



Problems of Book Development in the Arab World with Special Reference to Egypt

SALIB BOTROS

THE ARAB WORLD¹ IS still part of the Third World although the per capita income (as a criterion of development) of some of its states has become in recent years as high as in the developed industrial countries (if not higher in some cases, due to the accumulated oil surplus).

The Arab world as such has the following characteristics:

1. high rates of illiteracy;
2. low purchasing power due to low per capita income;
3. low level of technological development;
4. distorted balances of payments (at least in the non-oil-producing nations), which result in quantitative, administrative and monetary restrictions on foreign trade, including the import of books; and
5. lack of up-to-date statistics and information, including data on books.

These characteristics contribute to the obstacles that obstruct the development of the book in the Arab world and especially in Egypt.

GENERAL PROBLEMS

The publishing industry in the Arab world is faced with a number of challenges which have impeded rapid book development. The very process of book production and distribution causes difficulties. The book in Arabic is not understood as a special product, and is often treated as an ordinary commodity.² As a result, the process of production and distribution is often misunderstood and not handled efficiently. In essence, the lack of a publishing "infrastructure" and of experts in the field able to

Salib Botros is Acting Managing Director, Dar Al-Maaref, Cairo.

produce and market books has hampered the establishment of an effective book industry.

The illiteracy rate among the 142.8 million inhabitants of the Arab world is still high, although it is decreasing in some countries. Until recently, 70 percent of the adult population was illiterate. The illiteracy of a large part of the Arab world hampers the development of the book industry, since it circumscribes the book market.

The per capita income of the Arab world is shown in Table 1 as divided into two categories: the first comprises the oil-producing countries, and the second contains the non-oil-producers. It is evident that most of the population of the second group cannot afford books unless they are exceptionally inexpensive. Such a low per capita income hardly covers basic necessities. Meanwhile, the cultural standard of the first group does not permit their populations to buy books in Arabic in a way that develops the book industry.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

A host of economic factors have cooperated to obstruct the development of the production of books in Arabic in the Arab world, as well as book distribution among Arab countries. In the first place, these countries usually have a distorted balance of payments that necessitates imposition of many rigorous measures. Import licenses, quota systems, foreign exchange restrictions, and import duties are in some instances imposed on books, and always on the materials needed for book manufacture.

Chronic currency difficulties in some Arab countries make intra-regional book trade difficult, especially for books for general reading. These impediments also make it difficult for a country like Egypt to import machines and materials needed for book production. Foremost among these materials is paper of good quality.

In almost all Arab countries, printing paper, newsprint and magazine paper are subject to custom duties and other ancillary taxes which, taken together, total about 20 percent ad valorem. These duties and taxes are an onerous burden on the book industry in a developing country. Some Arab countries — Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia — that produce printing and writing paper domestically obstruct its importation by prohibitive customs duties or by administrative regulations designed to protect the infant industries. This state of affairs is an obstacle to book publishing in these countries, since prices of domestic paper are higher than international prices and the quality is inferior. The same restrictions

Book Development in the Arab World

	<i>Oil- producing countries</i>	(%)	<i>Non-oil- producing countries</i>	(%)	<i>Total</i>	(%)
Population (millions)						
1970	35.4	(27.7)	92.5	(72.3)	127.9	(100)
1975	39.9	(27.9)	102.9	(72.1)	142.8	(100)
National Income (millions)						
1970	\$16,173	(48.2)	\$17,374	(51.8)	\$33,547	(100)
1975	41,700	(63.5)	23,960	(36.5)	65,660	(100)
Per Capita Income (millions)						
1970	\$ 457		\$ 189	(72)	\$ 262	
1975	1,045		243	(53)	460	

Table 1. National Income, Population and Per Capita Income,
Arab World, 1970, 1975

Source: "Report of General Secretary of the Council of Arab Economic Unity to the 26th Session." June 1976, p. 5 and errata.

also apply to other materials required for book production, such as ink and binding materials.

Arab states tend to buy the latest printing technology under the influence of the "demonstration effect." In some cases this is inappropriate, since it is capital-intensive while the national economy is labor-intensive. In a country like Egypt that lacks foreign exchange, this tendency has a direct effect on book prices because it is impossible to fire surplus workers. Moreover, the maintenance expenses of such machines are very high, particularly because there are shortages of the appropriate skilled labor. The solution to this dilemma is to use labor-intensive technology together with capital-intensive technology in order to give a wider choice, so that costs of production can be reduced. This would affect book pricing.

An issue that has recently imposed itself on book development in the Arab world is the intraregional exodus of skilled laborers from the countries that have lower wage levels (e.g., Egypt) to the countries that have higher wages (namely, oil-producing countries). This deprives Egypt of its skilled labor, causing detrimental effects to the Egyptian book industry. Moreover, it raises wages in the book industry of the host country so that they become uneconomic. Hence, the training of manpower in all areas of the book industry, and especially in the printing industry, be-

comes urgent. This is a problem which lends itself to regional solution through three specialized regional agencies affiliated with the League of Arab States: the Council of Arab Economic Unity (CAEU), the Arab Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ARASCO) and the Industrial Development Center for Arab States (IDCAS).

COMMERCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS

Under present circumstances, where inflation has raised the prices of all imported raw materials, machines and wages, publishers have little room to maneuver since they are conscious of the dangers of pushing up prices in an area with low per capita incomes.

An approximate breakdown of the cover price of a general book in Arabic shows:

- 25-30 percent — bookseller's discount
- 25-30 percent — physical production
- 15-20 percent — author's royalty
- 10-15 percent — general expenses

This breakdown leaves about 10 percent to cover any other expenses and provide a profit for the publisher. If the publisher worked entirely without profit and everyone else took the amount they are now getting, the price of books would generally go down only by a meager amount. Some publishers try to increase their profit margins through ancillary sources of revenue.

The fact that the Arab world has a common language, religion and social environment accounts for the wide intraregional trade in Arabic books. However, a great part of this trade is in textbooks, which constitute 75 percent of the books in Arabic printed in Egypt and Lebanon which are exported to other Arab countries. This trade is expected to decline, due to the fact that almost all Arab countries have already begun to produce their own school text books domestically. Moreover, authors, particularly Egyptians, prefer to sell their copyrights to other Arab countries for foreign exchange rather than cede these rights for the currency of their own country. The economic factors mentioned earlier are real stumbling blocks that impede intraregional trade. The most serious factor is monetary. Some local monetary laws and regulations require that the value of books exported to another Arab country should be repatriated in free currency during a limited period of time. In the case of default, publishers are subject to financial penalties and are prevented from disposing of excessive stocks at low prices. This deprives the

Book Development in the Arab World

Arab market of cheap remainders which are common in the industrialized nations. Another factor is that some Arab governments buy books in Arabic from aliens who give the lowest bid in a public tender rather than from the publisher or author.

The publishers' associations at national and regional levels are to blame for the stagnation of the book trade in the Arab world. The domestic associations, as well as the Pan Arab Association, have not played effective roles. The flagrant example in this respect is Egypt. It has had a *de jure* association since 1965, but this association is fossilized. Neither authors, publishers nor book traders benefit from its existence. Unfortunately, the Egyptian association has always dominated the Pan Arab Association; this has accounted for the stagnation of the latter. Hence the book industry lacks institutional organization.

Publishers in the Arab world are mere investors who seek to maximize their profits. They concentrate on the kinds of books which are more salable, namely, literary, religious and Islamic heritage books. Publishers neglect other kinds of books in order to avoid more than minimum risk.

In some Arab countries — Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan — the book industry and the book trade have been nationalized. In Egypt, for example, the main publishing houses are owned by a quasigovernmental body, the Arab Socialist Union. Although it is the *de jure* owner, it is not active in this field. Therefore, publishing in Egypt is not administered satisfactorily. Moreover, the trade lacks a coherent publishing policy, although its main organs are state-owned. In Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, book imports and exports have to be conducted through public companies. Some other Arab countries, such as Lebanon, have a much larger private-sector participation in publishing, although Lebanon, which has traditionally been a center of regional publishing, has been affected by the recent civil conflict.

LEGAL ASPECTS

The problem of copyright is one that hampers the development of the book in Arabic in the Arab world. Some countries in the region already have domestic copyright legislation, but most of these laws require revision. Copyright has been acknowledged in Morocco since 1916, and in Lebanon and Syria since 1924; in Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, legislations were promulgated in 1966, 1973 and 1976, respectively. All these countries, with the exception of Syria, have joined either the Berne Convention or the Universal Copyright Convention (UCC). In Egypt the

law that provides protection dates back to 1954. Egypt has not yet acceded to any international convention in this respect, although a presidential decree (no. 591) was issued July 13, 1976, to the effect that Egypt accedes to the Berne Convention; but it has not yet come into force. The most recent Arab country to sign the Universal Copyright Convention is Libya.

On the other hand, Arab countries have failed to adopt, through the League of Arab States, an agreement which regulates copyright on a regional level. The agenda of the Arab Cultural Conference, held in Jordan, December 20-23, 1976, included an item concerning the need of the Arab states to adopt such an agreement. The proposed convention will be more effective in solving copyright problems. It will take into consideration the special circumstances in these countries and the technological development that permits dissemination on a widespread scale of low-cost reproductions of published books.

Author's copyright is a fragile right which needs special protection. However, most Arab countries lack copyright legislation at a national as well as regional level; and they have abstained from acceding to international copyright conventions such as Berne and UCC in order to avoid payment of royalties accruing to citizens of other countries. As recourse to general law in the case of infringement of author's rights is tedious and long, authors writing in Arabic are exposed to breach of copyright. This fact, coupled with both low royalties resulting from the low price of Arabic books and the high rate of taxes, makes it difficult for an author writing in Arabic or a translator to live solely on his literary earnings. Because of the marginal profitability of books, advertising is generally impossible.

Arab countries treat books in Arabic as an ordinary commercial commodity in every respect. Taxes and duties are imposed on books and materials needed for book production as a source of government revenue. Authors' and translators' royalties are subject to a direct tax similar to those imposed on commercial and industrial profits (35 percent). A great part of it (20 percent) is subtracted according to the "*stoppage à la source* principle" without any deduction for expenses.

The institutional framework of the book in the Arab world is distorted. A substantial part of the industry is owned either by the government or by quasigovernmental bodies, yet there is no coherent policy for the industry. The rest of the industry belongs to the private sector, which has no target but the maximization of profit by concentration on literary

Book Development in the Arab World

and religious books. Finally, the publishers' associations are inactive and provide no leadership.

References

1. The term *Arab world* denotes countries which are members of the League of Arab States: Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia (African Arab countries); as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Northern Yemen, Southern Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

2. "A book is sold, bought, passed from hand to hand, but it cannot be treated like an ordinary commercial commodity, because it is, at once, multiple and unique, in ample supply yet precious." See Escarpit, Robert. *The Book Revolution*. London, Harrap, 1966, p. 17.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank