

**Text of a Speech Delivered by Professor Abdul-Hamid
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All praise is due to Allah, blessings and peace upon the
Messenger Muhammad, his household and companions.

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Assalamu alaykum warahmatullah wabarakatuh

I do not think that there are really many serious issues that are confronting the Ummah at this stage of its life as much as the problem about situation of Arabic language. This is because; the issue of Arabic language deeply and serious impacts the Ummah's identity and its relationship with its human message and civilizational heritage as well as its future existence. The Ummah should either move forward or move backward, and live and give or recede and die. This matter has reached an extent that UNESCO is predicting the death of Arabic language - that comprehensive language of the Arab nation and the preserver of Islamic nation's heritage and history. It is a mistake to believe that extinction of nations or death of languages is impossible. Rather, in some cases, it is easily possible. Then we will realize that the fate of Arabic language will be like that of Latin that, torn up into different local dialects that quickly metamorphosed

into diverse and independent languages such as English, French and Spanish. In this case, Arabic language, if adequate care is not taken, can change into tens of different local languages with appellations such as Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Moroccan and the like. Then the pessimistic, backward and disoriented Muslim Arab whose wish and identity had been distorted will no longer need anything of the classical Arabic – as we presently see – more than *‘Al-Hamdulillah Rabil-‘Alamin’* and *‘Qul Huwallahu Ahad’*. He will then become like an ordinary Hindi, Pakistani or Tanzanian Muslim.

It is saddening that this is happening to Arabs and Arabic language at a time when the world is clamoring to form major blocs, the most recent of which is the European Union, which is next door to us. On the contrary, we find Arab blocs increasing in fragmentation and weakness without caring for the future of our children. It should be realized that the only basis for unity and advancement we have is through strengthening our linguistic and cultural links in order to have a solid ground for forming blocs and resuscitation.

Dear brothers and sisters, our Arab identity and the basis of our existence will fall, given the situation we are in now. If we – the Arab nation and the heart of Islamic civilizational and universal nation – do not rise to confront the present dangers that are threatening our language, the obliteration of our comprehensive classical Arabic language will be the starting point for

irrevocable fragmentation and loss of both Arab and Islamic nations. Loss of Arabic language that unites us and our peoples will become one of the major causes of irretrievable loss of Arab and Islamic nations.

Having said this, dear brothers and sisters, reform of the conditions of this nation is not that difficult – if we are serious. This is because; what is responsible for the situation we are suffering from is substantially the disease of negativism that has overwhelmed the Ummah’s vision and deprived it of the strength to act and take initiative – a situation that led us into expecting everyone else to do what we are supposed to do in order to reform the situation of our nation and protect its cherished possessions. That is how our people remain passive and negativists while waiting for the ‘government’, ‘the United Nations’, the ‘European Union’ and anyone else to rectify our situation for us while hundreds of millions of Arabs and billions of Muslims are sitting on the fence doing nothing!

In our current situation, the greatest responsibility falls on the shoulders of us – teachers. We are the ones that nurture generations of this nation. If we – who are supposed to be in the front line – do not realize our responsibility, change our nature or take the initiative to reform our conditions and face the most important and the most fundamental of our priorities, no one will ever do that on our behalf. If we fail to inculcate this spirit

and these abilities in our youth and our children, we will never be able to get out of this abyss but in a worse situation.

Dear brothers and sisters, the situation of Arabic language and its present scientific and cultural deficiency is one of the foremost fundamental issues that must be addressed so that we can change our situation – and we are capable of doing so – and equip our children with what can make them build their future and the future of their nation, reform their contemporary Islamic culture, bring the unity back to their Arab nation and resuscitate their human civilization.

It is well-known, dear brothers and sisters, that creativity is impossible without the first language. Yet, we teach sciences in English and French that are colonizers' languages! Why is it so?! The answer is that we do not translate the world scientific works into our Arabic language though most advanced nations – the small and big ones, and in spite of their advancement – pay great attention to scientific translation from other languages. This is because; translation and enrichment of their languages are regarded a fundamental matter for continuous enrichment of their cultures, languages and their peoples.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon Arab countries and our reformers to seize the initiative in ensuring the success of this task through institutions and endowments. They should start by giving the priority to translation of scientific periodicals. They should stop limiting their translation efforts to works of

Aristotle or Shakespeare, and similar stories meant for kids and teenagers.

Dear brothers and sisters, Japan – a country of only one hundred and twenty million people – translates in a single year, according to statistics, more than thirty thousand pages into their Japanese language. States like Holland, Belgium and other small countries do not, like major advanced countries, teach sciences in their schools, universities and all their educational levels up to PhD, except in their first languages. This is the situation with all the advanced countries, whether big or small. None of these countries makes learning other languages a prerequisite for students wishing to study in its institutions except in areas of postgraduate studies and scientific research, and that is only for the purpose of international academic contact and scientific translation. But learning at all levels – from kindergarten to PhD – is done in the nation's language, and not in other languages. Learning other languages is only for researchers in postgraduate studies for the purpose of enriching their nation and its culture and boosting their children's ability to be creative.

Learning foreign languages at different levels of public education in these advanced countries is optional. It is never made obligatory. And the purpose is to have a required quantity of serious cadres to enrich the nation's language and culture. Never will you find any nation – whose children have a common language – wasting its money and burdening its

children by imposing a foreign language upon them as we can see today in Arab countries. This is because; the citizens of countries and nations that have a common language do not conduct affairs of their lives or speak among themselves any other language except their national ones.

On the other side, it is unfortunate that, in spite of our teaching social sciences in Arabic language, we do not translate sciences into this language; and the result is deficiency we have in sciences. Whether we teach social sciences in Arabic or physical sciences in English, we lack creativity in the latter because English is not our first language; and we are short of creativity in the former because they are devoid of translations and enrichments. The remedy for all this is to have institutions whose task would be translation of scientific materials into Arabic language, especially scientific periodicals in all fields of physical and social sciences.

I could recall an encounter I had with an electrical engineering teacher in one of the Arab countries in 1970s. I asked him, “Where did you get your degree from?” He said, “From Russia.” I said, “How did you follow up the scientific achievements and advancements that were happening around the world? And in which language did you study?” He answered, “In Russian. And every week, we found in the library the summary of every latest thing in other languages. At the end of the month, we found in the library a full Russian translation of all the summaries we

have read. In this way, I had direct access to all that was going on in different languages and also in Russian language.”

It is similar thing that happens – albeit in different forms – in cultures of advanced countries. Perhaps, what happened to the already extinct Hebrew language that was resurrected and turned into a language of knowledge and teaching in all levels of education, and in a record time, should be regarded a lesson that shows us how capable we are of rectifying our backwardness and ending the cultural war and colonialism we are facing. This is especially so, since we have in front of us, a great number of successful experiences of advanced countries from Japan in the far East to Canada and the United States in the far West. We should learn from them how to actualize our goals in an easier and quicker way, and with greater competence.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is important for us to realize that when Arabic sources are enriched by education at various levels and in all specializations, as a result of translation of science into Arabic language, it will turn scientific translation into a commercial enterprise. This will enable publishers to seize the initiative and scientific translation will become a profitable business venture. With this, translation will cease being the responsibility of the state or that of the endowment alone. In this way, our language and culture will be enriched and teaching with Arabic language will be a successful project.

Translation does not mean that we should blindly imitate the sciences that we acquire and translate. Rather, the nation's scholars and researchers owe it as a duty to repackage them. For, Western sciences are two-pronged: An aspect that deals with scientific facts; and the other that employs the scientific facts in the service of their materialistic universal vision in which 'might is right' and that is based upon racial nationalism, penchant for animalistic domination, power politics and bestial moral decadence – a phenomenon that gave birth to a materialistic, racist and supremacist civilization in which there is breakdown of morals, religious and human values and spiritual universal vision of justice, brotherhood and human equality.

The West has relinquished the spiritual vision for reasons peculiar with its past and due to what religion has turned to in their estimation. As a result, the European peoples particularly and the Western nations generally are regarded as agnostic¹.

Members of the Arab and Islamic nations are, in the contrary, bearers of a spiritual message. Theirs is a message and vision that is, in its essence, built upon the concept of 'right is might', and as a result, is based upon principles of justice, brotherhood, equality and universality of human knowledge. However, our nations declined and receded as a result of the decline of

¹ It is a school of thought that believes that the existence of the ultimate cause, as God, and the essential nature of things are unknown and unknowable, or that human knowledge is limited to experience.

knowledge and sciences in our culture and the huge disparity between values espoused by this culture and the reality of the Ummah's public life. As a result, the religious sciences are living in history while in the West, civil and social sciences live – as they had done before – in Greek ideology.

Therefore, it is not strange that we should repackage the sciences that come from the West and employ them in the service of noble Islamic human spiritual goals. We also need to repackage the nation's sciences and heritage away from their historical applications and circumstances so that they can maintain their religious values and concepts and wise and time-tested heritage that can provide guidance regardless of differences of time and place. At the same time, we should repackage the Western social sciences away from their universal materialistic vision and circumstances in order to benefit from their scientific realities for the service of universal Islamic human civilizational vision.

We should not stop at that. We should rather move on in the light of our values and our civilizational heritage to develop sciences and knowledge and enrich the Islamic and human civilization.

Darul-Ulum College in Cairo has always been a great hope for reforming the nation's thought. It must remain so – taking guidance from the vision of Shaikh Muhammad Abduh and the thinkers and reformists who came after him in their efforts to

understand the other and benefit from his civilizational achievements, and to resuscitate the nation and breathe new life into its culture and its Islamic civilizational gift.

Dear brothers and sisters, I hope that Darul-Ulum College and University of Cairo that is the mother of Arab universities will seize the initiative in this regard by organizing scientific conferences in cooperation with Arabic language academies in order to create terminologies and regulate them linguistically to make rules of Arabic language and spellings easy in a way that suits the nature of today's science and educational systems. For example, we realize that a majority of students have problems writing in Arabic. We know that none of the Arabic letters compels the writer to identify its vowel. However, the letter '*hamzah*', especially makes it incumbent upon the writer to identify its vowel and the vowel of the letter preceding it, whether this '*hamzah*' comes at the beginning, middle or end of the word. What resulted from this is that '*hamzah*' is, in most cases, written wrongly. This is just to show that we do not know the rules of writing '*hamzah*' the rules of which experts from among our predecessors skillfully complicated thereby requiring concerning it what is not required concerning other letters. Is it not then better to apply to letter '*hamzah*' the same rules we apply to other letters without technical obscurantism or delusive sophistry?!

There is no longer any place for spelling formalities or grammatical complications in this age of rocket speed and scientific explosions. The student is already burdened with loads of works. Therefore, what is needed is to facilitate things for him, though not at the expense of quality. One of the ways of facilitation is to issue a resolution that whatever is written for the pupil should be clearly and correctly vowelized in order to help him have correct pronunciation right from the beginning without having to shoulder additional burden of specialized details of theoretical rules that cannot be properly comprehended or implemented, and as such, are practically useless and easily forgettable.

Dear brothers and sisters, the nation's educational institutions generally and Daru-Ulum and Cairo University particularly should seize the initiative in this serious matter. Egypt has always been the mother of initiatives in our Arab world, and it should remain so. There is no future for Egypt without the Arab nation as there is no future for the Arab nation without Egypt.

The Arab nation must come out of the Israelite wilderness. The Arab nation of today is different from the Arab nation of the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). The then Arab nation consisted of tribes of free and audacious men who lived in arid deserts that had never been ruled by any Pharaoh or humiliated by any Caesar. Neither was the will of these tribes ever subdued by any clergy institution.

But today, we are in the state of Israelite wilderness about which Moses (peace be upon him) addressed the Pharaoh who had enslaved his people: *“And is this a favor of which you remind me – that you have enslaved the Children of Israel?”* (Surah Ash-Shur‘ara 26:22) *“And We wanted to confer favor upon those who were oppressed in the land.”* (Al-Qasas 28:5)

What did Allah do with the children of Israel through Moses – peace be upon him – is what the present-day intellectual reform movement is trying to do. Prophet Moses led his people to the land of Sinai and told them – as the Qur’an informs us: *“O my people, enter the Holy Land which Allah has assigned to you.”* (Al-Ma’idah 5:21) But the Israelites gave him the response of captives who are beset by mentality of humiliation and slavery – a response that was full of fright and negativism: *“O Moses, indeed within it is a people of tyrannical strength.”* (Al-Ma’idah 5:22) And in their abject state of defeatism and negativism they told Moses: *“So go, you and your Lord, and fight. Indeed, we are remaining right here!”* (Al-Ma’idah 5:24)

The divine instruction given to Moses (peace be upon him) is certainly what we need today. Moses was assigned the responsibility of reforming the enslaved children of Israel and setting them free from the bondage of fear and negativism through two things:

One: Intellectual and ideological reform and visional rectification. This is what we also need today. Our situation is

in total contrast to any quality that Islam encourages whether it is justice, brotherhood, unity, perfection, generosity, courageousness or sense of honor. We do the opposite of what our religion teaches. Our situation is described by the following statement of Allah: ***“Their violence among themselves is severe. You think they are together, but their hearts are diverse. That is because they are a people who do not reason.”*** (Al-Hashr 59:14)

Therefore, what we are required to do – according to the instruction Allah gave to His Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) that he should reform the situation of the ‘humiliated slaves’ from among the children of Israel – is to have visional rectification and refine our ideological methodology. ***“And We wrote for him on the Tablets [something] of all things – instruction and explanation for all things.”*** (Al-A‘raf 7:145)

An important clause – without which there would be no meaning for the Tablets – was added: ***“And order your people to take the best of it.”*** (Al-A‘raf 7:145) It means they should take it with correct and best understanding. The injunctions of the Tablets should not be selectively complied with nor should it be implemented according to their whims. Rather, they should take them with all seriousness and sincerity so that the reform would be achieved in accordance with the correct methodology.

Allah gives us similar instructions in the last Divine Message about which He says: ***“We have not neglected in the Register a thing.”*** (Al-An ‘am 6:38)

“Just as We had revealed [scriptures] to the separators, who have made the Qur’ān into portions. So by your Lord, We will surely question them all, about what they used to do. Then declare what you are commanded and turn away from the polytheists.” (Al-Hijr 15:90-94)

“So do you believe in part of the Scripture and disbelieve in part?” (Al-Baqarah 2:85)

Two: Reeducating the nation. In this age, this responsibility is that of the family, the school, the universities, the educators, the reformists and the reasonable media. That is why Allah imposed a ‘wilderness’ of forty years on the children of Israel in the desert of Sinai so that they would be reeducated and produce a generation that would have a sentiment of the free people. It was after this that ***“David killed Goliath.”*** (Al-Baqarah 2:251) For, ***“How many a small company has overcome a large company by permission of Allah!”*** (Al-Baqarah 2:251)

In the light of the above, the task of the university teacher in our nation and the task of the universities, thinkers and reformers is to seize the initiative concerning our priorities by reforming the thought, correcting the ideology, bringing back the universal spiritual vision and according great importance to parental upbringing with the aim of producing generations that can bear

the message and repair what has been damaged in the nation's entity.

One of these priorities is what we are doing in this conference, which is restoring and protecting the place of Arabic language. For, its protection is a fundamental pillar if we are to protect the essence of Arab and Islamic nation, and the essence of its culture, civilization and future of its growing generations.

The issue of Arabic language and scientific translation, as well as repackaging our heritage and modern sciences is of utmost importance and seriousness if we really want to re-establish our cultural, intellectual and educational strength. Dear brothers and sisters, I hope this matter will be accorded seriousness it deserves before it is too late.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to you and to Darul-Ulum College and Cairo University for the attention they give to this important matter that manifested through their organization of this conference in conjunction with Center for Intellectual Studies and International Institute of Islamic Thought. I wish success to all.

Thank you all. Assalamu alaykum warahmatullah wabarakatuh