>64</sup> Taha Hussein, “Lughatān,” 235.

<sup>65</sup> Cynthia Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 196.



much support, including for example that of Samīḥah Aḥmad Māhir, daughter of the assassinated Prime Minister Aḥmad Māhir, the strike caused uproar in the country, and the public opinion was divided.<sup>66</sup> To Shafīq's utter dismay, Faṭimah Rashād, president of the National Feminist Union, came out and denounced Shafīq's timing of the strike as inopportune saying that demanding women's rights at this crucial moment was not in the best interest of the country.<sup>67</sup> Shafīq was relentless, however, and declared, "We have waited long enough. We want our constitutional rights immediately, and I think it is in keeping with the logic of our revolution."<sup>68</sup> After eight days, Muḥammad Najīb intervened and gave Shafīq his word that the new constitution would guarantee women's political rights, and the strike came to an end.<sup>69</sup> In this debate, Taha Hussein denounced Shafīq and wrote strong words against the strike in an article for *al-Jumhūrīyah*, which he entitled, "Ābithāt," (irresponsible women). Like Faṭimah Rashād, he believed this was not the right moment for such a highly-mediatized domestic conflict. He warned the British could use the unrest for their own benefit, and that everybody's effort should focus on putting an end to the current constitutional void (as the 1923 constitution had been abolished before adopting a new one), which in his opinion left the state without any supervision, and had to be contained as quickly as possible to ensure a swift return to parliamentary life.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 197 and 200.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>68</sup> "Prime Minister meets with Shafīq," *al-Ahrām*, March 14, 1954. Cited in Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist*, 199.

<sup>69</sup> Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist*, 204. In February 1957, Shafīq went into the Indian Embassy in Cairo and declared she was going on another hunger strike in protest of the Israeli occupation of Egyptian land after the Suez aggression in 1956, and she also demanded an end to what she described as Nasser's "dictatorial rule that is driving our country towards bankruptcy and chaos." After eleven days, she ended her fast. As a result, Nasser placed her under house arrest, and the press was ordered not to mention her name again. See Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist*, 238-50. Shafīq fell into depression and committed suicide on September 20, 1975.

<sup>70</sup> Taha Hussein, "Ābithāt" [Irresponsible Women], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 16, 1954. What followed was an intense debate, in which other intellectuals like Aḥmad Bahā' al-Dīn and Shafīq herself attacked Taha Hussein, whom they had expected to support women's rights, given his previous support for women in general and women's university education in particular. See Aḥmad Bahā' al-Dīn, "al-Ṣā'imāt" [Fasting Women], *Rūz al-*

Even after signing the evacuation treaty, the political situation remained precarious, and the British troops were still on Egyptian soil. The attempt on Nasser's life on October 26, 1954 only confirmed Hussein's belief that independence was on shaky ground. Speaking in front of a large crowd in Alexandria, Nasser escaped eight bullets from a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nasser quickly reassured the large crowd that he had not been killed and asked the people to stay put. "I am not dead. I am alive, and even if I die, you are all Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser," he shouted famously.<sup>71</sup> The Muslim brothers had announced they were against the new Anglo-Egyptian Treaty arguing that it sold Egypt to the British by agreeing to a clause allowing them legally to re-enter the country if Turkey or one of the Arab states were attacked. Taha Hussein deplored the event in two articles in *al-Jumhūrīyah*, which were then published alongside other articles by important intellectuals at the time, like Muḥammad al-Tābi'ī, 'Alī Amīn, Kāmil al-Shinnāwī, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ḥamāmshī and Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Nashāshībī. All these articles were published in a book called *Hā'ulā' hum al-ikhwān!!* (*These are the Brothers!!*). Hussein described the assassination attempt as a heavy ordeal, the success of which could have turned into a catastrophe.

I think about the possible consequences that could have befallen this country had those criminals succeeded in what they planned to do. Most probably there would have been an internal war among the citizens, as Egyptians with dignity would have wanted to avenge Egypt's young man. The strife among them would have been strong, blood would have been spilled and violations would have been committed. Order, law and security would have been suspended for some time the duration of which nobody could tell, and this [newly-acquired] independence would have been lost, the independence for which Egypt has suffered the heaviest, longest and most bitter of struggles. The foreigner would have

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*Yūsuf*, March 22, 1954, and Durīyah Shafīq, "Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-'ajā'iz al-farah" [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Old Busybodies], *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, March 22, 1954. Ironically, it was Taha Hussein who had made it possible for Durīyah Shafīq to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1928. After she had been registered by the Egyptian government to specialize in history and geography "as one of the branches of feminine education," she failed to convince the head of the educational mission in Paris that she preferred to study philosophy. She then wrote to Taha Hussein, who was then dean of arts, and asked for his help. "Within days, the director received a telegram from the Ministry of Education in Cairo advising him to change Doria's program at her pleasure." Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, *The Cairo Documents* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 25.

forced order and security in the country and Egypt would have returned to what it used to be, a humiliated country whose matters are managed by foreigners because it could not bear the responsibility of [its] independence and freedom for a few days, and because some of its sons brought death to he who has brought them life.<sup>72</sup>

He also saluted Nasser for his courage and for his responsible reaction in front of the crowds.<sup>73</sup> It was a close call, unlike other successful assassination attempts by members of the Muslim Brotherhood of key political figures, like the Prime Ministers Aḥmad Māhir (1945) and Maḥmūd al-Nuqrāshī (1948), as well as the President of the Court of Appeal Aḥmad al-Khāzindār (1948). These assassinations were still fresh in people's minds. The foiled plot provided further proof that extreme caution was necessary and that stability in the country had to be maintained if the British evacuation was ever to happen as planned.

In this tense buildup to the Suez Crisis, Taha Hussein continued his support for Nasser and Egypt's new independence in the face of the old colonial powers, and defended Nasser's decision to nationalize the canal on July 26, 1956. Hussein wrote that the British and French capital investment had doubled many times during decades of their exclusive control of the canal without any of that profit going to Egypt or Egyptians, who had built the canal with their own hands. Egypt, according to Hussein, had every moral and legal right to nationalize the canal. Despite overt threats of war, Taha Hussein could not believe that France and Great Britain would wage war on Egypt. For him Egypt was an independent country that was member of the United Nations and nationalizing the canal was a legal action. Speaking of French and British politicians, he said

They have turned everything upside down. They believe that they could scare Egypt with their soldiers and their fleets. They think they could wage war whenever they want, however they want and wherever they want, as if they own the Earth and could do whatever they like to its people. They think Egypt would fear them today like it used to

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<sup>72</sup> Taha Hussein, "Fitnah" [Ordeal], in *Hā'ulā' hum al-ikhwān !!* [These are the Brothers!!!] (Cairo: 1954), 19-20.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 20.

fear them before, and would listen to them the way it used to listen to them before. They think the world will let them launch a war, if they really want to launch a war.<sup>74</sup>

But war happened. The tripartite aggression, as Egyptians refer to the attack by Israel, Great Britain and France on Egypt on October 29, 1956, came as a huge shock to Taha Hussein. He had had his conflicts with France before, notably over the affair of his institute in North Africa and then the brutal show of force in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, but he saw the attack on Egypt as a crime. For Taha Hussein, the attack from France, traditionally seen as a friend of Egypt's and a longtime ally against the British, was a deep betrayal. In protest, he returned his Légion d'honneur to the French government. In her memoirs, his wife Suzanne described his bitter disappointment and profound hurt.

Already when [France] had forced the Sultan of Morocco out of his own country, Taha was profoundly saddened. He had an idea of France that was very high. He battled to defend it on many occasions, and worked hard to spread its culture. He had put so much heart into preserving the French schools [in Egypt] during the [Second World] war... There was the affair of Algiers, hurtful to the extreme. After an official promise from the French government, came a brisk refusal. He could not accept the attack on Suez, and he returned the Légion d'honneur.<sup>75</sup>

In a series of articles, in which he attacked the powers, especially France, he said the Fourth Republic was trying hard to redeem France from, what he described as, "its disgraceful defeat" in the Second World War. France, he went on, was trying to prove it was still a strong power, but its disastrous war in Indochina, and its "horrible sins," in North Africa, only added to the shame and disgrace. He described the Suez war as a crime that France committed with Great Britain, and qualified it as yet another consequence of its shameful defeat in the Second World War.<sup>76</sup> He said the attack on Egypt was clearly a "conspiracy," "that no human being could

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<sup>74</sup> Taha Hussein, "'Ubbād al-dhahab" [Worshippers of Gold], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 11, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 249.

<sup>75</sup> Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec toi: De la France à l'Égypte*, 216.

<sup>76</sup> Taha Hussein, "Majnūn" [Insane], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, November 12, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 256-7.

doubt,” and which the British, the French, and their “puppet” (as he always described Israel) put together in order to entrap the Egyptian army.

No one could dispute that [the conspiracy] was planned during the night or during the day, or during both night and day, and that those who planned it, organized it well and started to execute it. [They] neither felt shame nor any semblance of shame in their hearts or their conscience, because their hearts and conscience have hardened and have become cruel, feeling no disgrace and knowing no embarrassment, no matter how horrible the guilt.<sup>77</sup>

Hussein was angry and disappointed, and he continued to deplore French actions in Algeria well into the sixties. Commenting on a speech delivered by the French prime minister in early 1958 describing France’s brutality in Algeria as necessary to defend the “free world,” Hussein wrote

Which free world requires for its defense committing these sins and crimes, and going against the basics of all religions, morals, civilization and law. What freedom is established or defended by humiliating the free, and sentencing women and boys who have not reached adulthood and have never carried arms to their death. What is this freedom and what value does it have, what does the world need it for, what benefit could the human being, his civilization, his religions and laws derive from a freedom, which does not exist unless blood has been spilled, people have been killed, and orphans, widows and infants have been made homeless...<sup>78</sup>

The Suez war, events in North Africa, and vicious attacks against Egypt and Nasser by British and French diplomacy and in the western press, made it impossible for Hussein to evoke what he liked to call a “shared human civilization” to which all nations should contribute through culture and education. As the historian Shārif Yūnis has said, during the sixties, expressing animosity towards the “West” had become a sign of independence and patriotism.<sup>79</sup> In this polarized world, Hussein had to take a stand, and he stood with Nasser, Egypt and other countries fighting for their freedom.

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<sup>77</sup> Taha Hussein, “Mu’āmaratān” [Two Conspiracies], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, November 23, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 259.

<sup>78</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ahl al-Kahf” [People of the Cave], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 26, 1958. Republished in TTH\_6, 307.

<sup>79</sup> Shārif Yūnis, *al-Zaḥf al-muqaddas* [The Holy March], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beirut; Cairo; Tunis: Dār al-Tanwīr, 2012), 105.

## Redefining the Role of the Intellectual

Not only was Taha Hussein estranged by the reaction of the “free world” to attempts by weaker nations to become free and independent, but he also felt alienated at home. During the early years of the revolution, he addressed the nation and the Revolutionary Council on the pages of *al-Jumhūrīyah*, saying he offered his advice and analysis not for any personal gain, for he was already an old man, as he said. Yet, he felt that it was his duty as an intellectual to analyze complex situations and give advice on the way forward. By the early sixties, however, it became clear that expectations from intellectuals, like Taha Hussein and others, had changed. The regime expected intellectuals to enforce its vision and little more. Moreover, a new nationalist discourse discredited Taha Hussein’s generation and claimed that between the revolution of 1919 and that of 1952, this generation had failed to express the needs of the Egyptian people or to carry out the necessary social revolution.

In his famous *The Crisis of Intellectuals* (1961), Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, the journalist and spokesperson for Nasser, published several articles in Egypt’s leading daily, *al-Ahrām*, in which he identified what he, and by extension the new ruling elite, found wrong with Egyptian intellectuals. He accused them of not having been loyal enough to the revolution and explained what their new role should be. While he admitted that they had cooperated with the revolution after July 23, 1952, he qualified that cooperation as a “political loyalty to the revolution as a regime,” and not a real “revolutionary loyalty.”<sup>80</sup> By revolutionary loyalty, he explained that their duty was to theorize for the revolution its mission and unite their efforts to

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<sup>80</sup> Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, *Azmat al-muthaqafīn: Naẓrah ila mashākilnā al-dākhilīyah ‘ala ḍaw’ mā yusamūnahu...* [The Crisis of the Intellectuals] (Cairo: Al-Sharikah al-‘Arabīyah al-Muttaḥidah li-l-Tawzī‘, 1961), 48-9. This was a collection of his articles in *al-Ahrām*.

provide the rulers with the set of ideas they could implement to make the necessary revolutionary changes in society.

The normal and essential role for intellectuals, was not just for them to ‘cooperate’ with the revolution, but to interact with it, to ‘adopt’ its cause, to ‘take’ it on and ‘give’ it from their thoughts its ‘national theory,’ to formulate its revolutionary belief from their conscience and their knowledge... that is to say its road to fundamental and root changes in Egyptian society.<sup>81</sup>

The problem, according to Haykal, came from the fact that intellectuals were ill placed to know what the people wanted, and he believed this problem went back to the time of the monarchy.

Through their alliance with the *ancien régime*, Haykal claimed that intellectuals had isolated themselves from the people and were unable to express their problems or their needs.<sup>82</sup> In July 1952, he went on, the “vanguard of the army” (al-ṭalī‘ah), as he said, that carried out the coup took on the leadership role that intellectuals should have normally occupied. He criticized calls by intellectuals for the army to return to the barracks, arguing that such calls only indicated that intellectuals had not grasped the significance of that historic moment, as he described it.

Reiterating what Nasser had explained in *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Haykal said that the goal of the coup was not simply to depose the king, but to change Egyptian society as a whole.

Due to the political vacuum created by the coup, he believed it was inevitable for the army to be in total control. According to Haykal, Nasser understood that it was not the army’s role to govern, and he offered the solution when he resigned from the army and joined the people as a civilian. In that way, Haykal went on, Nasser became the country’s president and the army was no longer running the country and could focus on its real duties.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, *Azmat al-muthaqafīn*, 50.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 16-9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

Without any mention of the challenging British colonial context, Haykal accused the main political parties before the revolution of having aligned themselves with the interests of large landowners and of ignoring social reforms. He used this history to dismiss calls by intellectuals for the reestablishment of a multiparty system back in 1954 as only “theoretical.” The existing parties, he explained, and especially al-Wafd, which had the people’s support but still failed to accomplish any revolution in Egyptian society, proved they were incapable of effectuating any change.<sup>84</sup> Given that the army had no particular philosophy of its own to implement after the success of the coup, as he said, and given that in 1954 the revolution had not yet caused enough grassroots changes to allow for the creation of new parties, the reestablishment of a multiparty system was not a possibility back then.<sup>85</sup> Writing in 1961, Haykal still believed that Egyptian society was not ready to have new political parties that could carry out the changes society needed. The solution he proposed instead was to organize the Egyptian workforce through the state run National Union to develop the national resources.<sup>86</sup> In his analysis of the revolution’s (or the regime’s) problem with intellectuals, Haykal put the army and the people on one side and intellectuals on the other. The army officers who led the coup, according to his analysis, understood what the people wanted and acted on their behalf. The intellectuals, however, had isolated themselves from Egyptians and continued to do so by not rallying themselves completely behind the regime that represented the true Egyptian people and their interests. According to Haykal, that problem would not be solved until intellectuals had united themselves with what he described as “the revolutionary driving force.”

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 40-1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 76.



This was not Haykal's opinion alone. It was Nasser's too, and both opinions were at odds with how Taha Hussein had interpreted the early success of the revolution as already shown. Haykal quoted an important passage from Nasser's *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, describing the high hopes Nasser had placed on Egyptian intellectuals and his ultimate disappointment.

I used to think before July 23 that the entire nation was on the alert, and was only waiting for the vanguard (al-ṭalī'ah) to break the barriers, and then the nation would follow in back-to-back orderly lines, marching a holy march towards the great goal. An infinite crowd did come, but how far was reality from imagination. The crowds that came were divided into sects and scattered remnants [from the old system], and the holy march towards the great goal got delayed. That day, the situation seemed gloomy, scary, and foreshadowed danger. Then I felt, with a sad bitter heart that the duty of the vanguard was not over yet. We went to seek the opinion of those who [said they] had it, and seek experience from those with experience. Unfortunately, we did not find much.<sup>87</sup>

Intellectuals, according to Nasser, were unable to rise to the moment, set their differences aside and unite their efforts to back up the army. He was disappointed because those intellectuals could not agree amongst themselves on one way forward, and were thus unable to provide him with the concrete ideas that he needed to unite the nation and start everybody on the "holy march," as he called it. In his book, Nasser not only talked about intellectuals and their failure, but he also referred explicitly to university professors. He denounced their ego and total lack of awareness of the role they should be playing for country and nation. He even argued they should have found a role model in the young officers.

Many of [the university professors] spoke to me... And they spoke for a long time. Unfortunately, none of them gave me ideas. Each one introduced himself, and [spoke about] his qualifications [which were] enough to create miracles. Each one looked at me as if he was favoring me at his own expense with the treasures of the earth and the supplies of immortality. I remember I could not contain myself and I stood up to tell them: 'Every one of us can do a miracle in his own place. One's first duty is to give all effort to one's work, and if you, as university professors, thought about your students, and made them, as you should, [the] main [focus of your] work, then you would be able to give us an incredible force to build the country. [...]

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 85-6.

I did not wish to mention members of the Revolutionary Council as examples for them, and did not wish to tell [these professors] that until the emergency had called [the officers] for their grand duty, they were doing the best they could in their work. I did not wish to tell [these professors] that most members of the Revolutionary Council were professors at the Command and Staff College, and that this is proof of their excellence as professional soldiers.<sup>88</sup>

This dismissal of intellectuals and fear of the divisive impact of their ideas on the people also appeared in another significant document, *The National Pact (al-Mithāq al-waṭanī)*, in 1962. In the *Mithāq*, Nasser, after explaining the history of the revolution, described his plan of action and the importance for both democracy and socialism to work together for the benefit of the people. In this struggle to realize the people's dreams and achieve their expectations, he warned against what he described as "an intellectual adolescence." These intellectual adolescents, whom he described as weak and incapable of creative thinking, undermined society by offering ideas and interpretations that, in his words, "freeze the national struggle" and "spread a spirit of hesitation." These ideas, according to Nasser, represented danger, a "moral terrorism," as he said, which should be "confronted and eliminated."<sup>89</sup> In this program, Nasser called for a cultural revolution whose motto would be "knowledge for society," and he asked universities and research institutes to develop themselves so they could meet this objective. For Nasser, the old motto of the university, "knowledge for the sake knowledge," was no longer adequate. "Knowledge for knowledge's sake is a responsibility that our national capacity during this phase cannot bear the burden of," he insisted.<sup>90</sup>

On May 26, Taha Hussein responded publicly in disagreement with Nasser for the first time. In one of Hussein's last political articles in *al-Jumhūrīyah*, his response could be read, not

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<sup>88</sup> Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, *Falsafat al-thawrah wa-l-mithāq* [The Philosophy of the Revolution and the Pact] (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1970), 31-2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 222-3.

only as a reaction to the *Mīthāq*, but also to Haykal's articles on the crisis of the intellectuals a year earlier, which until then Hussein had completely ignored. Hussein started by praising Nasser's program and the time that it must have taken him to prepare it, describing the work as an immense effort that reminded him of Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*.<sup>91</sup> Hussein shared his views on two specific points, saying that he felt encouraged by Nasser's own confirmation in the *Mīthāq* that criticism was necessary for any progress. The first issue dealt with history, and so it was not a disagreement as such with Nasser's program, as Hussein said. In the *Mīthāq*, Nasser dismissed the 1919 revolution as having failed to produce any benefits for the people. Reiterating Haykal's opinion, Nasser said that given their allegiance to wealthy landowners, the political parties in charge failed to bring any social reform to the people.<sup>92</sup> He described the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty as having sealed the failure of the 1919 revolution by accepting an independence that was empty of any value or meaning.<sup>93</sup> He went on and described the period between 1919 and 1952 as a "setback" (*naksah*), in which those who had led the 1919 revolution lost all revolutionary capabilities when they aligned themselves with the landowners to "divide up the booty." This "corrupt partisan atmosphere," as Nasser described it, attracted intellectuals, who should have protected the revolution. Instead, they could not resist temptation, as he said, and eventually all those parties threw themselves in the arms of the palace at times, and in the arms of colonialism the rest of the time

The leadership that had taken on the struggle of the people [in 1919] gave in to the rising power of the palace because of that leadership's increased weakness. They all knelt [before the palace] seeking the [royal] blessing that could bring them closer to the ruling seats. They gave up on the people and renounced on their worth, not realizing that by doing so [these leaders] were voluntarily giving up their only source of original power.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Taha Hussein, "Juhd hā'il" [An Immense Effort], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, May 26, 1962. Republished in TTH\_6, 362.

<sup>92</sup> Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, *Falsafat al-thawrah wa-l-mīthāq*, 144-5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-50.

Taha Hussein was indignant, and may have seen Nasser's criticism as an attack not only on his generation, but also as a personal attack on him, for Hussein was a Wafdist minister and was member of government. Moreover, as explained above, he believed it was the culture and education of that period between 1919 and 1952 that were behind the success of the revolution. Nasser's understanding of what happened was therefore radically different from Hussein's.<sup>95</sup> Hussein therefore responded, defending his history and the history of his generation of intellectuals, educators and university professors. It is worth quoting Hussein's response in full.

Everything the President said about these political parties, their differences, and competition over power was spot on and there is no point in refuting it. But the President also talked about intellectuals and their activity during the period between the two revolutions, the 1919 revolution and the current one. It seems to me that he has not been fair to them. For they joined these parties, disagreed just like these parties disagreed, and lost much of their effort and time in futile politics. At the same time, however, not all of them succumbed to seduction, nor did they all compete over power, nor were all their efforts useless. They made a sincere effort whose effects can still be felt. I have no doubt that the President knows these effects and is not ungrateful to them. These intellectuals created during that period an intellectual awakening and an activity of the mind that cannot be refuted. They woke up the people and taught them using the books they wrote, the literature they published, and even with what they [themselves] wrote about politics. They were the foundation of education in the various schools and institutes. They took on the burden of the university, in fact the burden of the three universities: Cairo, Alexandria and Ain Shams. They graduated thousands of young people, who now bear the burdens of life not only in Egypt, but also elsewhere in the Arab countries. I would have preferred if the President were fair to them somewhat after he mentioned they joined the political parties and went along with them.<sup>96</sup>

By asking Nasser to be fair, Hussein might have also been referring to the effort he and others had made when they spent a year and half writing a new constitution for the country after

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<sup>95</sup> Despite Nasser's public dismissal of the role of the older generation, in private, he never hid his admiration of the Egyptian writer Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987), for example. According to the intellectual Luwīs 'Awaḍ, Nasser was particularly affected by al-Ḥakīm's nationalist novel, *The Return of the Soul* (1933). Nasser even intervened to protect al-Ḥakīm when, in the purge that followed the revolution, al-Ḥakīm was removed from his position as head of the national library (Dār al-Kutub). Consequently, al-Ḥakīm returned to his position. See Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Al-Hurīyah wa-naqd al-hurīyah* [Freedom and its Critique] (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-'Āmmah li-l-Ta'līf wa-l-Nashr, 1971), 57-69.

<sup>96</sup> Taha Hussein, "Juhd hā'il," 363.

the coup. Although Nasser in *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, then Haykal in the *Crisis of the Intellectuals*, accused the older generation of intellectuals of having disappointed the revolution by not giving the new leaders the ideas necessary to move forward, both Nasser and Haykal knew this was not entirely true. Hussein had been appointed to the “committee of the fifty” (lajnat al-khamsīn), as it was called, in December 1952, and the committee submitted its constitution in August 1954.<sup>97</sup> This committee represented the various intellectual and political currents in Egyptian society at the time. It included four members from the Wafd, two from the Liberal Constitutionalists, two Saadists, three from the Muslim Brotherhood, two from the New National Party, one member from Young Egypt, one member from the Kutlah al-Wafdīyah, as well as the presidents of the Court of Cassation, the State Council, and the Supreme Court, three officers from the army and the police, professors of constitutional law, in addition to other public figures. Six of the fifty members were Coptic Christians.<sup>98</sup> Taha Hussein and those on the committee gave to the Revolutionary Council what they believed was the result of decades of their experience in Egyptian public life, culture and politics. The Revolutionary Council, however, chose to ignore their constitution and it was never discussed publicly.

The intellectual historian, Tāriq al-Bishrī describes the 1954 constitution as having included “very sophisticated” technical and constitutional references.<sup>99</sup> It protected individual and collective liberties within a parliamentary republic.<sup>100</sup> For example, it ensured freedom of publishing and that of the press without any censorship or control. It also stipulated freedom of assembly without presence of the police if those assemblies were for peaceful purposes and

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<sup>97</sup> Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, preface to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 22.

<sup>98</sup> See Tāriq al-Bishrī, *al-Dimuqrāṭīyah wa-niẓām thalāthah wa-‘ishrīn yūliū: 1952-1970* [Democracy and the Regime of July 23: 1952-1970] (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Abḥath al-‘Arabīyah, 1987), 98.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. Al-Bishrī explains that he was able to find a typewritten copy of the constitution in the library of the Institute of Arab Studies, Ma‘had al-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabīyah.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

unarmed. The constitution also allowed for the creation of organizations and political parties without prior authorization from the government if the laws organizing their creation were respected and as long as they were created peacefully and for peaceful ends.<sup>101</sup> Al-Bishrī describes the constitution as a liberal one that avoided all the mishaps of the 1923 constitution.

The project [of writing the constitution] was just an adjustment of the abolished constitution of 1923. It really created highly sophisticated formulations, which ensured that Parliament would become the principal source of power around which all other state authorities would revolve. It also closed the gaps from which the king had managed to control the institutions of the 1923 constitution. [The new constitution] prevented any [future] attempts by the President of the Republic to dominate the authority of the nation, represented in Parliament.<sup>102</sup>

According to this constitution, the President of the Republic was to be a parliamentary president, elected by an organization composed of members of parliament and some local organizations for one term of five years. To avoid a repetition of the problems with the constitution of 1923, the new constitution indicated that Parliament would not be dissolved for the same reason twice, and if dissolved and no elections had taken place in 60 days, then the old parliament would convene again the next day.<sup>103</sup>

Yet, those who wrote the constitution did not give the army any role in building the new constitutional order. In his analysis of the new constitution, al-Bishrī argues that “it became clear that those who carried out the project aimed with their constitution to exclude the men of July 23 from participating in power, and keeping the military away from having any role in politics.” Although al-Bishrī admitted that those who wrote the constitution were right, theoretically, to exclude the army from ruling the country, they ignored the new political map and that as they

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 98-9.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 99.

were writing the constitution, the military and the state were already turning into a “coherent regulatory body.”<sup>104</sup> By trying to exclude the army, the new constitution was stillborn.<sup>105</sup>

If Taha Hussein’s first response to the *Mithāq* was to correct Nasser on history and the role Hussein’s generation had played before and after the 1952 revolution, the second was a direct critique of Nasser’s vision for the university. It is very likely that Nasser’s critique of the university was what prompted Taha Hussein to respond to the popular leader in the first place. Both Nasser and Haykal had already discredited Hussein’s generation before, in *The Philosophy of the Revolution* and *The Crisis of the Intellectuals*, but Hussein never responded. This time was different as the mission of the university was on the line. Again, it is worth quoting Hussein’s response in full.

The President was absolutely right when he said that knowledge should reform life and develop it. But he said that knowledge for knowledge’s sake is a responsibility the burden of which our national efforts at this stage cannot bear. I stopped at this sentence because I believe that knowledge for knowledge’s sake is a liability that we can bear in this phase of our lives. For universities and higher institutes should provide the youth with a good sound education that allows them to undertake the burdens of life and solve its problems, as well as reform life and develop it. If among those many thousands who are seeking knowledge, there was one whom the love of knowledge has possessed and he wanted to devote his mind and heart to studying, and dedicate his life for scientific research, then we should not turn him away from that, and we should not entice him to [take on] practical duties. Instead, we should totally encourage him to carry on with his studying, learning and going to the depth of scientific truths, for this is what can best serve a nation. Who knows, maybe he who has dedicated his life to knowledge and devoted himself to research and studying, will discover one day a truth among the many scientific truths that will fill up life around him with knowledge and light, and maybe this will have the best impact on reforming the people and developing them. In any case, [such endeavors] honor the people and raise their status among other peoples. Talents are a grace that God bestows upon those whom he chooses, and such people should not be turned away or resisted, for everyone is helped to achieve what he was created for. Having said this, I am confident that those who devote themselves to knowledge and dedicate their lives to it will always be a few, not only among our people, but also among the people of the whole earth.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>106</sup> Taha Hussein, “Juḥd ḥā’il,” 363-4.

In this rare case of public disagreement with Nasser, Hussein was defending what he believed was the mission of the university, especially the faculty of arts, whose immediate practical impact on society was not always obvious.

Zakarīyā al-Shalq argues that Hussein chose to respond to Nasser on the *Mīthāq* because he felt optimistic about Nasser's call for constructive criticism and for Nasser's praise of democracy as the political freedom that must accompany socialism or "social freedom" as Nasser put it.<sup>107</sup> Yet, given the history of Taha Hussein with the university and the faculty of arts that was discussed in the previous chapters, it is more likely that his critique was to sound the alarm for what he thought was a dangerous transformation of the mission of the project he had spent decades building. Had Hussein been really excited about the *Mīthāq*, he would have probably discussed it in more detail, which did not happen. Furthermore, in his response to the *Mīthāq*, Taha Hussein did not refer once to the word "democracy," dear as it was to him. Nor did he mention that word in the last political article that he wrote for *al-Jumhūrīyah* a month later, on August 19, 1962, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the revolution.<sup>108</sup> Finally, on July 30, 1964, Taha Hussein received a letter at home in which he was informed that he had been fired from *al-Jumhūrīyah*.<sup>109</sup>

## Redefining Literature

Not only did expectations from intellectuals change in the Nasserite period, but expectations from literature also did. As the historian Shārif Yūnis has recently shown in his

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<sup>107</sup> Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, *Falsafat al-thawrah wa-l-mīthāq*, 162 and Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, preface to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 37.

<sup>108</sup> Taha Hussein, "Yawm al-thawrah" [Revolution Day], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, August 19, 1962. Republished in TTH 6, 365-70.

<sup>109</sup> According to al-Shalq, Hussein was deeply hurt by that decision, and especially by the way he was informed of his dismissal after eleven years of writing regularly for *al-Jumhūrīyah*. Aḥmad Zakarīyā al-Shalq, preface to *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn*, 26.



book, *al-Zahf al-Muqaddas* [The Holy March], the new regime controlled the field of culture, including art, literature, the media and the press, by revoking licenses, nationalizing the existing cultural establishments and creating new ones entirely run by the state, such as the new ministry of public guidance. Within this system, job appointments as well as funding literature, the arts, and culture in general, depended more on the authorities' approval of the message contained in a work of the art and less on the public interest in the work itself.<sup>110</sup> Yunis argues that the criteria against which culture was measured were clear in the "Pact of the Intellectuals," published in 1965 by the Nationalist Socialist Union. In this text culture was defined as a "service rendered by the socialist government to the people in return for the taxes that they pay."<sup>111</sup> The purpose of this service, according to Yūnis, was to "support the revolution and make it successful."<sup>112</sup>

New expectations of literature, and art in general, also came from some young writers themselves, who had strong ideas of their own on how literature should change and why. They responded to the political changes happening around them, and felt it was their responsibility to seize what they believed was a historic moment to make radical social changes. Many of them were attracted to the school of socialist realism and they debated the ways in which they could commit their literature to the revolution and its principles. They called for the end of colonialism and creating a better life for the peasantry and the working class. While these writers respected Taha Hussein for his long impressive history and because most of them had been his students at the university, he increasingly came to be seen as a pillar of an old school of literature and literary criticism that resisted calls for a more explicit commitment to social and political reforms. Hussein, however, was worried about an overt politicization of literature and remained

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<sup>110</sup> Shārif Yūnis, *al-Zahf al-muqaddas* [The Holy March], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beirut; Cairo; Tunis: Dār al-Tanwīr, 2012), 59.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

protective of a writer's freedom. He questioned who was to decide what the needs of the people were and refused the idea that writers would have to answer to a predefined ideology. His debates with Marxist writers, Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim and ‘Abd al-‘Aẓīm Anīs in Egypt in 1954, and Ra’īf Khūrī in Lebanon in 1955, demonstrated not only his concerns but also his distance from socialist realism, which was rapidly gaining ground. In the view of these Marxist writers, the literature of Taha Hussein and his generation was not committed enough and failed to speak to the present moment and its struggles. They saw Taha Hussein as part of an older generation that could not see that times had changed.

On February 5, 1954, Taha Hussein published an article in *al-Jumhūrīyah* entitled “The Form of Literature and its Content,” in which he argued that language (al-lughah) was the form of literature, while meaning (al-ma‘ānī) was its content, and that the two formed an inseparable one. Al-‘Ālim and Anīs responded to Taha Hussein making a case for socialist realism and a debate ensued, in which ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād also intervened. Hussein responded to their critique calmly but criticized their ideas for being too abstract, or “Greek that could not be read,” as he described it. Al-‘Aqqād was very offended by their criticism of his work, however, and in his violent response he accused them of communism. Consequently, both al-‘Ālim and Anīs were fired by the Revolutionary Council, which was targeting communists, from their teaching positions at Cairo University during the purge of September 1954. In his 1989 introduction to the third edition of the book, al-‘Ālim was clear that the reason they lost their jobs was because of this debate and because, as al-‘Aqqād had rightly understood, their critique was not just literary, but also political and social.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim, introduction to *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah* [On Egyptian Culture], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1989), 16-7. Al-‘Ālim taught in the department of philosophy, while Anīs taught in the department of mathematics. In a televised interview with Taha Hussein in the late sixties in which he was surrounded by some of Egypt's well-known younger writers and journalists like Najīb Mahfūz, Anīs

Al-‘Ālim and Anīs developed their ideas further, added new chapters to their contribution to this debate and published everything in their famous *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah* [On Egyptian Culture], which they published in Lebanon in 1955, with a preface by the famous Lebanese Marxist intellectual, Ḥusayn Murūwah. In his preface, Murūwah argued that the title was a misnomer because al-‘Ālim and Anīs’ critique was accurate and applicable not just to culture, art and literature in Egypt but everywhere in the world, especially in Arab countries that were experiencing the same struggle. That struggle, or that battle, as he described it, was “the eternal battle between anything new and anything old, between the culture of a category of society whose historical role is disappearing, and another group that has new ideas and trying to shift society towards a new historical role.”<sup>114</sup>

In this book, ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Anīs described realism as a new school of literature that attracted young writers who wanted to connect literature to society in such a way so that this link became “a living connection that made [literature] an honest image and a creative mirror for social life in its anxieties, hopes and expectations.”<sup>115</sup> Anīs and al-‘Ālim’s main contribution was to insist that examining, revealing and evaluating the social content of a work of art was an integral part of any serious literary creation or criticism.<sup>116</sup> In that respect, as they clarified in a

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Manṣūr, Yūsuf al-Sibā‘ī and others, Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim was also present. Hussein reproached all these younger intellectuals for not reading enough, and for not engaging as well as they should with the classical Arabic tradition and world literature. “Except,” he added, “for Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim as I enjoyed reading his [latest] book, *Ma‘ārik fīkrīyah*, very much.” Al-‘Ālim smiled radiantly. Taha Hussein, the intellectual and the educator, probably wanted to recognize the intellectual contributions of his student turned adversary, in public.

<sup>114</sup> Ḥusayn Murūwah, preface to *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1989), 3-5.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Anīs, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Al-‘Ālim and Anīs, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 44. In their analysis of form and content, al-‘Ālim and Anīs highlighted that content was nothing but actions or events that reflected social views or facts. Form, according to them, was the operation that put these actions together to create the work of art. In their view, enhancing and bringing out the social aspect of the content would not undermine the form, on the contrary this would reveal more about the form, its structure and working. Ibid.

later article, their addition was to say that the work of art was not only about form and content, but they also specified that content was in fact a “social stand.” In their view, their work revealed “the natural interconnection and organic overlap between literary criticism and social criticism, thus uniting two types of study and enlarging literary criticism.”<sup>117</sup>

Using this understanding of literature and its purpose, Anīs and al-‘Ālim proceeded to condemn the older generation, like Taha Hussein, ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī and others. The young intellectuals dismissed old literature as “ossified and separate from the movement of life.”<sup>118</sup> Anīs saw the old writers as “bourgeois intellectuals” who were associated with a political system that was run by the middle classes and represented by the Wafd party. These classes failed to achieve independence, had to ally themselves with the British by signing the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and then, according to Anīs, they tried to convince the rest of the people that the struggle of independence was over. In Anīs’ view, Hussein’s literature from that period was disconnected from the “feelings of Egyptians,” as he said. He used Hussein’s protagonist, Amīnah, from *Du‘ā’ al-karawān* [The Curlew's Prayers] “the servant who learns French and marries the irrigation engineer to avenge her sister,” to argue that these were “emotions far from Egyptian society and do not enforce any serious life.”<sup>119</sup> As an another example, he thought Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm’s play, *Ahl al-Kahf* [People of the Cave], was part of a “reactionary literature, which, although reflective of an aspect of Egyptian life, does not share its surging movement, and remains at the feet of its weak and defeated relationships.”<sup>120</sup> The worst by far, in Anīs’ view, was al-Māzinī. His work *Ibrāhīm al-Kātib* [Ibrahim the Writer] according to Anīs, was a prime example of defeatist literature as the protagonist was totally

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<sup>117</sup> ‘Al-‘Ālim and Anīs, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 49.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>119</sup> Anīs, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 111.

<sup>120</sup> Anīs, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 66.

removed from his social environment. Anīs then made a leap and concluded that al-Māzinī's protagonist represented al-Māzinī himself.

For the truth is that [the protagonist] Ibrāhīm's attitude towards life is al-Māzinī's attitude as well, an attitude made of pessimism, desperation, escapism, hyperbolic individualism, and always thinking about the grave. [...] Yet running away from life did not stop a writer like al-Māzinī from becoming editor-in-chief of *al-Ittiḥād* and *al-Siyāsah*, two journals that, in the past that will never return, represented the Egyptian royalty and the Egyptian landowners.<sup>121</sup>

Literature, in the eyes of al-‘Ālim and Anīs, was therefore a political statement, and for them, it was not surprising that someone like al-Māzinī, who wrote what they believed was defeatist literature, ran journals that represented the interests of the monarchy and the rich, who benefitted from such literature. Not only was their critique literary, but it was also political, social and even personal. A writer was what he wrote.

In his response to al-‘Ālim and Anīs, Taha Hussein remained focused on the literary discussion at hand, and said he was not convinced that a literary work should only be about society, arguing that if such was the case, then no literary work should describe nature, for example.<sup>122</sup> He spoke more openly of his concerns about the political implications of socialist realism in Beirut a year later. In a debate entitled “For Whom the Writer Writes?” Hussein debated with the Lebanese Marxist intellectual, Ra’īf Khūrī over the question of whether an author should write for the public or the elite. The debate was republished, along with reactions from other readers and intellectuals, in the widely-read Lebanese periodical, *al-Ādāb*. *Al-Ādāb*, created in January 1953, played a major role in disseminating works of socialist realism, or what also came to be known as committed literature. In its first editorial, the editor-in-chief, Suhayl Idrīsī, explained that

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>122</sup> Taha Hussein, “Yūnānī falā yuqra” [Illegible Greek], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, March 5, 1954, cited in al-‘Ālim, *Fī al-thaqāfah al-miṣrīyah*, 55.

The literature the magazine promotes and encourages is the ‘committed’ literature, which flows out from Arab society and pours into it. As it promotes this kind of effective literature, the magazine delivers an ideal national message. For this group of conscious writers, who create a literature inspired by their society, can create over time a generation of conscious readers, who in turn, will feel out the reality of their society and create the seed of good citizens.<sup>123</sup>

In this debate, Ra’if Khūrī defended the position that a writer should write for everybody (al-kāfah). By everybody, he specified that he meant factory workers, peasants, students, small merchants and functionaries. These readers, he explained, not only made up his audience, but they also provided him with the material from which he created his literary work. More importantly, he argued that he wrote so that his work would guide this large audience, which formed the basis of any nation or country, as he said.<sup>124</sup> Turning to Taha Hussein, he asked him to specify who the elite (al-khāṣah) that he wrote for was, and why he chose to limit his readership to the rich and to the intellectuals, excluding peasants from upper Egypt, for example, who, in Khūrī’s view, would have recognized themselves in Taha Hussein’s work, *al-Mu’adhabūn fī al-ard* [The Sufferers], much more than a mathematician or an astronomer would have.<sup>125</sup> Literature, Ra’if insisted, should be open to life and connected to it, and a writer should be observant and analytical. As opposed to literature that solely entertained or focused on the artistic form without paying attention to the content (art for art’s sake as he saw it), Khūrī believed that the task of a writer was to make people conscious of their lives and to direct the people, through literature.<sup>126</sup> “Literature,” he declared, “must be concerned with topics derived from the important issues of the time and its problems.” In his opinion, there were four major concerns in Arab life at that moment: independence, democracy, social justice and peace. “I

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<sup>123</sup> Suhayl Idrīsī, “Risālat al-Ādāb” [The Mission of *al-Ādāb*], *al-Ādāb* 1 (January 1953): 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ra’if Khūrī, “Al-Adīb yaktub li-l-kāfah” [The Writer Writes to the Masses], *al-Ādāb* 5 (May 1955): 2.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 5.

believe in guiding and guided literature,” without any influence from the state or those in power, he reaffirmed.<sup>127</sup>

In his response to Khūrī, Taha Hussein refused the terms that defined the discussion. He saw that opposing an elite to a public to create a debate was “something artificial” as he said, and that he had never accepted the premise that he wrote for the elite. Throughout his life, he explained, he never considered those terms when writing or commenting on literature. He only saw literature and readers of that literature. Some of those readers liked what they read while others did not. He said that literature had always worked like that before Europeans started worrying about those new theories that Khūrī and others had become so interested in.<sup>128</sup> Why make up such a division and overcomplicate matters, “why split hairs, and why look for noon at 14:00 hours as the French say?” he asked. Right from the start of his response, Hussein made clear that his main worry was the interference of politics in literature. He argued that speaking of “guided and guiding” literature, “committed and uncommitted” writers, as well as writing for the “public” or the “elite,” stemmed from politicians trying to use literature to achieve their goals.<sup>129</sup>

Hussein explained that no writer wrote exclusively for the few. He believed that writing happened when a certain idea imposed itself on a writer until the writer felt forced to express that idea, in poetry or prose, and then give what he wrote to the people.

Many litterateurs fool themselves and say that they write only for themselves. Nonsense. A writer does not write for himself, and if this were the case, then he would not need to write. It would be enough for him to flirt with his thoughts and ideas as they roam around in his mind and confuse his emotions. He would not need to see them written down.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>128</sup> Probably referring to Jean-Paul Sartre and his writings on committed literature.

<sup>129</sup> Taha Hussein, “al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣah” [A Writer Writes to the Elite], *al-Ādāb* 5 (May 1955): 9.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 12.

Seen like this, Hussein declared that he was uncomfortable with labels, such as “socialist literature,” “communist literature,” or “democratic literature.” Such doctrines (madhāhib) should not be forced on literature, he insisted, and the writer should not feel the obligation to write according to this or that doctrine.<sup>131</sup> As he went on, his critique became sharper. Addressing those in favor of a “guided” literature, he asked them if they did not read and enjoy the old literature, which was not guided. This, he maintained, only illustrated the contradiction between what they liked to read in private, and what they wanted to create in public. In addition, he said he was puzzled there were writers who wanted to give up on their own freedom.

Let’s say the truth, say it openly without hesitation and without fear. You want to know the truth? It is very simple. Guided literature is the literature whose purpose is to become a literature of propaganda (adab al-da‘wah) whose purpose is to drive the people to what this or that [political] party wants, so the people become socialist, communist or democratic. I never fool myself and I do not like it for anybody to fool themselves either. I do not like to flatter the people in order to subject them to what they should not be subjected to. [...] For if this guidance were to come from anyone [but the writer himself], be it an individual, a party, the state, a group, then this would have nothing to do with literature.<sup>132</sup>

He said that he read socialist and communist literatures often, but seldom did he find sincerity in that kind of committed literature. He also took issue with the increasing criticism of writers who did not write about people’s needs. “What is this talk?” he asked. “First, what do the people need? What could these needs be and who can decide and realize these needs at any time?” He criticized limiting people’s needs to material necessities such as food, and insisted that the people were “adults” who could distinguish for themselves between what was good for their bodies and what was good for their minds.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 13-4.

<sup>133</sup> Taha Hussein, “al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣah,” 14-5.



Taha Hussein also defended literature against accusations that it was not responding fast enough to the events reshaping Egyptian life. According to him, literature had helped people realize that their lives needed change and by doing so it made the revolution possible.<sup>134</sup> He explained that the literature of the revolution itself, however, which writers are impatient to have, needed time and would not come about until new writers had grown up in the new environment that the revolution had created. Literature would change when these new writers had been accustomed to their newly found freedom from the oppressive monarchy, corrupt foreign occupation and the unjust economic system.<sup>135</sup> Responding in strong words to young writers advocating “literature for life,” as they called it, Hussein insisted that they were wasting their time and the time of their readers over “silly” questions that revolved around the responsibility of writers as well as the authority to which they should hold themselves accountable.<sup>136</sup> People had solved these problems since the “dawn of civilization,” as he said. Every writer, he argued, was responsible for his literature and the rules governing that literature. Like any adult, a writer answered first to his conscience, then to public law, then to the community of people within which he lived and finally to humanity as a whole.<sup>137</sup> He said he did not understand what those young writers meant by “literature for life,” for what else, he wondered, could any literature be for, “for death?” he asked.<sup>138</sup> He turned again to the political implications of this debate, and said the real question at hand was whether “art, literature included, should become a tool for social reform as decided by the state.” Such a question, he went on, was not limited to literature and art,

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<sup>134</sup> Taha Hussein, “Adab al-thawrah” [The Literature of the Revolution], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, October 23, 1954. Republished in *Turāth Ṭāhā Husayn: Al-Maqālāt al-ṣaḥāfiyah min 1908-1967 (al-Islāmīyāt wa-l-naqd al-adabī)*, vol. 2 (Al-Qāhirah: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah bi-l-Qāhirah, Markaz Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mu‘āṣir, 2007), 437.

<sup>135</sup> Taha Hussein, “Adab al-thawrah,” 440-1.

<sup>136</sup> Taha Hussein, “As’ilah” [Questions], *al-Jumhūrīyah*, February 28, 1956. Republished in TTH\_6, 659.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 660.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 661.

but also included science, indicating that the debate was not “purely literary or artistic” but a “socio-political” one. He therefore saw the debate as a choice between two approaches to art and literature, the individual or the social (*fardī aw ijtīmāʿī*). On one hand, he argued that the individual approach was free. It allowed writers to use literature as a tool for social reform if they wished to do so, or use it to express the self, society or nature if they wanted. The social approach, on another hand, did not accept anything but its own view that literature was a “pure social means.” “While literature had the right to intervene in politics if it wanted, I would hate it for politics to force itself onto literature,” he concluded.<sup>139</sup>

Ironically, in all these debates, neither the young writers nor Hussein himself, brought up the accusations of communism leveled against him in the late forties. In addition to his incessant calls for free universal education, Hussein had published a series of literary works deploring social injustice in Egypt at the time. He stressed the importance of combating corruption, as well as the poverty, ignorance and illness rampant among large segments of the population. These works included for example, *Ahlām Shahrazād* [Scheherazade’s Dreams] in 1943, *Shajarat al-bu’s* [The Tree of Misery] in 1944, *Jannat al-shawk* [The Paradise of Thorns] in 1945, *al-Qadar* [The Destiny] in 1947, *Mir’āt al-ḍamīr al-ḥadīth* [The Mirror of Modern Conscience] in 1948, *al-Wa’d al-ḥaqq* [The Just Promise] in 1949, *Jannat al-ḥayawān* [Animal Paradise] in 1950, and most importantly *al-Mu’adhabūn fī al arḍ* [The Sufferers], which was banned in Egypt and which he had to publish in Lebanon in 1949. This, in addition to a series of articles that he published between 1945 and 1949 in which he was outspoken about his disappointment in the outcome of the 1936 Treaty and the little impact it had had on the poor and the needy. In these articles, he expressed his disapproval of how public servants ignored the needs of the people, his

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 662-4.

worry about the spread of corruption under the British occupation, and the absence of a social welfare system that saved the dignity of widows and orphans.<sup>140</sup> Because of all this, Farouk suspected Hussein of communism and was opposed to Hussein's appointment as minister of public instruction in the new Wafd Cabinet of 1950. Farouk relented only after Naḥḥās' persistence.

Noticeable too in his debate with the younger writers, was the absence of Hussein's biting sarcasm that had characterized his earlier debates with members of his own generation and the previous one. He even wrote that this debate over committed literature or literature for life was annoying, because it claimed to be about literature, when it had nothing to do with literature. Yet, he said he intervened because he felt the younger writers were confused and were getting caught up in what he described as a "futile debate" that prevented them from dedicating themselves to literature.<sup>141</sup> He calmly refuted their arguments and warned repeatedly against intimidating writers into writing according to prescribed ideologies.

Yet, for the younger generation of writers who felt literature must play a direct role in the struggle for freedom and social justice after the revolution, their disagreement with Taha Hussein could not have been more meaningful. They felt their role was to guide the people and to guide other writers as well. Hussein was telling them exactly what they did not want to hear. By insisting that literature and art in general "should be seen as an end in itself, and that it should not be exploited for this or that purpose," they believed he was excluding literature from the

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<sup>140</sup> Taha Hussein discussed these ideas respectively in "'Id" [Feast], *al-Balāgh*, August 26, 1945; "Junūn" [Madness], *al-Muṣawwar*, May 23, 1947; "al-Qalaq al-khaṭar" [The Dangerous Worry], *Musāmarat al-Jayb*, December 21, 1947; "al-Thawb al-ḍayyiq" [The Tight Dress], *al-Muṣawwar*, January 9, 1948; "Azmaḥ" [A Crisis], *al-Muṣawwar*, February 20, 1948 and "Junūd al-shayṭān" [Satan's Soldiers], *al-Muṣawwar*, January 12, 1949.

<sup>141</sup> Taha Hussein, "As'ilah," 664.

struggle.<sup>142</sup> In his analysis of the debate between Hussein and Khūrī, literary scholar Aḥmad Abu Ḥāqah saw the conflict as generational. Like Ḥusayn Murūwah in his introduction to *Fī al-thāqafah al-miṣrīyah*, Abu Ḥāqah mentioned Khūrī's age (he was 43) and Hussein's (who was 66 at the time) to argue that the former represented the younger generation, while the latter represented the old. Abu Ḥāqah believed that Khūrī was rebelling against existing standards of literary criticism hoping for a larger social change, when Hussein was old and conservative.<sup>143</sup>

### **The End of a World**

During the fifties and sixties many of those intellectuals whom the young writers considered part of an older generation resistant to new ideas were disappearing. Moving eulogies were given to commemorate their lives and work at the Arabic Language Academy. As member and then president of the academy, Taha Hussein attended many of those events. He bid farewell to his colleagues at the university and the academy Aḥmad Amīn (1954), 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-'Abbādī (1956), 'Abd al-Wahāb 'Azzām (1959) Maṣṣūr Fahmī (1959), and Muḥammad Shafīq Ghurbāl (1961). He lost close friends, such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1956), his mentor Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid (1963), 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq (1966), Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (1968), his Tunisian friends the scholars Ḥasan Ḥusnī 'Abd al-Wahāb (1968) and the Sheikh of the Zaytūnah Mosque Fāḍil 'Ashūr (1970). 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, Hussein's lifelong adversary, died in 1964, and Hussein evoked his memory with much fondness and respect. The philosopher 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Badawī whom Hussein had proudly welcomed to the academy in 1945 passed away in 1965. The academy meetings, which Hussein attended regularly until his

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<sup>142</sup> Taha Hussein, "al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣah," 15.

<sup>143</sup> Aḥmad Abū Ḥāqah, *al-Itizām fī al-shi'r al-'arabī* [Commitment in Arabic Poetry] (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 1979), 361-2.

own death in 1973, also missed the presence of his political adversary the jurist ‘Abd al-Rāzzaq al-Sanhūrī (1971) and the writer and poet Maḥmūd Taymūr (1973) among others.

After Nasser’s sudden death, Taha Hussein gave a eulogy for him at the Arabic Language Academy on October 5, 1970.<sup>144</sup> It was a short speech in which he expressed his sadness, and praised Nasser’s efforts in abolishing class differences and for having always sided with the poor. In a few sentences, Hussein mentioned that he had brought up the question of political prisoners with Nasser, expressing concern for their families and how they were suffering in the absence of their fathers and brothers. Nasser reassured him that the government continued to pay their salaries, and that the ministry of endowments took care of the families of prisoners who did not work for the state. Hussein brought up his own relationship with Nasser, saying it was strong and dated back to the early days of the revolution. He said he had been particularly grateful when Nasser appointed him to the Order of the Nile in 1965.<sup>145</sup> Nasser had also awarded him the national honors prize for literature in 1959, as shown in the photograph below.<sup>146</sup>



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<sup>144</sup> Nasser died on September 28, 1970.

<sup>145</sup> The Order of the Nile is Egypt’s highest state honor awarded in recognition of exceptional services to the country. Nasser decorated Taha Hussein on the “Day of Science” or ‘īd al-‘ilm, on December 21, 1965.

<sup>146</sup> Photograph source: Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Public Domain).

Carrying on with his eulogy, Hussein hailed Nasser for his role in the 1956 war

It is enough that President Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir led the war against England, France and Israel in 1956 and I will not forget the speech he made at the venerable Azhar when he repeated ‘We will fight and we will not surrender.’ The truth is, he did not know how to surrender and never accepted surrender.

As for Egypt’s crushing defeat in 1967, which Hussein had written nothing about, he saluted Nasser’s courage in a short sentence, saying he endured the defeat the way “a man who knew the rights the people had on him, and the rights the homeland has on the people” should.<sup>147</sup> In this short resume of Nasser’s eighteen years in power, Hussein knew that siding with the poor and standing up to arrogant colonial powers would go down in history as Nasser’s greatest achievements. However, Hussein glossed over the extent of Nasser’s involvement in silencing the opposition, and his responsibility for the defeat of 1967. These two issues remain the two most controversial aspects of Nasser’s legacy over which Egyptians disagree to this day. Yet, totally missing from the eulogy by Taha Hussein for Nasser was any reference to freedom, democracy, culture or the university.

## Conclusion

Taha Hussein welcomed the army coup of July 23, 1952 with much enthusiasm. He saw the coup and the people’s embrace of the “blessed movement” as a result of what he believed was Egypt’s “cultural awakening.” In his reading of what happened, he thought this awakening, spearheaded by the university and disseminated through education and works of art and literature, had made the people understand the values of freedom, justice and equality. He

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<sup>147</sup> Taha Hussein, “Ra’īs al-majma‘ yu’abbin al-rāḥil al-‘azīm” [The President of the Academy Beatifies the Great Deceased], *Majallat Majma‘ al-Lughah al-‘Arabīyah* 27 (1971): 254-5.

In the wake of Egypt’s dramatic defeat in 1967, or the Setback as it came to be known in the Arab world, Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Old Jerusalem. On June 9, Nasser admitted the defeat, took full responsibility for it and resigned. After massive demonstrations in Egypt and the Arab world calling for his reinstatement, he retracted his resignation.

believed that they had realized what the corrupt *ancien régime* had failed to provide them and so they supported the army to change their lives for the better. In his view, the people's overwhelming support of the army transformed the coup into a revolution. Aware of the shortcomings that existed prior to the coup and which he had criticized time and time again, he hoped the new era would manage to eradicate poverty, illness and ignorance. He believed this change would take place with the help of people of knowledge, those who had been trained in Egypt's higher institutions of learning, and who through consultation could offer solutions for the country's problems. He therefore called for the continued support and the promotion of higher education in society as a priority.

Hussein believed that by siding with the army, the people demonstrated that they knew what was good for them and that power should be returned to them as quickly as possible. Through some articles in the early days of the revolution, and more importantly in a never realized constitution that gave full power to an elected parliament within a democratic republican system, he called on the army officers to return to their barracks and hand power back to civilians. Hussein and those who wrote the new constitution tried to empower individual and collective freedoms as well as ensure that the constitutional oversights, which had previously allowed the king to manipulate the country's institutions, were remedied. These changes, based on their long experience with the 1923 constitution, tried to avoid its mistakes and offered more guarantees that the people, through their elected parliament, would always remain the main source of power in the country.

Following the rejection of his constitution and the rise of an official discourse that dismissed the period between the two revolutions (and its intellectuals) as corrupt and alienated from the people, Hussein chose to remain silent on most of Nasser's domestic policies. In the

new official discourse in Egypt, the vanguard from the army that carried out the coup spoke in the name of the people. With the absence of political parties and a free press, there was no real space for a serious opposition. The new role for intellectuals, as defined by Haykal, was reduced to supplying the regime with ideas that reinforced its vision. In matters of foreign policy, however, Nasser courageously put Egypt at the heart of decolonization struggles, and he had Taha Hussein's full support in his conflicts with western powers. Given Egypt's new and shaky independence, especially between 1954 and 1956, Hussein judged it necessary for Egyptians to rally behind their leader until that independence was on more sure ground and the British troops had left the country. The tripartite aggression along with the horrors committed in North Africa and elsewhere by European powers, made the west an enemy that lost any kind of moral standing.

But Hussein's silence on what was happening inside Egypt was not absolute. He used literature as an outlet to voice his rejection of the ideological restrictions imposed on writers, artists and intellectuals. For him, committed literature or "literature for society" was not literature, but a form of political propaganda that tried to use literature to achieve political ends. His resistance, however, only alienated him from a generation of young writers who took socialist realism seriously and believed it was morally reprehensible for any writer not to engage in the revolutionary struggle for social reform and freedom from colonialism.

Finally, it was on behalf of the university that Taha Hussein disagreed publicly with Nasser. Taking issue with Nasser's view that the challenges facing the national struggle made it necessary to separate between "knowledge for society" and "knowledge for knowledge's sake," and his view that "knowledge for knowledge's sake" was a luxury that Egypt could not afford, Hussein chose to speak out. While he most probably understood that his call was too weak to be



heard, Taha Hussein thought it was imperative to defend the university and its mission.

Throughout the twenties, thirties and forties, the university was the cornerstone of his entire project for culture and education in Egypt. He believed, as previously discussed in the second and third chapters, that with its modern research and teaching methods, the university, and especially the faculty of arts, was the only institution capable of engaging critically with classical *adab* humanism and the sophisticated accomplishments of western thought. He argued that only such knowledge production rooted in the “old” and open to the “new” could offer the solutions necessary to meet the challenges facing the country in modern times, and create a system based on political accountability for the benefit of all Egyptians. This public disagreement with Nasser was Hussein’s last cry in defense of the study of the humanities and his warning against its marginalization.

## Conclusion

*Quand le budget de son ministère devait être discuté au Parlement, les députés attendaient avec impatience de voir comment l'aveugle s'en tirerait pendant les débats, et en particulier comment il défendrait son budget. Taha Hussein le défendit entièrement seul, dans un discours de quatre heures, pendant lequel il ne fit pas une erreur, fut-ce d'un seul chiffre.<sup>1</sup>*

This thesis has examined Taha Hussein's public career, as a statesman, politician and civil servant, centering the analysis on his efforts in building institutions of education and culture between the two revolutions of 1919 and 1952. By studying Taha Hussein's actions and reading them with and against his better known published work, the dissertation has shifted the focus away from the famous triangular struggle of power between the British, the king and the political parties, and turned the attention to developments in education, which had come under the control of the Egyptian government in 1922. By foregrounding Hussein's work on educational institutions, this study has demonstrated the official processes and public debates that enabled Hussein to use the existing parliamentary system, despite its many flaws, to create and restructure institutions, empower technocrats, spread Egyptian cultural influence abroad, and successfully adopt free universal education.

Taha Hussein had a project, and this thesis has shown how this project developed over the years, how it built on the Arab Nahda and how it responded to various political events, debates, and Hussein's growing official duties. The intellectual and political context in which Hussein was writing, and the bureaucratic and institutional context in which he was making decisions often get overlooked by the historiography on Hussein and by literary projects grounded in postcolonial studies. This intellectual and political context, which is necessary to

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Taha Hussein, *Avec toi: De la France à l'Égypte: Un extraordinaire amour Suzanne et Taha Hussein (1915-1973)* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2011), 192.

understand the man, his project and his time, is usually eclipsed by his published work, which is more accessible than archival records documenting his official career and the history of the institutions he built. Hussein's duties as a politician and a statesman at the heart of decision-making circles implied there were limits to what he could say or write publicly, as shown by his disagreement with King Farouk and the French over the creation of the Egyptian institute for Arabic and Islamic studies in North Africa. In his dealings with the French, he was a shrewd and tough negotiator. His retaliation against their interests in Egypt come as a surprise to readers who are only familiar with his writings and know about his close family and cultural ties with France.

Similarly, the details of Hussein's project help clarify his complex relationship with al-Azhar and with the Arab-Islamic tradition in general. His critique of al-Azhar, in his autobiography *The Days* and in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* for example, dismissing al-Azhar's teaching methods and what he saw as the rigidity of its sheikhs, convince the reader that Hussein was a staunch enemy of the prestigious mosque-university. Yet, his critique does not explain why he spoke fondly of his memories there as a student, why he credited it with having safeguarded the tradition for centuries, or why he praised it elsewhere as "a treasure of fertile minds, intelligent hearts, and ultimately ready to undertake the greatest of deeds. [Al-Azhar is] a treasure that modern Egypt should neither ignore nor forget."<sup>2</sup> As this thesis has demonstrated, his disagreement with al-Azhar was primarily over the implementation of his project of reform, which required a critical engagement with the tradition as a whole, including the language. Hussein did not seek to exclude al-Azhar from the project, but he understood that the religious establishment's monopoly of the tradition and the language had to be challenged if his project

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<sup>2</sup> Taha Hussein, preface to *Al-Azhar wa-athāruhu fī al-nahḍah al-adabīyah al-ḥadīthah*, by Muḥammad Kāmil al-Fiḳī [Al-Azhar and its Influence on the Modern Literary Renaissance] (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'ah al-Munīriyah bi-l-Azhar, 1956), zāy.

was to be carried out. From Hussein's perspective, al-Azhar did not allow the university to apply methods of critical scholarship to re-examine the tradition, and resisted attempts to make classical Arabic more accessible by simplifying grammar rules and finding more engaging teaching methods. For Taha Hussein, democratizing the language was the means to democratizing the tradition as a whole, and this put him on a collision course with al-Azhar. The conflict was about diversifying the authority over the tradition and claiming the right for scholars to engage with it.

In building institutions of culture and education, Taha Hussein as well as other intellectuals and policymakers of his generation faced the challenge of the West with self-confidence and believed that embracing what they saw as the new (the secular university, new kinds of knowledge, new teaching and research methods, new kinds of social practices) did not mean giving up or diminishing their own traditions and literary heritage, but was rather a natural continuation of that heritage. In the spirit of the earlier Nahdawis, they were inspired by the new but felt rooted in their past. They were well aware of the theoretical debate over "authenticity and modernity," but as the thesis has shown, they also understood that theory had to be translated into action to be effective. By working to reform the ministry of education, strengthen the university and create the language academy, they were confidently embarking on a tangible project of natural synthesis based on an active critical appropriation rather than a passive uncritical reception of ideas, institutions and practices coming from Europe.

By the end of his political career in 1952, Taha Hussein believed the institutional study of the humanities in its Arab-Islamic and European variants had successfully taken the Nahda forward. He went as far as to attribute Egypt's modern awakening, as he called it, to the faculty of arts, the scholarship it produced and the knowledge it disseminated to the people, through

textbooks, lectures, conferences and public defenses. He felt comfortable enough about his institutions and the expertise Egyptian scholars had developed within them that he wanted to export this knowledge beyond Egypt's borders. Without undermining the creativity and effort of Egyptian writers, artists, and teachers, this dissertation's focus on institutions tells a more nuanced story about the history of the Egyptian cultural influence over the Arab world, instead of just repeating the nationalist myth of a natural and everlasting Egyptian cultural domination. As this study has shown, while Taha Hussein defended the idea that Egypt had a particularly rich culture that had developed over its long history, he saw institutions as the infrastructure by which Egypt could move from consuming culture to producing it, and achieve its full independence.

This thesis has also shown the ways in which the adoption of free universal education was the culmination of Hussein's project. This government policy along with all the institutions he helped build continue to operate under the postcolonial state. Some of these institutions, like the Supreme Council of the Universities, have been criticized for providing the state with the means to keep a tight control over academic freedom, and free education itself has been accused of ruining the quality of the Egyptian educational system as a whole. I hope that this thesis has revealed the context that produced these institutions and the conditions under which free education was to be carried out. The state had already been a key player in the fields of culture and education long before Nasser came to power. Given the sheer size of Hussein's project, he understood the state had to become an integral part of it. In all his efforts, there is no indication that he ever questioned the hierarchy within which both the university and the language academy had to report to the minister of public instruction. Implicitly, however, he predicated the proper functioning of these institutions, and free education, on the presence of a parliamentary system with its many checks and balances. He expected this system, with its free press, turnover of

political power, political accountability, and government transparency over decisions and budget allocation, to regulate the role of the state in education and keep it in check. He defended the people's right to free education and once it was adopted, he expected the parliamentary representatives of the people to protect that right.

Furthermore, even Hussein's public debates on education should be seen in the context of the parliamentary system. Of course, he was the intellectual defending his ideas, but he was also a politician campaigning for those ideas on the pages of journals and periodicals. He needed to convince Egyptian voters of the soundness of the project. In this debate, his name must have carried a lot of weight, and that must have pleased the Wafd officials. As the historian Misako Ikeda has pointed out, readers must have preferred Hussein's beautiful style to that of his nemesis the pedagogue, Ismā'īl al-Qabbānī, which was dry and overly technical.<sup>3</sup> In content, this was a sophisticated debate between knowledgeable interlocutors who expressed their points of view on free education, its objectives and implications, as well as its rollout challenges. In form, it was a practical exercise in democracy. Those who followed the debate understood that it was addressed to them, and that their vote should settle it. This speaks to an observation made by the intellectual Luwīs 'Awaḍ in the early 1970s. When commenting on the years before 1952 he said that Egyptians then had a much clearer understanding of the rule of law and the role of the state, as well as the difference between duties and rights, be they public or private.<sup>4</sup> Rather than reading about abstract European theories of democracy, or learning about them at school, it was through debates like the one on education that Egyptians understood that their votes mattered.

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<sup>3</sup> Misako Ikeda, "Toward the Democratization of Public Education: The Debate in Late Parliamentary Egypt, 1943-52," in *Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy Johnson and Barak Salmoni (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press), 241.

<sup>4</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Aqni 'at al-nāṣirīyah al-sab 'ah: munāqashat Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wa-Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal* [The Seven Masks of Nasserism: Debating with Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal] (Cairo: Markaz al-Maḥrusah, 2014), 120.

Even if they were frustrated with the parliamentary system, they understood that political decisions had an immediate impact on their lives and the future of their children, and that any government should be held accountable.

This is not to say that Egypt's parliamentary experiment did not have problems or did not run into difficulties. On the contrary, that system was unable to put an end to the British occupation or social injustice as pointed out by many scholars. Taha Hussein himself was not immune to the misgivings of that system. Before the victory of the Wafd in 1950, he was repeatedly accused of communism, was forced to shut down his periodical *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* in 1948, and his book *al-Mu'athabūn fī al-arḍ* [The Sufferers] was banned in Egypt for its vivid depiction of poverty in the country, and he had to get it published in Lebanon in 1949. Yet, this does not mean that he lost faith in the parliamentary system as a whole, or that he experienced what some scholars have referred to as "the crisis of liberalism" of Hussein's generation. Evidence shows that he remained committed to that system while trying to fix it from within through education. To ensure educational reform was carried out efficiently, he created the supreme technical councils so he could shield policymakers from unstable politics and allow them to focus on running their institutions efficiently. His plan was to use education to fix the system, but it was a long struggle, because he also needed that system to be stable. The coup in 1952 broke this deadlock, momentarily. Hussein's immediate concern after the coup was to ensure the quick adoption of another liberal constitution that made parliament the biggest source of authority in the country, and he hoped the army would step aside for a civilian government as quickly as possible.

Unsurprisingly, the only time Hussein disagreed publicly with Nasser was to defend the period between the two revolutions. Hussein admitted there had been frustrations, difficulties and

corruption before 1952, but he refused to dismiss the accomplishments that happened in culture and education *despite* all these problems. He was even convinced that the knowledge produced between 1919 and 1952 was responsible for bringing down the monarchy and aligning the people with the army. In this unique public intervention, he warned against ostracizing “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” in favor of what Nasser called “knowledge for society’s sake.” Hussein felt he had to defend the university, the cornerstone of his project. However, it is unlikely that he expected much from this public intervention. He had always counted on state support for his institutions, and he counted on the people to hold the state accountable. State authoritarianism and rising public anger over colonial intervention in Egyptian and Arab affairs made the promotion of his project impossible after 1952. He must have seen the marginalization of the humanities in the country as a major “setback.” Nevertheless, as an old man in his seventies, he must have also understood that it was time for younger women and men to take over, and fight for their ideas the way he had tried to implement his own.



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