

THE ARAB BOOK MARKET EVOLVES, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

by Roger Taghom

There is so much dynamism in the Arabic-language book markets that it is difficult to keep track of all the new publishers, interesting bookshops, and countries whose publishing businesses are evolving. Claire de Gruchy at sales agency Avicenna, based in Oxford, raves about Minoa, an independent bookstore in Istanbul that started out as a small bookstore and café but has now extended to three floors, including a full restaurant. It has also opened specialist franchise outlets in an upmarket home furnishings store and a small fashion chain. Joan Warmae, who handles sales in the Middle East for Hachette, notes that Diwan Bookstores in Cairo is enjoying a resurgence of sales and opening new stores, underscoring that tourism as a whole is beginning to return to Egypt.

While the underlying challenges for the Arab market are well known – the geopolitical uncertainty, the dependence on oil, the refugee crisis and the plague of online piracy – there is light. Avicenna's founder Bill Kennedy, one of the most experienced observers of the region, notes that the book market in Saudi Arabia remains reasonably buoyant, despite the fluctuating oil price, with the Jarir bookstore chain still doing well. He is pleased to see a new player, Alfekr Aljami, buying academic titles quickly and pre-paying.

Warmae mentions a new player in Morocco, Success Content, and a "promising new customer" in Algeria, Lexica Kouchkar Livres. Tunisia is beginning to bounce back and sales figures at Al Kitab bookstore in Tunis are heading in the right direction, with the store ordering many social science titles for universities. An independent shop in the upmarket suburb of Marsa is placing good orders too and, more importantly paying – something that has been an issue with Tunisian customers in the past.

The UAE remains a strong market for English language publishers, with Sharjah as an important customer. Motivate Publishing and Explorer Publishing are two major English book publishers in the UAE. While in Sharjah the University Bookshop is leading, Jashanmal, Kinokuniya, Borders and Magrudy's remain

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vital in Dubai, while WHSmith runs outlets in nearby Oman and recently expanded to Bahrain Airport. In some places it is international library suppliers who are favoured for two reasons: many institutions prefer shelf-ready books and, while there is money to buy, budgets are insufficient to pay staff to process the books ready for library use.

Kuwait is a stable market, showing strong figures from Growmore, which operates campus bookstores and also supplies institutions; children's books too are popular, with the bulk of sales through That Al Salasil's bookstores. Sales to Egypt have declined from the past, but Kennedy believes the country is only now recovering from the currency devaluation which occurred in December 2017.

So far, so good, but not everyone is as fortunate. Salah Chebaro, who runs the online bookstore nwf.com in Lebanon, notes, "Currently we have whole countries which have either disappeared or are malfunctioning. Syria is struggling for the ninth consecutive year, Yemen is divided and has no prospects yet, Iraq is in disarray, Qatar is under embargo, Sudan and Algeria still have an unknown future and Tunis has not economically stood on its feet again." Yet, he added, there were "some promising signs coming, especially from Egypt".

But Chebaro saves his real fire for the issue that has dogged the region for years. "We are still plagued with the issue of piracy," he says, "be it print piracy or digital piracy." He continues, "Print piracy is now spread all over the Arab world and getting worse every day with no real agenda to fight it. Digital piracy is at an all-time high. With some efforts from nwf.com and the help of the Publishers for the Future of Publishing Group (see inset) we are trying to combat it by issuing take-down notices. We are still hoping that big companies like Google



Minoa Bookshop in Istanbul



Al Rawi bookshop, Sharjah

can take action and prevent their search results from showing pirated books. Today, nearly all Arabic books are pirated on the internet."

Observers say that some of the worst locations for finding pirated books include the Sahaflar market in Old Town, the Kadikoy market on the Asian side of Istanbul and the stalls on Olgunlar Street in Ankara which are directly opposite Ankara's main publisher and seller of academic books, Palme Kitabevi. Pirated books however can be found in many locations in the Arab book market, including in Egypt and Jordan.

De Gruchy says that piracy of textbooks has always been a problem in Turkey. "We used to sell original textbooks to about 30% of students; but now that figure has fallen to around 10%. With digital technology the quality of pirated texts has improved."

Elsewhere, Iraq is effectively a non-functioning state and lacks institutional funding and support. In Iran, the bottom has fallen out of the market due to US President Trump pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal, which crashed the value of the currency and led to high inflation. "All of the orders for the Tehran Book Fair in 2018 ended up being put on shelves three times more expensive than when they shipped," says Kennedy. "There was also a strong anti-West feeling at the book fair in 2018 which led people away from buying imported books and pointed them in the direction of local publishers, some of whom are pirates."

Emile Tyan, CEO of Hachette Antoine, the Lebanese publisher and bookstore chain which has 14 shops, says "The market isn't growing, but books are still 85 to 90% of our sales. However, the growth is coming from non-book items, gadgets and 'cultural' gifts." He notes, more positively, that on the publishing side it is slowly trying to establish Young Adult fiction in the Arab World and is publishing one or two YA titles a year.

On the horizon, other positive signs include Saudi Arabia's plans to modernise its publishing industry and update the Riyadh International Book Fair. According to Lebanese publisher Nasser Jarrou, who runs Jarrou Press and Publications in Tripoli, "they are collaborating

with an international team to pinpoint the problems and identify the steps needed to be taken."

Change and modernisation is inevitably coming to the region and having a strong Arab voice in the form of Sheikha Bodour al Quasimi, publisher of Sharjah's Kalimat, in the executive suite of the International Publishers Association surely helps. But there is much more to be done. The journey, as any traveller across the Arab sands knows, can be long.

Tackling piracy

An informal body calling itself Publishers for the Future of Publishing has been meeting four or five times a year to discuss possible solutions to the problem of piracy. The group was established two years ago at the suggestion of the late Imad Abdel Alhamid, owner of Jadawel publishers, and comprises a number of Lebanese publishing houses and retailers, including Hachette Antoine, Rateb, Jadawel, Adab and nwf.com

Emile Tyan, CEO of Hachette Antoine, says the idea was to offer mutual support and exchange ideas. "We help each other, we lobby various governments, we point out on social media where pirated copies are being sold," he says. "Sometimes customers get in touch and complain that one of our books is of low quality and we explain that it is a pirated edition."

Piracy is particularly bad in Egypt, says Tyan. "They do nothing to combat it. They have a very old copyright law, one with a maximum penalty of \$200. There is no intention to change this law and a proposal to change it has not even been debated."