LIBRARIES AND THE MIDDLE EAST QUESTION
by Noha Ismail

In a democracy, most major issues of public importance are influenced by public debates. We have seen this dynamic at work in debates over equal rights for Blacks and women, the nuclear arms race, abortion, human rights in South Africa, the plight of Soviet Jews, East-West relations, the state of the economy, and other such vital issues of the day.

In order for these debates to fulfill their intended objective we need, above all, an informed citizenry. That is the most important function of the free library system in a democratic society. To provide the public with free and equal access to materials that would help them to be clear on the issues that impact their lives.

Whereas that is generally true in most cases, unfortunately this potential has not been realized with respect to the Middle East issue, even though it has been on the forefront of the nation's consciousness for decades. And a few short months ago, half a million American soldiers put their lives on the line on account of it. Still, Americans have no clear understanding of the key facts, events and personalities that have shaped the area. This is profoundly disturbing given what is at stake here. It is also disturbing to those of us who are in the information field, and who also happen to care about what goes on in that part of the world, to see that the flow of information to which we are all committed is reduced to a trickle when it comes to Arab perspectives and Arab thought.

Indeed, there is certainly no shortage of books, periodicals, online databases and organizations dealing with the Middle East, but most sources of information available in libraries represent mainstream political thinking which often reduces the complexities of the Middle East to simplistic equations. East versus West, the forces of destruction versus the forces of humanity, communism versus democracy, Muslim fundamentalism versus Western civilization, and so on. This type of thinking is dominated by perceptions rather than by political realities. As such, it does not help the library patron get a better understanding of why Arabs act, think and feel the way they do.

For over 60 years American perceptions of the Middle East have been molded by policy makers who chose to view the area in terms of an oil producing desert, devoid of its own culture, history, and political dynamics. While there have been many variations on this theme, this essentially is the message that still filters down to the American people. I was, for instance, on a university panel quite recently discussing American foreign policy in the Middle East. A debate quickly developed on whether the United States was justified in going to war to protect “its” oil in the Persian Gulf — as if this area was culturally blank and populated by an irrelevant people. It did not occur to anyone that perhaps America should review its relationship with these people and become a little more aware of their histories and of Islamic civilization. Nor did it occur to any of them that if we had understood these people better, maybe...just maybe we could have resolved the crisis without the need to go to war.

Israelis are understood to be what, in fact, they are: that is, complex human beings with hopes and fears. They exist in the public mind as individual people who have suffered and who continue to suffer. We know them, we can see them in our mind’s eye and we can identify with them. On the other hand, Arabs are seen in the collective. Mobs of hysterical anonymous men who carry guns and dress funny. They are not real people. They are one dimensional, cardboard caricatures. How can the American public identify with them, or have any feelings of sympathy for what they say or do?

Given this gross misrepresentation of Arab humanity and Middle East realities, is it any wonder that there has been, up until now, no serious public debate? Needless to say, these perceptions are not in conformity with reality. In reality, Israelis, Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Iraqis, and Kuwaitis have all suffered and continue to suffer. Israelis want peace: so also do Palestinians want peace, and justice, and security, and a state of their own in a land where they have lived as a people for thousands of years. But while these needs of the Arab people are as real as those of the Israelis, they are not known here in the U.S.
There is no shortage of Arab writers who are eager to make their views known. The problem lies with the American publishers who are simply not interested to pick up their work. In some cases the reasons are economic — as a rule, these books do not sell very well. But generally speaking, a great deal of self-censorship goes on with mainstream publishers where the Middle East is concerned. The Palestinian viewpoint is simply too controversial in this country, so they steer away from it. Arab writers have to turn to alternative publishers, or university presses, and the only problem with that is that their work is seldom reviewed in the popular media or trade journals.

American libraries have not responded in a meaningful way to remedy that imbalance. They continue to select their books on the Middle East from what the mainstream publishers make available. They depend primarily on the New York Times and established trade journals for their reviews — so they consistently miss what is out there. The result is that we do not have adequate materials on our shelves that represent all of the different perspectives on the Middle East. This became very clear during the Persian Gulf Crisis when the war significantly increased the daily number of requests for in-depth information about Arab countries in general. When some more thoughtful Americans belatedly realized that such deep-rooted turmoil in the Middle East could not suddenly spring from a historical vacuum, they concluded that it takes more than CNN to become informed and turned to libraries for information to help them demystify Islam and unravel the roots of the historical complexities of the Arab World.

Libraries began feeling a need for long ignored works of history, politics and literature that provide clues to Arab culture and sensitivities. Readers who relied solely on U.S. textbooks or historical and social studies of the Arab World learned nothing about how Western colonialism paved the way to the current political chaos nor could they get a clear understanding of the detail, the human density and the passion of Arab Muslim life, because most Western authors persist in seeing the Arab World only as the second half of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The fact that 200 million human beings have a history of economic, political, cultural and social development quite independent of that conflict is ignored. So, many Arab countries that do not border Israel like Algeria, Morocco, Tunis, Libya, Sudan or the Gulf States, are very inadequately represented. For these countries, we depend mostly on the Area Handbooks that are prepared by the American University primarily for the benefit of military personnel who need a compilation of basic facts. These handbooks are dry and boring, and many of them are out-of-date.

The vast majority of books about the contemporary political scene focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict or on the politics of oil in the region and view the Middle East as little more than a battlefield for U.S. influence. Much of the research for these works has been conducted by authors who have rather well defined orientations: the orientalist, who is frequently condescending to Arabs; the academic, whose writing is often overweight with methodological jargon; the propagandist, who is more interested in myth than in reality; and, finally, the best-selling "pop" novelist, who often slips into racist stereotypes when writing about Palestinian terrorism, religious fanaticism, and degenerate, oversexed Arab sheikhs. A typical example of this last genre is Leon Uris. These negative stereotypes have sunk into the national subconscious unchallenged for decades. Plato, that old sage, recognized the power of fiction when he asserted: Those who tell the stories also rule society.

Because we do not have enough material to cover the Arab World adequately, when a crisis such as the Gulf War explodes on the scene, it is necessary to consult periodical literature, and the library's electronic databases since they provide supplementary access to a much wider body of information. But, again, caution must be exercised when reading the press coverage of the Middle East. The media mainly serves the "center," and such the reporting is often biased to reinforce the interests of the mainstream body politic. Any argument from the Arabs is subdued and converted into what is now a mindless cliche of the sullen Arab who will "not face reality." There is enough evidence to confirm that a double standard is at work here, to the detriment of a balanced public perception of the Middle East — and a balanced U.S. policy.

Because librarians are committed to intellectual freedom and to guaranteed access of information, we must make it our
business to ensure that the voices of the many people living through this critical period in Middle East history are heard. If that proves difficult because mainstream American publishers are not forthcoming and responsive to this issue, then we must turn to alternative presses and periodicals. Contact Arab-American organizations and solicit their help in locating materials that provide a better understanding of the issues and concerns that are at the root of the ongoing problems in the Middle East.

Such library practice could become critical to the issue of war and peace. While the Gulf War may be over, the problems that existed in that region for decades have only become more dangerous and critical. It would be a tragedy if, as a result of this crisis, the West once again were to miss the signals coming out of the Arab World. To respond rationally, we should try to unravel the many individual historical and political strains that have been woven together to generate the forces that drove this crisis.

If we are to avoid major upheavals and catastrophe in the region, a reassessment of outdated and inaccurate information and stereotypes is urgently required. As librarians, we can help the cause of peace by educating ourselves first, and then by keeping a truly global perspective on the issue. Above all, we must protect the library's integrity as a vital source of information and channel to the marketplace of ideas. Let me leave you with a quote from President Kennedy on the issue of intellectual freedom:

We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in a open market, is a nation that is afraid of its people.

The above is the text of a presentation given on November 30, 1991 at the Midwest Federation of Library Associations' Conference held in Minneapolis.

**DOCUMENTS:**

**A PROGRAM FOR LIBRARY CHANGE IN SWEDEN**

What follows is the platform of the Swedish association called BIS (Bibliotek i Samhällen) which means "Libraries in Society." It was adopted at a general BIS meeting on February 26, 1989.

BIS is a politically independent organization working on a socialist basis to promote progressive librarianship. For BIS socialism represents the dream of human liberation and development, true satisfaction of needs, and the fair distribution of material and social resources. A society striving to realize these objectives, should be governed as directly as possible by its citizens.

**LIBRARIES IN SOCIETY**

The accelerating complexity and rapid growth of information in our political system is leading to widening gaps of information and knowledge. "Experts" are taking over and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the ordinary person to have real influence on the essential issues of the day.

Cultural life is becoming more and more commercialized. Where capitalistic forces dominate, culture and information become market commodities.

Refugees, immigrants, and other international contacts have made Sweden a multicultural country, which enriches and develops the culture of the whole. A multicultural society requires increased knowledge and understanding. It also must give all groups the opportunity to maintain a cultural identity.

**POPULAR EDUCATION**

BIS asserts it is the task of libraries to actively participate in the struggle to build a really democratic society. BIS recognizes that it is necessary to obtain substantial additional resources in order for libraries to offer quality culture and education. The library must be a true alternative to the commercial sector, not merely a compliment. BIS will work for libraries that will function as centers for the exchange of differing viewpoints and cus-