

# Back



# Smart

Jamalon is the Arab world's go-to online retailer of books. But it now wants to step up and disrupt publishing itself

By Christine Grévé

Photographs by Debbie Fortes



**WRITING THE BOOK ON IT**

Ala' Alsallal wants to take the stuffy, old, redundant publishing industry and turn it upside down.



**GETTING SUED** is probably never a good thing. Getting sued by one of the best-known authors of our times? Definitely not. Getting sued by JK Rowling, author of the best-selling *Harry Potter* series? Not even a valid question in any rational conversation.

But sued Ala' Alsallal was by Rowling. It was 2007 when the Jordanian book lover (and defendant in question) found himself in that sticky situation. He'd supervised the translation of the *Harry Potter* series into Arabic, and, wanting to do something nice for the Arab community over Eid Al Fitr, he released the translated stories online.

It didn't take long to break the internet. Over a million copies were downloaded practically overnight.

It also didn't take long for Rowling's lawyers to be alerted to the fact that he had no license or publishing rights of any kind to do any of this, and soon, Alsallal saw himself slapped with a rather hefty lawsuit.

Fortunately, that didn't end him or his quest. He chose instead to use the knowledge he gained to kick off Jamaloon, a venture that has now become the Middle East's largest online bookstore, with more than 10 million Arabic titles.

"I learned many things from that experience," Alsallal says with a sheepish grin on his face. "But after everything, the most important thing it taught me was that there is a tremendous hunger for Arabic content. People always used to say, 'Arabs don't read,' but this wasn't a problem with the readership. It was an issue with the industry."

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It's exactly this problem that Alsallal has taken on, learning that the only way to tackle it effectively on a large scale, is to turn the MENA publishing industry on its head.

### **Arabs don't read?**

Like so many startup stories, the tale of Jamaloon begins in the basement of Alsallal's home in Amman, Jordan. It's 2010 and Ala' Alsallal, his mother, and his four brothers and sisters are packaging some books to be delivered, in their newly-painted purple van, to their very first customers.

Fueled by the *Harry Potter* incident, Alsallal was determined to prove that he had an untapped market at his feet. He started with only ten books listed on his online book retailing site, Jamaloon.com.

Validation of that belief came almost instantly. Almost entirely riding on social media, Jamaloon garnered a rapidly





## TOP 5 ARABIC TITLES

مهزلة العقل البشري  
قواعد العشق الأربعون  
وعاظ السلاطين  
أقوم قبلا  
مأمون القانوني

## TOP 5 ENGLISH TITLES

One Piece  
Harry Potter and the Cursed Child  
Me Before You  
Naruto  
Thinking, Fast and Slow

**WHO READS**  
55% MEN  
45% WOMEN

**TARGET AGE GROUP**  
18-34 in the GCC



**BALANCING THE BOOKS**  
With a Series A round of \$3.7 million behind him, Alsallal is now looking to raise even more in a Series B by the end of this fateful year.

growing audience that was scrambling for more.

After just two months, he started fundraising, and soon caught the eye of investor and the founder of Aramex, Fadi Ghandour, who put Jamal on a growth path with a pre-seed amount of \$15,000.

Alsallal then went on to join Oasis500's accelerator program, with another \$15,000. After a year with the program, Alsallal raised a seed round to the tune of \$400,000, after which came some legit office space and the building of the Jamal team beyond family and friends.

Today, Alsallal oversees a team of 65, with operations all over the region. The Ghandour connection has also resulted in a partnership with Aramex—a significant logistical advantage and a far cry from the little purple van delivering a few books at a time.

He has also learned to be on the right side of the law. Having established a publishing house in London, Alsallal

makes sure that he is on point with all publishing rights and licencing under British law.

## Those old house rules

The Arab world's publishing industry, by all accounts, is stuck in a relatively large rut.

Lack of reliable figures about book production and sales; insufficient readership; censorship and issues related to freedom of expression; difficulties of regional distribution and piracy; as well as barriers to the development of publishing structures are all atop a mountain of issues faced by the industry's stakeholders.

Alsallal says that the publishing industry is still very much fragmented, stranded in outdated operations and high printing costs. Trying to get the sector out of the dark ages seems a long and arduous process. "Until now, we did not



#### TURNING THE PAGE

The dream of Alsallal, Print-On-Demand could revolutionize the regional publishing industry.

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even have a primary distributor for books. We had to deal directly with publishers, which took a long time. We had to visit them...to earn their trust...to have agreements with them...to educate them about how we operate,” he says.

Alexander McNabb, a UAE-based publishing and media specialist who has worked in the industry in the Middle East for over 25 years, says that the problem runs deep and industry-wide.

“The Arab publishing industry is enmeshed in a nadir of its making, a systemic failure born of short-termism, greed, risk aversion and cronyism,” he says.

“I can’t blame the publishers themselves. Many factors have led us to this parlous state, including censorship, cross-border customs and logistics issues, social tensions and regional cultural and ideological differences. The role of publishing and its state in the Middle East is something we could debate for a week and still not truly encompass.”

McNabb urges that the opportunity for transformation is already here, but change is slow to happen.

“Here we are today, with the opportunity ahead of us to transform everything and our publishing industry is on its knees and simply won’t get up. Publishers are hide-bound, old-fashioned, counter-transitional and technology-averse. That’s a generalization, of course, but there are precious few who stand out as truly innovative and actively seeking to create solutions,” he says.

With publishers being so adverse to change and mistrusting of technology, McNabb is of the opinion that technology players with various solutions in the market have a steep uphill climb ahead of them.

“I am constantly amused by the lack of trust on the part of publishers. As Khalil Gibran tells us, ‘Thus does the first touch of selfishness make thieves of all mankind.’ In other words, publishers lack trust ‘cause they don’t deserve it.”

Censorship and commercial laws regulating the import of books vary from one country to another, even in the GCC, making it difficult for any publisher to effectively reach the whole Arab market.

And in the absence of any pan-Arab distribution structure, publishers must separately find different distribution channels in every country they wish to send their books to.

Bookstore networks are also deficient in several countries.

“One of the only ways for the public to get access to new book titles is through book fairs. It works well for the publishers, but for the reader? He has to wait for the book fair in March. Why?” Alsallal asks exasperatedly.

And local bookstores aren’t much help either.

“For example Kinokuniya [a giant book store in Dubai] has only around three thousand Arabic books,” he jests.

## A New Chapter

As the Arab world erupts with a growing population of the young, unemployment is becoming a portentous issue.

And those looking to take their talents for language and writing to the public have an almost impossible job of getting published.

For one, authors are often required to bear the cost of printing. These costs, vary across countries in the region, but almost always on the higher side.

According to Alsallal, the expense of offset printing and the need to print larger runs in advance has often left a community of talented would-be authors without an opportunity to have their work published.

Enter Publish-On-Demand (POD). The brainchild, and dream of Alsallal in the region, POD could revolutionize the regional industry. The service, launched this year, can leapfrog over many of the issues connected with traditional offset printing.

These include, but are not limited to, extended delivery times, warehousing and storage costs, expensive cross-border distribution and missed opportunities with out-of-stock books.

The POD service prints smaller runs than traditional offset printing, enabling publishers to print as low as just one copy of any book, lowering costs and giving publishers the ability to print in response to orders. And since orders are printed locally, international shipping costs are eradicated, which further reduces printing costs.

Furthermore, some censorship and red tape are bypassed.

“We publish everything in the UK according to the English law, that way we have much more freedom when it

## Books For Sale

The MENA region is seriously lacking access to reading material



### BAHRAIN

Population  
**1.37 million**  
Bookshops  
**5**

### KSA

Population  
**31.5 million**  
Bookshops  
**3 big bookshop chains (Jarir, Obeikan and Tuhama) and more than 100 small bookshops or small selling points in hypermarkets and malls**

### KUWAIT

Population  
**3.9 million**  
Bookshops  
**7**

### OMAN

Population  
**4.4 million**  
Bookshops  
**3**

### QATAR

Population  
**2.2 million**  
Bookshops  
**5 bookshops**

### UAE

Population  
**9.2 million**  
Bookshops  
**3 big bookshop chains (Kinokuniya, Borders and Majroudy's) and another 60 small bookshops**

(NO. OF BOOKSHOPS IS AN APPROXIMATE)

comes to publishing our content.”

“By working as a platform, we are enablers for authors to deliver their content as printed books to the reader, and this is how we fix the distribution issue,” he explains.

“And we provide worldwide free delivery. That’s the challenging part for readers and authors and for publishers for all the industry, how to move books from country to a country—so it’s a win-win-win situation.”

Just how important is POD for writers in the region and what could be its impact on the incumbent publishing industry going forward?

“POD with Jamaloon is a game-changer,” says McNabb, who is also a novelist. “It’s potentially transformational for the regional market.”

“It also means positive cash flow, fast turnover of sales, low returns and proactive inventory management.”

“Will plodding, turgid and old-fashioned publishers understand this? No. But young, hungry ones will. And they will take the market by storm.”

He stresses that POD slashes the barrier to entry and opens the floodgates for budding writers in the region to come forward with their works.

“Why would I pay a publisher to print my books now? I can print them myself!” says McNabb.

“There’s a massive new market opportunity in the region set to open because of this—a new egalitarianism, the cutting out of the middleman and a new transparent market where publishers will have to substantially add value in their marketing, outreach, and connection to readers.”

“If they don’t, authors will, and, can go direct. Personally, for the Middle East, I think that’s a great thing.”

Does that mean publishers should or could shun Jamaloon, the retailer?

“No, it means they need to embrace it and fast,” says McNabb.

“Or they can make like King Canute and try to turn back the tide. This is the future. Their choice is to learn to swim and surf or drown. It’s that simple. It’s that stark.”

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