

IPA in Conversation with ...
Bachar Chebaro
Secretary General, Arab Publishers Association
Publishing in the Arab world during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Conducted by José Borghino, Secretary General, IPA
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Transcript

José Borghino: Welcome to another episode of the IPA in Conversation series, where the IPA talks to some of our 83 members around the world to see how they are coping with the COVID pandemic.

Today, it's my pleasure to speak with Mr Bachar Chebaro, the Secretary General of our Associate Member, the Arab Publishers Association. Welcome Bachar!

Bachar Chebaro: Thank you very much

Some of our members won't know very much about the Arab Publishers Association. For their benefit, could you give us some background: How many members are there? Does the Association cover the whole Arab world? When was the APA founded? Who is the current President?

Bachar: Greeting everyone, I am the Secretary General of the Arab Publishers Association since 2016. It is an honor and privilege to be with you today.

The Arab Publishers Association is a non-profit association with financial and administrative autonomy established by the League of Arab States in 1962.

This association consists of Arab Publishers Unions, each represented by a member in the Association's board of members, in addition to the members of the general assembly that elects an equal number of representatives of the countries participating in the association. So, the association's board of directors currently are 32 members, 16 of them representing the Arab publishers' unions while the remaining 16 were elected by the general assembly.

The APA covers the Arabian countries that has associations and consists of 780 members, the current President is Mr. Mohamed Rashad who is Egyptian. So we are syndicates (unions) and members at the same time.

The main objective of the association is to defend and develop the Arab publishing industry, to protect intellectual property rights, and to defend Arab culture and all its components.

José: Ok, thank you very much, Bachar. That's very interesting. It's great to hear about the different structures of our members. So, let's talk about COVID. Has the lockdown for COVID-19 been the same across all your members? How strict were the lockdown measures?

Bachar: Yes, the lockdown has been the same across all our members but it took place in different timing in each of the Arab countries. It is good to highlight that all of the Arab countries share the same language but at the same time have different rules and regulations. Thus the same book is sold in different countries and whenever a publisher buys the rights of a book he usually buys the right of translation in all the Arab world.

The lockdown measures were strict in most Arab countries. Can I say, all Arab countries.

José: Were all bookstores closed?

Bachar: Yes, for two months, sometimes three months. It depends between one country and another.

José: Were home deliveries allowed?

Bachar: As you know, all the bookstores were closed in different durations and depending on each country's regulations, many publishers activated the home deliveries, but some warehouses were closed and thus the distribution was not in full capacity. That's happened with the online. All this (had to) wait.

José: Talking about the difference between physical and online. In some parts of the world, what COVID-19 has created has been an incentive for new channels of digital delivery. So, do you know what the split of physical sales versus digital was before the lockdown? Has that changed since the lockdown?

Bachar: Really, we make a survey, specially for this. As per a survey done by the APA, the sales of most Arab publishers, the digital increased between 30-35%. Yes, that's from the first month. But this is the problem, the sales of the physical decreased to more than 80%. Yes, that's what happened.

José: Wow, that is really tough.

Bachar: Yes, that is what happened in all Arab countries.

José: Yeah, I've heard from some of our members of a decrease of 70% but, 80%, I think you win the prize for the worst numbers. I'm sorry to say.

Bachar: Sorry for that.

José: Yeah, I'm very sorry to say that. In response to this has the government ...

Bachar: Can I say something here, sorry to interrupt you.

José: Sure.

Bachar: Once we were at Muscat Book Fair and at that time happened this COVID problem. The first 4 days were perfect. Days 5 and 6, 50/50. Days 6, 7, 8 – 90% of the people didn't attend the book fair because they were afraid.

José: Which book fair was this?

Bachar: Muscat. That was the last Arab book fair.

José: We'll talk about book fairs in a second because I think that's a very important issue, not just for you, but for a lot of our members. Given the severity of the loss of sales, physical book sales, have governments in the Arab region been supporting publishers? Are any sectors receiving specific support from the government? What about authors or booksellers?

Bachar: Some governments supported their local publishers but in general the region is under tight economical pressure especially with the reduction of oil prices. You know our area. I can say that GCC countries, the Gulf, and Morocco did support their publishers more than others. I don't have much information about the support that was given to authors or booksellers. But maybe, no I'm sure, it was less than publishers.

José: So, in many of these conversations, we've been hearing that a number of publishers have had to close down or severely restrict operations. You mentioned that you had 780 publishers that are members of the APA. Have you heard how the majority are coping with this? Are they getting through the COVID Pandemic?

Bachar: Once the pandemic started it was hard to cope with all the changes, but due to the need of survival the members started shifting more and more to digital and audio book formats. Even the publishers who did not have digital books started to turn their books to digital and audio formats.

Moreover, more online sales and home delivery occurred during this period of time with majority of publishers and employees working remotely. The best example is our interview via zoom that we are currently doing live from our homes. So that's the same problem.

José: I am in Gex in France. Where are you?

Bachar: I am in Doha.

José: So, some things get better. This communications revolution will keep going into the future. OK, so what have publishers done in response to the COVID Pandemic? In other parts of the world, for example, education publishers have been supporting teachers, pupils and even parents during this homeschooling epidemic. So, what has been happening in the Arab world?

Bachar: The publishers offered, through their syndicate associations, books to the people who were locked down in healthcare centers in order to entertain them. Other publishers offered the digital books through their official websites. That's the two ways they responded. I noticed that some publishers started a free online storytelling service to entertain children, also. So that's what happened in our area.

José: It sounds very similar to what education publishers have done elsewhere in the world so that's good news. But obviously we're concerned that once the COVID crisis is over then the usual selling conditions apply, or licensing conditions apply, and we go back to a sustainable model in the future. Because obviously giving content away for free is not a way of making business.

We talked briefly, you mentioned the Muscat Book Fair, and it sounds like that was the last fair that happened in the Arab world. They've all been cancelled in the meantime. Which book fair do you think will be one to open for business?

Bachar: The cancellation of the local book fairs caused a big loss in the industry especially with the presence of weak effective distribution channels. As per the survey done, the publishers get more than 50% of their revenues from the book fairs during the year. The next book fairs will be in Sharjah, it should be between 4-24 November, and the second one in Doha between 7-16 January 2021. These are still fixed and will happen, but most of the book fairs has been cancelled so far. Usually we have between 15-17 book fairs in the MENA region.

José: Well, let's talk about online. We've been hearing from other members where book fairs are really, really important. For instance, the Koreans also focus on their book fair every year and gain a lot of their income from that book fair. They've decided to go digital, online. Do you think that any Arab region book fairs will go online?

Bachar: Till now, nobody does something like that. Till now. But two online book fairs for Arabic books happened, but outside the Arab region (Sweden and Turkey). Specialised in Arabic books. In our region, if this problem will continue, we will have online book fairs.

José: Look, if you are interested in finding out exactly what the Koreans are doing, and there may be a couple of other book fairs that are also going online, then I'd be happy to introduce you to our Korean member and maybe you can talk to them about how they are coping with the new online structure and what the technological requirements are. So, after this interview, let's see if we can facilitate that for you.

So, let's start looking to the future as we're running out of time. It may be difficult for you to look to the future with any positive view, but do you think there is anything that has come out of this crisis that you can see as a positive for the Arab publishers into the future?

Bachar: This pandemic allowed the publishers to be aware about the ability to work from abroad and it highlighted the importance of having digital books and online channels and free deliveries. That's very important, the free deliveries. It also motivated the publishers to work together and cooperate to serve the community better.

José: What happens next for Arab publishers? Is there a recovery plan that you have in mind?

Bachar: Whenever this pandemic is over, publishers will be focusing more on improving their digital publishing books and will try to find more online channels to cover their losses.

José: So, look, we're coming to the end of our chat, unfortunately. I look forward to meeting you face to face as soon as we can. I'm not sure Sharjah will be the place but maybe next year. What was the one in January next year.

Bachar: We have Doha, in Qatar.

José: So, let's aim for some time next year, for us to get together. It would be great to see you again. But just as we're signing off, do you have any message for other publishers around the world who are also suffering from this COVID Pandemic?

Bachar: My message to the international publishers is to cooperate positively with other publishers and my suggestion is to overlook the year 2020 in their official contracts in order to help other publishers overcome their losses. I hope that will be useful for everyone.

José: Fantastic. Thank you, Bachar. We'll meet again soon I have no doubt, when the IPA has its virtual General Assembly in November. Until then take care, stay safe and goodbye. Thank you very much.