



# The Middle East Librarians Association 2022 Conference Program

## Opening Remarks

### MELA, its early history and impact on my activities

By Fawzi Abdulrazak

When asked to give a speech in this 50th anniversary celebration of MELA, I was delighted to oblige. The reasons for my enthusiasm were that the occasion also marks my entry into the world of books and librarianship. In addition, I wanted to share with my old as well as new friends and colleagues some of my personal experiences as one of the earlier members of MELA, with its founders and distinguished activists, whom I admired and followed in helping to shape the association into the way we know it today.

In the early 1960's MESA (the Middle East Studies Association) was organized. In 1972, MELA was founded as an offshoot of MESA, as Dr. David Partington, one of its architects, informs us in his article about the genesis of the organization. This article appeared in the very first issue of MELA Notes in 1973. In later essays, Dr. Partington talked about MELA and MESA and "The Arabic Collections in the US" in relation to the Public Law 480 (PL480) program through which 24 American Universities and Institutions received Arabic materials from Cairo's Library of Congress office, at no charge.

Aside from learning about the history of MELA and the individual scholars and librarians who participated in organizing it, one can glean from Dr. Partington's writings his long-term efforts to improve the status of librarians to that of faculty members. In his strong view, librarians' duties complemented those of scholars in teaching and research. As could be expected, faculty members at many universities considered librarians at a lower rank in the academic hierarchy, in comparison with them. To this end, Dr. Partington who was the only librarian on the board of directors of MESA (PhD Princeton) and George Atiyeh (PhD University of Chicago) teamed up to organize MELA and later on MEMP, to promote research and facilitate communication among librarians. However, without their devotion, and the efforts of other distinguished librarians, MELA would have not been successful in expanding its base as an organization for the benefit of all.

Among the early activists in the organization who emerged as MELA's future leaders were Martha Dukas (Harvard College Library) who played big role in writing the bylaws. John Eilts (University of Michigan); Patricia Philpot (Indiana) Frank Unlandherm (Columbia); Meryle Gaston (NYU); Dunning Wilson (UCLA); Chris Filstrup (NYPL); Eric Ormsby (Princeton); Edward Jajko (Yale); Dennis Hyde (U PENN); Marsha McIntock (OSU); Fawzi Khoury (Seattle); and others, played important roles in the growth of MELA.

In regard to the MELA Notes; its editors and contributors will always be remembered with admiration and respect for the work they did for the Association. Their contributions are well documented in the Notes for those who are interested to learn more about them and about the history of the organization as it was developing and growing year after year.

Among the names of those who enriched the Notes, with articles and reviews as I remember, were Jim Pollock who stood tall for many years as an editor of MELA Notes and served the Association from its earliest days in many different ways. Other contributors to the Notes, as I also remember, were Miroslav Krek (Brandeis); Abazar Sepehri (Texas); Adam Gasek (McGill University); and Michael Albin (Library of Congress).

MELA's bylaws define the methods and ways to improve the profession of librarianship by "facilitating communications and cooperation among members; by disseminating information and promoting research through acquisitions; preparing bibliographies; providing bibliographic control; and addressing matters affecting librarianship and librarians."

In the fall of 1972, when I started to work at HCL (Harvard College Library) under the supervision of Dr. David Partington, MELA was already organized. At that time, I had no idea how profoundly the creation of this organization and its founders would impact my professional and intellectual life.

Prior to 1972, I was a high school teacher of Arabic language and literature for five years after earning BA in Islamic and Arabic studies at Shari'ah College, Baghdad University in 1967. Between 1967 and the summer of 1972, I also contributed articles and essays in modern literature and mysticism which were published in several newspapers and journals in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, and Algiers.

My ambition at the time was to develop myself into a scholar in Arabic and Islamic studies. During the years between 1967 and 1972, I became increasingly interested books of all genres, a love instilled in me by my upbringing at home listening to the tales of A Thousand and One Nights and dreaming of travel to distant lands to seek adventures, like the character of Hasan al-Basri in The Tales. I was also very curious about old, yellowed books, which I was exposed to occasionally at the home of our next-door neighbor, Mullah Ahmed.

This Mullah was the Imam of my neighborhood in Kirkuk, Iraq while I was growing up. During the annual month of Ramadan, he told his rapt audience stories from Qisas al-Anbiya'; which was another source of fascination, with tales of past prophets and of human history, which were not very different from the tales of Alf Laylah wa Laylah, in captivating the listeners.

During July of 1972, I arrived in Boston MA, and went to visit the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, where Professor Muhsin Mahdi was the Director. At that time, I was hoping to continue my higher education with the possibility of getting a small job teaching Arabic. Professor Mahdi had a scholarly interest in Arabic language and literature and philosophy, as well, I learned later, in Alf Alf Laylah wa Laylah (A Thousand and One Nights). After a brief encounter with Professor Mahdi about my qualifications, he asked me to see the Head of the Middle East Division at Widener Library; Dr. David Partington, who happened to be looking for a person with my qualifications to help him catalogue new and old books (like lithographic editions). He also pointed out to me that it would be better for me to work and study at the same time, because getting a teaching job was not easy at the time. (One of his students in the PhD program had been driving a taxi to make a living.)

I met Dr. Partington whom I always called "Chief" and his assistant, Martha Dukas, I was hired as an intern first, and later on, I became the Arabic Language Specialist at Harvard University Library.

At the start of my job at Harvard, the Chief trained me to catalogue books, and soon after, he encouraged me to prepare bibliographies about the Arab World, highlighting the significance of history to Middle East American scholars. He also presented me with a few issues of the PL480 Accession List, which included descriptions of Arabic imprints from Egypt and Lebanon.

I observed that the PL480 Accession list, while impressive, was lacking titles from the rest of the Arab World. In addition, from my earlier studies, I knew the importance of bibliographic works, like al-Fihrist by Ibn al-Nadim.

This observation led me to compile the first volume of AHW, 1973 I found the PL480 Accession list to be very impressive, but it needed improvement by expanding it to include other Arabic titles from the rest of the Arab World. Thus, the first volume of my bibliography: Arabic Historical Writings, 1973 was born.

One of the things I will never forget was the chief dedication to provide the scholarly public with bibliographies. He promoted me as the sole author of Arabic Historical Writing, regardless the fact of all he had done to help me. He allowed me to prepare a good portion of it at the library; he revised my English, typed the whole manuscript; took it to the Harvard Printing Office, and sent copies of the published bibliography to various scholars, and to periodicals to be reviewed. Among them was a review published in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, by Professor C. L. Geddes.

With such mentoring and encouragement, I began preparing the next two volumes of Arabic Historical Writings. Here also the Chief took the initiative to have one of the volumes published by Mansell in London, England, in order to benefit a much wider scholarly public around the World.

The Chief's story in training me as young librarian, directing me to compile bibliographies like the three volumes of Arabic Historical Writings, and the six volumes of The Harvard's Catalog of Arabic Collection, and going out of his way to promote them, are vivid examples of his leadership and desire to disseminate information and knowledge in line with librarianship and MELA's bylaws, as he and the early founders of the Association had envisioned.

Producing the Harvard Arabic Collection Catalogue was major endeavor on my part and not easy to accomplish. It took several years of hard and continuous work during the day and evening including weekends to examine about ninety thousand cards against the actual books, which consisted of close to thirty thousand titles. This achievement was important for me to show my appreciation for all the support, trust and respect the Chief had showed me all along.

The other many aspects of the Chief's influence on me were in the field of acquisitions which eventually paved my way to venture into the kingdom of books as publisher and distributor.

During the 1977 while I was engaged in multiple tasks, I came to realize the big gaps in Harvard's Arabic collection in regard to books from many parts of the Arab World. When I asked the Chief to address the matter, he said it had been very difficult to forge alliances with Arab book dealers and to acquire new and old books because this task required taking trips to North Africa and the Middle East.

When I showed my readiness to visit the countries such as Morocco; Tunisia and Iraq which posed a big risk (having left from there nine years ago) the Chief accepted my suggestion, and soon I was preparing to start another phase of my duties in addition to cataloguing and compiling bibliographies.

On this first trip on behalf of Harvard UL during 1977 (it was almost nine years since I had left Iraq), I was able to acquire over one thousand books, in Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen; Syriac; Berber; French; and Spanish, including a few periodicals like the Turkish Qardashliq, which at the time was only available in four countries in the World.

My trip to Iraq and both Morocco and Tunisia brought my attention to the fact that other ME libraries in the States had the same problems as we did in acquiring books from Middle Eastern countries other than Egypt and Lebanon.

Before the end of the 1970's an arrangement was made for me to take another trip to Morocco on behalf of several University libraries among them Princeton, the Universities of Michigan, UCLA, etc. as I remember. The trip was successful in terms of getting books, but it presented financial problems, because some of participating libraries did not pay their share for the trip expenses of in time.

During one of MELA's annual conferences there was discussion about difficulties of getting books from several North Africa countries and Middle East, other than Egypt, where the Library of Congress was actively managing the PL480 program, and Lebanon where Muhammad Sulaiman was a major supplier of Lebanese imprints.

One of the things I clearly remember about this, a suggestion by Professor Eleazar Birnbaum (University of Toronto) was to encourage young librarians to take trips to acquire the needed books. I thought the suggestion was great and after Prof. Birnbaum's lecture I was approached by some librarians asking me to take such trips on my own.

Upon my return to Cambridge, I asked the Chief about this travel idea, and he said NO. To my surprise, but my determination led me to ask the University Personnel Office about the feasibility of starting a book business after working hours at Widener Library and on weekends. I was told that I could do that as long as I did not "mix apples and oranges". I had many good reasons to become a book distributor; among them, first was that several ME librarians were encouraging me to do that. Second, I needed an extra income to finance the literary periodical *Mundus Arabicus* which I was hoping to launch early in the 1980's; Third, I knew at the time that many members of the faculty at Harvard travelled to lecture and were paid for their trips. Fourth, I was aware of the fact that four Middle East librarians were engaged in book business discretely or in the open, I also knew M. Sulaiman's great impact on ME Libraries in the World after leaving his job at the University of Michigan Library under the supervision of the chief.

However, I was unhappy about myself to do something that my boss did not want. In 1980, I started *Dar Mahjar*, as a sole proprietorship and four years later the Company was incorporated. At the beginning five ME libraries became *Dar Mahjar*'s clients and soon after other libraries in the US; Canada and Europe started to depend on the company for ME books, excluding Lebanon and Egypt.

In addition to my activities in book business on the side, I continued to work under the direction of the Chief and he continued to support me in any way possible.

After establishing *Mundus Arabicus*, 1981- he joined me along with Prof. Mahdi and other scholars from different Universities to be part of the Editorial Board.

During the years between 1980 and 1995 when the Chief retired, the Chief's support never stopped. During the same period, I travelled to most of the countries in the Arab World, Europe and both North and South America to collect books, periodicals, video tapes and historical post cards.

As a result of such trips a wealth of materials and bibliographic information were collected in a systematic fashion. In regard to materials, the Argentina and Brazil junkets yielded, I was successful in obtaining about forty annual volumes of *al-Sharq* (Orient) journal edited in Sao Paulo, Brazil by Muse Kurayyim and a full set of *al-Marahil* (Etapas) periodical, edited by Miryana D. Fakhuri. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, arrangements were made to obtain Ilyas Qunsol's private collection (books and periodicals), including his published novels and plays, and his journal *al-Manahil*, for Harvard as a gift.

The collected material and bibliographical information made it possible to produce a host of bibliographies; indexes which in turn led me to write about the history of printing. Among these results was a complete bibliography of books and periodical published in North and South America, which was published in *Alam al-Kutub* periodical in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. An index of *al-Marahil* was also compiled and published in the same Saudi periodical by Helen Vincent, who was a member of the ME Department at HCL at the time.

To sum up my talk about the chief, Dr. David Partington, and other members of MELA I would like to honor the good memory of many friends who passed away, for their contributions. To name a few, Latif Khayyat (NYPL);

Lesley Wilkins (Harvard University); Frank Unlandherm (Columbia University); Fawzi Khoury (University of Washington, Seattle) David Giovacine (U PENN); Edward Jajko (Hoover Institution) and Mohamed Sulaiman (Sulaiman Bookshop), in Beirut, Lebanon.

Finally, I would like to say again, many thanks to Dr. Partington for the direction, support, and encouragement he gave to me. I found him to be a caring teacher, scholar, distinguished librarian, effective leader, and above all a wonderful human being and cherished friend.

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