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DİSİM



**THE NAHDA IN PARLIAMENT:  
TAHA HUSAYN'S CAREER BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
PRODUCTION INSTITUTIONS, 1922-1952**

By Hussam R. Ahmed

In December 1939, the Egyptian Ministry of Public Instruction created a new division to organize all cultural matters. As well as supervising education at its various stages, the ministry wanted to oversee "the dissemination of culture in the country."<sup>1</sup> They named the new division the Directorate of General Culture (Muraqabat al-Thaqafa al-'amma) and made it officially responsible for

Organizing the ministry's cultural efforts outside the walls of schools; finding the means of encouraging and supervising these [cultural] efforts; creating 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 associations concerned with the propagation of culture in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The ministry stipulated that the person appointed to lead this division must possess "high academic qualifications and long practical experience in such matters." They chose the famous writer and educator Taha Husayn

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(1889-1973) to head the new division, effectively appointing him Egypt's first minister of culture. At the time of his appointment, Husayn was one of Egypt's most influential intellectuals. He had written dozens of literary classics and hundreds of widely read articles and had served as the first Egyptian dean of arts at the Egyptian University for several terms between 1928 and 1939.<sup>3</sup> A year earlier, Husayn had published *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt), which presented a detailed report on the state of Egypt's education system and suggested improvements. The book confirmed Husayn's deep knowledge of the system and made clear that his reform project aligned with the ministry's objectives.<sup>4</sup>

Husayn led the Directorate of General Culture until May 1942, when the ministry promoted him to technical adviser to the minister of public instruction.<sup>5</sup> As adviser, he became responsible for the directorates of general culture, fine arts, and higher education. He advised committees and technical projects for education planning, curricula, school systems, textbooks, and educational missions abroad.<sup>6</sup> Among Husayn's important achievements in this role was his 1944 collaboration with the Wafdist minister Najib al-Hilali to make primary education free. When the Wafd won a parliamentary majority in January 1950, party leader Mustafa al-Nahhas asked Husayn to become his minister of public instruction, though Husayn was not a party member. Husayn agreed on the condition that the government would immediately make secondary and technical education free. He then served as minister of public instruction until the January 1952 Cairo fire, when King Faruq dismissed the Wafd cabinet.

While the British declared Egypt an independent kingdom in 1922, they retained effective sovereignty over the country until 1952.<sup>7</sup> In these years, known as the "liberal" or "parliamentary" period, intense debates took place in Egypt about how women, the family, the peasantry, and education could contribute to creating a modern nation.<sup>8</sup> Husayn was central to these nationalist debates and reform efforts. A rich body of scholarship, including hundreds of works in Arabic, analyzes Husayn's intellectual contributions.<sup>9</sup> But the scholarly attention to Husayn's writings has obscured his work as a politician and civil servant. This article situates Husayn at the center of the battle for full national independence by exploring his efforts to build strong knowledge production institutions and educational councils. It explores how Husayn and his reformist colleagues created and restructured educational