



Interview with Olivia Snaije & Karam Youssef

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KENNEALLY: On the left bank of Paris, in the 7th arrondissement, foreign visitors are common. Some are tourists drawn by world-famous attractions like the Eiffel Tower and the Musée d'Orsay. Others include high-level government officials, including delegates to the National Assembly as well as international diplomats. This week, a party of publishers from across the Arabic-speaking world has gathered for some sightseeing and some serious business.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

From north Africa, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf, the publishers are doing their sightseeing in the Paris offices of Gallimard and Actes Sud, and they are getting down to business at the Centre international du livre, the National Book Center, for roundtable discussions with French counterparts, sharing ideas and insights on developing readership, managing book distribution, and overcoming the challenges of training a new generation of translators.

Among the group is Karam Youssef from Cairo, a multitasking one-woman evangelist for reading and writing. Youssef is founder of Al Kotob Khan, an independent bookstore and book publisher in the tree-lined streets of the Maadi district. Over the last decade, she has published many new and established Egyptian novelists and poets and made Al Kotob Khan a literary and intellectual center. Karam Youssef joins me now from Paris. Welcome to Beyond the Book. *As-Salaam-Alaikum.*

YOUSSEF: *Wa-Alaikum-Salaam.* Thank you, Chris. I'm very pleased to be here. Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: Also joining from Paris is journalist Olivia Snaije, who is reporting on the seminar for *Publishing Perspectives*. *Bienvenue, Olivia.*

SNAIJE: *Merci beaucoup.* Thank you.

KENNEALLY: We are very happy indeed you can join us along with Karam Youssef to talk about this seminar program in Paris. It's the second part of a program run by



the Bureau international de l'édition française. Last year, BIEF brought over 20 publishers from the Arab world to Paris who spoke with other French publishers and agents. This year, a fellowship is being held for them. You can tell us more about the events of the week, Olivia.

SNAIJE: Yeah, this is the second part, as you said, of a program that the BIEF has organized. Just a quick note about what the BIEF does, which is mostly financed by the French ministry of culture – it exists to help French publishers, whether it's running a collective stand at book fairs, helping publishers sell rights in foreign territories, or network with industry people around the world. So here, they also help publishers develop relationships.

Of course, everyone is curious about publishing in the Arab world, and last year, they had invited these publishers, 20, to talk about production and distribution and to meet with French publishers. This year – this is the second phase – and they found that the Arab publishers who came last year were looking for more ways of cooperating with each other in order to maybe solve the major problems which seem to be in common, and it's such a vast territory and they have few distribution channels. So this time, they'll be visiting with French publishers. They'll be visiting bookshops. And they'll be talking about social sciences here in France and fiction and translation. So it's a four-day program.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned, Olivia Snaije, that this is sponsored by the Bureau international de l'édition française, which is subsidized by the French government. Give us some context. Why would the French government want to promote publishing and writing? It'd be part of a policy that continues their connections with the former colonial states in the region, but it's also part of a larger story.

SNAIJE: Yeah, I think it's part of sort of a soft power policy, and you can see this also with the various Instituts français, which is sort of the cultural arm of the French embassies around the world. The Germans do it, too, with the Goethe-Institut. It's a way of promoting their culture, but also of bringing other cultures to France. So as I mentioned before, the BIEF helps French publishers connect with publishers from all over the world. They'll bring French publishers, for example, on trips to Romania to visit Romanian publishers. Here, they're hoping that with translation funding, which the National Book Center announced last year – funding from French into Arabic and Arabic into French, they're going to be funding 70% of translations – that there might be some cooperation between Arab publishers and French publishers, whether it's selling or buying rights.

KENNEALLY: Olivia, you report a good deal on this part of the world for *Publishing Perspectives*. I wonder if you can help our listeners understand about the



publishing ecosystem in the Arabic-speaking world. It's a bit obscure to many people. Is there growing transparency? Are people on both sides, so the European context and the Arabic-speaking-world context, are they beginning to see better into the other side?

SNAIJE: Not really. I think as I reported last year, and I'm sure Karam can tell you more about this, it's an ecosystem that's obscure and difficult even for Arab publishers. It's a huge territory, and they all have different concerns, but they do have certain things in common. For example, piracy is a huge problem, and distribution is a huge problem. They're also dealing with a lot of unrest in countries – so that publishing in Syria shut down for a while, Iraq, and so on. So they have a very difficult time, because there's no government support. There's very little networking. In fact, when they all meet here, they're able to talk about things in common and come up with ideas for cooperating. So the BIEF wants to provide a fertile ground for ideas and collaboration.

KENNEALLY: Just how interested are French book buyers in literature from this part of the world?

SNAIJE: It's a struggle. It's a struggle, because there aren't that many publishers who are willing to invest in the translation. There may be a lack of interest on the part of readers. We had Farouk Mardam-Bey, who is the publisher for Actes Sud. He does most of the translation of Arabic literature into French. He was saying that readership is down, but not only in translated fiction from Arab countries. It's down in general.

On the other hand, there are quite a few Arab authors who write in French, so they're often published in France. That's a whole other discussion. But there are quite a few, mainly from north Africa, but some Lebanese, as well.

KENNEALLY: Well, we appreciate your insights, Olivia Snaije of *Publishing Perspectives*. We want to turn now to Karam Youssef. So, Karam Youssef, tell us about your experience so far. It's just getting started, the seminar in Paris this week, but what are your objectives? What do you hope to accomplish by joining this group?

YOUSSEF: Well, today was the first day, and I think we have done a lot. We have visited a bookshop and a publishing house. I'm hoping for a lot to achieve from this four days' program. My main goal really is to have a common understanding and to make the picture a bit clearer for the French publishers here and to know a bit more about the circumstances and difficulties we are working through, because it is very hard times, and we are struggling to get the books published, to get the



books distributed, and we have some major issues we have to deal with. So I just would like to have clear pictures and better understanding by the French publishers regarding the circumstances we are going through and the challenges we are facing.

KENNEALLY: Well, this seminar is not only an opportunity for you to share those stories with French publishers, but to share them among the other Arabic-language publishers who are joining you. It covers a wide part of the world, from Algeria to the Gulf, each of those countries with very different cultural circumstances, different political circumstances. How specific are the problems, or are they shared across the entire Arabic-speaking world?

YOUSSEF: This is very correct, because for example, I have never been to the book fair in Algeria, for example. We have spoke about it with the French – with the Algerian colleague who's attending with us and from Syria, from Jordan, and we share a big common problem. It's the distribution and the level of readership and the sales of books. The Arabs are about 400 million people. Still, we find difficulties to get our books moved from country to another through book fairs or other way of transportation. Also, the censorship sometimes, the piracy. This is a big issue. So we are. It's also a good opportunity to share some thoughts with other publishers from Arab countries.

KENNEALLY: What do you think is necessary to support a level of literary culture and publishing in this part of the world? What are the kinds of activities that would help promote what you're trying to do – to promote publishing, intellectual inquiry, and so forth?

YOUSSEF: Maybe if we got some of the government to support the small publishing houses or the independent publishing sector by buying some copies of our books and put it in the public library, because due to the economical situation in our country, the individuals don't have much budget to spend on the books. Books and reading is kind of luxury in the eyes of most of the people, so they wouldn't deduct it from the budget they have for food and education to go and buy a book.

So I believe the government could do something regarding the public library by buying copies and put it in the public library, so it would give the opportunity to readers to go and read the new books instead of reading the pirated books on the internet, because this is another dangerous issue. It could threaten the existence of the small publishing houses like myself, for example. So this is the kind of help I'm hoping for.

KENNEALLY: And today, as part of the seminar, Karam Youssef, you visited a bookstore in Paris. You own your own bookstore. It's called Al Kotob Khan,



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which I understand just means The Bookstore. What did you see in Paris that made you think you might be back home? Give our listeners a bit of a picture of the kind of center for learning and reading that Al Kotob Khan has become.

YOUSSEF: Kotob Khan is a bookshop, and we started back in 2006. It was one of the first cultural hubs in town where you can go to buy a good book. We have literally books – a nice selection of books in all different genres – and also you can attend a movie screening, a book discussion, a book signing, a poetry night, some acoustic music. So this is what we have been doing for almost 13 years now.

The situation in Paris, from what I have been seeing this year, because I was here last March, that people still go to the bookshops and buy books. This is something really amazing. In Cairo, in my bookshop, yeah, we have some sales, but it's not as – I'm hoping it's many, many reasons – reading is not that much of a lifestyle, or we are used to that. And the economical situation, the cost of publishing books – of course, it makes the price of a book a bit high – also, the cost of running a bookshop. So we try our best and find solution to maintain this situation and to maintain being there and do things in quality manner.

KENNEALLY: Karam Youssef, founder of Al Kotob Khan and a participant in this week's fellowship program for Arabic publishers held in Paris, thank you so much for joining me on Beyond the Book. *Shokran*.

YOUSSEF: (speaks Arabic). Thank you so much for your time and for having me with you. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: I also want to thank for joining us today from Paris *Publishing Perspectives* correspondent and journalist Olivia Snaije. Thanks so much for joining me on Beyond the Book.

SNAIJE: Thank you so much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at beyondthebook.com. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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