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The Current Status of Arabic

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Introduction

Language is the quintessence of a nation and the eloquent symbol of its identity, representative of its specificity and the embodiment of its intellectual and civilizational components. The Arabic language represents the essence of the Arab and Islamic Ummah's identity, and a fundamental component of the cultural and civilizational edifice erected by this Ummah over its time-honoured history. To neglect this essence is thus tantamount to neglecting one of the most crucial components of the Islamic Ummah after its religion, Islam, the eternal religion of which the Book was revealed by Allah (SWT) in the clear and eloquent Arabic tongue and whose honourable Prophet and Messenger, Mohamed Ibn Abdullah, was chosen by Allah from the community that mastered the best this language which Allah honoured above all other languages. Arabic has always been and will continue to be the language of eloquence and rhetoric and the ever flowing delectable source. To safeguard this treasure is to safeguard our identity, defend our edifice, and perpetuate the ability to understand the valuable civilizational legacy transferred from generation to generation and enriched by each and every one of these generations in all walks of life.

We have learnt from cultural and civilizational history that the thriving of a language carries in it the seeds of intellectual prosperity and of progress in sciences, arts and literature, that in the power of a language lies the power of the nation speaking it, and that a language gains its power from the linguistic creativity of its people and from their excellence in all areas of public life. Similarly, the weakness of a language translates into the weakness of its speakers, a weakness that sneaks into the limbs of society

and into all fields of life, resulting in a state of regression that could signal cultural and civilizational demise and bring life's wheel to a halt.

The Arabic language suffered the same fate as many other languages, regressing and weakening for many centuries. However, a new lease of life was given to it in the last third of the 19th century with a reinvigorated interest in writing in Arabic after lengthy centuries of lethargy. New press houses were created, newspapers and magazines were started and many Arabic works were published in different cultural disciplines. With the dawn of the 20th century, Arabic dictionaries appeared and the first attempts at encyclopaedias were made, then schools and after them universities were built. At a later stage, language academies were established, focusing on updating the Arabic language and developing it to meet the needs created by the development of Arab societies, in addition to the growing interest shown in Arabic outside the Arab world first by Muslim communities attached by virtue of their religion to the language of the Quran, and then by orientalist circles and research institutes and universities that ran Arabic language and Islamic heritage departments, irrespective of the reasons that fuelled the latter's interest. Thus, the Arabic language market prospered and grew steadily just as it expanded far and wide.

With this renewed interest in Arabic, thriving literary, cultural and scientific production in Arabic, the spread of Arabic-speaking schooling, press and media in and outside the Islamic world and increases in the numbers of non-Arab learners of this language worldwide, Arabic recovered a considerable degree of its status and worth within Arab and Islamic societies in general, to finally be adopted as one of the six official languages of the United

Nations Organization. In October 2012, UNESCO declared the 18th of every December as the World Arabic Language Day, a great achievement and triumph for our language on the international scene. Such achievement only amplifies our responsibility in preserving the power and dynamism of our language and enhancing its ability to keep pace with modern developments, in asserting its standing and reinforcing its presence not only within the Islamic world but on also internationally. It is our responsibility to develop the Arabic language at all levels so that it can reclaim the vital and significant role it played in enriching the Islamic civilization which in turn has served as one of the key sources that fuelled the advancement of contemporary human civilization.

I wrote the study being published today and presented it to the 78th and 79th conferences of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, in 2012 and 2013 respectively, to which I have the honour of belonging, in my attempt to investigate and analyze the current reality of the Arabic language within Arab societies while endeavouring to observe the rules of brevity dictated by the nature of presentations made before the Academy.

Prior to that, I had published in 2004 a book titled '**Future of the Arabic Language**' which was translated into Arabic and French, then another one in 2008 on '**Arabic and Globalization**', equally translated into French and English. Specialised researchers can detect a connection between the three books which evolve within the same context and will realize that these books' common leitmotiv is the desire to prove the ability of the Arabic language to be the language of life, of the present and the future, capable of standing up to globalization currents and of meeting the challenges of modernity without losing its specificity or surrendering its constituents.

Endeavouring to generalize the benefit of the concepts addressed in this study, I resolved to also translate it into French and English and publish all three versions in this book.

May Allah guide our steps on the path of righteousness.

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Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization
(ISESCO)**

The Current Status of Arabic

Indicators of a Linguistic Crisis:

The study sheds light on some signs of the linguistic crisis experienced by Arabs at this specific point in their history. Theoretically, the standing of the Arabic language within Arab societies should suffer no ambiguity and be instead a matter of indisputable course, closed to any discussion or analysis. Yet, there is ample evidence in today's reality that Arab societies, as diverse as they may be, are guilty of marginalizing the Arabic language, and of nurturing little interest in it as a symbol of their identity and a vehicle of their thought and culture. Even worse, this marginalization may go as far as outright hostility towards the language with efforts expended to prejudice it and undermine its loyalists who are standing fast in the face of the Arabic language detractors.

This strange phenomenon is almost non-existent in other human societies, whether today or in times bygone. At the source of any differences of opinion and stance about a given language is always another language and never the speakers of a given language rising against their common language. Never before have people differed so widely in the stance they take towards their own language as Arab societies have done towards their mother tongue, without this divergence for that matter reaching the extent of total boycott. A fragile bond with the Arabic language, no matter what the degree of its weakness is, isolates the person from his identity environment and results in a shaky sense of cultural and civilizational belonging that threatens to entirely fizzle out. This signals the existence of a crisis in language as the vehicle of thought and culture and as the medium of human interactions within the society whose members identify with this language. Without the existence of real grounds for this

twofold crisis, stances towards Arabic would not have been as multiple and contradictory as seen today in the Arab world, nor would we be before a crisis that we can only describe as civilizational in view of the negative and dangerous implications it carries in its folds for the clear majority of Arab countries.

A profound reflection on the causes behind this problem which in our opinion has evolved into a real crisis, may help us outline with more clarity this linguistic issue that is intrinsically linked to the cultural and civilizational existence of the Arab and Islamic Ummah in general.

The first reason we believe to be at the root of this crisis is the general state of weakness that is affecting the entire Ummah and stripping it of its ability to protect its specificity, safeguard its edifice, and preserve its constants, achievements, rights and interests. This general state of weakness plaguing the body of the Arab and Islamic Ummah cannot always be attributed to external factors such as occupation with all its forms. Indeed, internal factors are also at play whether they pertain to the absence of the scientific planning of Arab societies' affairs, to the generally dire conditions that prevail in most of them, or to personal factors that affect individuals staggering under the weight of society, of the cultural climate and of educational conditions. Be it as it may, we cannot attribute all the causes behind the Ummah's decline up to date to external factors exclusively and disregard internal ones. All these factors continue to play a significant part in the decline of the Ummah, a part which may even have grown over time. The result is an extremely enfeebled sense of linguistic attachment. This generates indifference towards the language issue in general and has resulted in the current linguistic and civilizational crisis that is threatening the stability of Arab societies.

This build-up of weakness which characterises educational and schooling conditions in most Arab countries and which extends to all learning levels comes second as a factor behind the language crisis. The status and position reserved for Arabic in the school system, from kindergarten to university, is far below the level that this language warrants. The result is generations of school and university graduates whose bonds with Arabic are generally weak for curricular and structural reasons that strip the educational system in general of its most important components, rendering it dysfunctional and unable to produce the desired effect and change in curricula, programs and systems.

Impact of Educational Conditions on Language:

The abysmal level to which education has plummeted in most Arab countries in terms of inadequacy, poor quality and ineffectiveness reflects negatively on the state of the Arabic language today and defines the position that Arab societies are taking towards it. A solid correlation seems to exist between the general condition of education with all its levels and the state of the Arabic language on all fronts. This close association extends to society which is negatively impacted in both cases. Strengthening, developing and promoting language in grammatical and functional terms is only possible if efforts are joined in the endeavour to develop the educational system through an integrated approach that advances education on the one hand and strengthens the sense of linguistic belonging in younger generations, on the other. In both cases, what is needed is strong willpower and determination, coupled with a love for Arabic and a desire to elevate it to the status and lofty position it deserves.

Among the practical factors exacerbating the weakness of Arabic and hindering its upgrade to keep pace with the progress

witnessed in all fields of life is the impact of media and communication channels -and there are many of them- such as Arab satellite channels (as opposed to satellite channels broadcasting in Arabic from Western capitals) and national television channels. Newspapers, magazines and other publications come last in the list of factors deemed responsible in view of the decline in the Arabs' affinity for reading, similar to the downward trend witnessed in other parts of the world, another problem that negatively impacts the condition of the Arabic in many respects. Apart from the news bulletins where a certain degree of attention is paid to the respect and observance of Arabic language rules and where speakers are selected from among those with a good knowledge of language rules and high professional experience, most programs aired on Arab satellite channels fail to abide by the rules of Arabic. Talk shows, to which a large segment of airtime is allocated, are considered culprits in the deterioration of the Arabic language, causing it tremendous prejudice and depriving younger generations from learning a sound and correct Arabic language from the mouths of hosts of these talk shows which generally speaking are a bane of visual media.

The degree to which talk shows aired on Arab satellites undermine the Arabic language and drive the viewers further away from their mother tongue, is only equalled by the impact of soap operas that play their own part in the dissolution and weakening of the language, except for historical series (known more commonly as religious series) that are mostly filmed in classical Arabic and adhere to linguistic rules. Apart from these few TV programs, the state of Arabic on Arab satellites is a far cry from being satisfactory, which only confirms the viewers in their neglect of and unconcern towards the Arabic language, and reinforces the general state of indifference that prevails towards Arabic.

The Arabic Language in Foreign Media:

It is amazing that foreign satellite channels that broadcast from foreign capitals but target the Arab world show a much clearer respect for the Arabic language, whether in their news bulletins, political interviews, or cultural, documentary and historical programs. Of such Arab-targeting western channels we can mention BBC Arabic, France 24, the Arabic-speaking Turkish Channel, the US channel al-Hurra, and the Arabic-speaking Russian channel. At all these channels, great attention is paid to the correctness of the speakers' Arabic in ways that are almost non-existent in both land and satellite Arab channels, with the exception of a few stations.

Some may argue that foreign Arabic-speaking channels have no option but to adhere to classical Arabic in addressing Arab viewers and cannot opt for one of the Arabic dialects to convey their messages to Arabs if they wish to address them all with no exceptions, while Arab channels often choose the dialect prevailing in the country from which they broadcast. There is no interest in arguing this point or refuting it since what really matters is that the Arabic language is respected at Western channels addressing Arab audiences, irrespective of the media message they carry or wish to convey to the Arab viewer, a matter in which we will not delve any further either.

It is therefore no wonder that generations that lived in the forties and fifties -and even the sixties- of the previous century found in Western channels a rich Arabic language source that was greatly instrumental in the learning and respect of Arabic grammar and pronunciation and its proper diction. The BBC, Voice of America, the Dutch channel, the German Channel and

Radio Moscow represented at the time schools for learning the Arabic language. Some teachers even pointed their outstanding students in the direction of these stations, particularly the BBC, to acquire proper knowledge of the Arabic language. Today, Western channels continue to provide this service to Arab viewers, probably in ways far more superior than those of Arab channels, whether they are state-run or private in those countries that underwent the process of media liberalization and opened up the sector to private investments.

Of equal influence in weakening the attachment of Arab societies to their language is the blind admiration of the West and the imitation of its models in all aspects of life. The impact of western life as portrayed in films, television, music, on social interaction sites, in media channels and through tourism for the financially able, strengthens the individual's desire to imitate the West in everything, starting with language and ending with lifestyle, interactions with others and individual and collective behaviour patterns. Needless to say, most Arab societies are the victims of a devastating Western cultural and linguistic invasion that imposes foreign languages that compete with Arabic, and in many cases even wage a war against the official language of this or that country. The situation in the Arab Maghreb countries probably stands witness to this.

Linguistic Invasion is Worse than Cultural Invasion:

Linguistic invasion is the most dangerous of all types of cultural invasion. Its impact on the individual and collective identity of society is most dangerous since it strips man of one crucial component of his existence, namely the national identity, the receptacle of a nation's spiritual, cultural and civilizational

characteristics. The invading foreign language, represented in our contemporary reality by the languages of Western colonial powers, combats the language of the colonised, edges it away from daily life and strips it of its immunity. As a result, this language may collapse and even disintegrate entirely, breaking the bond between man and his roots, stripping him of his identity and rendering him incapable of safeguarding his religious and civilizational components in the absence of self-defence mechanisms of which the national language is the most important.

Of no less relevance is the impact of old languages and dialects that used the Arabic script in the past, such as Kurdish and Nubian in the Arab Mashreq, Tamazight with its multiple dialects in the Arab Maghreb, the Hassanian spoken by Moroccans in the two Saharan provinces of Saqia al-Hamra and Wadi al-Dahab and in Mauritania, as well as the myriad dialects spoken in all Arab countries, evolved in harmony with classical Arabic for long centuries and are considered an important part of the cultural legacy of these populations. However, the emergence of intellectual and political movements, of which some are extremely hostile and biased against the Arabic language and see in it what they describe as **Arab linguistic colonialism**, reveals poor understanding of historical lessons and exposes a desire to divide these societies in an attempt to resuscitate the colonial policies that failed in the past and were initially fought by the champions and scholars of these languages and dialects. These trends enjoy the support of Western colonial powers and of some research institutions headed by fanatics and racists.

These anti-Arabic movements have inexplicably gained in power in some Arab Mashreq countries such as Lebanon and in Arab Maghreb ones such as Morocco and Algeria. Their militants

do not stop at promoting the co-existence of Arabic and Tamazight, a legitimate demand that is guaranteed by the Moroccan and Algerian constitutions, but call for marginalising and fighting the Arabic language by all means. With such claims, they join those of the Francophonie movement which has for long fought and competed with the Arabic language, seeking to sideline it and promote the French language which already enjoys strong presence in public life in many North African Arab countries.

Mention should be made of the fact that when the original inhabitants of North Africa embraced Islam in large numbers at the time of the Arab conquest, they also embraced the Arabic tongue which became the medium in which they expressed their sentiments, hopes, joys and woes and all other aspects of their lives. Tamazight-speaking Berber scholars, muftis and poets used to transcribe their dialects in the Arabic script, particularly the Soussi dialect prevalent in the Souss region of Morocco. Two examples suffice to show the elevated status in which the Amazigh people held the Arabic language. The **first one** is from the history of Morocco in the 6th century AH and the second one from its contemporary history, in the 20th century precisely. I refer here to Mohamed Ibn Toumert, known as al-Mahdi Ibn Toumert, founder of the Amazigh Dynasty of the Almohads and who, as a scholar, he indexed all his works and books in Tamazight transcribed in Arabic. The **second example** is Mohamed al-Mokhtar al-Soussi, one of the leading figures of the nationalist movement and academic and scientific renaissance of Morocco who authored dozens of valuable books in Arabic. He was a prolific poet and a staunch defender of the Arabic language militating for its spread within Amazigh circles, and strongly advocated Arab Islamic education under French protectorate. The people of the Amazigh regions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya still proudly speak Arabic

and some of them stand up to the supporters of Francophonie, refuting their claims and exposing the incoherence of their theses. No language shall prevail over another language, Arabic and Tamazight will continue to coexist in harmony, spontaneously cross-pollinating and enriching each other in full concord, because such is the nature of things and the lesson learnt from the shared history of Arab communities everywhere, regardless of the diversity of their ethnic backgrounds and religious inclinations.

The Cultural and Media War against Arabic:

Despite the growing fierceness of the cultural and media war against Arabic in many Arab Mashreq and Maghreb countries, and the diversity of its methods and contexts, Arab societies have still not severed their ties with the Arabic language, strayed too far from it or lost the Arabic touch. On the contrary, over time and in many places, Arabic has imposed its presence not only among the intellectuals and the educated, but even in popular environments where the illiteracy rate is higher and where living conditions are too much of a preoccupation to leave room for language concerns. For example, Friday sermons are delivered in all mosques in Arabic and understanding these sermons has never been confined within one social category to the exclusion of others. These sermons are accepted and welcomed by all and are generally understood the literate and the illiterate alike. Similarly, the Holy Quran is recited everywhere, in mosques, schools, houses, markets and all other places, and the learning and recitation of the Quran is widely popular especially among females of all ages and social classes. The bond existing between Muslims and Allah's book increases the Muslim's attachment to and his love for the Arabic language, irrespective of his origin,

ethnicity or mother tongue. This phenomenon is almost general to all Arab societies despite several hindrances. It is attested to by the many regional and international Quran learning and recitation contests regularly organised by government authorities such as ministries of endowments and Islamic affairs, as well as by non-governmental associations and organisations in their drive to indirectly promote and reinforce the Arabic language.

Another point of equal interest is that foreign series dubbed in Arabic and broadcast on Arab channels are widely popular because they are understood by all, irrespective of the cultural load or content of these series and which are not the subject of this study.

We are forced to address the question on the factors inciting the foreign parties producing and distributing these series in the Arab world to opt for classical Arabic instead of one of the many Arabic dialects.

The Commercial Factor in Language Dissemination:

Topping these reasons is the purely commercial motive of pursuing material gain, which is a legitimate pursuit in such cases since the ultimate goal is securing the large commercial gains generated thanks to the enthusiasm of most Arab satellite channels for these series. Were these parties to opt for one of the many Arabic dialects, they would fall short of securing the broad popularity they target. Commercially speaking, it is a sound move. But as we ponder this important subject from an academic angle, we believe that the choice of the Arabic language proves beyond the shadow of doubt, and regardless of any other consideration, that this language is what brings all Arab societies together in an

absolute way that suffers no exceptions. If the Arabic language was not embedded so profoundly in the heart of the Arab man, even if his ethnicity is not Arab, and with this cultural and social load, it would not have been chosen as a medium for promoting artistic productions made abroad, be it in Latin America or elsewhere. The Arabic language is a strong and effective element that cements the ties between all parties in Arab societies wherever they may be and irrespective of whom their detractors are.

This stands witness to the power, solidity and cohesion of the Arabic language. Even if exceptions exist, their impact is not powerful enough to cause the Arabic language to regress or surrender to the same fate as hundreds of languages that soared then fell and which were listed in a report recently published by UNESCO.

The Arabic language draws its power from the Holy Quran, a language that Allah (SWT) chose for His Holy Book and chose the seal of all His prophets and messengers, Mohamed (PBUH), from among its speakers. It is a language as eternal as life on this earth and a language preserved in the same way that Allah (SWT) preserved the Holy Quran.

If we believe that the Almighty promised His messenger and the community of believers that the Quran would be safeguarded: ***[We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)]***⁽¹⁾, and interpreters agree that the message here refers to the revelation sent to Mohamed Ibn Abdellah (PBUH), safeguarding the Arabic language is a weighty responsibility that we all carry, a momentous task entrusted to us, and a duty that we cannot possibly shirk. Preserving

(1) *Al-Hijr*, verse 9.

the language requires a sustainability of the efforts to develop and renew it because languages can be renewed in the same way as religions are. The Prophet (PBUH) said: “*Certainly Almighty and All-Powerful Allah will send an individual at the beginning of every century to will renew the faith.*”⁽²⁾ This renewal of the faith goes through a process of *ijtihad* that takes into consideration time-induced changes and the inevitable transformation that affects causes. Linguistic renewal occurs through a process of adaptation, acclimatization and improvement and by ensuring that the language keeps pace with the progress experienced in life in its continuous evolution and march. This is the responsibility of language academies, specialized faculties, teachers' institutes, and the information faculties and journalism institutes that train television journalists, speakers and producers of programs targeting children and younger generations. This is a collective duty and may even be considered an individual duty that falls to every person in a position of responsibility in a language-related sector.

Renewing the Arabic Language:

Renewing the Arabic language hinges upon bringing it closer to the public and facilitating its learning, removing all difficulties and obstacles to the acquisition of language rules that students experience in schools and at faculties in the advanced study of the language and exploration of its sciences. The efforts expended in this respect should be matched by efforts to empower the Arabic language in the written and audio-visual media. This effort would involve choosing speakers with experience and mastery of the

(2) Narrated by Abu Dawood in *al-Malahim* (512, *al-Hakim in al-Fitan wa al-Malahim* (567/4), al-Tabarani in a *al-Awsat* (522/4) on the authority of Abu Huraira.

Arabic language and by instructing managers in this three-pronged field to respect Arabic and use it in all radio and television media programs. In turn, this necessitates the decreeing of laws that protect the Arabic language and promote its proper and correct use in all platforms that resort to language.

The experience of our strong language academy where we meet is worthy of emulation by other Arabic language academies. In fact, most Arab parliaments and legislative councils should issue legislative texts that guarantee the protection and empowerment of the Arabic language within our Arab societies. It is clear that there is no mechanism to remove the many obstacles that hinder the Arabic language other than through law. This is the case in many Western countries since any encroachment upon the sanctity of a national language is equal to violating the sovereignty of the State, a constitutional principle that is in force in all states that respect their cultural and civilizational specificity, protect their national identity and consider language as one of the constants and pillars on which the edifice of the nation rests.

For Arab societies, the Arabic language must feature among the components of their cultural and civilizational identity without this clashing with their openness to modern times and their smooth integration within the transformations unfolding around the world through learning and mastering other languages and taking hold of the reins of science and technology while ensuring that the Arabic language does not suffer in the process.

The problem lies in the fact that Arab societies in the Mashreq and the Maghreb generally do not use Arabic in their everyday dealings and are exposed to a staggering cultural, media and linguistic invasion. Unbeknown to the general public, these societies are strenuously struggling against impressive temptations that

are pressuring them to yield in to alienation movements that are crushing our constants. For the Arab and Islamic Ummah not to lose this linguistic, intellectual and cultural battle, it has to remain strongly attached to its religion and to its fundamentals, and to fully understand that neglecting the Arabic language is equal to relinquishing one's dignity and identity.

Yet, and while we note with great regret the undeniable regression of Arabic in our Arab societies for the above-mentioned and briefly addressed reasons, we remain nonetheless optimistic and believe that despite all the challenges, this situation will not endure, and that a return of Arab peoples to their mother tongue will inevitably occur by the grace of Allah, no matter how strong the discouraging factors and hostile and malicious campaigns are, simply because the ardent defenders of this language are many.

Language, any language, is a living entity that is affected by all the elements suffered by other beings and is influenced by changes and developments. The life of a language stems from the life of its speakers. Its power grows or wanes in tandem with their rise to power and fall to weakness. Language is a dynamic element in civilization and a factor of influence in renaissance. When a civilization emerges, grows, bears its fruits and prospers, its language will also thrive and prosper and its influence will increase and spread far and wide. This principle has applied throughout the ages and successive civilizations and languages that mankind has known⁽³⁾. If Arab societies opt for the path of true progress and achieve steady development in all fields, confronting all the challenges and obstacles in their advance, the Arabic language will follow the same path and will assert its

(3) Dr Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri: *Future of the Arabic Language*, page 8, ISESCO Publications, Rabat, 2004.

presence until it becomes a contemporary classical Arabic that advances at the same pace as all other languages in their formulations and structures and that does not balk at progress. Contemporary classical Arabic represents the essence of the progress achieved by this language in modern times. It is the middle-stance language that stands on a loftier and more refined plane than the current language. It is an Arabic language that preserves its features, characteristics, structures and formulation but is at the same time a modern and contemporary language in every aspect of the word 'contemporary'.⁽⁴⁾ As such, the Arabic language can be described as being responsive to ever changing life requirements and human needs in the present and the future.

Contemporary Arabic:

Having monitored the conditions of the Arabic language in Arab societies, we must underline that **contemporary Arabic** is the only hope for the development of the Arabic language in a sound way at the current juncture marked by onslaughts on the cultural identity and the civilizational specificity of the Arab and Islamic Ummah. It is the language of the media, thought, literature, culture, administration and diplomacy.⁽⁵⁾ It is a living language capable of standing up to the fiercest alienation onslaughts and of advancing resolutely on the path of renewal which brings it closer to Arab societies and makes it a language of the present and the future. What continues to be missing is the attention and interest that Arabic warrants from its people, including and most of all decision-makers such as leaders, legislators, parliament

(4) Dr Shawqi Daif: *On heritage, Poetry and Language*, page 242, Maktabat al-Dirasat al-Adabiyya 100, Dar al-Maarifa, Cairo, 1987.

(5) Dr Altwaijri, op. cit., p. 2.

members, intellectuals, media figures and educators as the language of their culture and their federating factor. Should they relinquish or neglect it, their identity would be lost and their unity would shatter, turning them into mere dependents of other nations.

May Allah bless Egypt's great poet Hafiz Ibrahim who said of the Arabic language:

*I am the sea. In my depths all treasures dwell
Have they asked the divers about my pearls?
Woo unto you if I grow old and my beauty fades
My doctors are from you and dear is the medicine
So surrender me not to the ravages of time
For I fear for you when my time comes to an end* ⁽⁶⁾

Woe unto a nation that Allah honoured with the language of the Quran and made it the best Ummah ever sent to mankind and that still relegates this language to the meanders of time.

(6) Poetry compilation by Hafiz Ibrahim, vol. 1, page 253, 2nd edition, al-Hayaa al-Masriyya al-Aamma lil Kitab, Cairo, 1980.

Revisiting the Problems of Arabic

Language is a Constituent Element of the Ummah:

Language cannot be dissociated from the national entity that speaks it, the two being bound by an intrinsic and intimate bond, and the soundness of the former being contingent upon the soundness of the latter. Thus, Arabic as the language associated with the Arab Ummah and Muslim peoples who in spirit and culture speak Arabic as the language of the Noble Quran, of the honorable *hadith*, of rites, and the language of the Islamic heritage in which they all take pride and from which they derive their identity and their spiritual, cultural and civilizational specificity, is the tongue they harness to express their culture and civilization. This broad definition also encompasses the categories that use Arabic to gain insight into the Arab and Islamic culture and Arab humanities and arts, either out of a desire to sample the marvels of this universal heritage, or for scientific reasons and other motives. The Arabic language is not exclusively the language of Arabs and Muslims, but is instead a universal tongue in wide use throughout the world.

Yet, global as this language may be, the source of its strength, growth and prosperity remains contingent upon the cultural and civilizational level that the Arab Ummah has attained. In fact, the more powerful a nation becomes the more strength its language gains, and the feebler it becomes the weaker becomes the language, for languages cannot be dissociated from their nations.

Thus evolution is an inherent characteristic of the lifespan of a language. The starting point in this evolution is the language's birth, followed by a gradual process of growth. During this process, the language, as a living entity, follows an upward progression and experiences many transformations.⁽¹⁾

(1) Amine Al Khouli: *Language Issues in Our Life*, page 66, Al Hayaa al-Mesriyya al-'Amma lil Kitab, Cairo, 1987.

Arabic is not a mere vessel for culture and heritage, although this is crucially important. Language is in fact also a mindset, a communication channel and an extension of the Ummah's existence. Through its corpus of expressions and terms, language shapes both the collective and the individual value system. Arabic is a reflection of the intellectual and cultural level of its speakers and is first and foremost the primordial bond that unites its speakers and the brush that shapes the framework of the Arab and Islamic identity.⁽²⁾

If we concede that Arabic, similar to any other language, goes through cycles of growth, prosperity, agony and death, we can but recognize the weighty responsibility that falls to us in rescuing Arabic from the state of decrepitude it has come to. What could be more indicative of this linguistic abyss than the fact that Arabic is now unable to coin new words to keep pace with modern life? Such sterility is not inherent to the language itself but is more the result of the inability of its speakers to fertilize and enrich this language.⁽³⁾ This inability is at the root of the linguistic crisis, which is civilizational in scope.

The Root of the Arabic Language Problems:

Addressing the problems affecting the Arabic language is essential to any effort to tackle the problems hindering the access of Arabs to higher planes of advancement, progress and prosperity in different fields. Indeed, the problems of language are actually the problems of the Arab Ummah and any attempt to resolve these problems should find its starting point in reality as it is

(2) Dr Abdulaziz al-Douri: Pages from *History and Civilization*, page 206, published within the Complete Works of Dr Abdulaziz al-Douri, Vol 11, Centre for Islamic Unity Studies, Beirut, 2nd edition, 2008.

(3) Dr Sadeq Mohamed Naimi: *Intellectual History of the Crisis of Arabic*, page 35, Afriqia al-Sharq, Casablanca, 2008.

experienced on the ground and not virtually. This entails ascribing any language difficulties to the direct and real causes behind the deterioration of the Ummah and its poor performance.

Many researchers, literary figures and linguists have attempted to address Arabic language problems, including prominent Egyptian author Mahmoud Taymour who published in 1956 his book *Problems of the Arabic Language*. In this book, Taymour wrote: “*The real question is not about the validity of the Arabic language but rather **advancing this language** to help it assert its command and become dynamic in all fields of public life.*” Taymour's words were written when he addressed the broader issue of the suitability of Arabic for life and the future. The question, which was first raised early in the 20th century, continues to be of relevance today.

Mahmoud Taymour suggested four measures to advance the Arabic language by reforming it. In brief, these measures are:

First: Enriching the language with more words to accommodate developments in social life.

Second: Simplifying the language by steering clear of the arcane, embracing words used in colloquial languages, particularly if they are rooted in classical Arabic, and even borrowing words from vernacular to refer to daily and practical meanings and objects for which there is no equivalent in classical Arabic.

Third: Facilitating grammar, which is a *sine qua non* condition. In this regard, one can derive inspiration from the experiences of former grammarians and to draw benefit from their permissions and exceptions (the derogations to rules they declared as admissible).

Fourth: Generalizing vowelization: The use of diacritics is crucial in writing, starting with primary level school textbooks.

It is possible to invent in the future a technique that could save money and effort.⁽⁴⁾

By **enriching** the Arabic language through feeding its lexicon, **simplifying** it, which is a form of development and renewal of the language, **rendering grammar within reach** which involves tempering grammar to meet development needs, and **generalizing vowelization** which removes all barriers to good reading and sound understanding, it will be possible to reform the language in ways that bring it closer to the broader public, infuse it with more dynamism and extend its radiance.

Facilitating Grammar:

Dr Taha Hussein preceded Mahmoud Taymour by more than two decades when he addressed the simplification of grammar in the course of an in-depth dissertation on the reform of Arabic education and as he tackled the difficulties experienced by Arabic learners in general. In 1938, Dr Taha Hussein dictated his book *The Future of Culture* which was published the following year. He titled the 37th chapter of this book 'Which Arabic Language is the State Teaching?' and the 38th chapter 'Limiting Grammar Learning to Basics'. In chapter 42, titled 'Training Arabic Language Teachers', Dr Taha Hussein addressed in more ample details the Arabic language difficulties as he analyzed the topic of his book. This book served as a comprehensive and thorough report that the author presented to the Egyptian government formed after the 1936 Treaty with Great Britain to advance the Egyptian culture in the broader sense of culture which encompasses education and schooling in general.

(4) Mahmoud Taymour: *Problems of the Arabic Language*, al-Matba'a al-Namoudajjiyya, Cairo, 1956.

In view of the significance of what Dr Taha Hussein wrote on the Arabic language in his book, published in 1939, we will take a moment to ponder and analyze his words as one of the vanguard academics to call for the reform of classical Arabic through a reform of its sciences, most notably syntax and grammar. Dr Hussein wrote: *“Those who claim that we only learn and teach Arabic because it is the language of religion and accordingly base all their scientific and practical assumptions and conclusions on this, are misleading people. And no nation can edify its life around a misrepresentation.”*

He went on to say: *“Arabic is the language of religion. That is a fact. And it is a benefit for those who speak this language. But this benefit should be free and unconditioned, free from any constraints on reasonable freedom, and innocent of anyone who preaches or causes stagnation, because religion itself is innocent of all that.”*

He adds: *“If all of this is true, and there is no doubt that it is true, then the Arabic language is not the property of the men of religion who are certainly acting as its sole custodians and guardians. Arabic belongs to all the nations and generations that speak it, and every member in these nations and generations enjoys the freedom and privilege of use as enjoyed by owners, **provided he meets the conditions that guarantee this freedom.**”*

Dr Taha Hussein came to a crucial conclusion that he summarized as follows: *“We therefore think in this language. We can go as far as saying that language is not only a medium of social interaction and cooperation but is also a tool used by people, as individuals, to think, perceive and feel. If this applies, then we learn and teach Arabic because it is one of the necessities of individual and social life and a crucial tool to reach our goals*

irrespective of how close or far, difficult or easy, simple or complex these goals are. We do not learn or teach Arabic because it is the language of the Quran only but because it is much broader and global. We do not learn or teach Arabic because it is the language of Arabs and Arabic speakers, but we learn it and teach it because it is our language and the language of future generations, and we want it to remain the language of these generations.”

Having underscored the crucial importance of Arabic in the life of Arabs and Muslims, Dr Taha Hussein came to the crux of the matter, or what may be considered as the cornerstone in the reform of the Arabic language, this reform being the sine qua non condition of the advancement of the Arabic language. Dr Taha Hussein said: *“Reforming language sciences⁽⁵⁾ is a crucial condition for the reform of education as a whole. When you learn in a given language, your learning will amount to little if the language used in the teaching and learning processes is not clear, simple and close to the heart and mind.”*

He went on to say: *“The reform of Arabic language sciences is not all that is needed to make its teaching fruitful and beneficial. Interest should also be taken in the subject where this language is taught.”*

The subject referred to here is grammar. Dr Taha Hussein writes in this regard: *“Let us then scale down the grammar, morphology and rhetoric courses and reduce these to simple chapters in literature or other subjects.”*

(5) Dr Taha Hussein is careful in his wordings and does not refer to the reform of the Arabic language but to the reform of Arabic language sciences, which is a more accurate and expressive phrase.

Dr Taha Hussein goes further to explain his idea and says: “*It is not sufficient to reform grammar, morphology and rhetoric. I want us to strive for a more profound reform that extends to writing and reading and helps people reduce to the minimum the amount of errors they make when writing or reading. I want people to read in order to understand and not to understand in order to read. I want the purpose of writing to be clarity and elucidation and not ambiguity and mystification. I want writing to be a truthful and accurate reflection of speech, and not to translate some parts and omit others, or convey half the phrase and shed the other half. I want writing to convey letters and diacritics faithfully and with no omissions on the one hand, and resort to a transliteration that is based on ease, facility, speed and economy of time, effort and money on the other hand.*”⁽⁶⁾

Yet, and despite the importance and worth of Dr Taha Hussein's words, a certain ambiguity and lack of clarity persist about the meaning, the goals desired and the means and ways of achieving these ends, which incidentally is a characteristic of Taha Hussein's style. However, it is enough that this former president of the Academy and doyen of Arab literature found in himself the courage to address the issue of reforming Arabic language sciences at a time when such ideas were met with fierce resistance from a radical front that rejected renewal under all its forms and when such intransigence dominated intellectual life and generally undermined the Arabic language in the same way that it did Arab and Islamic culture.

(6) Dr Taha Hussein: *Future of Culture in Egypt*, pp. 287-382, Complete Works of Dr Taha Hussein, Vol. 9, the Science of Education, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, Beirut, 1st edition, 1973.

Mahmoud Taymour was less ambiguous in his upfront approach to the problems of the Arabic language, although these problems, in existence since the first half of the Fifties of the previous century, differ largely from today's problems. One can safely say that these problems have become more complex and exacerbated in a most disturbing way, overshadowing all other problems and rising to the level of serious cultural issues that prompt many a question. Such evolution is only natural since language, after religion, has the most powerful impact on the life of the Arab Islamic Ummah in the past, the present and so shall be in the future.

A Sound Judgement by Sheikh Mohamed al-Fadel Ibn Achour:

I came across a most interesting article by the Tunisian scholar Sheikh Mohamed al-Fadel Ibn Achour and published in 1969 under the title *Does the Arabic Language Have Any Problems?*⁽⁷⁾ and which he opened with this wonderful introduction: “A strange title that carries a strange question. This question may be construed as an affirmative enquiry, a rhetorical question or the oblivion of the foolish. Prior to this article I had raised the same question when I asked ‘Does Islam Have Any Problems?’ Certainly, there are many books and lengthy articles that testify to the existence of problems in the Arabic language.” He then goes on to describe the efforts of many Arab linguists to draw attention to these problems and address them. He says in this regard: “Arabic linguists, those who study and protect the Arabic language, were the first to draw attention to the state of Arabic. Hafni Nasef criticized in the series of lectures he delivered in 1909⁽⁸⁾ the

(7) The Tunisian newspaper *Al-Sabah*, issue 6038, 8 March 1969.

(8) Hafni Nasef published these lectures in his book *History of Literature and the Life of Arabic Language*, 3rd edition, Cairo, 1973.

condition of the Arabic language, the onslaughts targeting it and the crises it was enduring after becoming the object of criticism and vilification in all aspects. Leading institutes and universities also took interest in these modern issues.”

The perspective of Sheikh Mohamed al-Fadel was more holistic and his diagnosis of the ailments of Arabic more realistic. He identified ten problems that affect the Arabic language and listed them in the following order: simplification of the Arabic language, the issue of grammar, the issue of etymology particularly with regard to the present tense, linguistic exceptions and anomalies, acceptance by means of comparison, acceptance by means of usage, Arabic language teaching problems and methods in respect of grammar and morphology, the issue of transliterating foreign terms in Arabic, scientific terminology, of civilization-related terms -which falls in the same category as that of scientific terms-, the issue of dictionaries and finally that of bilingualism. Thus, Sheikh Mohamed al-Fadel Ibn Achour addressed at length Arabic language issues, contrary to his predecessors who were also his colleagues in this Academy. Still, he concurs with his predecessors in recognizing the importance of reforming Arabic language sciences, including grammar and syntax.

The Arabic Language is Regaining its Rightful Place:

Regardless of which problems affect Arabic today, they are not as dangerous as may imagine those who are highly anxious about this language's future. In reality, there are many indications that *“the Arabic language is reclaiming its status, facing its challenges in all confidence and determination, and asserting its dynamic presence thanks to more than four hundred million speakers and users and to a geographical space that is expanding day after day. Today, we learn of many universities in America and Europe introducing Arabic in their school programs, other universities*

that show interest in Arabic as a second language, thousands of Arabic language lovers and aficionados who endeavor, in many parts of the world, to learn it and consolidate their attachment to it, and of the efforts of some Arab countries, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to spread this language and support its growth in Indonesia for example. Every day, we are witnessing in our own societies the creation of new associations to protect this language, the oldest of which was created in Egypt and the newest in Morocco. In Egypt, there is the Association of Arabic Language Guardians, the Association of Lissan al-Arab and the Egyptian Association for the Arabization of Sciences. In the United Arab Emirates, there is an Association for the Protection of the Arabic Language and in Morocco there is the Association for the Protection of the Arabic Language, created about five years ago. This new role of civil society institutions in the Arab world is an indicator of the growing awareness about the importance of the Arabic language and the need to safeguard it, spread its use, simplify and develop it to become the language of the present and of the future. It is also an affirmation of the Arab citizenship and identity, both of which derive their essence from this language and its immense cultural and scientific legacy.”⁽⁹⁾

The spread of the Arabic language has grown with its integration of the digital world and its rise to a prominent status among the languages used in the World Wide Web. This has encouraged Microsoft to open a branch in Cairo specialized in Arabic with the aim of developing our language and integrating it in this World Wide Web. A report of the Davos Economic Forum indicates that, culturally and geographically speaking, the Arab

(9) Farouq Shousha in the address he delivered at the opening of the Arabic language study day organized by ISESCO in Rabat on occasion of the World Arabic Language Day, 18 December 2012.

region has the highest rates of assimilation of new information and communication technologies, which only confirms the extensive scope of classical Arabic in both the real and the virtual worlds.

This constitutes cause for hope and an impetus to continue searching for solutions to the existing problems which are the fruit of the general conditions experienced by the Arab and Islamic Ummah in all fields.

In his book *Contemporary Arabic Language*, the physician and linguist Dr Mohamed Kamel Hussein says as he presents his linguistic project on what he calls 'reasonable syntax': "*Those who want to preserve the language and refuse any innovation are similar to those who want to preserve the beauty and fragrance of flowers by locking them in metal boxes, causing them instead to wilt and wither. The proper preservation of living organisms is only achieved through careful attention and by developing them in ways that ensure their adaptability to the environment where they evolve.*"⁽¹⁰⁾ Endeavoring to adapt the Arabic language to the environment where it is currently evolving is the crux of the matter of reforming language at all levels and the starting point in addressing linguistic problems which, as mentioned earlier, are no more than the reflection of the general problems experienced by Arab societies.

The Moroccan thinker Allal al-Fassi says in a linguistic study he conducted on semantic distortion, published in the first issue of the magazine '*al-Lissan al-Arabi*'⁽¹¹⁾: "*Language springs from the individual and society, and studying phono-semantics reveals the intimate link between the word and the intellect that gave*

(10) Dr Mohamed Kamel Hussein: *Contemporary Arabic Language*, al-Maarif lil Tebaa'a wal Nashr, Cairo, 1976.

(11) Allal al-Fassi: *Semantic Distortion*, *al-Lissan al-Arabi* magazine, issue 1, Rabat, 1964.

birth to it and the environment where it emerged. This would confer vital importance on semantics if our desire is to ensure that each nation defines itself through its mother tongue.” There is no doubt that the semantic distortion mentioned in this regard is a linguistic plague among many and also one aspect of language corruption which is, in turn, indicative of the corruption of society.

Toward a New Corpus Linguistics:

Farouq Shousha was right when he proclaimed his confidence in the Arabic language and heralded a bright future for it, and when he called, in his address at ISESCO's permanent headquarters in Rabat, for what he termed **new corpus linguistics**, saying: “*The Arab media figures and the media in general were successful in paving the way within many linguistic spheres to the idea of a much needed new corpus linguistics. New corpus linguistics is a vital necessity for us at this point in our life and would be a continuation of the endeavor started by al-Khaleel Ibn Ahmed in the 2nd century AH when he began the first language compendium named Mu'jam al-'Ain. This great mathematician who had a natural gift for authentic language and a predilection for linguistic accuracy did what can only be achieved today with the help of immense databases and modern computers. This new corpus linguistics, contingent upon the cooperation of language and culture institutions in the Arab world, will provide the only means of assessing the evolution of the Arabic language in its civilizational, academic and social uses and its creative manifestations in the ages that followed the reference era, during which ages language compendiums were sealed and therefore could not accommodate this immense linguistic profusion, and of finally understanding the linguistic present in all its practical manifestations.*”⁽¹²⁾

(12) Farouq Shousha in an address he delivered at the opening of the Arabic language study day organized by ISESCO in Rabat on the occasion of the World Arabic Language Day, 18 December 2012.

While little doubt exists that the issues preoccupying researchers in language issues differ from one environment to the next, they all converge at the difficulties experienced by learners of Arabic. These difficulties take shape in a lengthy study time needed to grasp the complexities of syntax and morphology, at the expense of language mastery, ease of understanding, appeal to learners and spiritual rapprochement with this language. This ultimately leads to a psychological rejection of Arabic, a disregard for its use and the recourse to colloquial languages that divide and that pounce on the opportunity to penetrate further and expand, replacing classical Arabic which is the real tongue of Arabs and one element of their unity.

Poor Standards of Teachers Enfeeble Arabic:

Among of the hardest problems facing the Arabic language and enfeebling it are the poor standards of teachers, be it at the primary, intermediate or university levels. This poor performance is fundamentally interconnected since the low levels of competence of many university teachers at Arabic language and literature departments of faculties or education institutes impacts on the level of any teacher who graduates from these institutions and begins practicing his profession armed with little baggage and poor capacities having missed a solid training in Arabic language sciences or in any other human sciences. The student in elementary classes thus becomes the victim to these inadequacies. One can add to this the unappealing way in which Arabic teachers are portrayed in films, theater and television. This teacher is often depicted as a poor, hopeless and shabbily dressed civil servant who often invites mockery. If we add to this stereotypical image of the Arabic teacher the administrative and financial conditions endured by teachers in most Arab countries, particularly in the past few decades and today, we find ourselves before an under-

performing specimen unable to properly accomplish the mission of teaching Arabic entrusted to him, for what he does not possess he cannot share. Certainly, the sound training of Arabic language teachers is crucial to language preservation and its soundness and to the continuity of its cultural and civilizational mission. This situation is in sharp contrast to conditions in other countries where the teacher of the national language is placed at a befitting status as the custodian of a vital element of the national identity.

At times we perceive a perverse determination to present the Arabic language teacher under this unflattering light and to morally and physically marginalize his role in society out of loathing for this language and keenness to repel people from it and empower colloquial languages or foreign ones, mostly French in Arab Maghreb countries or English in the Middle East. This phenomenon deserves a more profound study at many levels and not at the linguistic one alone.

An in-depth analysis of the factors behind this abnormal state brings us to a painful conclusion, namely that students who join the Arabic language and literature departments at faculties of humanities, education institutes or teacher training institutes in most Arab countries are often graduates with poor grades that do not enable them to access science, architecture or medical colleges. The result is that Arabic language students at universities and higher institutes are generally those before whom the doors to other specialties were closed and who found no other alternative but to teach Arabic. This is a very dangerous situation with perverse repercussions on public life, and which happens to prevail in almost all Arab countries.

Under such unhealthy circumstances, we cannot reform the teaching of Arabic language sciences unless this reform starts from the base in the long term, and at the top in the medium one.

This means that the reform would run on two parallel lines, reforming the curricula of Arabic language teaching, starting with the primary level and improving the conditions of teachers by improving their functional, administrative and psychological state. At the same time, the Arabic teaching curricula at universities and higher institutes would be reformed in all aspects, along with the rehabilitation of teachers and lecturers without undermining their spirit, and providing financial incentives for this category of teachers.

Linguistic Corruption:

The general state of weakness that characterizes the teaching of Arabic at various levels, and the unsound situation that prevails within the educational environment which should be more conducive to teaching Arabic in better and more productive ways and in better moral and material conditions, are two of the problems facing the Arabic language at this critical juncture experienced by all Arabs and Muslims. Thus, resolving these two issues with sufficient transparency, coupled with seriousness and firm determination, is the only way to remedy to this **linguistic corruption**.

The extensive use of vernacular in cultural, media, literary and artistic life is a complex issue that is hard to resolve because it is indicative of a systematic policy of levelling the ground before dialects (each country has its own dialect, and even worse, each province of the same Arab country has its own dialect) in the media, in newspaper, magazine and satellite channel advertisements, in the publicity panels set up on the roads and those posted on internet websites. These dialects prevail even at schools and universities and it is often the case that Arabic language teachers dispense their lessons in dialect. To make matters worse, teachers and lecturers at Arabic language departments at Arab

universities use these dialects, the result being that at some faculties, research projects on topics related to the Arabic language and its sciences are presented and defended in vernacular.

Despite the negative impacts of the competition that dialects represent for classical Arabic, some researchers see positive aspects in this. Dr Mohamed al-Kettani, former dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Tetouan and member of the Academy of the Kingdom of Morocco, writes in a study he conducted about the role of the media in advancing the Arabic language in contemporary life: *“The existence of dialects side by side with classical Arabic was never a threat to the Arabic language. This language remained the medium of thought, culture and sciences over the centuries, while dialects continued to exist in all Arab countries playing their natural roles, without one undermining the other and even at times benefiting from one another. Dialects embody a linguistic spontaneity that requires no teaching or training on the part of society's members, a means to express their feelings and daily requirements. Classical Arabic on the other hand remained the language of thought, science and literature, a language strong with its linguistic rules and the elements of its continuity, reliant on teaching and learning and on the mastery of its rules to safeguard it throughout the generations and to faithfully transmit its intellectual, scientific and civilizational legacy down the ages. All that could be perceived in this duality, inherent to all languages, is that the gap between the language of thought, science and culture and the dialects of daily life would shrink at times and expand at others, affected by a variety of factors.”*⁽¹³⁾

(13) Dr Mohamed al-Kettani: *Arabic Language in the Legislative, Administrative and Information Discourse in Morocco*, page 151, publications of the Academy of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat, 2011.

While this duality may not be dangerous at times, as argued by Professor Mohamed al-Kettani, it stands at other times as an obstacle before the Arabic language, erected in many cases with premeditation by the detractors of classical Arabic and of the Arab cultural and civilizational identity. In some Arab countries, dialects are encouraged and promoted in the media and in advertisements in fierce competition with classical Arabic and as a first step towards the latter's total exclusion. The danger then does not lie in the duality of classical Arabic versus dialects as this is the nature of all things, but more when this duality is promoted with a hidden agenda.

This said, we continue to feel that most Arabic language problems are self-inflicted, and by this we mean the lack of enthusiasm on the part of its speakers, their failing in accomplishing their duty towards their mother tongue, the language of their religion and the symbol of the cultural identity and civilizational sovereignty, and their shirking of their historical responsibility to preserve their heritage and protect their moral existence. A thorough analysis of the linguistic geography of the Arab world reveals a political determination to exclude and badger (not compete with) classical Arabic and fight it using all means. There is a veiled intention to sanction alienation and negative cultural and intellectual invasion (not the positive invasion which edifies instead of demolishing and which represents a cross-pollination of civilizations) and promote a form of modernity that erases identities, nullifies the metaphysical and excludes sanctities. Therefore, we have to be alert to the hidden objectives behind any call to promote vernacular at the expense of classical Arabic.

Furthermore, we need to emphasize that if classical Arabic has spread to all parts of the planet at this phase in history, this ex-

pansion is largely owed to the **Arabic language's self-motivation thrust**. Thus, this expansion which began in the twentieth century and continues today did not always follow a straight path, nor was it always beneficial. Three forms of counter productivity have resulted from this evolution and should be mentioned if just briefly:

First: The Arabic language did not keep pace with this expansion in ways that could ensure its development according to healthy patterns, renew it and preserve its purity and power.

Second: The Arabic language was enfeebled from the outside and not from the inside, as a result of contempt for linguistic rules and a disregard that went as far as the outright breaching of language rules and the utter disrespect for its conditions.

Third: Although Arabic has become a universal language, being one of the six languages officially adopted by the United Nations and its affiliated organisations, it continues to suffer from internal pressures in the Arab world and external pressures in the form of foreign languages and dialects.⁽¹⁴⁾

This overwhelming linguistic pressure is hard to resist since it enjoys internal as well as external support. Arabic cannot stand strong in the face of all these pressures, or stated plainly in the face of this war being waged against it, stand up to the plots hatched by its many detractors and face up to the belligerence of enemies who come under all colours and with myriad drives.

We are before a highly interesting situation with strange contradictions. At a time when the Arabic language should develop

(14) Dr Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri: *Arabic Language and Globalization*, page 39, publications of the Islamic educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), Rabat, 2008.

and prosper from the inside considering its spread and the growing interest in it from different social categories, we are instead witnessing a linguistic regression at many a level. This unnatural situation is reflected at various degrees in the media.⁽¹⁵⁾ Needless to say that language regression is one side of human civilization decaying into the abyss of backwardness.

The Inability to Adapt to Life's Requirements:

The strongest challenge Arabic may meet is the inability to adapt to life's requirements and cater to novel and renewable needs. What is needed now is to meet these challenges by facilitating the process of functional and practical response to Arabic so that its speakers acquire the feeling that it is truly their mother tongue and experience no discomfort when they are speaking it⁽¹⁶⁾. Inability to keep pace with the developments unfolding in life is an obstacle that can only hinder natural evolution in all fields, and not only in the linguistic one.

It is clear that Arabic is suffering from a dysfunction even as it continues to hold great potential and ability to adapt to modern life's requirements. These abilities need to be honed and reinvigorated to become dynamic and move in the right direction of strengthening the language and fuelling it. To play its part in developing society, classical Arabic needs special treatment which begins by broadening its body, developing it to accommodate the daily life and actions of the citizen as he evolves within his family and community. Then this language body should be developed to incorporate the novelties of modern times and their

(15) Ibid., page 39.

(16) Dr Hussam al-Khatib: *Arabic Language: Modern Enlightenments*, page 42, al-Hayaa al-Mesriyya al-'Ammal lil Kitab, Cairo, 1995.

scientific, technical and civilizational inventions and discoveries; fields where ignorance cannot be admissible, nor can reliance on a foreign language or a dialect.⁽¹⁷⁾

There is no doubt that developing the body of language so as to keep pace with developments experienced in modern life is an essential condition for what we call the *malleableizing of language*, i.e. expanding the language scope to integrate new terms and create a renewable, dynamic, advanced and integrated body of language in the lives of individuals and society. That is the way to enriching Arabic and solving its problems, and to paving the way to tackling other linguistic issues related to the Ummah's culture and its civilizational identity, condensed in the tongue that best conveys this Ummah's spirit.

There is little doubt that the issue at hand exceeds by far the scope of the linguistic dimension for it affects the existence itself and sovereignty of the Arab and Islamic Ummah, for the prosperity of a language is part and parcel of the growth of its nurturing mother and vice versa. The Iraqi historian Dr Abdulaziz al-Douri says: “*The language grows and prospers as its speakers advance in their culture and civilization, and what is more, language is a tool in aid of this renaissance. Arab and Islamic studies were conceived in this language, and continued in the same way throughout the gestation period. Arabic became the language of administration, then came the movement of translation and interaction with other cultures from the second century AH, an era*

(17) Dr Abbes Jirari: *Arabic Language in the Legislative, Administrative and Media Discourse in Morocco*, page 36, publications of the Academy of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat, 2011.

which enriched Arabic by inspiration and enhancement, and so on until Arabic became the language of a universal civilization.”⁽¹⁸⁾

This is the integrated and harmonious approach which we should adopt to truly and not virtually elevate the Arabic language and reinstate it to its position as the vehicle of the Ummah's identity and the custodian of its heritage. The starting point is creating a general environment that is conducive to language reform and to the resolution of all its problems. This in turn is only possible if a strong willpower and determination to act exist at all levels, towards creating a regenerating Arabic language that is interactive with modern times and a tool for edification and growth based on loyalty to deep-seated constants and on the sense of belonging to the One Ummah.

(18) Dr al-Douri, op. cit., page 212.

ANNEXES

World Arabic Language Day Summary

-18 December-

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 190th session of the Executive Board at the request of Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

The corresponding explanatory note is attached hereto.

Action expected of the Executive Board: proposed decision in paragraph 14.

Explanatory note concerning the proposed World Arabic Language Day

1. The Arabic language is the most widely used of the languages of the Semitic family, and one of the most widespread languages in the world, with more than 422 million speakers. Its users are spread around the region known as the Arab world, as well as in many other neighbouring areas, including Ahwaz, Turkey, Chad, Mali, Senegal and Eritrea. The Arabic language is highly important to followers of the Islamic religion as it is the language of the two fundamental sources of Islamic legislation: the Holy Qoran and the prophetic *hadith* - the sayings and deeds the Prophet Muhammad (God bless him and grant him salvation) handed down orally and subsequently assembled in compendia. No prayer (or other form of worship) in Islam can be performed without knowing some phrases from the language. Arabic is also a major ritual language for many Christian churches in the Arab world. Furthermore, many of

the most important Jewish religious and intellectual works of the Middle Ages were written in Arabic.

- 2.** The spread of Islam endowed Arabic with a lofty status and it became the language of politics, science and literature for many centuries in the lands governed by Muslims. Arabic left its mark directly or indirectly on many other languages in the Islamic world, such as Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Urdu, Malay, Indonesian and Albanian, as well as African languages such as Hausa and Swahili and European languages, in particular Mediterranean, including Spanish, Portuguese, Maltese and Sicilian.
- 3.** The Arabic language is taught officially or unofficially in Islamic countries and African countries that border on the Arab world. Arabic is the official language in every one of the Arab States and is also an official language in Senegal, Mali, Chad and Eritrea. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations system.
- 4.** Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the bearer of a whole nexus of cultural expressions and conveys identity and the values and visions of the world. It is a vessel which contains cultural diversity and the dialogue among civilizations, and a bridge enabling closer relations between societies and a richer diversity of forms of expression and interaction and the exchange of support and empowerment. The Arabic language is located at the heart of this approach in view of its lexical stock from other languages. And it - the language itself - enriches these other languages with lexical compounds and terms.

- 5.** Multilingualism - a factor in harmonious communication between peoples - is of particular importance as regards the agencies of the United Nations system; by encouraging dialogue, interaction and tolerance, it ensures effective and greater participation for all in the course of action of these organizations, as well as greater efficiency, better results and more active participation. The safeguarding and promotion of multilingualism should be assured by varied measures within the United Nations system in a spirit of partnership and communication.
- 6.** The balance between the six official languages, namely, English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese and Russian, has been a prime concern for all chief executives of United Nations agencies. A number of measures have been taken between 1946 and the present day to strengthen the use of the official languages to ensure that the United Nations system, its objectives and actions are understood by the public on the widest possible scale.
- 7.** On 18 December 1973, the United Nations General Assembly, at its 28th session, decided by means of Resolution 3190 (XXVIII) to include Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, and to amend accordingly the relevant provisions of the rules of procedure of the Assembly. Arabic had already been adopted as an official language at UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization and the Organization of African Unity.
- 8.** On 17 November 1999, at the 30th session of its General Conference, UNESCO declared 21 February to be International Mother Language Day (proposed in Document 30 C/DR.35 in order to promote linguistic and cultural diversity).

9. Pursuant to 33 C/Resolution 51, adopted on 20 October 2005 by the UNESCO General Conference at its 33rd session, and on the basis of the letter dated 26 February 2007 from the Director-General of UNESCO to the United Nations Secretary-General on the proclamation of 2008 as International Year of Languages, on 16 May 2007, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 International Year of Languages by means of Resolution 61/266.

10. In the framework of supporting and strengthening linguistic and cultural diversity in the United Nations system, the United Nations Department of Public Information on 19 February 2010, reference number OBV/853 (PI/1926), announcing just before the celebration of International Mother Language Day, which takes place on 21 February every year, the decision to celebrate a world day for each of the six official languages of the United Nations. It decided that the international language days would be as follows:

- French Language Day would be marked on 20 March, International Francophonie Day;
- Chinese Language Day (in memory of Cangjie, creator of Chinese characters) would be marked on 20 April;
- English Language Day would be 23 April, the traditionally recognized birthday of William Shakespeare;
- Russian Language Day would be 6 June, the birthday of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin;
- Spanish Language Day would be celebrated on 12 October, traditionally observed as Día de la Hispanidad.

On 18 December 1973, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 3190 (XXVIII) on the inclusion of Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly.

11. The purpose of celebrating every one of the six language days is to raise awareness among Member States and the agencies and staff of the United Nations system of the history of each of these languages and their cultures and development. All speakers of each of these languages should prepare a programme of activities for the day of their language, including inviting well-known poets, writers and authors to take part in the celebrations, and develop publicity materials connected with the events. The Arabic language is no exception to this.
12. Marking all of the language days through a range of musical performances, literature readings, competitions, cultural shows, lectures, art exhibitions, plays and folk exhibitions and the creation of occasions to make better known the cultural and social treasure of the language in question, is an expression of the cultural diversity of the countries that speak the language, and an opportunity to discover more about the language and its contribution to human civilization.
13. The Arab Group at UNESCO will endeavour to fund the activities connected with the marking of World Arabic Language Day, and accordingly the proposed decision will not impose any financial obligations upon the Organization.

Proposed decision

14. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to consider the following draft decision:
 1. **Aware of** the Arabic language's role in and contribution to the safeguarding and dissemination of human civilization and culture,
 2. **Also aware that** Arabic is the language of 22 of the Member States of UNESCO, that it is one of the Organization's

official languages, that is spoken by more 422 million Arabs, and that more than 1.5 billion Muslims need to use it,

3. **Understanding** the need to implement more wide-ranging cooperation between peoples through multilingualism, cultural rapprochement and dialogue among civilizations, in line with what is set out in the Constitution of UNESCO,
4. **Recalling** Resolution 3190 (XXVIII) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly of 18 December 1973 at its 28th session, by which it included Arabic as one of the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees,
5. **Welcoming** the decision announced on 19 February 2010 in Document OBV/853-PI-1926 issued by the United Nations Department of Public Information, which concerns the celebration of international days for the six official languages of the United Nations and designates 18 December as World Arabic Language Day,
6. **Appreciating** the assurances provided by the Arab States and those with Arabic as an official language concerning the safeguarding, conservation and celebration of the language,
7. **Invites** the Director-General to include World Arabic Language Day on 18 December of every year as one of the international days marked by UNESCO.

Workshop on the Arabic Language^(*)
(On the occasion of the World Arabic
Language Day)
-18 December-

It gives me great pleasure to address you at the opening of this workshop organized by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) on the occasion of the World Arabic Language Day, proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) during its Executive Board's 190th session.

This international recognition of Arabic should inspire us to pore over the problems facing it, with focus on ways to promote its status and surmount obstacles, and allow for adjustment to new advancements.

The decision of UNESCO in this regard reads as follows:

“Aware of the Arabic language's role in and contribution to the safeguarding and dissemination of human civilization and culture; also aware that Arabic is the language of 22 of the Member States of UNESCO, that it is one of the Organization's working languages, that it is spoken by more than 422 million Arabs, and is used by more than 1.5 billion Muslims; understanding the need to implement more wide-ranging cooperation

(*) Statement by ISESCO Director General at opening of Arabic Language Workshop (ISESCO headquarters, Rabat: 18 December 2012).

between peoples through linguistic pluralism, cultural rapprochement and dialogue among civilizations, in line with what is set out in the Constitution of UNESCO; appreciating the assurances provided by the Arab States and those with Arabic as an official language concerning the preservation, protection and celebration of the language; invites the Director-General to promote the celebration of World Arabic Language Day on 18 December of every year as one of the international days marked by UNESCO.”

No wonder then that we at ISESCO take immense pride in commemorating the World Arabic Language Day. **Arabic is important to us as Muslims, because it is the language of Quran, the sacred book of Islam. No prayer (or other form of worship) in Islam can be performed without knowing some phrases from the language. Arabic is also the medium of the Arab Muslim tradition in literature, arts, science and other realms of achievement, and the main component of the identity of Arabs, both Muslims and Christians.**

The importance of the Arabic language in our lives is such that we need to redouble efforts to promote it, develop its structure, renovate its rules, and enrich its vocabulary, in such a way as to become able to comply with new advancements in all areas of human development. Thus, although we may fully be aware of the seriousness of the challenges facing the Arabic language, **we have to admit that we, so far, have not done the necessary academic revisions nor found the practical solutions to overcome the linguistic problems.**

We cannot however discount the tremendous effort made by the Academies of Arabic Language, 8 academies in number, to

promote Arabic, simplify its grammar and develop its structure. On top of these academies comes the Cairo-based Academy of the Arabic Language, represented here today by its Secretary General, who also holds the position of the Secretary General of the Federation of Arabic Academies, the distinguished poet and prominent media pundit, Mr Farouk Shousha, whom I am pleased to welcome today at ISESCO's headquarters, as a dear colleague in the Cairo-based Academy of the Arabic Language, of which I am a corresponding member.

Promoting the Arabic language cannot be the sole responsibility of the Academies of Arabic language. It is a common task of various stakeholders, including the ministries of education and higher education, the ministries of culture, the ministries of endowments and Islamic affairs, the ministries of information and communication, as well as of parliaments and legislative bodies, which are supposed to enact laws providing for the preservation of Arabic and for using it properly in the public life. **Indeed, the protection of the Arabic language should be an act of sovereignty, for preserving it falls in line with the preservation of national security, in the large cultural and civilizational sense of security.**

Arabic is a strategic cause of prime importance to the Ummah as a culture and a civilization, hence the need for more concerted efforts by government bodies and relevant institutions to help promote its status. And this will be at the core of our discussions at today's workshop.

Simplifying the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, while preserving it from any degradation and extending its use, is a duty that each and every one of us should carry out. Actually, we shouldn't let this day pass without doing something that would

bring us nearer to achieving our objective of promoting the Arabic language and fostering its use in everyday life. To this end, we ought to apply ourselves in earnest to the problems and challenges at hand, following a sound approach combining the mechanisms adopted by the Arabic language academies and specialized colleges, and the techniques utilized by media outlets, which play an important role in disseminating a language, be it poor or good; although unfortunately, poor language is widely used by the Arab media nowadays.

I am pleased to welcome you once again at ISESCO Headquarters, and to thank UNESCO for adopting the decision on celebrating the **World Arabic Language Day**. I ask Allah the Almighty to guide us and help us promote our beautiful language and achieve the lofty objectives of fostering multilingualism, cultural rapprochement and inter-civilizational dialogue.