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Persian British Muslim Invents a "New" Alphabet : [The "Abjad" Project - an Attempt to Restore the Lost Amicability between Children and the Language.](#)

Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and our ancient brilliant culture has become (Aziz Qawmin Zal) – its deterioration at the hands of the "new generation" has taken it to a point where it has no dignity even in its own home. Our beautiful language has become difficult after it was once easy and the famous and simple approach used by Arabic teachers of "paper, pencil and sharpener...now concentrate with me." is no longer enough to rescue it. The danger threatening the "Arab tongue" is serious and any steps towards rescuing it have to be encouraged even if they do not originate from native Arabic speakers.

Here is an Iranian man who was brought up and educated in England, and who converted to Islam 10 years ago. He devoted these years to his creative educational project that teaches children the Arabic language through a story, letters, books, board, CD, audio cassettes and a TV series.

It was through Abjad that Mustafa Majzub decided to return to Arabic - the language of the Qur'an – some of its pillaged dignity; and here also he is insisting on emphasising Arabism amongst children by sparking their interest in their language.

This is an open invitation for all interested parties to get to know this unique attempt and benefit from it; whether they are the Ministry of Education, The National Assembly for Childhood or The Reading for All Project; and to try and restore Arabic to its position as a language which contributes to the writing of history.

By *Maha Shahba*

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Because of the offenses being made against our Arabic and Islamic culture that we are currently witnessing we are urged to hold tightly to the safeguarding factors of our cultural entity. A language is deemed as probably the most important factor in determining and in ascertaining a nation's identity, civilization and cultural aspects.

The Arabic language is facing a state of sad deterioration and retreat throughout the Arab world and in Egypt. A single glimpse at billboards and signs, which fill the streets with a deformed language, or to listen to interviews on the television with any group of youths is evidence of this. Moreover, it is sufficient to read the published report on what was considered the "illiteracy scandal" where 40% of preparatory students (between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade) in the Beheira Governorate could not read or write. Talking to your child after school is proof enough when the terms "Miss, School, and Break" have replaced "Almuaalim, Almadrasah, and Alfus'ha".

Therefore, I considered it rather strange that a man who does not originally belong to the "language of Dadd", should show such concern for our Arabic language and to try and teach it to our children. Moreover, being of Christian origin, he was not exposed as a child to the Glorious Qura'n and the miracle of its Arabic - Mustafa Majzub, the innovator of the "Abjad" project converted to Islam in Egypt in 1990 after a meeting with the Muslim British writer, Dr. Martin Lings.

While at Oxford University in England, Mr. Majzub paid much attention to children's literature. Such attention was redoubled while he studied the Persian and Arabic Language. He was particularly interested in Arabic and teaching it to children after converting to Islam and reading the Qura'n and dedicated ten years to carry out his ambitious project. This he conducted through his innovation of a "new" alphabet and the Letters' Pyramid which facilitates the child's recognition of the different forms of the letters. It also uses the transforming plastic letters, which have no peer in the world in any language, and includes the Story of Letters, a splendid picture book which offers the child entertainment coupled with information.

Besides its obvious educational benefits, the project pays special attention to aesthetics and it restores the lost relationship between the child and the book; or at the very least has the honour of making such an attempt.

"My attention to Arabic and the style of teaching it to children," said the owner of Abjad, "initiated when I was a student at Oxford University. There I was a member of a group called the "Alice Group", in reference to Alice in Wonderland, whose purpose was to honour the author of this story, Lewis Carroll, an important British writer of Children's Literature. Hence, my

attention to children's literature began. I spent a long time at University studying and researching Nineteenth Century children's literature. It is enormous. European children grow up with traditional stories and tales such as Robin Hood, Peter Pan, and others. The custom of the bedtime story that is widespread in the West has helped to safeguard this tradition. In addition, mothers begin the process of teaching their child at the pre-school age. From this, the idea of illustrated books or picture books began, the type of which I did not find when I came to live in the East. There are several children's books which contain a great deal of printed text and some books which have pictures but they are not *picture books*. A picture book is essentially a story which the child can follow without knowing how to read. The written text is small and does not dominate the page. The picture is spread out over the entire page. Once the parent has read the story over and over again, the child is encouraged to try and read on his own since the pictures guide his way through the plot."

Through the research and studies undertaken in cooperation with Syrian teacher and friend at Oxford University, Dr. Bassam Saeh, a long period of discussions with child education specialists, and through direct experience with children, Mustafa Majzub was able to design the "Prince of The Letters" book. This is a picture book that teaches children the Arabic alphabet and its usage through an adventurous story titled "Dharwaazad, Prince of the Letters."

The strange title of the story is part of its suspense and ambiguity, which unveils as the story's events unfold and was designed to attract the child's attention and spark his curiosity. It is not enough to merely give children information – we must raise questions in his mind and answer them gradually through the development of the events. In addition to its educational value, some parts of the story, particularly the songs, were designed to offer the child pure entertainment. By attracting children to books, a relationship will have been established that will last him a lifetime and the world will have gained a new reader rather than another culturally illiterate human being.

The story begins with dancing letters, playing and rejoicing in the woodland. At the outset, a problem surfaces when the letters try to make the word "play" (نلعب). The letter (ع) starts to cry when the (ل) pokes her in the eye. The letter (هـ), the Queen of the letters, tells her to close her eye. Through this the child learns that the letter changes its shape from (ع) to (هـ) when it connects to a preceding letter. The letters of the Woodland then try to make the word "rejoice" (نمرح). A new problem arises because the letter (ر) has no hand to hold on to the letter (ح). The letter (ر) and its group (ذ, ز, ر, ز, ا, د) discover that they cannot connect to a following letter and ask the Queen why they have no hands. The Queen remembers that the name of the carpenter who made the letters is "Dharwazad" and she sends the Hoopoe to look for him. It is later on revealed that the name of the carpenter consists of the letters of this group.

The Hoopoe goes on a long journey and returns to tell the letters that "Dharwazad" no longer lives in his old house. Instead, he found his nephew "Mikkizad" who has invited the letters to visit him. Thus, the story of the letters continues telling a thrilling and enjoyable story. It teaches children how to read the Arabic letters, how to write them, how to use them and how to yield them. At the end, the child can comprehend all what was ambiguous, and find the solution to every particular problem. Simply, letters have "hands" to connect to other letters or hold their "tails" when they appear at the end of a word. Even the letters which do not have hands are satisfied that they are distinctive since they bear the name of their maker "Dharwazad" (دزوزاد). The yellow letters, (م), (ك), and (ي) also feel special since they form the name of his nephew "Mikkizad". The letters (ط), and (ظ) have a special plume instead of tails and the Queen, (هـ) has a special distinctive throne.

Through this story, I found a magical solution to a personal problem. For several months I was unable to make my child –a pupil in grade one– memorize any of the letters which could not connect to a following letter. I was too exhausted to convince him to sit down for long hours after a hard school day to study together and to memorize them. Then I realized that a story and a toy could do miracles. This was reiterated to me by instructors, specialized in teaching Arabic to children, as they suffer daily in their classrooms from the same problem.

In addition to the picture book, the ingenious plastic letters offer solutions to the problems of teaching the child the letters of Arabic alphabet. There is a basic problem with existing letter sets. Either the letter will be represented in its basic form - which does not enable a child to write a word – or letters are represented in all their forms making these sets very large and confusing. These letter sets are not only useless and unbeneficial but could also be detrimental. Children can get bored and frustrated when trying to deal with this maze and the tool which is designed to attract children to the language soon turns into a burden.

The entire issue seems to be too complex without any solution! Not so! A man of Iranian origin living in Egypt solved the problem by inventing an ingenious system presented as a toy to teach children Arabic. As explained briefly, Mustafa Majzub, the owner of the idea, designed his letters in such a manner that a child can manipulate the letter pieces - using their hinges, connecting to another letter with their "hands" or adding a tail - to represent the letter's different forms according to its position in a word. However, this is not all. Mr. Majzub also gave reason and logic to the letter groups. By grouping letters according to their similarities, he discovered a seven row pyramid and colour coded these groups using the seven colours of the rainbow. The first row, violet, consists of the letters (س، ش، ص، ض، ق، ف، ك، ن، ل) and have similar tail endings. The second row, indigo, consists of the letters (و، ز، ر، ذ، د، أ) and are the letters that cannot connect to a following letter. The third row, blue, consists of the letters (ع، ح، خ، ج، غ) and share common tails. The fourth row, green, consists of the letters (ب،

ت ، ث ، ف ) and all have upturning tails. The fifth row, yellow, consist of the letters ( ل ، م ، ي ) and all have very distinctive tails. The sixth row, orange, consists of the letters ( ط and ظ ) which have no tails and their shapes do not change according to their location in the word. At the top of the pyramid, red, comes the letter ( هـ ) and is crowned as the queen. This letter is distinguished by having four shapes and two hands. Thanks to the genius of the design of the letters, this piece of plastic can be transformed to represent all four shapes( ه ، هـ ، هـ ، هـ ).

Mr. Majzub does not conceal his surprise in discovering this distinctive Alphabet Pyramid and says, "The Abjad Project excels the Western level of educational books for children. I can safely say that it is unique on a global level. The quality of the materials used are of the highest standard - plastic, and paper - and were manufactured in a manner that makes them safe, practical, beautiful and attractive to children. In addition to the books and letters, there is a CD ROM and audio cassettes which were recorded in the voice of the famous artist, Samira Abdel Aziz. I also sought the assistance of distinguished Eastern musicians from the Opera House to record the soundtracks and songs with traditional oriental instruments."

Together with the magnetic letters and the collection of Abjad books - "Abjad Letters", "Abjad Animals", "Abjad Numbers" there is a whiteboard, where the magnetic letters can be assembled, and can be used for writing using a special pen manufactured from non-toxic materials. There is also a cloth eraser for cleaning both the board and the A5 books, all of which can be written on since they are laminated.

The next stage will witness a new book and tool to help teach children the Hamza and the short vowels. The company is also planning a thirty-part television series to teach children the letters. The four main characters - a Cat, a Hoopoe, a Donkey, and a Duck - were specially designed for the Arab child, similar to the characters of "Aalam SimSim". The projects development can be followed via a special site on the internet: [www.abjad.com](http://www.abjad.com).

If we ponder on the Abjad project as a solution to the actual problems faced when teaching our children the letters of Arabic language, it is a notion of great benefit. Our language has been honoured by Allah -Praise belongs to Him- by revealing His Glorious Qura'n in Arabic, so we must safeguard it. We must not forget that if the language of any people excels, they will excel. Let us teach our children a second foreign language or several foreign languages, but first let us save their beautiful mother tongue and encourage every attempt made to ensure they have a lasting relationship with their language.