

Talk of the Day: On the Egyptian University

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

For some time now, certain people have been circling around the Egyptian University, accusing it of a lack of patriotism, of irreligion, and of disloyalty to learning itself. They incite public hostility against it and warn Egypt of imminent danger and grave evil—simply because the Egyptian University has sought to be truly Egyptian, and to fulfill its duty in this country as universities elsewhere fulfill their duties in their own.

Yes, the university has been accused of all these supposed crimes because it considered inviting a French professor to deliver lectures on Arabic literature or Arabic philology. For this, it is charged with betraying religion and nation alike; it is accused of apostasy and even of high treason. This is not strange—for in Egypt, nothing is strange.

We fear only that such delusions may reach those who have no direct connection to the university, leading them to misunderstand its work and its aims. It is for these people alone that I write these words.

No sooner had the university been founded than its governing council—headed at that time by His Majesty the King—realized that it could neither live nor flourish if it relied solely on Egyptian scholars. It was established to serve as a bridge in higher learning between Egypt and Europe. With this in mind, the council resolved to invite European professors. Indeed, the university did not open its doors before appointing three European professors to the Faculty of Arts: one for English literature, one for French literature, and an Italian scholar—Professor Guidi—to teach Arabic literature, or, as the university then described it, literature rather than geography and history. He delivered his lectures in Arabic, and the crowds who attended them were large, their admiration greater still.

In the second year, Professor Guidi, having apologized on account of his advanced age, was succeeded by another Italian scholar, Professor Nallino, who lectured on the history of astronomy among the Arabs. In the third year, the Faculty of Arts was reorganized, and two Italian professors were invited: Professor Nallino to teach the history of Arabic literature, and Professor Melloni to teach the history of the ancient East. A German scholar, Professor Littmann, was invited to teach the Semitic languages, and another Italian, Professor Santillana, to teach the history of philosophy. All four lectured in Arabic. Students from al-Azhar attended these classes in large numbers and admired them greatly, just as the professors themselves admired their Azharite students. Indeed, Professor Santillana once told the president of the university: “If you truly wish the university to succeed, help the Azhar students to attend and specialize here.”

Then came the war, and the connection between the university and Europe was severed. This occurred after we had studied under French, Italian, and German scholars who taught us Arabic literature, philosophy, and history, and who taught us the Semitic languages in a

manner we freely admit had never before been seen in Egypt—and which we remain far from achieving even now. It is the duty of the Egyptian University, and of any university, to bring us closer to the day when Egyptian professors will teach as European professors do.

During the war, the university relied exclusively on Egyptian professors, some from al-Azhar and others from outside it. We regret to record that the university's scholarly standing declined sharply—a decline felt by students, professors, administrators, and the public alike. All lamented this state of affairs and longed for the university's earlier path.

When the war ended, several of the university's own graduates who had studied in Europe returned to teach there. They did not return with arrogance; rather, they returned convinced that one hand cannot clap, and that the university cannot live or thrive without the assistance of European scholars and a strong intellectual bond between Egypt and Europe. Each of these professors pressed for the recruitment of European scholars in his field, and together they drafted a written system which, had it been implemented, would now command the support of the majority of the faculty. They have appealed to God, to His Majesty the King, and to the Egyptian government to remove the financial obstacles that stand in the way of its realization.

Thus the professors of the university and its governing council stand united in their desire to invite European scholars in large numbers. Their new plan has been presented to His Majesty, who graciously promised to consider it and to extend his support.

In the midst of all this, I learned that Professor Paul Casanova—who teaches Arabic at France's most eminent scholarly institution, the Collège de France, and whose lectures I myself attended for four years in Paris—might visit Egypt in the coming winter to conduct research at the French Archaeological Institute and in the antiquities of Fustat. I therefore proposed to the Council of Professors that the university take advantage of his presence to invite him to deliver a series of lectures on methods of research in philology and literature. The councils approved the proposal, and the university wrote to him. He replied apologetically that his visit was uncertain, and that even if it took place, his archaeological duties might prevent him from lecturing. He did, however, promise to discuss the possibility of organizing such lectures during a later visit. And there the matter ended.

Is this, then, the grave danger that threatens Egypt's dignity, religion, and political existence?

I want people to know that when the Egyptian University invites European professors, it is doing nothing unprecedented. It follows the practice of the great European and American universities, which regularly exchange professors without any sense that this compromises national dignity. They see in it only the pure scholarly benefit for which universities were founded. German professors lecture in France, and French professors lecture in Germany, even in our own day.

I want people to know that the Egyptian University, in inviting European scholars, is merely resuming the tradition upon which it was founded—a tradition from which it benefited greatly and through which it rendered great service.

I also want people to know that the professor whom the university invited—and who ultimately declined—is no ordinary man. He is a true scholar of Arabic philology and literature. I have heard him interpret the Qur'an from a purely linguistic perspective, and I wished then that his methods might pass beyond the walls of the 'Abbāsid riwāq, even surreptitiously, so that scholars of al-Azhar might study the Qur'anic text through a genuinely linguistic lens. This man serves Egypt's history and literature in ways that would earn our highest respect had even a part of his work been accomplished by one of us. He has produced a valuable study on the urban planning of Fustat—a city few among us care to study or even locate accurately. He has translated al-Maqrīzī's **Khitat** into French—though very few of us read al-Maqrīzī at all. And he is preparing for publication a work by one of the great hadith scholars, discovered two years ago on papyrus in Edfu—unknown to those who claim to fear him on Egypt's behalf.

I want people to understand that the Egyptian University is an institution of modern learning, and that its doors and windows must remain open so that free air may circulate within it—air fit for free inquiry and modern progress.

If there are those in Egypt who wish to study only behind closed doors and shuttered windows, then let them turn to the institutions of the old style. Even these institutions have begun, in recent days, to open their doors slightly. If they truly require darkness, let them close what has been opened.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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