

Draft
Ismail Serageldin
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The Bibliotheca Alexandrina Proposal on Muslim Classics

Introduction:

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina, with a number of other partners and sponsors, seeks to launch a comprehensive program to revive the great classics of Islam and to bring forth the enlightened views of the great Muslim reformers. This material, much of which is out of print, or has never been translated from its original language, would be then translated as needed to have editions in Arabic, English, French, and Farsi and put on line in a new portal that would also provide links to other scholarly sites for those who seek additional contacts. Publication of this material will also be discussed with appropriate publishers, but the main intent is to put it all on-line to encourage access for a broad public.

The purpose of this exercise is twofold:

- To show a younger generation of Muslims the progressive, open and tolerant face of so much of their tradition; and
- To present to westerners another face of Islam and Muslims.

Therefore, the material must be made understandable in contemporary terms, and thus each edition will have an appropriate introduction, to provide context and highlight relevance to 21st century conditions. Older material will require appropriate footnoting to explain archaic terms. Much of the older material ultimately posted may consist of appropriate selections from the great works properly organized for easy navigation and comprehension. All in all, the product has to be user-friendly and accessible to the average high-school student or college undergraduate.

Coverage:

The initial program envisages some 120-150 works (including the anthologies), roughly equal to about 25,000 - 50,000 pages of material. These would initially be produced in Arabic and English, and in phases over a three year period. Starting from the second year, a parallel stream to translate into more languages will be added.

Geographically, it shall cover works originating from all the predominantly Muslim countries, from Morocco to Indonesia and from central Asia to Northern Nigeria, but will also select works coming from places where Islam is no longer a force (Andalusia) and where Muslims live as a minority, for example in the west.

Thematically, it shall cover all aspects of Islam, but with a special emphasis on the interface between faith and societal matters.

Chronologically, it shall cover material from the earliest days of Islam to the present, but with a special emphasis on the last 150 years.

Revival of the classics:

The new editions are to highlight the radical and progressive nature of their thought. Imagine revisiting Omar's letter to the Qadi, a 7th century discussion of the presumption of innocence and that justice delayed is justice denied, and that evidence gathered illegally is not admissible as evidence, or on the right of the accused to confront his accusers... all that in the 7th century! These themes are still remarkably modern to this day even in the west!

Or the revolutionary work on science and math in the Middle Ages, with a rebellion against the authority of text and the emphasis on the empirical method, carefully explained by Ibn Al-Haytham centuries before Bacon Descartes and Galileo!

An anthology of classic writings

As the great works are complex to read by the nature of their style and organization, it is intended first to focus on producing anthologies of carefully selected pieces from the great works organized in a modern and accessible fashion.

However, as the project progresses, it will be essential to provide modern editions of the great classics themselves.

Simplified editions of the great works

In seeking to provide easier access to the great works of the past, we will also consider shorter editions with a more modern language, as was done several decades ago by Abdel Salam Haroun for the Sira of Ibn Hisham (in Arabic).

The new editions would also benefit from new introductions, Indexing, Cross references, and electronic searchability.

The promotion of S&T:

If young Muslims are to become producers of knowledge and not just consumers of technology, encouragement of science and technology (S&T) will be important. Not only because these societies need such skills in the highly competitive world of the 21st century, but also because the rationality, logic, skepticism and the evidentiary approach of science and technology are an important element in combating extremism, fanaticism, obscurantism and xenophobia.

Reviving some of the glorious past in these areas is important for the promotion of evidence-based arguments and the values of the scientific enterprise. Thus one of the themes that should be addressed among the anthologies of the classics would be the Arab-Muslim tradition in Science & Math.

The Arab-Muslim tradition in Science & Math:

Here we are proposing scholarly reviews by discipline, including brief biographies of the luminaries who produced that work:

- Math
- Astronomy
- Medicine
- Geography
- Engineering
- Physics (optics)
- Chemistry

Hot Topics:

It is essential that we address the hot topics that should be the subject of important intra-Muslim debate as well as dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. Among these hot topics that we intend to address through various means involving seminars, commissioned papers, survey papers and anthologies of selected writings, are:

- Sharia
- Democracy
- Women
- Non-Muslims
- Ridda
- Jihad
- Pluralism in contemporary society
- Human rights
- Gays
- Free speech
- Evolution and cosmology
- Scientific research (ethics)
- The scientific method
- The work ethic
- Economics and finance
- Globalization and the limits of the cultural specificity argument
- Etc.

Organization for implementation:

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina has assembled a team of experts from all over the Muslim world. They have drawn up a preliminary list of some 150 works from the last 150 years and are in the process of drawing up a list for the classics.

This committee will supervise the work, and will be the editorial board for the project. It will work under the guidance of the Librarian of Alexandria (Dr. Ismail Serageldin) and will have as Secretary, Dr. Salah Elgawhary of Egypt.

An eminent advisory board of other distinguished experts will undertake the peer-review of the material being proposed for presentation.

The BA will provide all the logistics and the infrastructure to enable this project to proceed.

Preliminary contacts with the Union of Arab Publishers have been established to search into copyright issues and identify translations where they exist.

The Carnegie Corporation:

Mr. Vartan Gregorian of The Carnegie Corporation has indicated strong support for this project, and will personally be involved in supervising its implementation, bringing to bear his enormous experience and wisdom. The Carnegie Corporation is expected to support at least part of the work envisaged in this endeavor.

Support of the Alliance of Civilizations:

However, it will require a lot of support over the next five to seven years to implement this project to the full measure of its potential. It is hoped that endorsement by the Alliance of Civilizations of this project would help expand the base of support for this initiative.

Collaboration with others:

This portal will be linked to many other institutions and we hope that many will participate in the workshops and seminars that will accompany this enormous multi-author (editor) project. It is our intention to also encourage important Muslim-Muslim dialogue on the hot issues as well as Muslim and non-Muslim dialogue about these same issues.