



Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.



مؤسسة محمد بن راشد آل مكتوم
MOHAMMED BIN RASHID
AL MAKTOUM FOUNDATION



“There is no future
without books”

Mohammed Bin Rashid
Al Maktoum



ARAB READING INDEX 2016

“In some ways,
certain books
are more powerful by
far than any battle”

Henry Wallace

“The reading of all
good books
is like a conversation
with the finest minds
of past centuries”

René Descartes



“Those who know how
to read are the ones that
lead the human race”

Voltaire

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Foreword

Chairman of the Board

Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation

Arab Reading and Knowledge Indices... Objectively and scientifically tracking situations and trends for a sustainable development

“History teaches us that no civilisation has endured by relying solely on its might and its wealth, but rather by virtue of the efforts of its people to innovate solutions for the challenges that faced them. Civilisations that stopped learning and researching future opportunities declined and were reduced to being the subject of history books,” said His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, underlining the unparalleled importance of hard work and innovation in building nations.

To be sure, for this paradigm to achieve its objectives, we need to exert tremendous efforts to create the scientific tools that would see us through the challenges; we need to propose solutions and implement best practices to face them. With that in mind, we present you today with the fruit of these efforts, which reaffirm Dubai and the UAE’s lead when it comes to launching innovative initiatives and project that seek to spread knowledge around the world.

The first of its kind in the region, Arab Reading Index initiative was the fruit of a collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and extensive efforts by top-tier experts and specialists in research- and knowledge-related fields. It supports the UAE’s National Reading Strategy, which seeks to instil a reading culture in the country.

The Index is an objective scientific tool that tracks the status of reading and evaluates cultural development in the Arab World. It also serves to measure the extent to which our knowledge-related initiatives have succeeded in realising their objectives. We are confident that the Index will be a go-to source for facts and figures for stakeholders and decision makers in their efforts to set policies that encourage reading and knowledge.

With the same frame of mind, we had previously launched the Arab Knowledge Index, another unique product that studies knowledge in the Arab World along six main axes: pre-university education, higher education, technical vocational education and training, information and communications technology, economy and research, development and innovation.

The Arab Knowledge Index has successfully offered stakeholders in the Arab World a roadmap to rely on when setting strategies, providing them with accurate data and statistics, updated on a yearly basis in accordance with international standards.

The Arab Reading and Knowledge Indices thus become part of the Arab Knowledge Project, which seeks to fill the knowledge gap in our region, enabling our countries to produce and disseminate knowledge, and to use it for the good of our people and future generations.

Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum
Chairman of the Board
Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation

Preamble

United Nations Development Programme

The release of this report comes as the Arab Knowledge Project enters its 10th year investigating the complementarity between knowledge and development, and how this interaction can contribute to achieving sustainable human development in the Arab region. Over the course of a decade, the Project has moved from studying and analysing the state of knowledge in the region and its theoretical foundations, to applying rigorous quantitative tools to monitor and evaluate the sectors which present a strong link between knowledge and development. These are pre-university education; higher education; technical vocational education and training (TVET); information and communications technology (ICT); economy; and research, development and innovation (RDI).

This year's report encompasses two distinct but related components. First, the 2016 Arab Knowledge Index, an updated and revised version of the 2015 edition to better capture the state of knowledge systems in the Arab region. Second, the Arab Reading Index, a new initiative resulting from an electronic survey on reading practices which received more than 145,000 responses from 22 Arab countries.

While the Arab Knowledge Index focuses on how the relation between knowledge and development can help meet contemporary challenges, the Arab Reading Index assesses the practice of reading in the lives of people across the region. It emphasizes the role of reading as an indispensable tool which empowers individuals, improves skills and capacities, and supports innovation and creativity. Reading is to knowledge what letters are to the alphabet; it is the embodiment of the passion and curiosity that drive advances in knowledge and development. Reading is a distinguishing feature of developed

nations that offers limitless opportunities for learning, providing a distinct advantage in an era of unprecedented progress in science and technology. Reading also provides the means to understand ourselves, others and our social environment, as well as to devise effective and sustainable solutions to complex economic, social, political, environmental and development challenges.

The Arab Knowledge Index and the Reading Index are complementary efforts towards the establishment of knowledge societies in the Arab region. Both indices seek to provide reliable data to inform decision-making processes and to support the development of evidence-based policies aiming at advancing knowledge-led human development in the region and beyond.

The methodology adopted for the Arab Reading Index marks a shift for the Arab Knowledge Project from the utilization of external data and/or development of case studies on specific countries, toward producing its own data by conducting an electronic survey covering 22 Arab countries. In the coming years, the intention is to develop further tools of study and expand their coverage in terms of topics and participation.

Despite the challenging circumstances in the region, the Arab Knowledge Project has remained steadfast. Its milestone achievements are a result of the longstanding and solid partnership between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, and are guided by the vision of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, who maintains that: "The race for excellence has no finish line".

We would like to express our gratitude namely to the teams at the Arab Knowledge Project, Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation; looking forward highly and with eagerness to the yet upcoming initiatives and publications by the Arab Knowledge Project.

Sophie de Caen
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Introduction

Reading is an indispensable practice in contemporary societies as it opens up new opportunities, enhances communicative, social and professional skills, and encourages innovation and creativity. At a time when knowledge and information are being exchanged at an unprecedented pace, reading remains a key gateway to knowledge acquisition, particularly through self-learning. It is a practice that enables individuals to better understand themselves and their surroundings, and hence achieve empowerment. Even in religious contexts, reading is emphasised as an honourable practice: “You study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life” (John 5:39); “Recite, and your Lord is the most Generous; who taught by the pen; taught man that which he knew not” (Quran 96: 35).

The benefits of reading are not limited to individuals, but extend to society as a whole. When all individuals in a given society become literate, they are collectively better able to counter external hegemony and face the threats of extremism and dogmatism. A nation that reads knows no subjugation nor hunger,¹ because it will be prepared to solve any social, economic or political problems.

Reading has been held up throughout history as one of mankind’s noblest pursuits. It is said that the Sacred Library in the temple of Pharaoh Ramses was adorned with the words: “The place of the cure of the soul”. It has also long been recognised that regular reading opens up the mind to new concepts and opportunities, as noted by Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad:

I do not like reading because it helps me write, and I do not like it because it adds to my years ... I like reading because I have only one life to live, and this is not enough for me; reading enables me to have more than one life, as it gives my life more depth—although it does not give me more years ...

I do not like books because I am ascetic ... I love books because one life is not enough for me ... No matter how much food you have, you have only one stomach; no matter how many clothes you have, you have only one body; no matter how far you travel, you cannot be at two places at the same time. By nurturing your mind, feelings and imagination, you can have more than one life.²

Reading is a key tool for acquiring, developing and disseminating knowledge, and has come to represent the mark of a developed nation. Reading is also considered an important criterion for evaluating societies, measuring intellectual openness and progress, and determining their ability to chart their own path to development. In one of his works on the importance of books, Voltaire argues that those who know how to read and write are the ones who will lead the human race in civilized countries.³

In light of its importance to knowledge acquisition and cultural exchange, an assessment of the role of reading in Arab societies is necessarily insightful, and will allow for comparisons with other regions around the world.

The Arab Reading Index attempts at answering questions such as: How have written publications (be they printed or electronic) fared in the face of competition with modern audio-visual media? And to what extent is the environment in the Arab countries conducive to reading? This effort complements the Arab Knowledge Index initiative launched in 2015, and supports the broader Arab Knowledge Project in its aim to realize an Arab “knowledge revival”.

The ARI also aims at informing strategies that encourage reading and confirm its centrality both to achieving sustainable human development and transition towards the knowledge society in the Arab region.

Reading

According to the referential Arabic dictionary, Al-Muajam Al-Wassit, issued by the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, to read is to follow the words with the eyes while pronouncing them (aloud) or without pronouncing them (silent reading), and that to read something is to combine its constituent elements.⁴ Technically speaking, to read is to recognize and decode written and printed symbols. It is a compound cognitive process that relies on symbols and characters to understand and comprehend meaning. Reading is also therefore the cornerstone of cognitive and cultural achievement and a method for acquiring linguistic and communication skills.

The Current Dictionary of Education⁵ defines reading as a cognitive, visual and mental activity that decodes the meaning of a certain text by reconstructing its content or message. In the field of education, reading is the practice whereby a learner is capable of decoding and understanding various texts in order to gain knowledge of the world.

The act of reading cannot be reduced to a purely visual activity. While visual analysis of written signs is necessary for reading, it represents only one aspect of the central process of verbalizing those signs. Reading starts with receiving the written information (visual input), but in the following stages this input is cognitively and verbally processed in order to deduce the significance of written signs. The act of reading and writing is a mental act requiring compound cognitive activity that leads to an understanding of the read text.⁶

As such, it is crucially important to develop the habit of reading and to master its practice, because reading plays a key role in developing the knowledge, skills, abilities and values that form the goals of learning.⁷

Reading is a cognitive act that involves decoding symbols previously known to the reader (drawn from the alphabets of different languages) with the aim of understanding the meanings of words that constitute sentences which, combined, give the text its full meaning. However, it can also take the form of the retrieval of stored information by touch, as in the case of the Braille system, and there are even forms of non-linguistic reading, such as reading music or illustrative charts. In computing, reading denotes the retrieval of information from storage devices, such as hard disks, flash drives, etc.

Literacy

A distinction is often made between reading, as a general concept, and literacy as a skill. The former refers exclusively to a visual, mental and cognitive activity that allows for the decoding of the meaning of a certain text. The latter goes beyond this to denote reading and writing capabilities that allow for the development of a reading habit and the refinement of the skills involved in retrieving written information, to the extent that it becomes a functional tool in people's lives. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as:

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written material associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.⁸

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines literacy as “the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society.”⁹ According to the Quebec Board of the French Language, literacy is a process that allows adults to acquire skills through which they can function in society and, where appropriate, continue their studies.¹⁰

Both reading and literacy are essential for adapting to the rapidly-evolving information age and the knowledge society. These skills benefit not only individuals but society as a whole, given their role in improving productivity, workforce efficiency and citizen involvement and participation. “The impact of literacy on economic development and poverty alleviation is also positive and can be easily determined by comparing the standard of living, per capita income, GDP, industrialization and development of infrastructure within a country”.¹¹

Free reading

Free reading is voluntary reading performed by individuals to fulfil a specific need or simply for their own satisfaction. This kind of reading is valuable, because deliberately chosen enjoyable material will remain in the mind of the reader. Mona Shukri defines this type of reading as reading books, magazines and newspapers, both Arab and foreign, printed and electronic, for the purpose of self-learning and independent knowledge acquisition and reproduction, as opposed to education and indoctrination, which are tools used by political and religious authorities.¹² Certainly, reading is not a goal in itself but rather a process through which knowledge is acquired from various sources, thereby developing the reader's personality and facilitating positive interaction with their surroundings. Hence, free reading is a voluntary activity that draws on a set of mental processes through which a text is read, absorbed and understood, thereby enriching and expanding the reader's knowledge. This makes free reading an intellectual activity – processing information and reaching conclusions – as opposed to mechanical reading, which is limited to identifying and pronouncing letters.

Thus, free reading encompasses three aspects: a physical aspect of looking at and decoding the text; a mental aspect represented by the understanding of concepts and ideas; and an emotional aspect represented by the higher skills which allow the reader to interact with, criticize and evaluate the text and relate to it in daily life. The distinction between free reading and other kinds of reading is that free reading is motivated by personal interest. Hence, free reading becomes an essential tool for learning, education and access to all forms of knowledge, as well as a means of entertainment.

In this work, reading is defined as a voluntary act through which the reader interacts with a written text and transforms written symbols into information and ideas from which he/she gains knowledge and enjoyment. This includes all types of text (books, magazines, articles, etc.), in either paper or electronic form. Hence, the scope of reading is not limited to printed material, but includes publishing methods that have emerged as a consequence of the ICT revolution, which has altered patterns of reading and substituted electronic material for printed material -as illustrated in a report by UNESCO that indicates a shift in reading habits towards e-books in developing countries.¹³

Available reports about reading in the Arab Region

Reading is among the most important basic human skills that provide access to knowledge which empowers societies intellectually and physically.¹⁴ Several reports suggest that reading rates and book sales in the Arab region have declined dramatically in recent decades.¹⁵ Some reports describe the reading crisis in the Arab region as ‘severe’ and requiring an immediate response from all stakeholders, including governments, intellectuals and the public.¹⁶ This reading crisis will have dire consequences, and is no less serious than the political, economic and social challenges that face the Arab region.¹⁷ Some have even described lack of reading as a “disability”, while others note that the problem not only relates to the number of readers, but also to the qualitative aspects of what, how and why people read.¹⁸ Other reports fear a looming process of “cultural desertification”- a phenomenon attributed to factors including, most notably, the lack of a cultural strategy and political will to appropriately address the issue.

What the current numbers say

From the outset it should be noted that reading statistics about the Arab region are poorly documented, limited in availability, and many a times not credible. Most are collected from electronic fora or websites claiming to specialize in cultural or educational fields, including electronic newspapers and magazines. Some of the statistics that are commonly cited within this context are that Arabs read an average of six minutes per year, while Europeans and Americans read for 200 hours annually;¹⁹ an American child reads six minutes per day, while an Arab child reads seven minutes per year; the combined annual reading of 20 Arab children is required to complete one book, while a British child reads seven books and an American child reads 11 books per year.²⁰

These statistics vary from one source to another, and no clear or accurate reference for them has been documented that reveals their origin. It is therefore important to note that the references

listed for the above-mentioned statistics are not the original publishers of these figures, which until today remain unidentified.²¹

Furthermore, there are a number of national reports that follow different methods but similarly indicate a general decline in reading. For example, a survey on reading in Tunisia showed that 75 percent of respondents do not have books at home; and only 18 percent had read a book in the last 12 months. The share of those who read is higher among women (21 percent) than among men (15 percent); while the highest share was observed among youth aged 18-25 years (28 percent) and the lowest was among the age group 46-55 years (8 percent).²²

In Algeria, a 2015 study reported low reading rates among Algerian children. This was related to the lack of reading options and the absence of a national cultural programme to encourage reading in society in general and among children in particular. Among other important figures, the paper stated that Algerian children read for two minutes per year, while adults read half a book per year. Major densely-populated cities, such as Oran, Algiers and Constantine only offer 10 libraries for children, most of which do not meet the standards set by the Ministry of Culture's General Directorate of Books and Reading. In addition, 93 percent of schools in Algeria do not have libraries or reading halls.²³

Whereas in Syria, a field study was conducted in Latakia on reading habits among 242 families living in good educational and financial conditions. It showed that 85 percent of families do not have a library for children or even a single shelf for their non-school books. As for the number of books per child, 24 percent of children had less than 10 books, while only 11 percent had more than 50. The types of books read by children were as follows: fiction (30 percent), religious books (22 percent), puzzles and games (19 percent), science (13 percent), curriculum-supporting books (seven percent), history (five percent) and children's magazines (0.77 percent).²⁶

A study on reading in Palestine reported that 54.14 percent of Palestinians read, despite the ban imposed on the import of books, particularly the Arab states. According to the study, males read more than females (58.2 versus 51.5 percent) and the share of families that have libraries in their homes was 25.1 percent in cities, 18.8 percent in villages and 31.8 percent in camps.²⁵ Upon comparing reading rates among individuals aged nine years and above, it was found that the place of residence made little difference; the percentage of people who read was 56.3 in cities, 53.0 in villages, and 51.9 in camps.²⁶

The Saudi newspaper, Okaz, published an article which included statistics from various sources about reading in the Saudi society. It states that in 2014, Saudi Arabia ranked tenth on the World Culture Score Index, with an average individual reading time of six hours and 48 minutes per week. But this includes all kinds of reading, such as reading the Holy Quran, newspapers, magazines, school textbooks, work files and reports, and entertainment material. The article also said that more than 33 percent of Saudis read every day and more than 17 percent read every other day. It claimed that 68 percent of Saudis spend more than 10 minutes reading printed newspapers, magazines, books and fiction, while 75 percent spend more than 10 minutes reading electronic texts.²⁷

Data limitations

Reviewing these figures raises deep concerns regarding the present and future of the Arab region. These statistics illustrate a low reading rate in the Arab countries, and some identify this as an important factor in the decline of culture and knowledge in the region. It should be noted that figures published on reading in the world in general, and the Arab region in particular, suffer a number of weaknesses that should be taken into consideration when analysing and interpreting these statistics. This is by no means an attempt to circumvent reality or excuse the weaknesses indicated by these figures; rather, the aim is to highlight the limitations of these statistics and the relativity of conclusions to allow for a more accurate and objective approach. Some key considerations in this regard are as follows:

- Calculation method: The figure of six minutes of reading per year seems unreliable, particularly in the absence of any methodology used to calculate it. What kind of reading and to which age group does this figure refer? Does it distinguish between required reading (for school or academic purposes) and free reading? Does it include all kinds of texts or only books? Does it take into account the number of illiterate people in the Arab countries? The same questions may be raised in relation to the “one quarter of a page per year” figure, which is wrongly claimed to be taken from UNESCO, as noted by Leah Caldwell in her article.²⁸
- Measurement methods: Most of the circulated figures concerning reading were based on surveys that rely on opinions and perceptions which lack objectivity or methodology. This makes it difficult to accurately quantify reading, especially if measured in the number of books or pages, or the number of minutes Arab children spend reading. These measurements should be accompanied by further variables such as the size of the book, the number of words per page and different reading habits across countries.
- Variations and contradictions: There are variations – and even contradictions – between figures from different institutions and surveys. This confirms that there are differences in the methodologies employed, some of which are not suitable for describing a complex activity such as reading. This hinders the construction of a clear and objective representation of reading conditions in relevant countries, and precludes the possibility of comparison. In addition, concepts and definitions differ from one country to another, making it almost impossible to directly compare concepts used in different countries.²⁹
- Descriptive aspects and quantitative nature: Most surveys are limited to important descriptive aspects; but these do not help to explain the realities and identify the obstacles to reading. Hence, they do not contribute to the process of implementing change. Rather than knowing whether or not Arabs read and how much they read, it is necessary to identify the underlying reasons for these trends in order to devise appropriate solutions. This can only be achieved through studies and measurements that examine different variables in the given context. Current research on reading is quantitative by nature and does not consider factors such as readers’ personal traits or social, cultural and economic peculiarities.³⁰

- New media: The ICT revolution has had a deep impact on reading. Therefore, any measurement of reading that does not take into account new media, omits important aspects of reading that affect the acquisition of knowledge. In fact, most reading indicators do not take into consideration electronic reading habits: to what extent is e-reading a common practice? What are the most common subjects of e-reading? Has e-content contributed to or undermined knowledge acquisition? Answers to these questions cannot be found in the figures that are currently available on the Arab region. One scholar notes that free reading has declined in recent years, because people have shifted to social media... It seems, however, that even reading on social media networks has become limited, as most people prefer the 140-character tweets that spread news, rumours and inaccurate information. But these are not adequate to enrich general knowledge.³¹
- Background to confusing figures: While acknowledging the decline of reading in the Arab world, many researchers and scholars do not see this decline as a crisis. They warn against passively accepting the published numbers and drawing false conclusions regarding Arab citizens' reading tendencies. These researchers also note some signs of revival that have appeared since 2011. For example, there has been an increase in the number of people joining e-book clubs – such as goodreads – and discussing what they read throughout the year.³² This shows that social media, newspaper websites and e-book downloads have created favourable conditions for reading.

Based on the above, we may conclude that comparative research concerning cultural activities is still in its infancy, despite the much circulated statistics and figures. However, this awareness of the limitations of figures and the questions surrounding the methodology used should not prevent us from admitting that reading conditions in the Arab region are unsatisfactory. These figures should be considered seriously, as initial symptoms that require further investigation in order to identify the root causes of the problem and devise potential solutions. The knowledge gap in the Arab region and the need to bridge it, along with the challenges facing Arab countries in their efforts to achieve sustainable human development, make reading a vital, even an existential issue. If Arabs read little or none at all, the knowledge gap will widen. In other words, this will have consequences not only at the individual level, but also for the whole Arab world, including loss of identity and historical heritage as well as failure to produce knowledge, build capability, develop skills or improve performance.

Arab initiatives to promote reading

Arab civilization has experienced periods of significant intellectual achievement in the past, and reading has always been at the heart of such successes. Various aspects of the arts and sciences were absorbed from other civilizations and developed by scholars, producing rich intellectual contributions. However, due to several factors beyond the scope of this report, the Arab world slipped into a state of stagnation that led to several voids at the cultural level. The only way to bridge these gaps is through a reading-centred revival that would enable Arab countries to again make positive and effective contributions to human civilization. The various initiatives implemented in recent years by some Arab countries to encourage reading could foretell of such a revival. These include the We Love Reading Initiative, which was launched in Jordan and has spread to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE); and the “Arabi 21” project created by the Arab Thought Foundation.

Other Arab initiatives to encourage reading are listed by the Bayyraq website on its list of “Reading Initiatives that Indicate Increasing Interest in Culture and Knowledge”:

- I am Iraqi.. I read: A campaign launched in 2012 by Iraqi youth “to bridge the gap between Iraqis and reading”. This began on social media with the publication of e-books and the development of lists of international and Arab book titles. Later, a youth event was organized in Baghdad followed by interactive projects such as establishing outdoor venues for reading books, distributing books to taxis in Baghdad, and announcing reading forums in parks and public places.
- My City Reads: A cultural and social initiative launched in Rustaq, Oman, to encourage and create a free reading community. Its activities include installing libraries in government services departments so that people can read while waiting to be served, organizing fairs for used books, establishing the first mobile library for children, and launching a campaign to build a public library in Rustaq.
- Reading for the Visually-Impaired: A humanitarian charitable initiative launched as part of the Grand Reading Challenge project under the patronage of the Ministry of Education in Jordan. Activities include inviting visually-impaired children to forums to read English stories using the Braille system, and a voluntary audio book project which allows anyone to record audio books on their mobile phones or computers and upload the recording so that visually-impaired people can listen to them.
- Alwan: A project launched by the Childhood Cultural Center in Qatar under the slogan “colour your life with reading”. The Center’s Director General explains that the project aims to design a bus to provide children with an untraditional mobile library that offers them interactive and fun reading. This mobile library contains computers for interactive workshops and publications suitable for children aged 3-11 years, including stories written by Qatari children.

In addition, some Arab countries have taken action to organize charitable exhibitions of used books for sale at affordable prices to young people. Some of these exhibitions include: Amman’s used books exhibition (as part of the “Amman Reads” activity); a charity book exhibition in Riyadh, which completed its eighth season this year; an exhibition of used books in Casablanca; and the Noun exhibition for used books. Other countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, have organized bus tours featuring a wide selection of books which travel periodically around vulnerable and remote areas that lack libraries.

Despite the importance of these and other initiatives, the Arab Reading Challenge, an ambitious initiative launched by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President of the UAE, remains one of the largest initiatives in modern history to encourage students to read. It has created a significant reading movement across all Arab countries, with more than one million students committing themselves to participate in reading fifty million books during each academic year. The Arabic reading competition is open to students from grade 1 to grade 12 in participating

schools, and runs from September to March of each year. It consists of five different stages; each stage requires participants to read and summarize a total of ten books. At the end of the fifth phase, qualifying tournaments begin at the level of schools and education districts, then at a country level, and up to the finals which are held each year in Dubai during the month of May.

The importance of this creative project lies in its attempt to increase the interest in reading among younger generations in the Arab world, and to turn it into a natural habit. It aims to develop youth's intellectual abilities, enhancing their curiosity and helping them acquire effective communication and analytical skills, and encourages the use of Arabic as the language of thought, science, religion, literature, and identity in the 21st century. It also reflects a sound philosophical vision based on the premise that, as Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid notes, reading is the key to knowledge, and knowledge is the key to cultural revival. Promoting knowledge and cultural openness should start at an early age. By instilling the love of reading in the hearts of the young, we are building the foundations of progress and excellence for our countries.³³

The need for an Arab Reading Index

In light of the importance of reading as a tool for knowledge acquisition and creativity across all aspects of human thinking, science and culture, there is a clear need for the development of a tool for monitoring the state of reading in the Arab countries and identifying related challenges. This would help devise plans and comprehensive strategies that enhance cooperation between families, schools, media, and cultural centres in for developing future generations that appreciate reading and are proactive in making positive changes to reading habits.

The Index should take into account the individual characteristics of Arab societies and consider their interests, challenges, cultures, diversities, and methods of expression, as well as examine the reading conditions within each local context. This constitutes a shift from the typical forms of monitoring and measurement – which aim to characterize and rank countries – towards focusing on the identification of challenges and potential solutions.

The availability of an Arab index based on a systematic and objective assessment that takes into account the social, cultural and economic conditions would contribute positively and effectively to efforts monitoring cultural developments in the Arab countries. The intent of the Index will be to inform leaders and decision makers and encourage them to develop road maps for promoting reading in Arab societies.

In this respect, one critic notes that when discussing reading in the Arab world, it is assumed that reading is going through a crisis. The causes of the crisis are then discussed and the absence of a culture of reading is identified as a major concern, as well as the association of reading only with the educational system. This pattern is repeated, owing to the “near absence” of research centres that follow a scientific approach in dealing with the reading problem, or that conduct field studies to provide indicators on the status of reading in the Arab world. Hence, there is a need for research centres that will enable us to change our way of dealing with such difficult issues.³⁴

Arab Reading Index structure

Quantifying the state of reading is certainly a challenging task, mainly to its complex nature and the multitude of dimensions involves (mental, psychological, emotional, social, etc.). The Arab Reading Index is a unique tool that brings together all these different components under a single index, comprising the following three pillars:

Extent of reading

The extent of reading pillar refers to the quantity that is read during a certain period of time. This could be measured by the number of books, pages or the number of minutes spent reading per day, week or year. It aims to determine the quantity read during a given period using a unified unit of measurement that allows for comparison.

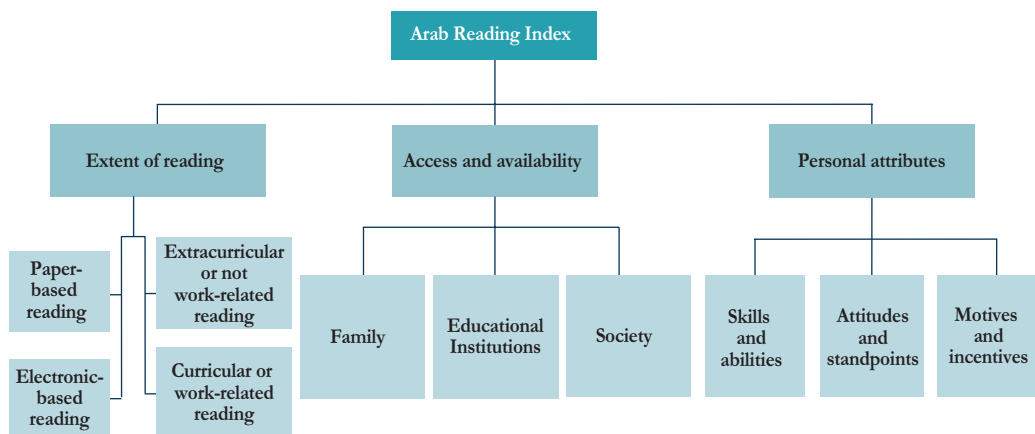
This pillar, however, is not limited to quantitative data. It also takes into account the quality of what is being read by distinguishing between curricular and extracurricular texts, and identifies which subjects receive more interest than others. Attention must be given to what Arabs read, as some books may be more beneficial than others. Furthermore, given the prevalence of digitized texts, this pillar includes all types of digital and electronic documents.

Access and availability

Reading seldom becomes a habit if one is not raised in an environment that encourages the practice. Therefore, to investigate reading in the Arab region and understand what some describe as a “crisis” or a “disability”, opportunities for people in the Arab region to establish a connection with books – as well as their availability – should be explored. Therefore, the Arab Reading Index examines access to reading opportunities in each country at three levels:

Figure 1:

Structure of the Arab Reading Index



Family

There are undoubtedly many factors behind an individual's aversion to reading, including illiteracy, ignorance, poverty, unemployment, etc.; none of these determinants, however, negate the role played by the family in promoting a culture of reading and establishing an intimate and enjoyable relationship with books. Nevertheless, a child in the Arab world normally experiences books for the first time at school; an experience that is usually accompanied by negative feelings because reading textbooks is both mandatory and associated with homework and stressful examinations.

In this regard, The What? magazine polled a group of Arab writers and intellectuals on the causes behind the reading "crisis". Respondents stressed that parents are mostly responsible for causing children's aversion to reading owing to their own lack of interest in reading and in helping their children develop reading habits. It was also described as a consequence of the absence of home libraries. As the presence of a library at home motivates the family to discover the secrets of reading, its absence has created generations that are averse to reading and are utterly inclined to follow their own whims.³⁵ Particularly in the early years of childhood, the presence of books at home is essential for familiarizing a child with reading and fostering his/her curiosity in the act.³⁶

Educational institutions

Education plays an equally important role in developing a child's reading habits through the access they offer in terms of reading opportunities; these opportunities are presented by the whole educational system, which includes the teachers, curricula, administration and facilities. Each of these components plays a specific role in encouraging reading. The school library, for example, is likely to be the place where children first encounter books; it is their first experience of searching for topics and learning how to interact with published material. A child's experience with libraries, whether negative or positive, will have a strong impact on his/her impression of other spaces related to books and reading. Curricula must also pay more attention to reading as a key tool for developing comprehensive knowledge in the information age. However, more often than not, they tend to transform the school into an institution that teaches children to resent books and reading, as current curricula are mostly indoctrinating and compulsory. As a result, children quickly learn to resent reading and writing because the highly-disciplined and purely instructive approach of school life make them less attractive and exciting.³⁷

Society

The role of schools and families in facilitating access to reading opportunities should be complemented by government and civil society efforts. In nations with high rankings in terms of reading, significant attention is accorded to books and reading at all levels. This is reflected in these countries' infrastructures, such as the existence of public libraries, as well as in their policies, such as offering price support for books, and organizing reading competitions, book fairs, and other initiatives that promote reading. The Arab Reading Index therefore takes into account the reading opportunities provided by ministries and civil society organizations to encourage reading and strengthen young people's relationships with books.

Regarding reading opportunities in the Arab region, some scholars note that many public libraries are deserted, not only due to the ICT revolution but also owing to outdated organizational management and book supplies. Others attribute the decline of reading in the region to the media's negligence in promoting books and reading, noting that the prevalent culture in the Arab world is a verbal one, with no effort made to transform it into a written culture and bridge the gap between so-called "refined culture" and "popular culture."³⁸ Many more community-related discouraging factors may be mentioned in this regard.

Personal attributes

Saleh Nassar and colleagues³⁹ note that reading is a dynamic process that requires mental, psychological and physical balance. Any imbalance experienced by the reader will adversely impact his/her reading efficiency. Psychological factors have the greatest impact on reading. Individuals' motives for reading, their perceptions of themselves and of reading, and their previous experiences and capacities in learning how to read are all variables that shape the relation between the individual and the act. For this reason, this pillar was added to the Arab Reading Index, taking into consideration three factors: skills and abilities; attitudes and standpoints; and motives and incentives.

Skills and abilities

These are strongly connected with mental and psychological processes such as imagination, thinking, memorization, etc. Reading skills refer to the "ability to handle various texts (i.e. continuous phrases/ paragraphs, called prose literacy, and schematic texts, such as those included in forms, maps or timetables, or document literacy)."⁴⁰ In recent years, the concept of literacy has been considered "a human right, called the basis for lifelong learning. It empowers individuals, families and communities and improves their quality of life. Because of its 'multiplier effect', literacy helps eradicate poverty, reduce child mortality, curb population growth, achieve gender equality and ensure sustainable development, peace and democracy".⁴¹ The Arab Reading Index includes literacy-related variables, making a distinction between the ability to read and write and literacy skills, which include reading and processing information from written texts.

Attitudes and standpoints

Generally speaking, attitude is a subconscious component of psychological activity. It is manifested in the personality as a tendency to respond in a certain manner to stimuli and to things that fulfil individual needs.⁴² Attitudes towards reading are defined as responses acquired by children in their early years that make them approach reading in a positive or negative way. As such, attitudes contribute to shaping the motives to read. One scholar notes that an individual's attitudes towards reading are affected by upbringing, acquired knowledge, social experience, and information received through media and mass communication. It is also shaped by the characteristics of the individual's social group, the most common activities of the group, the resulting professional reading trends, some of their objective choices, as well as the reference group to which the individual feels a sense of belonging.⁴³

Motives and incentives

Motives are basic elements that drive human behaviour in a certain direction. They could be internal motives that lead to interest in a certain topic, or external motives to complete a specific task for a given benefit (reward). The motive to read is defined as the individual's continuous desire to read and to enjoy what s/he is reading. This individual is characterized by persistence, curiosity for learning, participation in reading activities and competitions, cooperation, sympathy, and high efficiency.⁴⁴ As in the case of other complex processes, reading has multiple motives, creating different complex structures for different kinds of reading; however, they remain constant for the same reader.⁴⁵ Motives to read are classified into aesthetic motives, knowledge motives, emotional motives, leisure motives, and life experience motives.

The data required to implement this index, with its various variables, is mostly unavailable. Even when data is apparently available, it has not been reliable above explained reasons. Therefore, a methodological tool – further outlined in the section below – has been devised to obtain the required data.

Methodology

In light of the lack of reliable data to calculate the Arab Reading Index, the methodological tool that was envisaged needed to satisfy the following criteria fulfil all standard conditions (particularly in terms of validity and consistency) to ensure reliability of results; cover all indicators within the structure of the index, including the social components; and measure quantitative reading indicators, assessing readers' characteristics and perceptions regarding the overall reading environment.

It was observed that a questionnaire would meet all these conditions. Despite some drawbacks, questionnaires are mostly used in public polls and surveys in order to track perceptions and trends. If methodological and technical conditions are met, questionnaires can provide valuable data that help draw valid conclusions about the subject while saving time and effort.

Structure of the questionnaire

In terms of structure, the questionnaire consists of an introduction that explains the survey's framework and goals, followed by a section requesting general information about the respondent, and finally the questions following the same order as the pillars of the index. To ensure the collection of the maximum number of responses and save time, the core team decided that most questions be closed in nature. The team also diversified the statements and provided an explanation on how to answer (by selecting one answer, all that apply, etc.) to avoid repeating the same pattern for each question, which would often lead respondents to answer mechanically and without due consideration. The questionnaire was tested by distributing it to a number of students in Tunisia, Morocco, UAE, Egypt and Jordan. Cronbach's alpha ranged between 0.61 and 0.89. This confirms a degree of consistency that allows trust in the results of the questionnaire.

Table 1:

Distribution of the questionnaire statements according to the pillars of the Arab Reading Index

Arab Reading Index										
Level of Reading (General section and 10 statements)						Access to Reading Opportunities (17 statements)			Personal Factors (10 statements)	
By subject		By medium		By language		Family (5 statements)	Educational institutions (5 statements)	Society (7 statements)	Attitudes (5 statements)	Motives (5 statements)
Within the field of study or work	Outside the field of study or work	Printed/paper	Electronic/digital	Arabic	Foreign language					
2a, 3a	2b, 3b	3c, 6	3d, 7	2c	2d	Questions 8-12	Questions 13-17	Question 18 with 6 statements	Question 19 with 5 statements	Questions 20-24

A list of initial questions was compiled and discussed with the core team of the Arab Knowledge Project to ensure their validity, clarity and relevance to the index. This process resulted in the design of a questionnaire consisting of 44 statements as shown in Table 1.

In order to avoid limiting the Arab Reading Index to the measurement of quantitative aspects of the state of reading in the Arab world, six questions were added on qualitative aspects (questions 4, 5, 25, 26, 27 and 28).

The questionnaire is of particular significance for the following reasons:

- It is based on a comprehensive vision that links reading and knowledge, and is supported by scientific foundations derived from theories on the psychology and sociology of reading.
- It covers the different quantitative and qualitative aspects that affect and are affected by reading, thereby overcoming many of the limitations of previous attempts undertaken to measure the state of reading in the Arab region.
- It meets all academically recognized methodological conditions for designing a questionnaire, starting with explaining the general objective and ending with testing and ensuring validity and consistency.

Data collection method

To ensure the participation of the largest number of respondents from various geographic locations and different educational and professional backgrounds, an electronic questionnaire was developed. To increase the response rate, the questionnaire was also disseminated by a number of Arab celebrities in the fields of media, sports, arts, etc. who shared the questionnaire on their

Twitter and Facebook accounts. To facilitate data collection and analysis, the questionnaire file was linked to an Excel Sheet so that all answers were directly saved in to a database that was immediately available for processing and statistical analysis.

Sample size

After excluding incomplete questionnaires and those with inappropriate answers, the total number of responses was 148,294, of which 60,680 were filled by students in various stages of their education and 87,614 by non-student respondents with various social and professional backgrounds. Therefore, despite the short time allocated for collecting electronic data, participation in the questionnaire was high which could in itself be interpreted as a positive indicator of a general interest in reading.

Statistical methodology

The process of calculating the overall result of the Reading Index consisted of several preparatory stages, including:

- Normalizing the results on a scale of 1 to 100, where a higher value indicates a better score for the relevant country on the given pillar or sub-pillar.
- Calculating the value of the first pillar extent of reading based on its two main sub-pillars: average number of books read (annually) and average of total reading hours (annually).
- Calculating the value of the second pillar access and availability based on its three sub-pillars: family, educational institutions, and society.
- Calculating the value of the third pillar personal attributes based on its three sub-pillars: skills and abilities, attitudes and standpoints, and motives and incentives. As no data was available for the sub-pillar skills and abilities, the literacy rate in each country was used to indicate the number of people who are able to read.

As for relative weights, given the importance of reading as an individual act, the extent of reading pillar was allocated a relative weight of 40 percent, with the remaining 60 percent equally divided between the two pillars access and availability and personal attributes. Within each pillar, relative weights were equally distributed among sub-pillars, and again among variables.

This structure was subject to a number of statistical tests to ensure its validity. Results showed consistency between various components of the Reading Index at all levels. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.970 for the extent of reading pillar, 0.984 for the access and availability pillar, and 0.851 for the personal attributes pillar.

It should be noted that the extent of reading measured by this Arab Reading Index does not take into account the time spent reading correspondence or religious texts.

Results

Extent of reading

The findings of the Arab Reading Index strongly differ from the figures published on the Arab region so far as discussed earlier in this report. In fact, current results showed a remarkable level of interest in reading among Arab people, as shown in the extent of reading pillar:

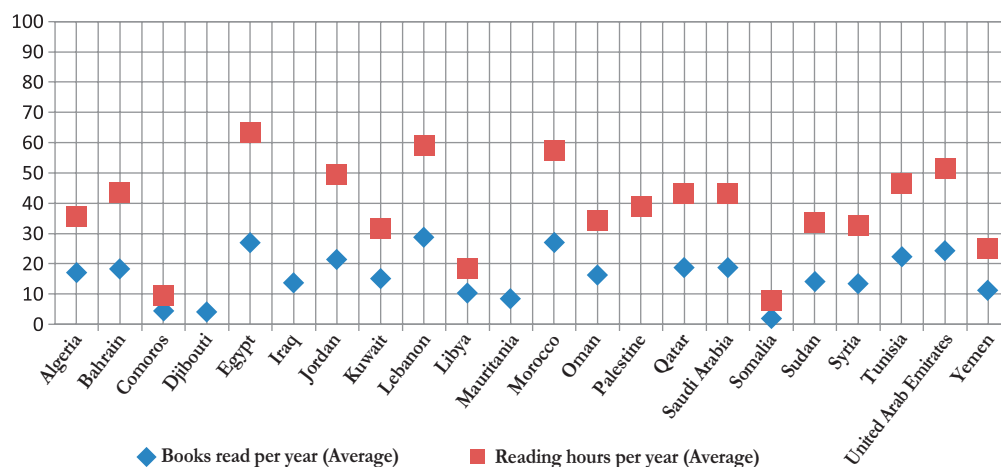
- The average number of reading hours per year varied between 7.78 hours in Somalia to 63.85 hours in Egypt, with an Arab average of 35.24 hours per year.
- The average number of books read per year varied between 1.74 and 28.67, with an Arab average of 16.08 books per year.

The number of books read per year was above the Arab average in the following 12 countries listed in descending order: Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, UAE, Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, State of Palestine, Algeria and Oman. The same countries, with the exception of Oman, also scored above the Arab average in terms of number of reading hours per year, with little variation in their order (Figure 2). These results refute the often-cited figures that have given rise to claims of a “reading crisis” or “reading gap” in the Arab region. They show that the reality is not nearly as severe as suggested by some reports and websites, some of which claim that on average Arab individuals read one quarter of a page per year or six minutes per year as mentioned previously.

For a deeper understanding of the state of reading in the Arab region, the extent of reading pillar included variables measuring reading related to the field of study/work vs. outside the field of study/work, electronic vs. printed documents and language of reading. The results were as follows:

Figure 2:

Average number of reading hours and books read per year in Arab countries



Extent of reading by subject matter: Within or outside the field of work or study

As shown in Table 2, a statistical comparison between the time spent reading subjects that are related to respondents' field of work or study and the time spent reading material about other fields shows that the level of reading outside the field of work or study was higher, with varying differences from one country to another. On average, the difference was 4 hours per year and two books per year. In terms of the number of hours, the highest difference (almost 12 hours per year) was recorded in the UAE and Jordan, whilst the lowest difference (less than 30 minutes) was recorded in Morocco and Mauritania. As for the number of books, the highest difference (5 books per year) was recorded in the UAE, and the lowest difference (less than one book) was recorded in Libya and Mauritania. These results indicate that for the survey sample, reading is an activity that is appreciated for its own sake and is not connected with external obligations.

Table 2:**Extent of reading by subject matter: Average for Arab countries**

Extent of reading	Related to the field of work or study	Outside the field of study or work	Statistical significance test*
Hours per year	15.18 hours	15.18 hours	Difference between the two averages is significant at the level 0.000
Books per year	6.8 books	9.27 books	Difference between the two averages is significant at the level 0.000
* 5% significance level			

Extent of reading by medium: Print or electronic

The comparison between the time spent reading printed versus electronic books and documents shows a higher average for the latter (19.45 hours per year) compared to the former (16.03 hours per year). This is not surprising given the widespread of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the emergence of reading alternatives that are more attractive than contents available in print. Today, printed books are challenged by the competitiveness of e-books, which allow savings in printing, publication, and distribution costs and are easier to carry and store. According to a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers, e-book sales will outnumber print book sales by 2018. Also, a recent survey indicates that the percentage of people who read e-books has reached 11 in the UAE, 9.1 in Saudi Arabia, 7.6 in Qatar, 6 in Bahrain, 6 in Lebanon, 5.6 in Morocco, 5.5 in Oman, 5 in Egypt, 4.5 in Algeria, 4.1 in Jordan, and 3 in Sudan.⁴⁶ This is confirmed by a UNESCO study which notes that this new technology has changed the way people read, with many mobile phone and internet users opting to use e-books.

The rise of digital reading and the resulting competition with traditional printed media has become a key topic at seminars and conferences. For example, the most recent Arab Publishers Conference

held in Sharjah under the title “Publishing Industry: Prospects and Challenges in the Digital Age” focused on the effects of modern technology, including the declining sales of printed books, papers, and magazines, and the emergence of smart phones and social media as alternative means for reading and obtaining information. According to the Secretary-General of the Arab Publishers Association, the correct response to this trend is to embrace this publishing tool which depends on quick advances and easy access and at the same time find suitable solutions to keep pace with the developments, whether positive or negative, resulting from these advances.⁴⁸

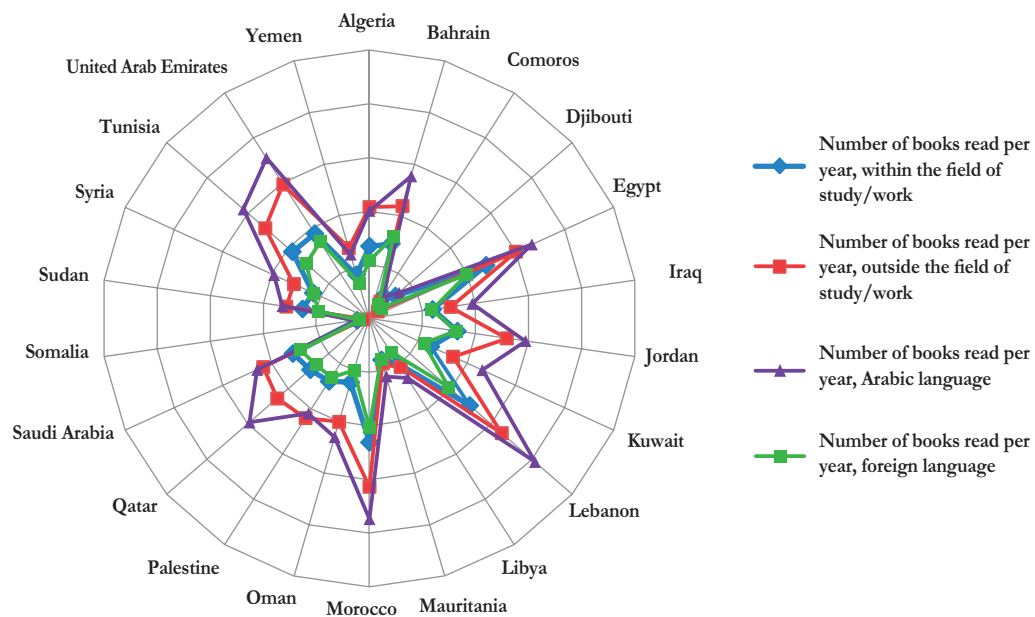
The decline in reading printed material does not indicate a decline in the extent of reading as a whole; there is increasing recognition worldwide that no other generation of teenagers and youth has ever read as much as today’s generation they just do so using different technology (tablets, smartphones, computers, etc.). This has resulted in the emergence of a new pattern of reading which many observers consider more interactive but which involves less concentration given the need to read quickly and share (i.e. read, like, comment, share, and publish). As such, there is a shift from “meditative reading” to “dynamic reading”.⁴⁹

Extent of reading by language: Arabic or foreign

The amount of reading in Arabic was much higher, with country scores ranging between an annual average of 1.23 books in Somalia and 20.4 books in Lebanon, with an Arab average of 10.94 books per year. The annual average of reading in foreign languages (French or English)

Figure 3:

Number of books read annually by language and relation to field of work or study



ranged between 0.9 books in Somalia and 10.22 books in Morocco, with an Arab average of 5.9 books per year. The difference between the annual average of books read in Arabic and in foreign languages was varied: 11 books in Lebanon; 9 books in UAE; 8 in Morocco and Qatar; 7 in Tunisia; 3 in Yemen, Libya and Djibouti; 2 in Mauritania; and 1 in Somalia and Comoros.

This is consistent with the findings of the Next Page survey, in which most respondents said they preferred reading in Arabic, be it print newspapers, magazines, and books or online content. The only exceptions were Algerians, who had equal preferences for Arabic and French, especially when reading online, and Tunisians and Lebanese, who said they preferred Arabic when reading print books and magazines, but preferred French or English when reading online.⁵⁰ In the same context, a survey on reading patterns in Saudi Arabia showed that 80.4 percent of the sample children preferred reading in Arabic, while 13.1 percent preferred mixing Arabic and English.⁵¹

One can argue that even though these results do not refute current perceptions regarding the declining status of Arabic, they denote an increasing interest in Arabic by Arab societies. This should come as no surprise given the variety of national and regional initiatives promoting the Arabic language. For example, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation's "Bel Arabi" initiative was launched in 2016 on the occasion of the UN Arabic Language Day with the aim of changing the stereotypical image of Arabic and encouraging Arabs to use their mother tongue in the virtual world, especially on social media. Likewise, the Qatar Foundation established the World Organization for Renaissance of Arabic Language, which aims to use creative initiatives to make Arabic a language of communication, research, science, and culture. The results of the Arab Reading Index represent a positive indicator of the readiness of Arab readers to read books in Arabic and encourage further efforts to enrich Arabic content, whether in print or electronic form. Such efforts will serve to enhance the status of Arabic as a tool in knowledge production, transfer and localization, and a means to acquire the requisite values and skills for developing a knowledge economy. This would not neglect foreign languages though, which allow access to international knowledge and technological products.

Access and availability

Instilling reading habits among children is largely dependent on the surrounding cultural environment at the levels of the family, educational institutions and society. The overall score on the access and availability pillar confirms the existence of an enabling environment that encourages reading in certain Arab countries. Four countries (Morocco, UAE, Egypt, and Lebanon) scored above 80, while Djibouti, Comoros, and Somalia scored below 10. As for types of access, results show interesting disparities both among and within countries (Figure 4).

The results shown in Table 3 indicate that the level of access to reading opportunities in the Arab region as a whole is still low, especially at the level of the society. In general, scores on the school sub-pillar were the highest in most countries, except for Lebanon and Egypt, which scored higher on the family sub-pillar. Meanwhile, standard deviation values confirm that scores were widely spread, which means that strengths and weaknesses differ from country to country. Therefore, the following section will shed light on access to reading opportunities, with a focus on the performance of individual countries.

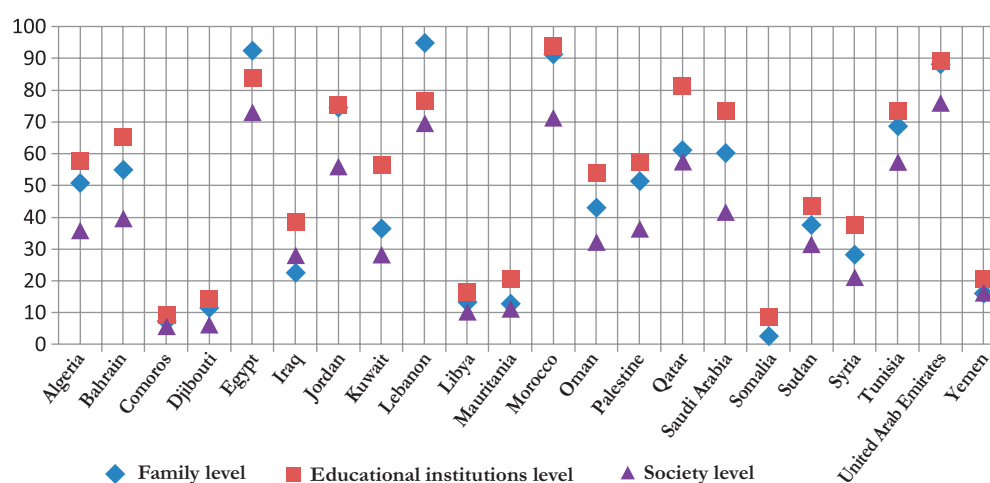
Table 3:

Access and availability sub-pillars: Average for Arab countries

Access and availability	Average score	Standard deviation	Significance level test*
Family	46.16	30.10	Difference between average scores is significant at the level 0.000
Educational institutions	52.02	27.77	
Society	36.56	23.72	
* 5% significance level			

Figure 4:

Access and availability sub-pillars: Results of Arab countries



Family

Scores on the family sub-pillar varied between 1.45 in Somalia and 94.84 in Lebanon. This wide disparity largely explains the low Arab average score. Eleven countries scored above 50. These include four countries that scored above 80 (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and UAE), five countries that scored between 60 and 75 (Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia), and two countries (Algeria and State of Palestine) that scored almost 50. On the other hand, Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, and Yemen scored below 20.

This shows the need to enhance the role of the family in the Arab world as an enabling environment where children learn about reading. All relevant studies have confirmed that there is a strong

positive correlation between the family environment and children's love of reading. In this respect, the Reading and the Knowledge Society report issued by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture quotes a number of local, regional and international studies that confirm the role of parents – particularly mothers – in defining children's views of reading. These studies also show positive correlation between reading trends and a number of variables that are related to the family, such as parents' education level and amount of reading, as well as the availability of a library at home.

Educational institutions

Scores on this sub-pillar show a similar trend to that noticed in the family sub-pillar, but with some differences in numbers. In general, scores varied between 7.44 in Somalia and 93.6 in Morocco. Thirteen countries scored above the Arab average (52.02). This number includes the same group of countries that topped the previous sub-pillar, in addition to Algeria, Kuwait, Oman, and State of Palestine. On the other hand, the same low ranking countries on the family sub-pillar received low scores on this sub-pillar.

This result, which indicates the overall availability of a suitable environment at most schools in Arab countries, represents an important drive towards the creation of reading communities. It places significant responsibility on schools to instil the habit of reading among children. Such a habit will not develop unless one experiences the joy of reading, which will not happen until reading becomes a kind of discovery that develops the mind and expands understanding; all of this depends on having a good way for dealing with scientific material which students are required to read.⁵² Several studies have dealt with this subject, whether in the Arab region or beyond. They agree that the school environment plays a key role in motivating children to read. For example, a survey on reading trends conducted in Ankara, Turkey, showed that teachers play a vital role in developing positive attitudes towards reading among children.⁵³

Society

Scores on the society sub-pillar were relatively lower than those on the other two sub-pillars (family and educational institutions). They ranged from 1.67 in Somalia to 75.92 in the United Arab Emirates. The average score for all Arab countries was 36.56, which falls in the lower part of the 1-100 scale. The low access to reading opportunities at the society level, in both government and private institutions, is related to the weak cultural environment in some Arab countries, lack of interest in reading venues, absence of cultural activities and programmes that motivate people to read, lack of exhibitions that introduce new books and seminars that discuss them, and lack of interest in activities that promote books and encourage the habit of reading.

In general, the above results indicate the need to formulate strategic plans by all entities that are concerned with educating and developing youth – including families; ministries of culture, education and youth affairs; media outlets; and civil society institutions – in order to exert more efforts to instil a love of reading among children and encourage them to read regularly. This would help overcome the intellectual and knowledge deficits that lie at the heart of the cultural, civilizational, scientific and technological challenges facing the Arab world.

Table 4:

Personal attributes sub-pillars: Average for Arab countries

Personal attributes	Average score	Standard deviation	Statistical significance test*
Skills and abilities	82.38	15.60	Difference between average scores is significant at the level 0.000
Attitudes and standpoints	57.33	25.57	
Motives and incentives	51.10	24.30	
* 5% significance level			

Personal attributes

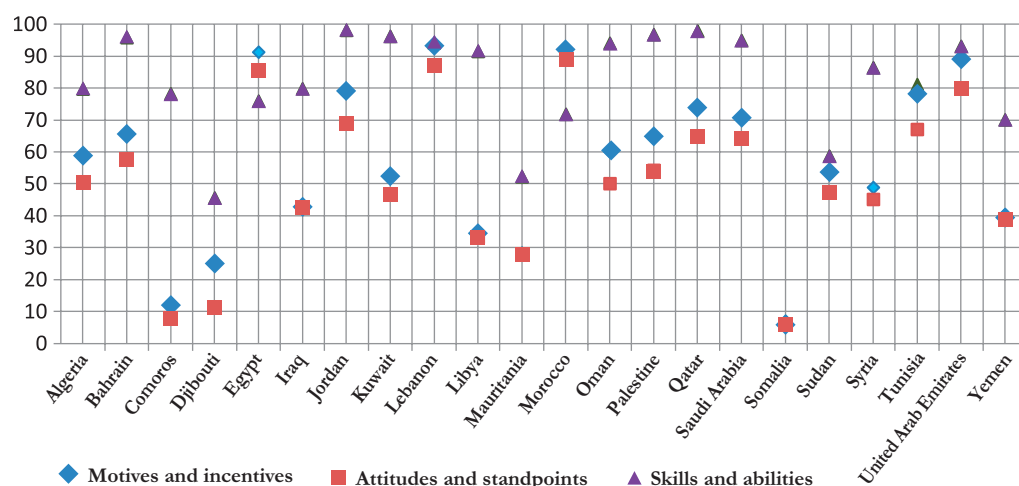
Personal attributes play an important role in defining individuals' relationships with reading. As explained in the conceptual framework section, in order to form a genuine reading habit, a number of cognitive and personal attributes are required, including most notably reading and comprehension abilities, a positive attitude towards reading and having motives to read. Therefore, these three factors were incorporated as sub-pillars of the Arab Reading Index. Scores on the personal attributes pillar ranged from 6.35 (Somalia) to 93.40 (Lebanon), with the following breakdown of results:

Table 4 reveals better performance on the skills and abilities sub-pillar, with a higher average score and a lower standard deviation in comparison to the other two sub-pillars (attitudes and standpoints and motives and incentives). It needs to be reiterated that the skills and abilities sub-pillar was not directly measured through the questionnaire but was calculated on the basis of literacy rates among individuals of both sexes who are above 15 years old in each country, as this rate indicates the number of people who are capable of reading. Average scores on the attitudes and standpoints and motives and incentives sub-pillars were close to each other and to the middle of the scale, which means these two factors play a limited role when considering the Arab average score. However, looking at the performance of individual countries reveals wide disparities (Figure 5).

Correlation analysis showed a statistically significant positive correlation between the three factors. This is consistent with studies on the psychology of reading which conclude that reading is essentially a psychological process rather than a physical or mental one; it is related to the general abilities of readers, their willingness and motives to read, the purpose of reading, the tendency to read in specific fields, and the thought process before, during, and after reading.⁵⁴

Attitudes and standpoints

Twelve countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the UAE) scored higher than the Arab average score, ranging between 58.78 in the case of Algeria and 92.97 in the case of Lebanon. The lowest scores were those of Somalia (6.91), Comoros (11.93), Djibouti (24.98), Mauritania (28.2), and Libya (35.13).

Figure 5:**Personal attributes sub-pillars: Results of Arab countries**

These results – although positive overall, and especially in the case of countries with scores above 70 – indicate the need to pay more attention to this aspect, because attitudes are strong drivers of motives to read, as confirmed by numerous Arab and international studies. In this respect, a study published by the Journal of the College of Education confirmed that several components of the motivation to read – including sharing, curiosity, and learning – are largely present in individuals with positive attitudes towards reading.⁵⁵

It was not possible to compare these results with others due to the lack of regional comparative studies concerning attitudes towards reading. There are, however, many local studies about this subject, which agree on the importance of attitudes to reading and focus particularly on identifying the attitudes of school and university students towards reading and the link between these attitudes and personal variables such as gender, intelligence, level of education, academic discipline as well as environmental factors such as parents' educational attainment, household income, educational practices, cultural and social factors, and others. This leads to the conclusion that identifying students' attitudes towards reading is an essential step because such identification could provide relevant parties with a starting point to help instil, enhance, and direct positive attitudes to strengthen the motives to read and make reading a genuine habit for individuals.

Motives and incentives

Scores on the motives and incentives sub-pillar are relatively low when compared to those on the skills and abilities and attitudes and standpoints sub-pillars. Only ten countries scored above the Arab average score. These are also the countries with top rankings on the attitudes and standpoints sub-pillar, with the exception of Oman and Algeria. The same observation applies to the group of lowest ranking countries. In general, it seems that more efforts are needed to strengthen and support

the motives to read. This requires identifying the real motives which drive an individual's desire to read and which give them most satisfaction. In this respect, it is necessary to focus on developing intrinsic motives to read, such as curiosity, persistence, self-image, reading efficiency, self-efficacy, etc., instead of focusing on extrinsic motives. Several studies in various parts of the world have indicated a positive direct impact of intrinsic motives on the desire to read and comprehend, and consequently on academic achievement.⁵⁶

Skills and abilities

The rate of literacy in the Arab region is constantly improving, with several Arab countries reaching global levels of almost 100 percent. Scores on the skills and abilities sub-pillar were above 80 in twelve countries, between 60 and 80 in six countries, 52 in Mauritania, and 45 in Djibouti. No data was available for Somalia. These results are overall very high and confirm the availability of the essential requirement for reading (i.e. literacy) which would help develop reading skills and establish reading as a habit. The existence of this minimum literacy requirement inspires hope when promoting reading in the Arab region and confidence in the ability of citizens to acquire basic life skills that enable them to actively contribute to knowledge societies and economies. This explains the consensus in the United Nations on the importance of literacy, reflected in UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment 2005-2015⁵⁷ that aimed to ensure literacy for all on the basis that "creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy."⁵⁸

However, efforts to promote the traditional concept of literacy should not be at the expense of promoting digital literacy, which has become vital in an age of technological revolution. In this respect, experts argue that new forms of reading using digital tools put into question new beliefs related to and ideas acquired through reading, as well as readers' motives and strategies, and their relationship with information and knowledge.⁵⁹

The above analysis concerning attitudes towards reading, motives to read, and reading abilities shows that reading is a comprehensive skill that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. As long as these elements are in harmony, reading will be a beneficial and continuous act. Moreover, since reading abilities, motives to read and attitudes towards reading are acquired characteristics rather than inherent ones, they are in constant need of an environment that facilitates their growth and enables them to strengthen knowledge capital.

Quality aspects of reading

To enable a better understanding of the status of reading in the Arab region beyond the quantitative aspects, the questionnaire included questions that cover some qualitative aspects of reading, including the following:

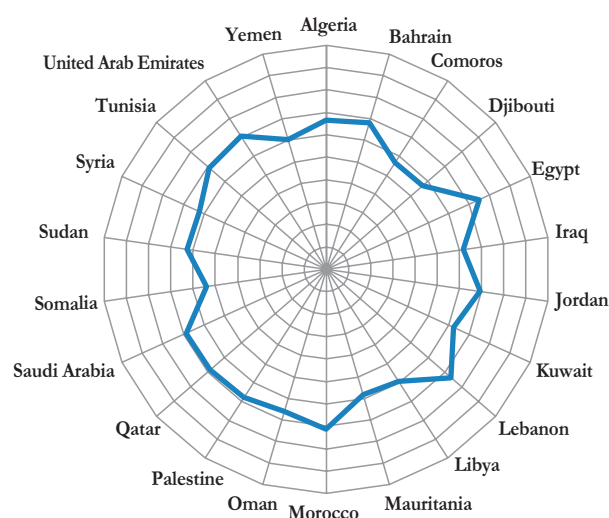
Reading: comfort and happiness

Whether undertaken out of duty or personal interest, for knowledge acquisition or entertainment, reading will eventually reduce stress and lead to positive feelings. Yet, it is only internally-motivated reading that may give the reader a feeling of happiness, self-satisfaction, and internal peace. Reading enriches the mind, induces imagination, generates a better understanding of the world and stimulates creativity and innovation. This raises well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and improves one's ability to recognise beauty within oneself and in the world, thereby creating a feeling of joy and happiness.

Respondents were asked whether reading made them feel happy, and their answers confirmed the positive connection between the two. Overall, 64.93 percent of respondents said reading made them feel happy. This proportion did not drop below 50 percent in any country, remaining between 54.15 and 74.92 percent. Based on the answers of respondents, Arab countries can be divided into three groups. The first group comprises countries where more than 70 percent of respondents said reading made them feel happy. This includes Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. Thirteen countries populate the second group, in which the results were between 60 and 70 percent; these are: Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Finally, the third group includes Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, and Somalia, where the results ranged between 50 and 60 percent.

Figure 6:

Extent of happiness derived from reading in Arab countries (%)



Happiness is a constituent concept of ‘positive psychology’, which is concerned with fulfilling one’s potential and achieving self-satisfaction and internal peace. According to experts, when one has a positive experience, pleasant memories of this experience are retained, along with a feeling of pride and achievement for having completed a specific goal or learned something new, thereby increasing self-confidence and self-esteem. This is experienced by those who read voluntarily rather than reluctantly; they learn and enjoy at the same time. Some psychologists even view reading as a means to reduce stress and depression, because it keeps the mind occupied, shifts focus away from one’s concerns, and creates a feeling of joy and self-satisfaction.⁶⁰

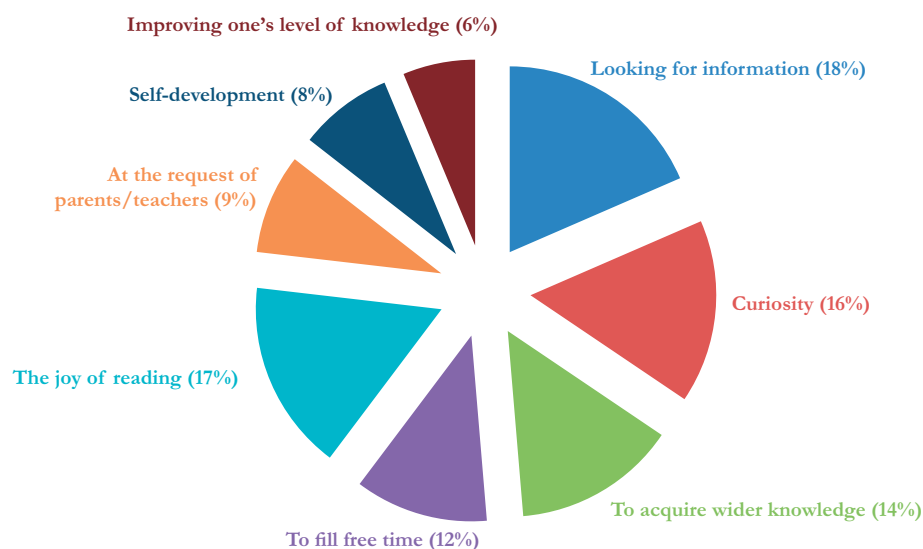
Moreover, a study released by the “Social Science & Medicine” journal associated book reading with longevity.⁶¹ The survey followed 3,635 men and women aged above 50 years over a period of 12 years, and found that reading books for 3.5 hours per week was associated with a 17 percent reduction in mortality rate over 12 years. It suggested that reading had a positive impact on the individual’s cognitive abilities as it improves the activity of brain cells.

Why people read?

As discussed above, motives play an essential role in people’s decision to read and are therefore important to understand. The respondents were asked to identify the main reason why they read out of eight possible options. The results showed four main motives for reading: looking for information; the joy of reading itself; curiosity; and to acquire wider knowledge. The motives with lower rankings were: at the request of parents or teachers; self-development; and improving one’s level of knowledge (Figure 7).

Figure 7:

Motives for reading across the Arab region



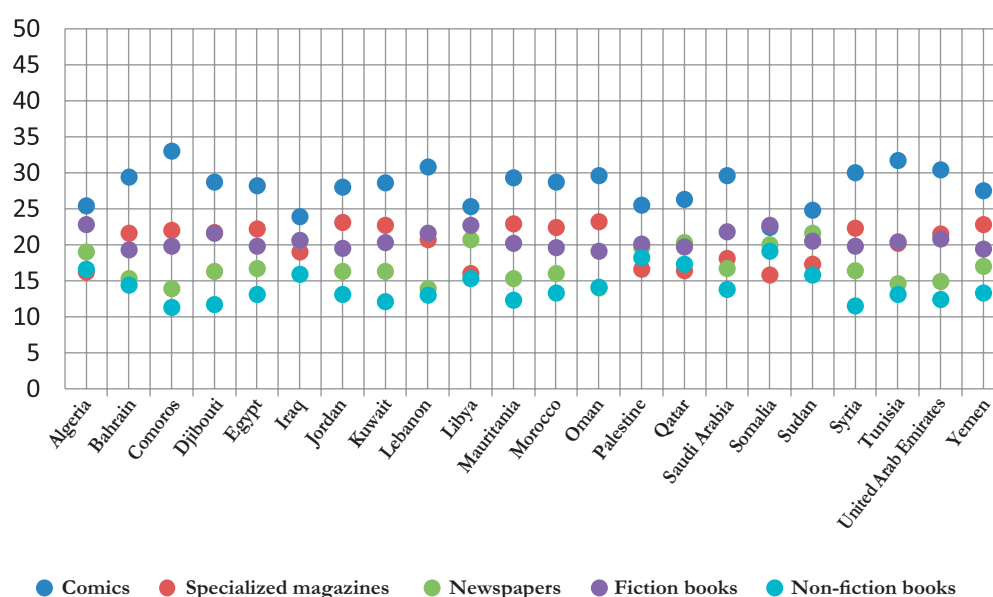
This shows that the most common motives for reading in Arab countries combine an external motive (seeking a certain benefit that has to do with knowledge acquisition or education) and an internal motive (enjoying reading and satisfying curiosity). This appears normal given the fact that a high percentage of the respondents are school and university students who read as part of their studies, as well as for personal interest, resulting in a higher percentage of reading in general. However, some studies on the obstacles to reading have shown that the intensity of homework and school curricular could reduce the time available for free extracurricular reading.

Types of printed material respondents read

Despite the contemporary technological revolution, some respondents continue to read printed material, including books, magazines, newspapers, and others. In particular, it seems that books have not lost their allure, as the results of the Arab Reading Index have shown. Reading non-fiction books ranked first (28.05 percent), followed by fiction books (20.55 percent), and specialized magazines (20.21 percent). Reading newspapers and comics ranked in the lowest two positions (17.06 and 14.12 percent respectively). This general trend, especially in relation to reading books, applies to all Arab countries with the exception of Somalia, which had equal percentages for reading fiction and non-fiction books. Adding up the percentages of people who prefer reading non-fiction books and those who prefer reading fiction books gives a total of 48.6 percent, which means that books in general are the predominant preference of Arab readers among the different types of printed material read.

Figure 8:

Types of printed material read in Arab countries



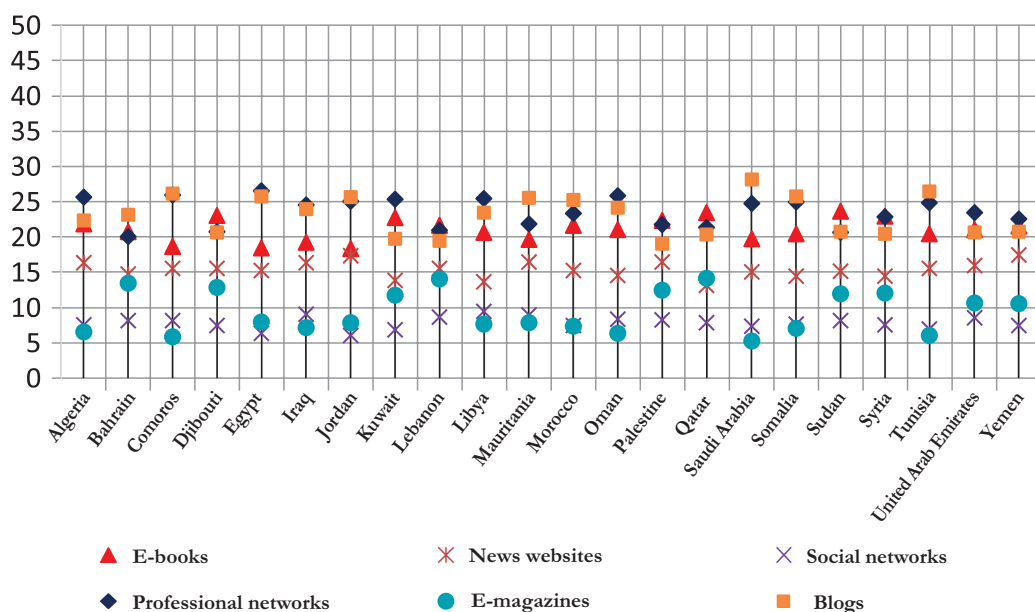
This result is very positive if taken in light of the previously-mentioned study published by the Social Science & Medicine journal. The study explores whether or not there is a positive impact for reading books in comparison to other types of printed material.⁶² It argues that reading books is connected with “two cognitive processes that could give the reader a ‘survival advantage’. First, reading books promotes ‘deep reading’, which is a slow, immersive process; a cognitive engagement that occurs ‘as the reader draws connections to other parts of the material, finds applications to the outside world, and asks questions about the content presented’. Cognitive engagement may explain why vocabulary, reasoning, concentration, and critical thinking skills are improved by exposure to books. Second, ‘books can promote empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence, which are cognitive processes that can lead to greater survival’.”⁶³ It is not clear whether the survey sample read fiction or non-fiction books, however the study assumed that most respondents most likely read fiction after referring to another survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2009, showing that “87% of book readers choose fiction.”⁶⁴

Types of electronic material respondents read

In an age in which information and communications technology is experiencing unprecedented advances, reading cannot remain confined to printed material. The emergence of new electronic media to deliver books, magazines and newspapers is a natural step, and has resulted in a new type of reading: digital reading. There exists a multitude of websites and networks in various fields that make it possible to find information faster and with less effort, and to interact with other readers around the world.

Figure 9:

Types of electronic material read in Arab countries



The results of the survey showed that the highest percentage of respondents read material on social networks (23.52 percent), followed by news websites (23.02 percent), and e-books (21.01 percent). Specialized e-magazines ranked fourth (15.32 percent), followed by blogs and professional networks (9.35 and 7.78 percent respectively). This distribution demonstrates that reading electronic content is more focused on public life, which is consistent with the findings of a survey conducted by the Next Page Foundation shows that most people who use the Internet do so to chat or to read newspapers and magazines (100 percent in Syria, 80 percent in Lebanon, 78 percent in the State of Palestine, 77 percent in Saudi Arabia, 75 percent in Jordan, 62 percent in Egypt, 59 percent in Morocco, and 55 percent in Tunisia).

In this regard, some intellectuals and media specialists have noted that reading electronic content mainly refers to the public life of individuals, while reading print material is more about processes related to official entities, schools, universities, research, and reports. Furthermore, digital reading has become a daily activity that one learns quickly without going to school, thus becoming a need that individuals practice with different frequencies given its direct relation to daily realities.

It is worth noting that reading electronic material has given rise to controversy between those who support it and those who warn of a negative impact on mental capabilities. Despite the rising recognition of the advantages of such media (saving effort, cost and time and expanding reading opportunities beyond the limits of time and place), many psychologists and neurologists warn that fast browsing of online content affects neural links in the brain and their formation. They argue that using the Internet develops the skills of finding information, but creates difficulties in focusing thoroughly on articles (they claim that the level of concentration while reading online is 25 percent of that employed when reading printed material), and weakens their interest, which makes it more difficult to understand complex information.⁶⁶

Interest in the latest publications

The results showed that 38.29 percent of the respondents seek to follow the latest publications, with 19.68 percent regularly following print publications, and 18.6 percent regularly following digital publications. This can be seen as an indirect indication of interest in reading and publications in general, and of an almost equal interest in the latest of both print and electronic publications. This is in some way consistent with respondents' almost equal interest in reading printed material and electronic material (in general); this comparison however conversely resulted in a tipped scale towards electronic material.

Comparing the results of Arab countries, the percentage of people who expressed interest in learning about the latest print publications and that of people interested in the latest electronic publications was almost equal in most countries, with the exception of Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Somalia, where people who follow electronic publications accounted for less than three percent of respondents. This is not surprising in light of the fact that these countries lack the technological infrastructure necessary for people to access the Internet and electronic services. This was noted by a UAE scholar who, in an article on digital culture, stated that digital culture does not expand in a balanced way, whether within the same society or between different societies. It

creates a kind of cultural monopoly and is not equally distributed among individuals and societies. Access of individuals and societies to this culture is dependent on their abilities and skills in handling it and in using technology. These abilities are certainly inversely proportional to the rate of technological illiteracy, as they can reach their lowest levels, and might even be almost inexistent where alphabetical illiteracy is high, which is still a problem in many societies.⁶⁷

Conclusion and Recommendations

Reading is mankind's main means for acquiring knowledge, communicating with others, and achieving progress and prosperity. Therefore, it has acquired vital importance in our world today and has become an indicator of intellectual and cultural sophistication. It provides individuals with access to knowledge, allows them to remain informed, and supports their continuous development. However, to achieve such benefits, reading should be a lifelong daily habit, especially in a world that is characterized by the rapid development of knowledge and innovation.

The Arab Reading Index contributes to the efforts of the Arab Knowledge Project in improving the status of knowledge in the region based on an enlightened vision of sustainable development. The index seeks to identify the obstacles to reading in the Arab region and to measure its levels, forms and media. The importance of the Arab Reading Index lies in the fact that so far the methodological tools to accurately diagnose the status of reading in the Arab countries was lacking. Now, the availability of these figures can help formulate visions and policies to promote reading as a means to advance social development.

The results of the field survey, which included 148,294 respondents from all Arab countries (60,680 students in various educational stages and 87,614 non-student respondents with various social and professional backgrounds), confirm that the Arab people have not abandoned reading, as has been claimed in recent years. Their motives and goals may differ; the tools and media they use may vary; and their skills, abilities, and financial conditions may not be the same, but they do read.

Print books might be less attractive than they used to be, especially among younger generations that are growing up in the modern ICT age, but the act of reading itself has apparently not declined. On the contrary, it has increased owing to the wide spread of new technologies and applications-particularly smart phones, tablets, and e-readers.

The Index can help to identify some of the prerequisites for improving the status of reading in the region, especially in terms of the formative environments in which children are raised. Depending on the educational methods they adopt and the physical and mental incentives they offer, these environments can predispose children to either a love for, or a hatred of reading. Furthermore, the results show that access to reading opportunities is available to varying degrees in most Arab countries, with the exception of those suffering from unstable conditions. Nonetheless, this access requires improvement at all levels—family, school, and society. Creating a generation that both actively reads and enjoys reading is a shared responsibility that requires concerted efforts by families and schools, as well as through active political will and strong social support.

Reading is not merely a process of decoding written symbols; it is a process of mental and emotional interaction between the reader and the text. Hence, the dynamics of reading cannot be understood in isolation from the personal characteristics of the reader. That is why the Arab Reading Index has sought to analyze reading skills and abilities, motives, and incentives to read and attitudes and standpoints towards reading. The results show significant disparities between countries in terms of these sub-pillars, similar to the disparities noted on the sub-pillars of access and availability. Countries with low scores on the motives and incentives and attitudes and standpoints sub-pillars also scored lowest on the access and availability and extent of reading pillars. This shows quite clearly the threat posed to the cultural, developmental and knowledge status of these countries.

This diagnosis should serve as a clarion call for successful, well-resourced Arab countries to exert coordinated, collaborative efforts to help neighbouring Arab countries overcome the crises they face and create a better future for the entire Arab region. The consequences of intellectual, cultural, and educational backwardness will not be contained within the borders of individual states, but will rather threaten the stability of the region itself and undermine its competitiveness and development, as Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum has previously stated:

Our fate as Arabs is to work and face challenges together. The resources are available and so are the opportunities. If we set aside the many common denominators between us Arabs, then geography alone demands the highest levels of cooperation between Arab countries. When the world deals with us, it places these denominators at the center of its policies, calculations, and plans regardless of the effectiveness of these denominators. We must invest this effectiveness positively and constructively.⁶⁸

At the national and local levels, institutions – such as ministries of culture, youth and education, and civil society organizations – should devise strategic plans to instil the habit of reading among children and young people. Educational programmes and practices that encourage reading should be developed, such as launching awareness campaigns to educate families on the importance of encouraging children to read regularly; improving the social environment; and providing facilities, venues, and events (libraries, reading clubs, book fairs, writing workshops, etc.) that build an enduring relationship with reading in its different forms. In this respect, all media outlets, whether conventional or otherwise, must play their part in directing the public to read and influencing the behaviour of individuals – especially children and teenagers – through programmes that promote reading and new publications. This includes interviews with writers and talk shows discussing significant headers. Furthermore, the discourse of television and radio stations has to evolve in order to contribute to efforts promoting reading, restoring its allure, improving its quality, and directing it towards the realization of knowledge societies.

The results and accompanying discussion in this report serve as an example of the kind of analysis that the Arab Reading Index makes possible. The field survey resulted in the creation of a rich database that is the first of its kind in the Arab world. This database can be used to conduct further quantitative and qualitative studies which may support a deeper analysis of the status of reading in the region. Therefore, work is expected to proceed in the next stage in two complementary directions:

- The overall results presented in this report do not focus on personal, social, and educational characteristics of the respondents. However, given the importance of personality differences and their effects on individuals' relationships with reading, a second report will be produced to investigate the status of reading by analysing in greater depth a number of key variables, such as age, gender, educational attainment, place of residence, category (student/non-student), etc.
- The current structure of the Arab Reading Index will be refined and supplemented by additional sources of data to develop a better understanding of the status of books and reading in the region. The topics covered in the questionnaire will be expanded including book publication and distribution, book fairs and visitor numbers, book marketing, copyright protection, etc. All these variables will help reflect further the levels of production and popularity of reading material in Arab societies.

Reading is undoubtedly one of the gateways to knowledge and development. As the extent of reading among individuals in a given society becomes higher, they gain access to better opportunities, become more aware of the world around them, and become more capable of engaging in continuous self-learning and self-development. Conversely, the less people read, the more they risk falling prey to cultural misinformation and social marginalization, which severely undermine their ability to contribute to development.

As such, reading is an essential means for empowering people and communities, avoiding decline and stagnation, and building the knowledge capital that forms the cornerstone of comprehensive and sustainable Arab development. For this to happen, there needs to be a new generation of readers who regard reading not only as beneficial (for homework, at the request of others or in hope of reward, albeit these being important at a certain stage) but who also embrace the concept of voluntary reading - an instinctive daily practice stemming from the awareness of the vital importance of reading in developing oneself and society. This is the true challenge for reading in the Arab region.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ Ahirshaw, 2014 (in Arabic).
- ⁷ Al-Zaki et al., 2013 (in Arabic).
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- ⁹ OECD, 2003.
- ¹⁰ Office québécois de la langue française, 2005.
- ¹¹ Organisation of the Islamic Conference (SESRIC), 2010.
- ¹² Shukri, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ¹³ UNESCO, 2014.
- ¹⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, 1999.
- ¹⁵ Al-Mudhaki, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ¹⁶ Al-Omani, 2011 (in Arabic).
- ¹⁷ Shukri, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Arab Thought Foundation, 2009 (in Arabic).
- ²⁰ Karima, 2015 (in Arabic).
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- ²³ Bouanaka, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ²⁴ Salem, 2010 (in Arabic).
- ²⁵ Kaid, 2009 (in Arabic).
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Tashkendi, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ²⁸ Caldwell, 2012.
- ²⁹ Duriez, et al., 1991.
- ³⁰ Hersent, 2000.
- ³¹ Tashkendi, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ³² Al-Jazeera Mubasher, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ³³ Arab Reading Challenge, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ³⁴ Shukri, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Twati, 2004 (in Arabic).
- ³⁷ Shukri, 2015 (in Arabic).
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Al-Nassar et al., 2006 (in Arabic).
- ⁴⁰ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009.

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- 42 Al-Sood, 2009 (in Arabic).
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- 51 King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, 2013 (in Arabic).
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