

# Egypt and Arabism

*Al-Risala, 26 December 1938*

My dear friend, I have read Professor Sati' al-Husri Bey's own article in last Monday's *Risala*, and I believe it is genuinely my right that you publish my own reply to this same article — nor do I imagine you would ever begrudge me this same right. This reply, in fact, is a chapter from my own book *The Future of Culture*, soon to appear within days; it was, then, already written, and already printed, before Professor al-Husri's own article... With my truest affection, and my most sincere fraternity.  
Taha Hussein

I have already noted, some time ago, that it is genuinely incumbent upon the Egyptian state to spread this same culture among the various classes of the Egyptian people, on the one hand, and to carry it beyond Egypt's own borders, to whatever countries are capable of genuinely absorbing it, and benefiting from it, on the other.

For some genuine reason, certain Eastern countries have told Egypt she is the leader of the Arab East; and for some genuine reason, Egypt has believed what has been told to her. If this is indeed true, it carries consequences that must genuinely follow from it, and responsibilities that must genuinely attend it.

And if this is not, in fact, true, then it becomes our own genuine duty to make it true — since doing so would fulfil our own dignity, on the one hand, and would raise us above the very selfishness unbecoming of any genuinely noble people. What admits of no doubt whatsoever is that God has furnished Egypt with means of reviving and spreading culture He has not yet furnished to any other Arab nation. It would hardly become the Egyptians, then — a people others have long spoken of as noble, and who claim this same nobility for themselves — it would hardly become them to keep to themselves whatever good has been granted them, reserving for themselves alone whatever blessing has been bestowed upon them. What genuinely befits their own nobility, and their own dignity, and the higher ideal they themselves aspire to, is, rather, this: that their own present should genuinely match their own past, that they should be the very source of light for the countries around them, and that theirs should be the country toward which the hearts of every seeker after knowledge, and every lover of it, naturally incline.

Egyptians may well imagine they have already acquitted themselves well in this same cause — and I wish to tell them plainly that they have done nothing whatsoever toward it.

The Arab countries do read whatever is published in Egypt, in her own newspapers, books, and magazines — yet Egypt has done nothing whatsoever, up to now, to actually ease these same countries' own access to her own books, newspapers, and magazines. Some of these same countries, indeed, face genuine difficulty simply securing whatever copies they need of these same books, newspapers, and magazines. Had Egypt genuinely eased the Arab countries' own access to her own printed works, she would have accomplished only the very least, the very easiest, service to culture imaginable — one that would, besides, return to her own genuine benefit, both material, and moral alike.

Yes — Egypt does help certain Arab countries secure the services of certain teachers, perhaps spending some money on it, perhaps finding it some genuine effort. But this, too, remains among the very least demanding of tasks — the responsibilities attending the distinguished position granted her among the Arab countries require far more of her than this. I shall mention only two matters here. The first Egypt has already begun addressing, though slowly, and hesitantly: opening the doors of our own schools and institutes to students from the East, and genuinely caring for them, once they arrive in our own country — not merely easing their own pursuit of learning, but easing their own life in Egypt too. When I weigh what European countries do to genuinely care for their own foreign students, against what we ourselves do, I find myself weighing, quite simply, existence against non-existence.

Even so, when Europe cares for her own foreign students, she does so, in truth, to spread her own influence, drawing foreigners in to spend their own money there, and sending them home again, genuinely influenced by her, transformed into her own emissaries within their own countries. We, though, stand in no genuine need of spreading our own influence, since we covet nothing whatsoever — Egyptian influence, after all, spreads itself, quite naturally, across the Arab countries, resting as it does on love, affection, and fraternity. What we must do, rather, is ease Arab students' own path toward study, and residence, in Egypt — in fulfilment of what is right, in discharge of genuine duty, in faithfulness to friends, and in sparing these same friends the journey to Western countries, should they find that same journey genuinely burdensome, or difficult.

The second matter I proposed privately, more than ten years ago now, when His Excellency 'Ali Mahir Pasha first assumed the Ministry of Education. I had attended an archaeological conference held in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, and, upon my return, submitted a special report to the Minister, requesting that Egypt establish Egyptian primary and secondary schools within these same countries. What stirred this same proposal in me was what I had witnessed, first-hand, of foreign schools' own intellectual dominance over these same countries — and I genuinely believed the Egyptian mind stood closer to the Syrian and Palestinian mind, far better suited to genuinely connecting with it, and exerting a beneficial influence upon it, than the American or French mind ever could.

The Minister of Education, at the time, gently pointed out to me, smiling, that this was simply not feasible — Egypt might well want it, but foreign policy would, without any doubt, refuse it. And this was, at the time, genuinely true. Now, though, with the Montreux Convention already concluded between us and Europe, with Syria and Lebanon having already secured some measure of freedom, and Iraq already independent, I no longer see any genuine political obstacle standing in the way of exactly this kind of cultural cooperation, among Arab countries united by a common language, a common faith, a common higher ideal, and sharing, besides, economic interests of genuinely great significance.

I do not believe the national policy of these same countries would object to Egyptian schools being established within them, carrying to their own sons a genuinely Arab, Eastern culture, delivered by Eastern teachers like themselves, Arabs like themselves, speaking to them in their own language, sharing their own taste, their own inclinations, their own sensibility. Nor do I believe European policy would object to this, given the agreement already reached between us and Europe, permitting European schools to settle in our own country, enjoying everything necessary to carry out their own mission within the bounds of Egyptian law, on the very basis that reciprocity would underpin this same agreement.

It stands entirely clear we have no wish to establish our own Egyptian schools in France, England, or Italy — but it remains entirely our own right to establish Egyptian schools within the Arab countries themselves, countries genuinely influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by these same powers' own authority and influence.

It stands entirely certain, moreover, that were we to establish Egyptian schools in the Arab countries, we would establish them, and run them, in exactly the manner we ourselves would wish foreign schools to be established, and run, in our own country: we would establish them as genuine institutes of cultural cooperation between ourselves and the people of these same countries, with Egyptians never monopolizing the work within them, but drawing, instead, upon whatever local nationals could genuinely assist them; institutions never imposing Egyptian geography and Egyptian history in place of each country's own national geography and history, but serving, rather, as institutions where local youth are raised for their own homelands, not for Egypt. It would be enough for Egypt simply to assist in this, to take part in it, to discharge the very duty she owes her own neighbours, and her own partners in language, faith, and economic life — and enough for her, too, to earn from them love, affection, and fraternity in return.

It might well be said the Egyptian state's own burdens are already too heavy to permit her such an expansion of cultural outreach beyond her own borders, given her own pressing need to spread culture within them first. This may well be true, in certain respects — but it is equally true that our own independent existence carries its own responsibilities, and that failing to discharge these same responsibilities ill befits whatever dignity, and leadership, we claim for ourselves.

There is no doubt whatsoever that these same schools, should we establish them, would prove of far greater benefit, to Egypt and to the countries where they are established alike, than a great many of the consulates and legations we scatter across the countries of the earth, from which we scarcely reap any real benefit, and from which the countries hosting them scarcely reap any real benefit either.

There is no doubt, either, that the financial burden attending the establishment of these same schools ought never to fall entirely upon the state alone — it ought, rather, to be shared by those Egyptians capable of sharing it, first, and by local nationals, second, with the state's own role limited to providing genuinely valuable assistance, in funds, and in personnel.

In exactly this manner, Egypt would carry her own responsibilities, discharge her own cultural duties, and bring her own present into genuine harmony with her own past. Egypt, after all, was once, throughout the Islamic ages, the very source of culture and learning for

the Arab countries of the Middle East, never failing in this role, except when Ottoman authority itself compelled her to fail in it. Now, though, having recovered her own independence, she must recover her own cultural standing in the Near East as well. There remain Arab countries where foreigners have established nothing, and can establish nothing, in the way of schools and institutes, and whose own people find no surplus of funds to spend on developing culture as they genuinely ought — it is Egypt's own genuine duty, then, to hasten to these same countries' own assistance, sparing no effort whatsoever in doing so.

These same countries are the Hejaz, and the lands of the Saudi Arabian state more generally. I have no doubt whatsoever that Egyptians would give their full, genuine approval to establishing at least two schools — one in Mecca, the other in Medina — indeed, I have no doubt they would go beyond mere approval, to genuine giving, and genuine spending; and I have learned that the people of the Hejaz themselves genuinely wish for exactly this, and press insistently for it.

Nor is any of this the whole of what Egypt ought to undertake, in spreading culture across the Arab countries — there remains something else besides, something whose own necessity has become widely felt, whose own need has grown genuinely pressing, to the point the Ministry of Education has already begun considering it, and preparing for it: cooperation in organizing culture itself, and unifying its own curricula, across every Arab country alike. This is called for by these same countries' own need to unite their own efforts, given they share one and the same higher cultural ideal; and called for, too, by the fact that higher education in Egypt has already reached a level of advancement genuinely drawing students of learning from across the Arab countries.

Higher education in Egypt, though, follows genuinely precise, genuinely demanding regulations, which may well stand between these same students and their own genuine benefit from it, and their own attainment of its own diplomas and degrees. These same students must, then, be properly prepared for this same education, prepared as thoroughly as Egyptian students themselves are prepared for it. A group of Arab, Eastern opinion leaders already gathered, more than a year ago, within the Committee for Authorship, Translation, and Publishing, and deliberated on exactly this, as they deliberated on other varieties of cultural cooperation, drawing up a genuine plan, and drafting a system for it. The Ministry of Education has since begun considering the matter, and preparing to convene an Arab-Eastern conference. What I genuinely

hope, for my own part, is that this same conference should become a regular, periodic event, one moving among the various Arab countries, exactly as the Medical Congress, established some time ago, already does.

I attended, this past year, representing the Ministry of Education, the Congress of National Committees for Intellectual Cooperation, and spoke there, before the assembled delegates, of Egypt's own capacity to become one of the most significant centres for exactly this kind of intellectual cooperation, should she genuinely discharge her own cultural responsibilities toward the Arab countries — this, since Egypt, by virtue of her own geographic position, and by virtue of her own modern renaissance, offers the truest possible image of exactly the kind of genuine intellectual cooperation the League of Nations itself aspires to: cooperation drawing nations closer together, erasing whatever differences divide them, and elevating their own intellectual life above every variety of rivalry, and every form of conflict. The Egyptian University, for instance, stands as an environment where nearly every human culture converges, carried there by distinguished professors, Egyptian and European alike, differing among themselves in homeland, and in their own political, religious, and economic convictions.

All of these same cultures converge, and blend, and are smelted together, within the Egyptian mind itself — a mind that absorbs them, assimilates them, and stamps them, afterward, with something of its own particular Egyptian character. This same mind is capable, thereafter, of spreading these cultures, Eastern and Western European alike, across the countries of the East, entirely free of whatever fanaticism and prejudice ordinarily corrupts culture.

This same speech was genuinely well received by the assembled delegates. But will this same speech be well received by Egyptians themselves? Will Egyptians genuinely feel that a golden opportunity, as the saying goes, now presents itself to them? For every evil carries some good effect. The evil, here, is that our own need of Europeans, in education, remains genuinely great; the good effect of this same evil is that we can become the very messengers of learning, culture, security, peace, and reconciliation, between East and West alike.

Should Egypt wish to seize exactly this opportunity, it would prove genuinely easy for her — requiring only that she attend to strengthening her own ties with the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva,

and the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation in Paris, on the one hand, and with the scholarly environments and institutions of the Arab East, indeed of the wider Islamic East, on the other.