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# Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World

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# Summary

The difficulties involved in the production and distribution of creative works in the Middle East cannot be separated from the overall political and social climate of the region. A series of United Nations (UN) reports identified three fundamental deficits in the Arab world: in political rights, in women's rights, and in knowledge. Related to these deficits are three critical sources that pose barriers to the greater dissemination of creative works in the region. This monograph addresses barriers to the broad dissemination of such works as they relate to Arabic literature and other genres of the printed word.

Three major barriers confront the dissemination and consumption of Arabic literature. The first barrier is censorship, which is a significant problem in the Middle East. Nearly all Arab Middle East countries employ government censors. Censorship is often aimed at stopping the publication or distribution of content deemed politically, morally, or religiously sensitive. Religious institutions, such as al-Azhar, Cairo's center of Islamic learning, often assist government censors by recommending books to be banned. A second barrier is the small market for literary material in the Arab world. Book production and, presumably, reader consumption are relatively low in the Middle East in comparison to other regions with similar socioeconomic levels of development. One factor behind this low book-consumption rate is the region's high rates of illiteracy, especially among the generations born before 1970. A final barrier is the poor internal distribution systems for books. This is compounded by the challenge of selling books across a vast number

of countries all with their own censorship requirements, regulations, and tax codes.

During the 45-year Cold War, the U.S. and British governments utilized various forms of media in their ideological conflict against the Soviet Union. While there are significant differences between the U.S. efforts to counter extremism and the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, key lessons can be learned from this period.

One of these lessons is how to overcome the understandable skepticism that foreign audiences have toward government-sponsored media activities. During the Cold War, this problem was solved through the use of public-private partnerships. These partnerships allowed the U.S. and British governments to distance themselves from their media promotion activities while at the same time ensuring that the private groups they supported adhered to each nation's basic foreign-policy goals. Another lesson from the Cold War is to carefully consider the target audience and identify media sources that are most likely to influence them. As was the case in the Cold War, the *intelligentsia*, broadly defined, in the Arab world are the mostly likely to read and be influenced by printed material. A third lesson is the value of nonpolitical material in combating extremism. The items most valued by Eastern European and Soviet audiences were those that compensated for the intellectual vacuum in their lives, not those that directly combated communism.

To overcome these barriers (censorship, the market, and distribution), we advocate a series of policy recommendations, most of which would involve actions by nongovernmental institutions and other international allies, not overt U.S. government action:

- Make censorship a consistent agenda item in bilateral dialogues with regional allies.
- Work with European interlocutors to promote constructive-themed works, such as through international book fairs.
- Promote Arab literature prizes.
- Assist individuals in obtaining banned works through person-to-person distribution and Internet publishing.
- Support education reform and promote literacy.

- Promote specific authors in the United States and in their native countries.
- Convert or adapt printed material with constructive themes into other media to reach broader audiences.
- Utilize new techniques in Internet technology to overcome censorship and distribution barriers.
- Assist in the expansion of libraries and bookstores.