The Ministry of Education: The Reform of Secondary Education

al-Siyasa, 12 December 1923

We were with the Minister of Education a week ago, speaking about higher education, and I no longer recall quite how we came round to secondary and primary education. I said: "This subject will need a long conversation of its own with Your Excellency." The Minister said: "I shall be glad to hear this conversation, and to give it its due weight." It seems the time has now come for me to open, with His Excellency, one thread of this very conversation; the newspapers have reported that the Ministry of Education is proceeding with the establishment of the Royal University. And what better, more useful occasion for speaking to the Minister of Education about secondary education than the founding of the Royal University itself? The Minister knows that a university is a vast, powerful edifice, requiring a solid foundation — and its only foundation is secondary education. If secondary education is not strong and solid enough to properly prepare a young man's mind for advanced theoretical study, then secondary education has no value in itself, on the one hand, and nothing of value can be built upon it in the way of advanced theoretical study, on the other. I do not think I need to prove that the connection between the secondary school and the university is a strong one; this connection is self-evident, and it is enough to note that the very first purpose of establishing a secondary school is to prepare the student who will leave it to enter university. Indeed, it is enough to note that certain European countries — among the most experienced and accomplished in education — make the secondary school an integral part of the university itself, not a separate institute apart from it, so that the very administration overseeing higher education, with its full grasp of higher education's nature and needs, also oversees secondary education, in order to harmonize the two kinds of education, and properly prepare the mind to benefit from higher education's lessons. Secondary education in France is not independent of the university; it is, rather, a part of it. When the word "university" is used in France, it is understood to include both higher and secondary education. The University of Paris is not confined to the faculties of arts, sciences, medicine, and law; alongside these faculties, and the specialized branches connected to them in these higher sciences, it encompasses all the secondary schools scattered throughout the Seine département — and say the same of the universities

of Bordeaux, Lyon, Dijon, and the other universities of France.

Secondary education, then, is the foundation of higher education, and the secondary school is the foundation of the university. If we want higher education to be productive, and to have a genuine university suited to our needs, our hopes, and our dignity, then the very first thing we must think about is reforming secondary education, so that it becomes a proper foundation for genuine higher education. This does not mean we object to establishing the University, or wish to delay its founding until secondary education has been reformed; we already have our higher-education schools, we need these schools, and we could never suspend them for years while secondary education is being reformed. Indeed, we believe the very greatest good lies in establishing this University — and even if its founding produced, for now, nothing more than the unification of higher-education administration and the guarantee of independence for that education, this alone would be something worth desiring and striving to achieve. We do not, then, object to establishing the University, nor do we demand its delay; we simply note, from this point forward, that the results of university education will remain, just as the results of education in the higher-education schools remain, unsatisfying, unconvincing, and unsuited to the country's needs and dignity, unless secondary education is reformed so that higher education can be built upon it on a solid foundation.

This is something the committee formed some years ago to draft the Royal University plan already sensed: it detailed the various respects in which secondary education fell short, and proposed a method for making up this shortfall — establishing an intermediate section of education, between secondary and higher education, whose purpose would be to remedy the deficiencies of secondary education, and to make up for what the student had missed at the secondary-school level, so that by the time he reached higher education, he would arrive properly and adequately prepared. It appears the Ministry of Education has accepted this idea and been persuaded by it; indeed, it appears to have already begun implementing it, at some point, and intends to carry it out once the Royal University is established, as is said to be happening these very days. Nor is the Ministry of Education the only one to have hit upon this idea: the Egyptian University, too, has sensed the deficiency of secondary education, its own professors complaining of the weakness of the students presenting themselves for the advanced courses in literature, philosophy, and history, and have proposed to the University's own board

of administration the establishment of a preparatory section for the Faculty of Arts.

The idea itself is acceptable, but only on condition that it remain temporary, until secondary education has been reformed. If this idea is instead taken up as a permanently valid idea, and this principle — the establishment of an intermediate level of education between the university and the secondary school — becomes fixed in Egyptian education, then that is undoubtedly a harm: a harm, because intermediate education has no value in itself, being neither secondary education nor higher education; and a harm, because it will produce poor results. Some secondary-school students will content themselves with the secondary-school certificate and turn to employment instead, and these students, holding and content with the secondary certificate, will remain very far indeed from acquiring what anyone who genuinely wishes to receive a proper secondary education must acquire. Others will then go on to this intermediate education, and once they obtain its diploma, will turn away from higher education and content themselves with that diploma instead. A class of young people will thus arise unlike any we have known before — not the class holding the secondary certificate, nor the class holding the higher-education certificate, but a class somewhere in between. The result of all this will be to multiply the number of those we might call half-educated people. Primary education will produce us one group, secondary education another, and intermediate education yet another — and all these groups will differ in strength of mind and soundness of understanding, in exact proportion to the differences in what they acquired at their various schools. The danger this poses to our social life is a great one.

The interest of higher education itself, then, requires the reform of secondary education, and our social interest requires the reform of this secondary education too. There is no doubt that the Ministry of Education would do the greatest possible good by taking as its guiding principle this: that every level of education should be sound in two respects — sufficient, on the one hand, as a means toward the level that follows it, and, on the other, such that its holder may be content with it in its own right. It is plain that our own secondary education lacks both of these qualities: it is not sufficient as a means toward higher education, and the government itself acknowledges as much, nor does it provide anyone content to stop there with what he needs. The lives of secondary-certificate holders in the government's own bureaus testify to

this; their standing in public life testifies to this as well; and the comparison between what they study and what their counterparts in Europe study, in quantity as much as in quality — as the logicians would put it — testifies to this too, and leaves no room whatsoever for doubt. Secondary education must therefore be reformed, and this reform must begin now — not tomorrow, not the day after — so that only a few years pass before the reform is complete, and the University finds among the holders of the secondary certificate students genuinely capable, who can then turn away from intermediate education altogether, toward pure higher education.

But what should the method of this reform be? I confess I cannot, on my own, point the way to this method; indeed, I hope the Minister of Education and his assistants will join me in acknowledging that none of us, on our own, can find or point the way to this method, and that we must certainly enlist the help of specialists from Europe. We return here to what we requested of His Excellency the Minister of Education last summer: enlisting the help of technical advisers from Europe in matters of education at every level. There is nothing shameful in acknowledging our own shortcomings, so long as we work to remedy them, and independence, or the desire for independence, does not mean claiming infallibility for ourselves and contenting ourselves with what we already have until clear proof arises that what we have is insufficient. Consulting specialists is therefore essential. Were I permitted to make a proposal to the Minister of Education, I would ask him to consider the systems of secondary education in France, England, Germany, and America, to compare them against our own needs, and to choose from among these systems whichever proves best suited to those needs. Once he has made his choice, he could then appoint one or several specialists thoroughly versed in that system, to study, together with the Ministry of Education's own specialists, the system of secondary education in Egypt, and to propose whatever reforms they see fit for it.

I believe this alone is the approach that can guarantee both the reform of secondary education and the construction of the University upon a solid foundation. I hold to this view, and call for it, and believe the Minister would do the very greatest good by setting to work at once, so that only a few weeks pass before that specialist, or those specialists, are here in Egypt, and the new system of secondary education can begin to be put into practice as early as next year. I do not wish to close this piece without offering the Minister of Education my sincerest congratulations

on the victory he has just achieved: he has succeeded in what he set out to do, bringing all the higher-education schools under his own ministry — a success whose benefit and necessity we have already demonstrated elsewhere.