

The Speech of Taha Hussein Pasha Before His Majesty the King at the Desert Institute

Al-Ahram, 31 December 1950

My Lord, Your Majesty:

What a magnificent lesson you are giving your people in these days especially: a lesson in loyalty! How fitting that people should take it to heart, and that their hearts and minds should hold to it. Three days ago we celebrated a noble work of your great father, Fuad I University. Yesterday we celebrated a great work of your noble grandfather, the Geographical Society. And today we celebrate this greatest work of Fuad's, may God brighten his face: the Desert Institute.

You are always with us at these ceremonies, my Lord. You honour them and fill our hearts with gladness and our souls with joy, and the people see your care for learning and for scholars, as they once saw your father's, and find in it a splendid image of a loyalty without equal and without limit. You are fit to be your people's teacher in character: in the character that governs an individual's conduct toward others, and in the character that governs a people's conduct toward its king and a king's conduct toward his people.

You teach people how sons should keep faith with their fathers' memory, and you teach the people to follow their king's example and keep faith with righteous, reforming kings.

Your great father, my Lord, deserved above all men the loyalty of sons to fathers and of peoples to kings, and I do not exaggerate in saying he deserved, more than most kings, humanity's loyalty to his undying memory. It is no small thing to found, in the Arab East and the Islamic world, the first modern university on modern lines. Nor is it small to found, in the Eastern and Islamic world, the first modern institute of the desert.

This university serves not Egypt alone but all people, and this institute serves not Egypt alone but the whole world. Institutions of learning, my Lord, are confined to no homeland and no race; they belong to all humanity, and whoever founds an institute or a university serves

not only his own country but every country.

Your father was the most deserving of this loyalty, whether from you or from his people, because he was not content with the university he founded, or the Geographical Society he revived, or the many forms of civilisation he spread. He thought, planned and ventured on this great intellectual adventure that only great men undertake: to bring the distant near, to remove the sources of fear, panic and terror, to make the desert fertile and safe, and to turn it into a source of knowledge, learning, security and calm.

We, my Lord, are the people most conscious of the desert and most affected by it. The desert presses on us from both sides, and our great Nile is only a slender thing running between two immense deserts.

To think of the desert is to think of widening the Nile until it spreads its good over the whole land and floods both its banks with fertility and growth. But we remember the desert not only because it presses on us from both sides. We remember it also because our ancient Arabic literature depicted nothing as it depicted the desert: awesome and terrifying, full of horror, fear and dread, a lair of fear and torment, ringed with fear on every side, where beasts of prey roam free and kill any man who crosses their path or falls into their hands.

That is the image of the desert our Arabic literature has left us: terror, fear and horror. Your great father, my Lord, wanted only to remove all of this and make the desert a source of research, knowledge, learning and light; to let people know it as they know their fertile land, use it as they use their fertile land, and gather from it good, blessing and benefit.

He wanted this when he thought of making the institute a home for those who study the desert, who would examine its land and climate, its plants and animals, all its properties, first to teach people and then to make its use and benefit possible. He opened to them a source of knowledge and a source of mastery over a frightening and wayward nature.

That is what your father thought, and no sooner had he thought than he resolved, and no sooner had he resolved than he acted. He founded the institute, my Lord, and wanted to found it alone, with his own strength and his own money, without asking the government to found it. It was a venture he undertook and wished to pay for himself, so that

when its use became clear, the people and everyone else would benefit from it at no cost. He founded it and gave it a vast endowment to cover its needs. He did not stop at endowing fertile land; he endowed the towering building as well. Then God's decree overtook him and he passed to his Lord before completing what he had begun, and you came forward, carrying the banner, pressing on to the goal and finishing the road he had started.

Now the institute is opened, and here are the world's scholars, come to join the Egyptians in honouring your father's memory and in offering sincere thanks to Your Majesty for the care you give to learning and to scholars, for the means of research and knowledge you have made available to them, and for this wealth, which people can hold only when all of them, in every land, share in it. This institute, my Lord, is a fruit of that happy reign over which your father presided, but a fruit he began and you brought to ripeness. In keeping faith with your father, attending this ceremony and completing what he began, you teach the whole Egyptian people loyalty.

But when you turned your attention to this institute, my Lord, you saw knowledge advancing around you and new things appearing that were unknown when your father first thought of it, and you saw that the university he founded had already produced young people who could study the desert well and take up its burdens.

The institute has a large library, a large museum and a lecture hall, and around it there will be a special garden containing only desert plants and desert things. It holds everything scholars need for research and writing. Your father, my Lord, was the least self-seeking of kings and thought least of himself, and he wanted his country to be like him, free of self-seeking. He believed that a person cannot live alone, nor can nations and peoples; that solidarity and cooperation are the basis of civilisation; and for that reason he thought of this institute as a circle where scholars from every part of the earth who care about the desert could meet, and where specialists could work together on research whatever their homelands and races.

So he wished, and so you wished, and what you both wished has come to pass. These scholars who have come to Egypt to share in this ceremony are clear proof that what your father wanted, human cooperation in goodness, piety and knowledge, and what you wanted, has been realised by his command and yours, and has borne fruit today.

To you, my Lord, our finest thanks and sincerest reverence for your care of this institute; and to your great father God's mercy and good pleasure. May God brighten his face, my Lord, and lodge him among the righteous and the reformers.