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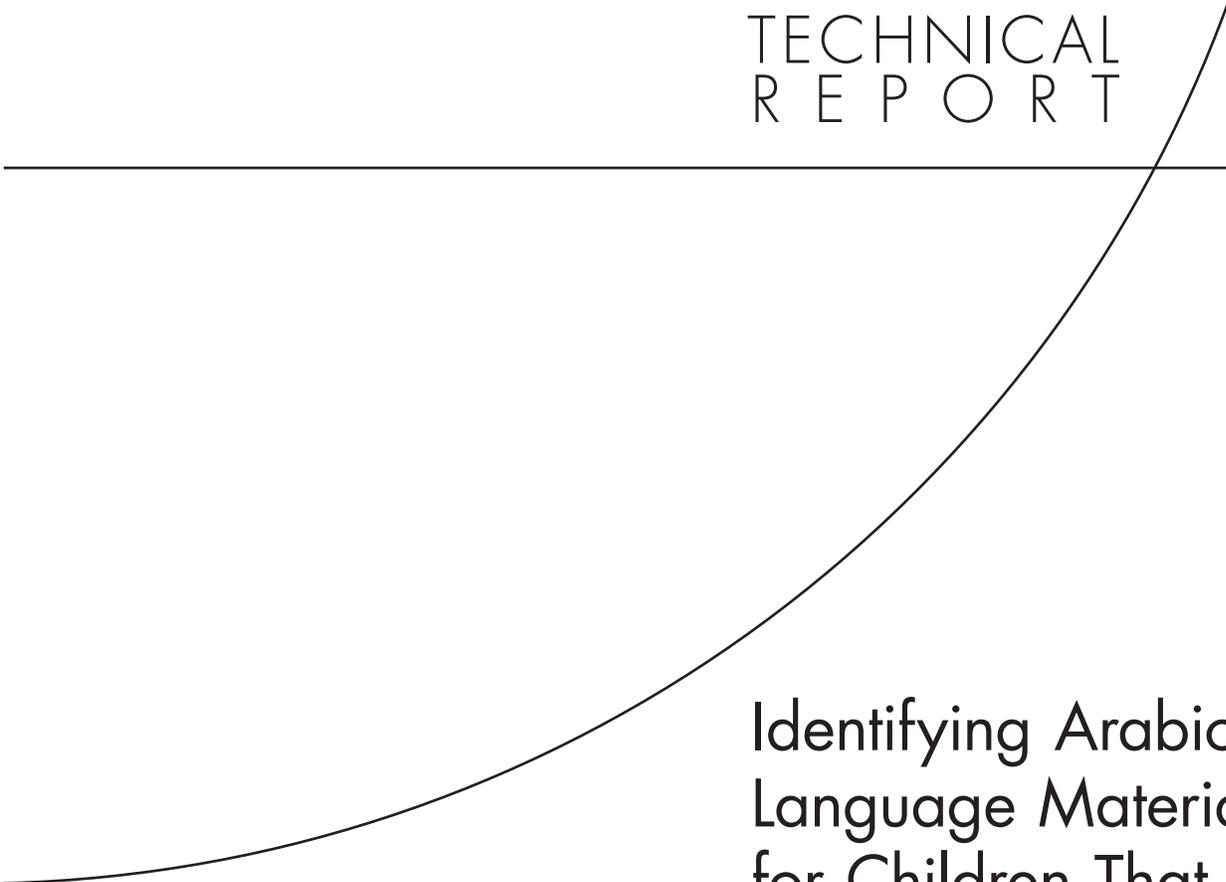
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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T



Identifying Arabic- Language Materials for Children That Promote Tolerance and Critical Thinking

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

There is widespread awareness both inside and outside the Arab world that reform is necessary to further human development in the region.¹ One critical component of reform is the building of a knowledge society that supports and values the production, diffusion, and application of new knowledge and the expression of new ideas. A key aspect of a knowledge society is a well-educated citizenry open to new ideas, motivated and capable of challenging the ideas of others, and able to create important local knowledge.

One way to build these skills is to capitalize on the rich cultural resources already being produced in Arabic that reinforce tolerance by celebrating the region's cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity and that promote new ideas and support the development of critical thinking. The work described in this report is part of a broader effort to identify and disseminate materials whose messages encourage tolerance and support the development and use of critical thinking skills. This work, focused on identifying Arabic language materials targeted to children ages 4–14, arguably may be even more effective in promoting tolerance and critical thinking than earlier efforts directed toward adults (Schwartz et al., 2009). While a large social psychological literature attests to the fact that attitudes can be changed, this literature also finds that deep-seated, long-held attitudes that verge on or represent core values and morals are among the most difficult to alter. Moreover, by adulthood, it may be much more difficult to get people to consider new ideas that challenge long-held beliefs. As a result, most adults who acquire and engage with materials that promote tolerance and critical thinking already support their messages; getting these materials into the hands and minds of those who think differently poses enormous challenges.

In contrast, targeting youth has numerous advantages. First, works for children can offer constructive messages at a time when ideas about in-groups and out-groups are just forming; there is less need to counter intolerant beliefs. Second, tolerant messages can be (indeed, for the youngest children, must be) presented in a nonpolitical form that is less likely to upset parents or other authority figures. And third, the combination of the “youth bulge” in the Arab world and the fact that Arab children are far more likely than their parents to be literate translates into a much larger potential audience for children's materials than for adult materials.²

¹ The Arab Human Development Reports represent the most prominent calls for reform and greater attention to human development emanating from within the region. In addition, see el Baz (2007). For examples of specific initiatives, see Sakr (2008); Arab Republic of Egypt (2007); and The Jordan Education Initiative (2007).

² The spread between adult and youth literacy in the Arab world is quite large. Particularly large differences in literacy rates among adults (everyone over the age of 15) versus youth (just those aged 15–24) are found in the following countries: Algeria (69.9 percent versus 90.1 percent); Egypt (71.4 percent versus 84.9 percent); Morocco (52.3 percent versus 70.5 percent); Sudan (60.9 percent versus 77.2 percent); Tunisia (74.3 percent versus 94.3 percent). All data are from the 2009 Arab Human Development Report.

Using developmental psychology theory and research, we determined what messages, in what form, are most understandable to children of different ages and what presentational elements make materials engaging and therefore potentially persuasive to children. We used what we learned to develop a set of criteria for identifying and screening children's works that foster tolerance and critical thinking.

Of the 104 works that were identified and screened, 68 met those criteria and form our final repository. The bulk of the collection is made up of written works and is dominated by short stories. The print focus reflects the limited availability of locally developed works available in other types of media. Specifically, there are very few indigenously produced cartoons in the Arab world—and fewer still promote the values on which our efforts focused. More than half (52 percent) of the materials collected were authored or produced in the four countries of the Levant—Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria—despite strong efforts to ensure geographic diversity across the Arab world.

The rejected works generally paid insufficient attention to constructive themes; particularly in materials for the youngest group (ages 4–6), the value of obedience often overshadowed messages about tolerance or support for critical thinking. Materials were disqualified that promoted intergroup understanding at the expense of another group. For example, one rejected book encouraged unity between Christian and Muslim Palestinians in order to unite against Israeli occupation.³ Another rejection criterion concerned the outcome of the critical thinking process portrayed. If the end result was greater adherence to a traditional belief system or support for intolerance, then the material was not accepted.

The collected works validate the view of Arab scholars that important creative materials are being produced in the region despite, or perhaps because of, the political and intellectual challenges that artists confront. Indeed, we found a significant body of children's literature indigenous to the Arab region that promotes tolerance and critical thinking. A number of works even took on taboo or otherwise sensitive subjects—e.g., a young child whose divorced parents share custody and cooperate in parenting him; a teenage boy who is abused by his alcoholic father.

The collection points as well to a number of weaknesses in the supply of constructive works. The most obvious is the often poor production quality of books published in the region. Poor-quality paper, printing, and illustrations (some books had missing pages) and the absence of illustrations in some materials for the youngest age group make many of these materials unattractive and unengaging. Online content was beset with its own problems: There were numerous broken links, examples of authors posting text but not illustrations, or text abruptly cutting off before the end of the story. Poor print production quality is probably best explained by the perceived need to keep books affordable, particularly in poorer countries like Egypt. Poor presentation of online content probably reflects the fact that authors are forced to post their own content rather than having dedicated IT support from a publisher.

A number of barriers exist to increasing both the supply and quality of these materials. High illiteracy and poverty rates reduce the demand for such works (UNDP, 2003). Earlier RAND work that focused on adult materials noted there are few bookstores and few public libraries in the region, and more “liberal” books are banned while intolerant literature is subsidized. Little taste for leisure reading further discourages demand for such materials (Schwartz

³ Najlā' Nasīr Bashūr, *Sha'nūnat al-'Īd* (“Palm Sunday”), Beirut: Mu'sasat Tāla: 2004.

et al., 2009). Although our research did not allow us to systematically examine barriers to the production and dissemination of materials that support tolerance, the collection process revealed a number of barriers, including limited access to many of these materials, poor production values, and unclear copyrights. Previous RAND work on education reform in the Gulf region suggested additional barriers to the dissemination of these materials to children. Specifically, rigid, centrally controlled education curricula whose content might not change for decades may not accommodate works for children with messages of tolerance. Despite parents' importance in conveying attitudes, values, and support for literacy, we know little about their role in promoting media use, reading to their young children, and conveying messages about tolerance and support for critical thinking. RAND's education reform work in the Gulf suggests that parents tend to view the schools and educators as the experts in imparting key cultural values; they neither seek nor readily accept this role for themselves (Zellman et al., 2009).

To encourage the development and dissemination of materials that support constructive messages, it is critical to systematically examine gaps in our knowledge. In particular, we lack good market data about children's publishing and particularly about the role of copyright issues, although failure to develop and enforce copyright laws is generally recognized by those in the region as a serious problem (UNDP, 2003). We also lack a clear understanding of piracy issues, which were informally reported to us in the course of our work as a compelling contributor to the widespread reluctance to produce high-cost, high-quality television productions.

It is important as well to look at key cultural institutions to determine how they can help to get materials with constructive themes into the hands of children. A first effort might focus on examining the openness of schools and education ministries to including such materials in their curricula or libraries. A number of countries in the region have begun to reform their education systems (UNDP, 2003). In a more open education space, these materials might find a place if they were better known, if teachers could receive training on how to integrate them into lessons and other activities, and if they were more accessible.

There could be considerable payoff from an exploration of the role that parents play in encouraging literacy and tolerance in their children. Research consistently identifies parents as the primary sources of influence on a host of outcomes; parents serve as the gatekeepers for information and conveyors of values. Little is known about perceived parental roles or models of socialization in the Arab world, although such knowledge is critical in understanding how parents might help to promote open-mindedness, tolerance, and critical thinking in their children.

In the short run, it is important to make the materials we identified widely available. One approach would be to make our catalog available on the Web. It might be possible as well to work with libraries, bookstores, and cultural centers in the region to bring these materials to a wider audience. It might also be worthwhile to think about ways to make these materials accessible to Arabic-speaking children in the United States. One approach might be to place these materials in public library and school library collections in areas with a high concentration of Arabic speakers (e.g., the greater Detroit and Washington, D.C., areas). Finally, it would be most worthwhile, given the low levels of literacy and small amount of leisure reading in much of the Arab world, to find ways to convert or adapt printed works with constructive themes for other media, particularly television, given the high penetration of satellite television programming in the region. Airing such programming during Ramadan would be particularly attractive given the cultural norm of families watching television series after breaking the fast.

Dissemination of works with constructive themes requires consideration of current barriers and supports. Efforts to adapt printed works to other media may require that attention be paid to mitigating the disincentives for doing so, most particularly widespread copyright violations and pirating of such materials. Regional authors, publishers, educators, and policy-makers are best positioned to disseminate these works to potential users and to develop ways to capture and promote more such materials, since successful and sustainable reform must come from within (UNDP, 2003). A solid dissemination strategy should build on local institutions such as ministries of education and nongovernment organizations. Attention also should be paid to the role that parents currently play and might play in the future in supporting such works. Our collection, which clearly demonstrates the richness of regional materials, hopefully will encourage these efforts.