

Arab book publishing

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The controversially received Arab Human Development Report of 2003, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), refers to the state of the book industry in the Arab world. It concludes that, so far, Arab book publishing has not been able to develop its full potential. The reasons behind this stunted growth are hotly disputed within the Arab publishing market, with publishers, readers, intellectuals and officials all in disagreement as to where the fault lies. Those in the publishing business complain that governments inhibit required creativity through censorship, fail to adequately protect copyright and impede the distribution of printed matter beyond national borders. Readers complain that there is not enough interesting material in Arabic and instead read works offered in other languages. In addition, books are too expensive measured against available income. Literary figures criticise publishers for their unwillingness to take risks or to publish the new and unknown, and so choose the alternative of writing in other languages. Politicians specialising in education grumble that people in the Arab world are not reading enough.

Book production and statistical records

The problems start with the fact that no comprehensive data is available in Arab countries on the situation of the book business along the production chain of writing – publishing – marketing – reading. UNESCO figures put the share of Arabic books in world production for 1991 at 1.1 per cent. The 22 member countries in the Arab League account for about 5 per cent of the world population, however. The Arab Bulletin of Publications which is produced annually by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) in Tunisia, records an average of 4671 titles per year for the totality of Arab countries for the period from 1994 to 2001, with figures that are in part below those from UNESCO. Estimates from the Arab Publishers Union in Cairo are based on the assumption that the approximately 1000 publishing companies in the Arab countries bring at least 20,000 titles onto the market annually. The figures “1000” and “20,000” in themselves raise doubt as to the seriousness of the information. With discrepancies in the basic figures such as these, it is always extremely problematic to rely on statistics from regional or international organisations. The collecting and recording of data as such is a problem for the Arabic book itself.

The market

International comparisons show that the book industry does not match the growth of a national economy if there is not a sufficiently large proportion of the population with a high literacy rate and rising standards of education. The other way round, increases in the ability to read facilitate the transition to mass production which leads to lower book prices and in turn, increased access to books. In this regard, it appears that the regional prospects for the Arabic book are still shackled by

conditions determined on an individual national basis and which can only be tackled through educational policies. No single Arab country can show for itself the criteria for the critical mass conducive to the development of the book sector. It is true that the total population of Arab countries currently amounts to around 307 million people, of whom about 191 million are over 15 years of age and who to that extent would represent readership under general educational conditions. However, with an average literacy rate of 60 %, the Arabic book market is reduced by almost 40 % for this age group. Accordingly, the Arabic market is made up of approximately 115 million (potential) readers. To compound the problem, their comparatively low income means that the higher population countries have a worse book-access ratio which measures the relationship between the average book price and average per capita income.

Regulatory policy problems

For decades, the book industry in the Arab world has had to struggle with challenges on a regulatory policy level. Firstly, policies based in some countries on the conditions of a planned economy – e.g. in Egypt in the sixties -, led to increased uncertainty on legal positions. During nationalisation in favour of the General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO) set up in 1971 and other institutions, publishing as it then functioned in Cairo was really destroyed. Secondly, press and media laws are also used in every Arab country to regulate the book market. Information ministries, secret service organisations and religious bodies are entrusted with pre- and post-censorship, with a restrictive impact on creativity and its free development in book form. One of the reasons why, with the decline of Egypt, Lebanon became the leading printing centre for the Arab world was undoubtedly the relatively liberal character of the Beirut censors. Thirdly, the Arab countries have few achievements to show for themselves when it comes to the protection of intellectual property. Respect for material and intellectual private property is not considered to be self-evident.

Copyright

Precisely because Arabic as a written language crosses the borders of individual countries, third countries – but frequently countries of origin as well – are supplied with pirate copies. This can only be detrimental to the development of the book. National regulations on copyright protection – insofar as they exist – are unable to intervene to control this. Although Lebanon was the first independent Arab country to sign up to the Bern Convention when it did so in 1947, for decades Beirut was firmly established as a centre for piracy. The mere affiliation to the Bern Convention is by no means a guarantee that its obligations will be applied on a national level within the country. It is only now that publishers in Beirut perceive the lax handling of legal regulations as more of a disadvantage than an advantage; as pirate copying of Arab books has increased outside Lebanon – in Syria, for example, but also in Iran -, so too have the calls for more copyright protection coming from Lebanese publishers.

Despite this negative starting point, there are signs that the protection of intellectual property will become a more important theme on a regional basis, given that membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is a stated aim of all Arab countries. But belonging to the WTO depends on the prior acceptance of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of 1994 which is becoming more and more of a tool for protection, rather than the old Bern Convention. It is therefore no accident that since 1995, a number of Arab states have accepted the TRIPS agreement. The prospect of WTO membership has become an incentive to adopt the protection of intellectual property on a national level as well.

Challenges facing publishers

Against this regulatory policy background, it is not easy for Arab publishing companies to develop book production. Only a few companies are in a position to develop a concept that is clear in terms of content and for the long term. In the virtual absence of market studies and empirical surveys of reading habits in Arab countries, most publishers appear to act intuitively; reprints are produced of whatever has been sold more or less successfully over the years.

Publishers who publish new titles and unknown authors are taking far greater risks. This means that it is not unusual for authors to have to subsidise the publication of their works, rather than being paid for them by the publishing company.

The fact that the new and ambitious is only developed to a limited extent in Arabic is also caused by the perception on the part of the business minds that the market is small. Unconventional publishing in the areas of fiction, the humanities and social sciences calls for a higher level of education and those who have that in Arab countries often read books in other languages. This is encouraged by Arab authors who – like Fatema Mernissi or Aziz al-Azmeh – write in other languages and whose works are only translated into Arabic afterwards. The erosion of Arabic in favour of English and French cannot be overlooked and is also likely to have an impact in the loss of the market share of Arabic books in the homes of Arab book buyers.

All in all, Arab publishers do not seem to pay enough attention to the target groups for individual publications or entire editorial lists. The profiling of readers, or more important still, of potential readers, is to a great extent underdeveloped. Many publishing companies make do with producing books of general interest in the categories of religion, literature, society and politics, aiming to reach as many readers as possible. The provision for frequent readers who are interested in specific subjects is meagre by comparison, although it is precisely here that the more dynamic market segment might be expected. If the prejudice of “non-reading Arabs” is taken seriously, it has to be recognised that more or less large proportions of the population do in fact read, which makes it all the more important to identify target groups.

At any rate, the quality of book production appears to be becoming more important for Arab consumers as a buying criterion. Privately owned

publishing houses now take great care over the outward appearance of their publications.

Distribution

A key problem lies in the inadequate character of sales and distribution. Whereas newspapers and magazines are relatively easily distributed across the borders between Arab countries, the Arabic book is not integrated in an efficient distribution process. The reasons for this probably involve the structure of Arab publishing houses. The business background of a typical Arab publisher is that of the printer and bookseller. Most publishers have their own bookshops in which books from other publishing companies are only limitedly on offer. Both locally and regionally, book distribution is not yet an adequately independent area of business.

Book fairs are the most important sales tool in the Arab regions. The point of them is to bring books in large quantities to the important trading centres in order to compensate for the sparse, regular flow of books during the rest of the year.

But this central element in distribution is also continuously impaired by regulatory policy obstacles. In Cairo, for example, publishers from outside Egypt regularly complain that their publications intended for the book fair are held back by the customs or censorship authorities, so that their participation always involves an increased business risk. At least the organisers of the book fair in Jiddah tell exhibitors in advance which titles have no chance of being shown on offer in Saudi Arabia.

Otherwise, a publishing company only has the option of opening its own branches in other Arab countries or of reaching agreement on the distribution of books with other publishers in the region. But these distribution channels only achieve as much appeal as the resilience of the personal contacts they are based on. There have been scarcely any signs yet of an online book trade worth mentioning.