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Arab books and human development

The challenges faced by Arabic book publishing are considerable but is it really responsible for all the problems of the Arab world?

The 2002 *Arab Human Development Report* was a landmark document. Written by Arab social scientists, it was the first auto-critique to address the challenges faced by the Arab world at the start of a new century. The *Report* set out an agenda of reform based on three perceived "deficits": the freedom deficit, a deficit of empowerment of women and the "human capabilities/knowledge deficit relative to income". To support their bold assertions, the *Report's* authors assembled data from a wide range of sources and, drawing on the model of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Reports, sought to view the social and economic challenges from new and innovative angles. Consequently, the *AHDR* 2002 provided a wealth of new ideas to stimulate discussion and debate on the contemporary Arab world.

Given the weight of data and arguments, the general reader might be forgiven for having overlooked a brief paragraph, in a chapter otherwise dedicated to research and information technology, on the state of books in the Arab world. "There are no reliable figures on the production of books," the *Report* contends, "but many indicators suggest a severe shortage of writing; a large share of the market consists of religious books and educational publications that are limited in their creative content." Drawing on the 1999 study of S. Galal, *Translation in the Arab Homeland: Reality and Challenge*, published by Cairo's higher council for culture, the *Report* continues:

The figures for translated books are also discouraging. The Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates. The cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Maa'moun's (sic) time is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year.

It is no coincidence that the authors chose the Caliph Ma'mun as a starting point. The Caliph is credited with initiating one of the most important translation projects in human history. A convinced rationalist, al-Ma'mun (r 813–33) established in Baghdad the famous "House of Wisdom" (*Dar al-Hikma*) dedicated to the translation of Greek philosophical works, preserving in Arabic the wisdom of ancient Greece for all posterity. There is an irony in the thought that the Arab world today, representing 270 million people spread over 22 countries, can only manage one fifth the translations of modern

Greece. Such round figures are hard to substantiate: the National Book Centre of Greece, founded by the ministry of culture, does not keep records on translations into Greek. However, they reported a total of 6,826 books published in Greece in 2002. While it is possible that one quarter of Greece's publications were translations, it is not clear that this would be a sign of publishing vitality. The figure for Spain is spurious; its total figure for book publishing, of which translations would be a minor part, does not exceed the tens of thousands each year. Yet these shortcomings in the statistics have not hindered the international reception of the *AHDR's* data on Arab book publishing.

Its figures were seized upon by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman to illustrate the isolation of the Arabs in an increasingly globalised world.

On education, the report reveals that the whole Arab world translates about 300 books annually – one fifth the number that Greece alone translates; investment in research and development is less than one seventh the world average; and Internet connectivity is worse than in sub-Saharan Africa. ('Arabs at the crossroads' NYT 2 July 2002)

Friedman derived the title of his column from a quote in the *AHDR*: "The Arab world is at a crossroads. The fundamental choice is whether its trajectory will remain marked by inertia ... or whether prospects for an Arab renaissance, anchored in human development, will be actively pursued." The authority of the *AHDR* and the *New York Times* combined to give these data great weight in public debate. Respected analysts noted for their sympathy with the Arab world, such as Vartan Gregorian, quoted the book figures to demonstrate the need for an opening of the Arab mind to outside influences as a strategy for countering the power of Islam in Arab politics. US secretary of state Colin Powell, too, explicitly cited the "crossroads" quote to validate a new US policy to invest in social change in the Arab world. Books in the Arab world had come to be associated with the forces inhibiting an Arab renaissance. And so the authors of the *AHDR* 2003 returned to the subject in some detail. While cautioning readers about the lack of reliable statistics "on the actual amount of literary production in the Arab world", they draw on UNESCO figures to assert that, in 1991, "Arab countries produced 6,500 books compared to 102,000 books in North America and 42,000 in Latin America and the Caribbean". Still drawing on UNESCO figures, the 2003 Report claimed:

Book production in Arab countries was just 1.1 per cent of world production, although Arabs constitute 5 per cent of the world's population. The publication of literary works was lower than the average level of book production. In 1996, Arab countries produced no more than 1945 literary and artistic books, which represents 0.8 per cent of international production. This is less than what a country such as Turkey produces, with a population about one-quarter that of the Arab countries. In general, Arab book production centres mainly on religious topics and less on other fields such as literature, art and the social sciences.

This preoccupation with religious books, first raised in the 2002 *Report*, recurs throughout the 2003 text. "There are no accurate statistics on the types of books preferred by Arab readers," it notes, "but according to many publishers and observers, the bestsellers at the Cairo International Book Fair are religious

books, followed by books categorised as educational." The *Report* then directs the reader to a table that purports to support these generalisations. Comparing the relative distribution of published books, by field, in ten Arab countries and the rest of the world in 1996, the table shows that the Arab world did produce more than three times the world relative distribution of books on religion – some 17.5 per cent compared to just over 5 per cent of the rest of the world. However, religious books represented a distinct minority – and the smallest category overall – of the relative distribution of books in Arabic, with the social sciences representing closer to 20 per cent, the sciences exceeding 20 per cent and the arts and literature tallying the highest figure of some 22.5 per cent.

The Arab book, the 2003 *Report* concludes, is a 'threatened species' and the challenges faced by Arab book publishing are very real. Print runs of books are low, ranging for the average novel from 1,000–3,000 copies. "A book that sells 5,000 copies is considered a bestseller" it states. With fewer books being published and small runs, publishing runs the risk of becoming "economically unfeasible".

According to Fathi Khalil al-Biss, vice president of the Arab Publishers Union, who is quoted in the report, Arab book publishing has been threatened by three factors: censorship and the practice of banning books among the 22 Arab states; low readership, blamed on economic stagnation and competition from the mass media; the lack of adequate distribution of books across the Arab world. Al-Biss added that a lack of respect for intellectual property rights was also a deterrent.

Just as Colin Powell drew on the first *AHDR* to justify the "US–Middle East Partnership Initiative" of 2002, so the US administration drew on the two reports in drafting their 2004 working paper for the G–8 in which it set out the parameters of a "Greater Middle East Partnership". On the basis of the now familiar numbers – however unreliable – it blames the dearth of Arab publishing for the underlying problems in education and literacy and is, yet again, preoccupied with the relative share of Islamic books. The "US Working Paper for G–8 Sherpas" quoted in *Al-Hayat* concludes:

The region's growing knowledge gap and continuing brain drain challenge its development prospects. Arab countries' output of books represents just 1.1 per cent of the world total (with religious books constituting over 15 per cent of this.) ... Five times as many books are translated into Greek (spoken by just 11 million people) as Arabic.

Given the concerns for "building a knowledge society" set out in the 2003 Report, the state of the Arab book deserves further examination. After all, books are one of the most important vehicles for the dissemination of knowledge in a society. While the issues raised by the two reports are very real, the paucity of hard statistics, the normative value assigned to certain types of books and the unspoken assumption that the Arab world lags behind the rest of the world in intellectual terms for want of a sufficient number of translated works, are matters that need further discussion.

