

International Publishers Association Regional Seminar
READ.EMPOWER.TRANSFORM
THE ROLE OF READING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ARAB WORLD

KEMPINSKI AMMAN
30 September
1 October 2019

REPORT



international
publishers
association

union of
jordanian
publishers



INTRODUCTION

Under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah, the International Publishers Association (IPA) and the Union of Jordanian Publishers (UJP) co-hosted the Middle East and North Africa publishers' seminar in Amman on 30 September and 1 October 2019. This was the third IPA regional seminar, following African iterations in Lagos (May 2018) and Nairobi (June 2019), but the first in the Arab world, where publishing faces sets of challenges that are both peculiar to the region and found elsewhere in the world.

These seminars provide a unique, multisectoral platform for original thinking, creative collaboration, and decisive action to stimulate and shape the future of publishing in a given region. They are attended by hundreds of publishers, policymakers, educationalists, entrepreneurs and creative industry stakeholders with the common goal of making publishing an innovative, influential and universally beneficial force in their region.

The overarching goal of the Amman conference was to take a fresh look at the Arab region's publishing industry and explore the power of reading to change the course of history.

For two days, the Kempinski Hotel Amman was the centre of gravity for Arab publishers, with more than 300 delegates from 30 countries in attendance. They heard from industry leaders, creators, academics and lawmakers, participated in professional networking, and witnessed 10 panel discussions on some of the most pressing issues and opportunities. These included how reading can contribute to socio-economic development; education and literacy; the use of reading as a humanitarian response and therapy; and the ascendancy of digital and its importance for the region's future.



DAY 1



As proceedings got under way, there was a palpable sense of promise in the air. Numerous publishers associations from Arab countries had already expressed satisfaction at the close attention the IPA was paying to their region, for here was proof that the IPA was listening. This was the first time in the Geneva-based association's 123 years that it had made such clear overtures towards the publishing industry of the Middle East and North Africa, in particular by seeking closer ties with its regional members.

After an enthusiastic welcome by the UJP's representative to the IPA, Khaled Bilbeisi, IPA President Hugo Setzer gave a speech about empowerment through reading and how it enables people to understand and challenge ideas. It is 'the means for society to progress, generation by generation,' he said, 'But that empowerment is also seen as threatening by some — those who deny freedom of expression and the freedom to publish.'



OPENING KEYNOTE



Things really got rolling with a pithy opening keynote by Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti. An accomplished writer and thinker, Barghouti confessed to suffering from 'the disease of frankness', before describing a 'publishing crisis' in the Arab world. He said the problems cover 'everything from education and culture to agriculture, industry, commerce, freedom of speech and movement, the absence of an agreed method of peaceful exchange of power and the heavy interference of governments in the simplest affairs of the people.'

Barghouti also called out Arab publishers' suboptimal editorship, the absence of literary agents, regional distribution challenges, and the scarcity of quality children's publishers. However, he also paid tribute to those Arab publishers that do use good editors, respect intellectual property rights, fight censorship, and 'understand that they are part of the solution in our troubled lives, not part of the problem.'



PANEL 1

Digital Disruption: Solving the Arab World's Book Distribution and Retail Challenges with Technology



This 'clicks vs. bricks' conversation comprised a panel of young entrepreneurs who believe that a digital-first e-commerce model holds the solution to the distribution questions facing the 22 Arab countries and beyond. However, the CEO of Abjjad, Eman Hylooz, urged publishing houses to use homegrown regional platforms as they move to e-commerce, and not US-based giants, to support and reinforce the digital economy.

We also learned that the Arab Publishers Union has successfully lobbied for tax and import exemptions on paper books in some Arab countries, but not

on e-books, which continue to be treated as a service rather than a vital commodity. In response, Sail Publishing CEO Iman Ben Chaibeh contested that a book is a book, whatever the format, and that the job of publishers was to make books as widely available as possible. She also asserted that the antidote to piracy was accessibility, saying, 'You can't fight piracy until there is a proper digital platform that is legal and cheap. If people could find books easily, they would not buy pirated copies.'

Moderator: Alaa Al Sallal (Jordan) – Founder and CEO, Jamaloon

Panellists

- Ammar Mardawi (Jordan) – Country Manager, Storytel Group
- Eman Hylooz (Jordan) – Founder and CEO, Abjjad
- Iman Ben Chaibah (UAE) – CEO, Sail Publishing

PANEL 2

The Role of the Publishing Industry in Humanitarian Response and Refugee Resettlement



This panel examined the emergence of publishers as enablers of refugees, guiding them towards success and self-sufficiency by aiding their integration while reinforcing their identity. The availability of bilingual titles and books on conflict, refugees, and migrants can play a powerful role in helping displaced people to reconcile their past and present.

Moderating the session, Syrian journalist and TV presenter Zeina Yazigi, opened by stating that just 6,500 books are published annually in the Arab world, compared to 100,000 in the US; one book is translated into Arabic per million Arabs; and the region consumes just 1% of the world's books. These scarcities are in stark contrast to the 26 million refugees and displaced people from Arab countries.

Italian children's publisher Carlo Gallucci stressed the importance of creating books that educate kids about different cultures, of which he published seven in 2019. Alluding to his national context, Gallucci said: 'This helps refugees to integrate, and it helps Italians to accept their presence.'



We also heard about the Kalimat Foundation's innovative Pledge a Library initiative, started in 2017 by the foundation's manager, Amna Al Mazmi. The scheme has produced and donated 80 mobile libraries containing 100 children's books each to a huge range of vulnerable young people around the world. To a refugee child arriving in a strange country, seeing books in their own language tells them they are welcome, Amna said, adding, 'For them, it's like returning home.'

Moderator: Zeina Yazigi (Syria) – Journalist

Panellists

- Amna Al Mazmi (UAE) – Manager, Kalimat Foundation for Children's Empowerment
- Carlo Gallucci (Italy) – Publisher and CEO, Gallucci Editore
- Rabeea Najm Al-Din Al-Naser (Jordan) – Researcher in Children's Literature, University of Bologna, Department of Quality Life Studies

OFFICIAL OPENING

After lunch, the Jordanian Minister of Culture and Youth, Dr Mohammed Suleiman Abu Rumman, addressed the seminar. He brought greetings from Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah before underscoring the need for standards, innovation and international thinking to safeguard the publishing industry's future.

The minister described the Amman conference as timely given the current challenges facing the Arab world's publishing industry. He said deep analysis and evaluation were needed to develop a roadmap 'to rescue this vital industry', which is an indicator of a nation's intellectual and cultural health.



Abu Rumman also called for strategies and policies to develop the publishing industry and enhance its contribution to national GDP. He suggested restructuring the author-publisher relationship from legal and commercial aspects and dealing with major local and global changes related to e-books and the digital space.



PANEL 3

Literacy and Book Accessibility in Conflict

The third panel examined literacy and access to books in conflict settings, where school attendance is often nil and illiteracy rates soar. We heard about the valuable work of development NGO and IPA partner Dubai Cares to help communities heal through bibliotherapy, rebuilding libraries and creating accessible books for the visually impaired, to ensure no children's literacy needs are ignored. Dubai Cares Programs Officer Dana Jawad Amro said, 'Support for refugees from stricken areas should give the same consideration to knowledge and learning as it does food and healthcare.'



The panellists also discussed how publishers, governments, aid agencies, and international institutions must join forces to promote literacy where war prevents school attendance and to ensure reading materials reach children.



Dr Hasmig Chahinian, who is in charge of Arabic children's literature at the National Library of France, told the audience that refugee children's reading tastes were not altered by their circumstances. 'They want to read about happy topics, ambition and trips, exactly the same as their peers from the rest of the world,' she said.

Moderator: Shereen Kreidieh (Lebanon) – General Manager, Dar Asala

Panellists

- Taghreed Najjar (Jordan) – Founder and Director, Al Salwa Publishers
- Dana Jawad Amro (Jordan) – Programs Officer, Dubai Cares
- Dr Hasmig Chahinian (France) – Liaison Officer, The National Library of France / IBBY France



PANEL 4

The Role of Technology in Overcoming Illiteracy and Promoting a Reading Culture



The fourth conversation centred on two big challenges of the digital age: eradicating illiteracy and implementing reading strategies and policies that cultivate national cultures of reading. The session discussed promising new approaches in leveraging technology to address illiteracy, and ways to catalyse collective action by the publishing industry, policymakers, non-profits, and aid agencies to develop national cultures of reading.

Discussing local challenges for entrepreneurs, the panellists cited low investor confidence as a major obstacle to Arab company growth. Tarek El-Bolbol, CEO of audio publisher Booklava, said the region's publishing entrepreneurs and startups were commonly met with condescension and lack of funding, mirroring the experience of many Western startups.



He also told old-fashioned publishers with a rigid, traditional outlook to change or face failure. 'The only way for older publishers to survive is to work with new entrepreneurs – otherwise they'll wake up and find that Amazon just ate the whole cake,' he said. 'There are two mentalities around — the old and the new. And it's not necessarily about age — you can have some young publishers thinking in a traditional way.'

Rama Kayyali of Little Thinking Minds said it had taken her two long years to raise \$2 million in a single round of funding that had been beset by refusals from investors outside the region, and nit-picking and heel-dragging from those within it.

Moderator: Nour Al Hassan (Jordan) – CEO, Tarjama

Panellists

- Elizabeth Wood (USA) – Senior Director of Publishing and Innovation, Worldreader
- Rama Kayyali (Jordan) – CEO and Co-Founder, Little Thinking Minds
- Tarek El-Bolbol (Lebanon) – CEO, Booklava

PANEL 5

Digital Publishing and the Arab Classroom of the Future

The first day's final session scrutinized a world where educational technology (ed-tech) held so much promise for better educational outcomes, but where uptake was slow. Amid rapid regional digitization, the textbook industry is being disrupted by digital publishing, while classrooms are adopting technologies for more personalized and immersive learning experiences. Yet one thing is clear: governments, the publishing industry, and educators must work together to embrace digital publishing and classroom technologies to enable innovations that will accelerate regional educational performance.



Siroun Shamigian, CEO of Kamkalima, said one problem was that teachers worried about being supplanted by technology, a fear she said was unfounded. 'Technology is here to stay, and it can help teachers get better results, but teachers need to be educated and better trained to understand how to use it,' she said. In response, Dr Hanada Taha Thomure, a Professor of Arabic Language Education from Zayed University (UAE), quipped, 'Well it might replace bad teachers...our job is to help teachers understand that technology is a tool that gives new insights, but teachers need handholding and training.'

Moderator: Zaidoun Karadsheh (Jordan) – Founder, Partner at Media Plus

Panellists

- Siroun Shamigian (Lebanon) – CEO, Kamkalima
- Dr Hanada Taha Thomure (Lebanon) – Endowed Professor of Arabic Language Education, Zayed University UAE
- Mohamad Al-Baghdadi (UAE) – Founder and CEO, Al Manhal



DAY 2

Welcome Address



The second day of the IPA Regional Seminar in Amman was opened by UAE-based publisher Bodour Al Qasimi, CEO and Founder of Kalimat Group, and Vice-President of the International Publishers Association.

She began by admitting she had discarded her pre-prepared speech and would instead respond to some of the views aired during the eventful previous day, including Mourid Barghouti's speech about the 'crisis' of Arab publishing. She warned her fellow Arab publishers against handwringing resignation and urged them to confront the challenges facing the 'Arab intellectual renaissance' instead. 'This reality is not destiny,' she said, adding that Arabs 'can grasp knowledge and science to survive and make it to safety.'

Concurring with Barghouti about the shortage of professional Arab editors and literary agents, and about limited publishing freedoms, Bodour added copyright enforcement, slow uptake of digital technologies, translation challenges and difficulties of getting Arabic content to the wider world. But she insisted there is much to celebrate as well, such as UNESCO's designation of Sharjah as World Book Capital 2019 (in part a reflection of Sharjah's world-class book fair); Arab publishers winning awards and successfully penetrating overseas markets; and serious efforts to bring Arabic content to global readers through digital media.

In closing, the IPA Vice-President stressed the urgent need to embrace change and technology. 'Life doesn't move backwards; the publishing industry in the Arab world shouldn't go backwards either,' she said.



OPENING KEYNOTE



Next on the podium was Lebanese author and journalist Joumana Haddad, an outspoken rights advocate who is consistently listed among the Arab world's most influential women. Hers was an image-rich speech that conjured a childhood blighted by a civil war from which books were an escape.

'My childhood memories are confined to two images: first, I'm scared in the shelter during the Lebanese civil war; second, I'm carrying a book and reading.'

Joumana's speech crescendoed towards anger at the social and cultural barriers that hinder Arabic reading and discourage critical thinking. She said there could be 'no future nor salvation for the Arab world without reading.'

Arab culture, she asserted, discourages reasoned thinking, which holds the Arab world back and allows autocracy and conservatism to reign over a passive, uncritical populace.

Haddad described inspiring images and videos online depicting the essential presence of reading for people around the world, in the Far East, North and South America, Europe, Russia, China, but not in the Arab world.

She explained, 'I hate to strengthen our inferior view of ourselves, knowing that we were once pioneers in culture and science. But reality remains reality: I hope to see similar pictures from across the Arab world.'

'Is there a plan to promote reading?' she asked, 'Unless consideration is given to the critical mind in the Arab world, our search for reading solutions will be futile. We need a comprehensive conceptual revolution at all levels.'

PANEL 6

Building a Creative Nation: Developing the Next Generation of Publishers, Writers, and Artists



The first discussion on day two probed how to develop new publishers and authors, and ensure a healthy publishing pipeline for years to come. A consistent refrain was the notion that the region's governments need to do more to assist the incubation of talent and culture. Vibrant publishing and creative industries generate employment, drive economic growth, and bring progress and sustainability.

Dr Rana Dajani, moderating, said the world was in a 'tsunami of data' as she described her research into the development of education for Arab countries 'via academic methods that are recognized in major international universities, such as Harvard and Yale'.

Palestinian author Ibrahim Nasrallah said he didn't buy the idea that young Arabs don't read, but complained that politics 'destroys everything'. 'Knowledge should bring change, but young people in this region end up clashing with the system, and the revolution is always stolen,' he said. 'Governments like to be pictured as supporting artists, but then they don't make real investments



in culture. Cultural ministries are always those with the smallest budget.'

UAE's Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, Noura Al Kaabi, said creativity was one of the most important skillsets to adopt and develop in the 21st century.

'Development blueprints and models in education and expression are already available; we don't need to reinvent the wheel, we only need to benchmark with the world's best practices to take a step forward,' she said.

Moderator: Dr Rana Dajani (Jordan) – Founder and Director, We Love Reading

Panellists

- Noura Al Kaabi (UAE) – Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development in the UAE
- Zeina Hashem Beck (Lebanon) – Poet
- Ibrahim Nasrallah (Palestine) – Poet and Novelist

PANEL 7

Bringing the Voice of Arab Writers, Publishers, and Content Creators to the World

Around the world, readers are hungry for original, distinctive writing and, above all, narrative diversity. National markets are booming worldwide, and the growing demand for diversity is a trend that Arab writers, publishers, and the creative industries in general need to exploit. However, despite this and the launch of numerous initiatives, grants and awards, publishers in the Middle East and North Africa have been less successful in getting Arabic products to global consumers than other cultures.



Dia Haykal, of Haykal Media, said that in addition to investing in talent it was essential to build a strong ecosystem by safeguarding the flow of enticing new content to the market and ensuring translations continue to reflect linguistic changes, creating the necessary allure to draw further investment.

Dr Ali bin Tamim, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Authority, flagged some errors that can undermine the quality of a translation. 'A common mistake in the publishing industry in the Arab world is when a poor book is selected because the author has a track record of good books,' he said. 'Another is when the translation of a great book in the source language is awarded to an unknown translator in the target language.'

Moderator: Wael Attili (Jordan) – Co-Founder, Kharabeesh Innovation

Panellists

- Dia Haykal (Syria) – Head of Content, Haykal Media
- Inaam Kachachi (Iraq) – Journalist and Writer, Asharq Al Awsat daily Newspaper
- Dr Ali bin Tamim (UAE) – Chairman, Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Authority



PANEL 8

The Future of Arab Libraries: Transforming Libraries from Print to Digital

Moving from print to digital business models is a concern for every link in the publishing chain, and libraries are no exception. They will likely evolve into hyper-connected, creative spaces that serve as a gateway to digital citizenship and where users can co-create and experience the future. Several technologies and trends are already shaping the libraries of today, including bookless libraries, augmented reality, and e-lending.



José Borghino, Secretary General of the International Publishers Association, stressed the need for libraries to evolve in the digital landscape to stay relevant. He added that libraries need to diversify and transition from merely lending books to becoming economic incubators, cultural hubs, and experiential learning centres.

Dr Nidal Al-Ahmad, of the National Library of Jordan pointed out that piracy was a print problem first and foremost. 'You can photocopy a book and the PDF can be pirated; an e-book in EPUB3 is more secure,' he said.

Steven Rosato, Business Development Executive for American e-content distributor Rakuten OverDrive, said, 'Digital is not a competition or a race; it's just another format. The competition is for readers, for "mind-share"'. He contended that governments ought to invest in libraries and support publishing, because 'studies say the return is five to one in economic benefit'.

Moderator: Dina Youssef Salib (Egypt) – Director of Information Institutions and Professional Skills Department, Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Panellists

- Dr Nidal Al-Ahmad (Jordan) – General Director, National Library of Jordan
- Steven Rosato (USA) – Business Development Executive, Rakuten OverDrive
- José Borghino (Australia) – Secretary General, International Publishers Association

PANEL 9

Freedom to Publish and New Media

For young people everywhere, the internet, social media, and socialized messaging are the primary source of news and information. The Arab world is no exception, and here the question of who is accountable for poor quality, erroneous, malicious or offensive online content is a question of intense debate. The panellists explored the real and potential dangers of social media in the wrong hands, how publishers' subjective experience of 'freedom' differs around the world, and how the impulse to restrict publishing freedoms is not limited to 'the usual suspect' states.



Chair of the IPA's Freedom to Publish Committee, Kristenn Einarsson, recounted a conversation with a South African publisher who was about to release a controversial book about former president Jacob Zuma. Amid fears of being shuttered or facing a cyber attack, the firm set countermeasures to ensure that, come what may, the work would remain available online as a PDF. Einarsson said the lesson here was that not only do publishers need exceptional courage to bring such works to light, they also need a plan.

Moderator: Porter Anderson (USA) – Editor-in-Chief, Publishing Perspectives

Panellists

- Faisal Al-Fayez (Jordan) – President, Jordanian Senate
- Marcia Lynx Qualey (USA) – Founding Editor, ArabLit
- Kristenn Einarsson (Norway) – Managing Director, The Norwegian Publishers Association



Moderator Porter Anderson pointed out that governments the world over are guilty of trying to silence publishers. He reminded the audience that US President Donald Trump's legal team had gone to great lengths to prevent the release of Michael Wolff's book Fire and Fury. He noted that the difference in that case was that the publisher had the right to resist, and had published anyway.



PANEL 10

Does the Arab World Need its Own Copyright Directive?



The closing session looked at copyright and whether the Arab world, comprising 22 countries inhabited by more than 380 million people, was ready for a single regional directive. A number of Arab countries have made important national gains in this area, but whether the region as a whole is ready for a single, unifying system is unclear. Most participants and some in the audience felt that what the region requires to fight piracy is not more laws, but proper implementation of those already in place (including the TRIPS agreement, to which the Arab nations are signatories).

This point was picked up by panellist Michael Healy, executive director of the Copyright Clearance Center (USA), who was sceptical about the need for a single Arab directive. Drawing a European comparison, he said the EU's Direct Single Market (DSM) had 'grown out of a particular set of political, judicial and social conditions', none of which was present in the Arab world. 'Let Arabs have Arab laws designed for Arab markets, rather than a pale imitation of the DSM,' he said.

Moderator: Rawan Dabbas (Jordan) – Head of International Relations, Emirates Publishers Association

Panellists

- Michael Healy (USA) – Executive Director, International Relations, Copyright Clearance Center
- Dr Abdul Rahman Al Muaini (UAE) – Secretary General, Emirates Intellectual Property Association
- Caroline Morgan (Australia) – Secretary General and Chief Executive, International Federation of Reproduction Rights Organisations



CLOSING REMARKS



In closing, the president of the Union of Jordanian Publishers, Fathi Al Biss, was emphatic in his praise of all who had made this ground-breaking seminar possible. Mr Al Biss, who has served as the vice-president of the Arab Publishers Association, was particularly thankful to the International Publishers Association for creating a moment where the entire region could meet under one roof, exchange ideas and explore solutions to a variety of shared challenges.

He was followed by IPA President Hugo Setzer, who said he had been struck by the commonalities between publishers around the world, whatever their culture or origin.



'Often, we are so focused on our differences — of which the media remind us every day — that we are blind to what we have in common,' he said. 'Seven hundred years ago, people in this region wouldn't have known that my country, Mexico, even existed. But now, publishers from many different countries and cultures are meeting to share experiences — and we have found that far more unites us than divides us.'

What underpins the International Publishers Association community, he said, is, 'Acknowledging, accepting and respecting our differences, but choosing to focus and build on what we have in common.'

Mr Setzer ended with a call to continue the dialogue started in Amman at the IPA's next Regional Seminar for Arab publishers, which will be in December 2020, in Marrakesh.



EMPOWERING START-UPS EXHIBITION

Throughout the seminar, IPA hosted an exclusive exhibition space for start-ups, small businesses, and new initiatives. This space was designed to empower a range of local and international, commercial and state-sponsored businesses by giving them a visible forum to promote their unique ideas and network with interested investors and stakeholders. The space was buzzing with creative ideas and actionable solutions by ready businesses. Exhibitors included:



DAY 3

Sightseeing



To unwind after two days of intellectual exertions, seminar delegates could choose from several sightseeing tours of Amman, including to the Dead Sea, which lies an hour's drive from the Jordanian capital; to the 12th century Islamic castle of Ajloun and the ancient city of Jerash; and for more intrepid explorers, a full day's tour of the stunning city of Petra, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.



SPONSORS

The IPA Regional Seminar in Amman would not have been possible without the generous support of our sponsors. A special thanks to:

GALA DINNER SPONSORS:



PANEL SESSION SPONSORS:



GOLD SPONSORS:



SILVER SPONSORS:



BRONZE SPONSORS:



EXCLUSIVE GLOBAL TRANSPORT PARTNER:



MEDIA SPONSOR:



MEDIA PARTNER:



internationalpublishers.org