The Arabic Print Revolution

In a brief historic moment, printing presses, publishing ventures, a periodical press, circulation networks, and a mass readership came into being all at once in the Middle East, where none had previously existed, with ramifications in every sphere of people's lives. Among other outcomes, this significant change facilitated the cultural and literary movement known as the Arab *nahḍa* ("awakening").

Ayalon's book offers both students and scholars a critical inquiry into the formative phase of that shift in Arab societies. This comprehensive analysis explores the advent of printing and publishing; the formation of mass readership; and the creation of distribution channels, the vital and often overlooked nexus linking the former two processes. It considers questions of cultural and religious tradition, social norms and relations, and concepts of education, offering a unique presentation of the emerging print culture in the Middle East.

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The Arabic Print Revolution

Cultural Production and Mass Readership

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For Keren and Sophie

Who bring so much light to the "tribe"

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Preface and Acknowledgments

> As you know, I have received no money from the *jabal* [Mount Lebanon] nor have I received the [newspaper's] dues from Tunis. As for the other agents, some of them delay payment, while still others send in only a quarter or half of what they owe me. I have lost 700 francs to my agents in Algiers . . . He who gives, gives. I am not going to sue those who don't.[1]

Thus wrote Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, owner of the weekly *al-Ǧawā'ib*, to a member of his family in 1866. Shidyāq, a celebrity of the Arab *nahḍa*, is remembered for his pioneering literary, scholarly, and journalistic work and his major contribution to his society's awakening. Seldom do we associate his role in Arab cultural history with financial hitches and agent malperformance. Even more rarely do we care to consider the debtors and agents themselves. Yet, hitches, malperformance, and other material and organizational factors were integral features of Shidyāq's literary routine, at once facilitating and encumbering it. They affected the work of all makers of the cultural change, eminent and lesser ones alike. Such constraints had a substantial impact on the scope and pace of producing written works, their dissemination in the region, and their availability to the emerging reading publics. Writers and thinkers who are known to us as trailblazers of modern Arabic thought and literary production were all subject to these checks. They also played an important role in advancing the necessary technical and logistic underpinnings, along with a body of auxiliary personnel of all stripes. Yet, in the rich and expanding literature on Arab cultural development of the time, these banal facets are seldom noticed and the many men involved in them remain largely unknown. Historians have usually focused on ideas, contents, and genres of the writings and on their broader historic implications. This book sets the spotlight on the other, less-known aspects of the story, without which there would have been no literary awakening.

[1] Letter to Ẓāhir al-Shidyāq, 14 October 1866, quoted in ᶜImād al-Ṣulḥ, 99.

Save for some modest precursors, it was only in the nineteenth century that Arabic texts began to be printed in the Middle East on a big scale, and only in its last third that printing became a considerable industry. Until then, the region's rulers and societies had shown little interest in Gutenberg's invention: The existing political order, sociocultural norms, and time-honored writing practices seemed to render printing redundant. The grand historic changes of the nineteenth century altered this aloof attitude and led potentates and some creative local entrepreneurs to open the gates for printing and its products. They set up presses and publishing projects, drawing on the local literary heritage and encouraging new creation, different in substance and format from the old. Concomitantly, a set of circulation channels and functions – from postal services to bookshops, from subscription arrangements to public libraries – emerged to sustain the flow of printed works and make them accessible to potential consumers. The growing public thirst for news and orientation and the advent of schooling systems gave birth to an inquisitive reading public. Overall it was a dramatic shift. In a brief historic moment, a publishing industry, diffusion networks, and a mass readership came into being all at once. Books and other writings, hitherto of limited use, became central to public and interpersonal communication and other vital everyday practices. Developments that had taken place in Europe over several centuries were telescoped here into a condensed process, with visible repercussions in every sphere of the society's life. Together they amounted to a far-reaching cultural transformation. By the eve of World War I, printing had become a prime device of spreading news and ideas and enabling a lively public discourse across the region. The emergence of printing and publishing, and the shift from illiteracy to reading, formed a crucial platform on which more extensive and profound cultural changes rested. This book examines this platform as such.

The history of the book, printing, and reading is by now a well-established subfield of cultural history, with a focus on the European and North American experience. In the Middle East and the Islamic world, however, research on this subject is still in its infancy. We already have a substantial corpus of excellent research on many other aspects of the cultural changes, but little on publishing and reading. Serious interest in this has begun some fifteen years ago and it is rising, as reflected in a series of international symposia (notably Mainz, 2002; Paris, 2005; Leipzig 2008; Berlin 2015); in published works (contributions by Geoffrey Roper, Orlin Sabev, Nelly Hanna, Konrad Hirschler, Ian Proudfoot, Dana Sajdi, Beth Baron, and Marilyn Booth have been especially significant); and recently also in several doctoral dissertations (notably by Kathryn Schwartz, Hala Auji, and Hoda Yousef). Such an output is impressive and exciting, but on

the whole the efforts made so far are rather modest in relation to the questions that beg exploration, especially with regard to the period of mass printing. A volume recently published by Ashgate and entitled *The History of the Book in the Middle East* – an ambitious, 570-page tome with 27 essays (only a handful of them dealing with the post-1800 period) – mirrored the rudimentary state of the field: Containing important and even groundbreaking studies by leading scholars, it still resembles a net full of holes. Clearly much remains to be explored in the Middle Eastern context.

This book seeks to contribute to that endeavor by studying developments in the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire during the formative phase of the cultural change, from 1800 to 1914. I became aware of the substantial lacuna in the field some twenty-five years ago while working on the history of the Arabic press, an undertaking that was seriously hampered by the want of a systematic map of Arab printing, publishing, and reading. Reckoning that an exploration of these matters across the entire region was too ambitious a task for a single project, I chose instead to conduct a narrower study by way of a pilot, dealing with a limited case that would serve as a lab for testing key questions in a single community. Published as *Reading Palestine* (University of Texas Press, 2004), the study looked into central cultural issues related to publishing and reading in Palestine's Arab society from 1900 to 1948. After another decade of research, reflection, and reconsideration of previous concepts, I am feeling more comfortable to take a broader look.

This book focuses on the Arab region's "eastern" parts, the *mashriq*, with which I am better familiar: Egypt, the countries of the Fertile Crescent, and to some extent the Arabian Peninsula. It should be borne in mind, however, that this was just one of several arenas in the Islamic lands where such developments took place at about the same time, triggered everywhere by the entry of printing. In countries of North Africa, Iran, India, and farther in Southeast Asia, such changes unfolded concurrently and often in close association with those examined here – in technology, diffusion mechanisms, and above all consumption. This book, then, is essentially about a link in a chain, but one that bears many of the genetic attributes of the other links as well.

The inquiry revolves around three axes: production, that is, printing and publishing; consumption, namely the emergence of mass readership; and the creation of diffusion channels, the indispensable nexus linking the previous two. Each of these comprises a varied set of functions and mechanisms. It goes without saying that in casting such a wide net the book can offer no more than an introductory statement on the workings of the cultural-literary activities. Each component of the scene by itself may be a subject of a book-size inquiry. For example, Arab printing, narrowly

speaking, could be a topic for a colorful study that should address technological and mechanical matters, issues of typography and lithography, book formats and graphic images, social aspects of the printer's trade, the routine of printers' working with authors, publishers and sellers, and so on. My purpose here is different, and broader: To trace and explore the constituent processes of the entry of printing into the region, delineate their historic phases, and examine the ways by which the new medium affected the cultural transformation. This includes looking at practical sides of publishing, considering the emergence of diffusion conduits, and scrutinizing readers' accommodation to the practice in its early stage. To shed light on these, I shall follow the personal stories of several typical representatives of the process: Khalīl Sarkīs, the semi-aristocratic Lebanese publisher; his humbler Palestinian peer, Jurjī Ḥabīb Ḥanāniyā; the Tripoli resourceful bookseller ᶜAbdāllāh al-Rifāᶜī; the book-diffusion entrepreneur, Yūsuf al-Shalfūn; and individual book readers such as the Cairo youth Hudā Shᶜrāwī and her rural compatriot, Sayyid Quṭb, a teenager who was exposed to the world of reading in an Egyptian village on the eve of World War I. Certain sides of the story had to be left out: aspects of printing technology; the contents and themes of the published products (save for a limited categorization of them, in Chapter 3); and the wider political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications of the entry of printing, along the lines pursued by Elizabeth Eisenstein and her many followers (and critics) in the wide subdiscipline of book history. These are subjects for further inquiry, which is indeed highly needed. I do, however, consider questions of cultural tradition, social norms and relations, concepts of education, and religious faith that are pertinent to publishing and reading. One can tell a multifaceted story of a society's development by examining the emergence and role of printing in it. This book illuminates certain central chapters of that story.

I now come to the pleasant duty of thanking the many who helped me in various ways as this study was taking shape. I am indebted to my students in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University, especially those who participated in my graduate seminars on modern Arab cultural history during the last decade. Each of these seminars served as a workshop for testing new ideas and examining new studies in the company of bright students, ever an enlightening and enjoyable experience. I remain forever obliged to all of them. I learned so much from my colleagues and friends Miri Eliav-Feldon and Elchanan Reiner of Tel Aviv University, with whom for several years I taught joint courses on printing and reading in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim societies. I owe them more than they would admit, for exposing me not

only to the rich saga of the book and publishing in Christian and Jewish Europe but also to some of the central dilemmas involved in studying them, and the field in general. Numerous other friends and colleagues helped me with advice, insights, and references, of whom I wish to single out for special thanks: Beth Baron, Guy Burak, Dagmar Glass, Uri Kupferschmidt, Amalia Levanoni, Kathryn Schwartz, Sasson Somekh, Alon Tam, Mira Tzoreff, and Fruma Zachs. Yaron Ayalon, Miri Elieav-Feldon, Jacob M. Landau, and David J. Wasserstein read parts of the manuscript, offered invaluable comments, and saved me from some shameful slips, as did the three anonymous readers of my MS for Cambridge University Press. I am beholden to all of them. They all share whatever merits this book might have but none of its faults or errors it must still contain, for which I alone am responsible.

Most of the research for this study was conducted when I was a visiting fellow at the Department of Near Eastern Studies in Princeton, in 2007. The department people and the marvelous university surroundings proved as inspiring as ever and made my work there a sheer delight. I was immensely fortunate to have been invited to attend Robert Darnton's PhD seminar on book history at Princeton's History Department, which proved a highly instructive experience for me in more ways than one. And Firestone Library did not cease to amaze me with its treasures of even the most obscure items. My heavy debt to its phenomenal collection and to the librarians who put it together over the years should be clearly evident in the pages below.

At Cambridge University Press, Maria Marsh, Cassi Roberts, Amanda George, and James Gregory executed the task of turning my manuscript into a book with remarkable efficacy and much grace, as did the project manager Aishwariya Ravi and my superb copyeditor Jothilakshmi Ganesh at Integra-PDY. I am grateful to them all. I also thank Salim Tamari and *The Jerusalem Quarterly* for their kind permission to reproduce the Ḥanāniyā family image, first published in issue 32 (2007) of the journal. Finally, I wish to record my incalculable debt and intense gratitude to members of my dear family, who accompanied me in this long journey with admirable tolerance: my wife Yael, who knows best how vital her role in this was; our sons Yaron and Gil; our grandchildren Yuval and Omri; and our daughters-in-law Keren and Sophie, who have brought so much joy to our circle and to whom this book is dedicated.

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A Note on Transliteration

The frequent mention of Arabic names – people, books, journals – has led me after much hesitation to apply a full system of transliterating Arabic into English. Students of Arab societies should need no guidance for this self-explanatory system, which may help them identify Arabic names and terms with precision. The non-specialist should simply ignore the screen of dots, macrons, and inverted apostrophes and easily proceed without them.