

Damascus Book Fair Disappoints

Author: [IWPR](#)

(20-Aug-08)

Publishers who took part in this year's Damascus book fair said attendance and sales were lower than those of the previous year because of Syria's economic woes.

"The turnout last year in the fair was much better than this year. Sales weren't good because of high prices," said Mihyar Kurdi, director of the Arab Cultural Publishing Centre in Morocco.

The twenty-fourth annual Damascus book fair, which ended last week, drew participants from 24 nations and included 35,000 titles. This year's fair coincided with Damascus being named the 2008 Arab capital of culture. Yet that did not help to boost sales, said publishers, nor did the 20 per cent discount on all books.

"Syrians' purchasing power is weak and they're living on tight budgets," said Jibrán Abu Joda, a sales representative for Al-Saqi publishing house, a popular Arabic-language book publisher which is based in London and also publishes in Lebanon.

"When readers visit our house, they want to buy as many books as possible. But they can't afford it, and they're putting off buying books until next year."

The government and event organisers did not release any figures on the number of people who attended this year's fair or the number of books sold.

Al-Saqi said its daily book sales dropped from about 600 last year to 300, while the Arab Cultural Publishing Centre said its sales plummeted from about 200 books daily to 40.

Mustafa Al-Sadi, a sales representative for Al-Ubaikan bookstore in Riyadh, said publishers could not offer more of a discount because they were paying such high rents at the fair.

"If the Syrian government lowered the prices for publishing houses, then [publishers] would lower the prices more," said Sadi. "Now, the only ones who lose out in all of this are Syrian citizens."

Suhaib Al-Sharif, director of Al-Fikr publishing house in Syria, attributed the poor turnout to insufficient publicity for the fair. He also said that fewer young people are buying books because they spend so much time online.

But young Syrians attending the fair cited economic factors, saying their disposable income is too tight to purchase books.

Shadi, a 26-year-old sales representative for a private company who did not want his last name used, said he makes only 15,000 liras (300 US dollars) per month, and the cheapest books costs about 300 liras.

“Someone coming from abroad who makes a lot of money might be able to buy a book, but I can’t,” he said.

Iraqi writer Fadhil Al-Rubaii said he did not sell any copies of his new book “Imagined Palestine” at the fair, noting that at 1,200 lira the price may have been too high for the Syrian market.

In addition, eleven books addressing sexual issues were pulled from the fair this year when religious leaders reportedly balked at their content – perhaps a backlash against the growing number of books available over the past few years on topics that were once taboo in Syria.

The fair included a larger number of religious titles than in previous years, said observers.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

Location: [Syria](#)

Focus: [Syria](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/damascus-book-fair-disappoints>