

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Lebanon

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Intellectual freedom, free access to information, freedom of expression or speech, and censorship have been all along recurring problems in libraries worldwide.

Everyday and in many countries, it is a routine practice that books, pamphlets, newspapers, videotapes, etc. are censored, and in some cases for those whose ideas are the object of censorship risk death and imprisonment. Mercifully, the issue of censorship in Lebanon is not at present (and has never been) a matter of life and death. "Lebanon does enjoy a wider margin of democracy and practices more aspects of human rights compared to other countries in the developing world" (Naaman, p. 24), precisely the Arab World. Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution clearly states that "the freedom to express one's opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by Law", such as, the Printing Code. Censorship is applied by the censoring authorities only on obscene and pornographic materials, political and religious materials which could harm the national security of the country, and on all materials published in Israel as Lebanon is considered in a state of war with Israel since 1948.

Population:	3,084,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 2,970 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Arabic
Main religions:	Islam - Christianity
Literacy:	92% (1995)
Online:	6,39% (March 2000)

The Republic of Lebanon is 10,453 square kilometres situated on the Eastern Shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The population is estimated to be 3.5 million and Beirut is the capital. Although Arabic is the national language, English and French are widespread languages used exclusively in tertiary and secondary education, higher education, government agencies and businesses.

The history of modern libraries in Lebanon began with academic libraries. The Syrian Protestant college (called the American University of Beirut since 1920) was founded in 1866 by the American Missionaries in Lebanon and Syria. The French Saint Joseph University was founded in 1881, and the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College) was founded by the American Presbyterian Church as the American Junior College for Girls in 1924.

The respective groups began to develop their libraries according to their national origins. The American-oriented libraries had centralised systems, with emphasis on services. The French-oriented libraries had general scholarly libraries, with independent libraries for each faculty or school.

In addition to the above, other academic libraries were established in Lebanon: the Near East School of Theology (1932), the Lebanese University (1953), Haigazian College (1955), Beirut Arab University (1960), the Holy Spirit at Kaslik (1962), Umam Ouzai College for Islamic Studies (1979), Notre Dame University (1987) and Al-Balamand University (1988).

Most of these universities have played a key-role in Lebanon's cultural and economic development.

There is no doubt that the civil war in Lebanon, which broke out in 1975, did impose a hidden censorship. Its social, economic and political outcomes negatively impacted the potential development of libraries and information centers. Academic libraries were increasingly faced with adverse effects such as shortage of professional librarians due to emigration, interrupted mail services for extended periods of time, inflation and devaluation of the local currency, which reduced severely acquisition of materials for more than fifteen years. In addition to that, some libraries were directly shelled and some librarians lost their lives. The civil war has also obliged the librarians to apply self-censorship (in particular on political items) to avoid any act of violence against the institutions or the librarians. For example, at the Lebanese American University (LAU), all the free pamphlets and newsletters issued by the different Lebanese political parties were stamped as "Gifts" or placed in what is called the "Closed Circulation" area to prevent confrontations with the public.

Despite the many difficulties, the library community in Lebanon managed to sustain itself and continued to provide services to users on daily basis.

The established peace in 1990 motivated the academic institutions to undergo a major transformation and redress the longstanding imbalances caused by the civil war. Laws have been reinstated all over the country. Thus academic libraries

were able again to acquire, organize and make the information accessible to users according to each institution's policies or financial means.

At LAU, as in many academic libraries, the selection of materials is not restricted by any factor. The library stocks materials of the widest possible range to reflect the curriculum. However, self-censorship is exercised for the following main reasons:

1. To protect the possessions of the library from vandalism.
2. To protect the library from any act of violence or retaliation.
3. To protect the library staff from any act of violence.
4. To protect the institution from any legal repercussions.

Several library items are located in the "Closed Circulation" area, for they are rare materials (i.e., manuscripts, pictures, posters, etc.) or controversial which could put the library and the institution at stake (i.e., polemical, political, offensive materials and all publications banned from the market). These items are only circulated in-house under the control of the librarians.

Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses" was placed in the 'Closed Circulation' area after it disappeared from the Library as well as all other Rushdie's publications that were available in the Library.

In addition to self-censorship, the library community in Lebanon suffers from the censoring authorities. The publications sent out or received are randomly filtered. A book could be removed from the market for being labelled "obscene" without any consideration for its literary values (i.e., Hadiqat al-hawas/Abdou Wazen.-- Beirut : Dar al-Jadid, 1993), art videos ordered from abroad could disappear before reaching the library for they are morally provocative; and political books could be banned from the market for being controversial (i.e., From Israel to Damascus). Yet, the publications of Amnesty International which condemn some practices of the Lebanese or Arab authorities are not banned (they are available at LAU in the "Closed Circulation" area).

However, when it comes to electronic resources and the Internet, there are no restrictions whatsoever on behalf of the Lebanese government. The effort to enforce some restrictions on the usage of the Internet is done on individual level. Each institution applies self-censorship to keep a "healthy academic environment". At LAU, pornographic sites are blocked as well as cult sites which encourage suicide and other macabre practices.

In specific terms, LAU library, as well as other academic libraries, have a responsibility to provide services that are academic, unbiased and which meet the demands of their customers.

Over all the academic libraries in Lebanon follow a policy statement, which does not only clarify their positions on censorship, but also recognize that controversial materials exist and that they may be selected or rejected in accordance with the laws of the land and of the institutions they serve.

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