

Reading must once again be the Arab world's loyal friend

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An old Arabic saying claims there are three things that are mythical and impossible to find: the Ghoul, the Phoenix, and the Loyal Friend. A fourth, it could be argued in this age, is reading.

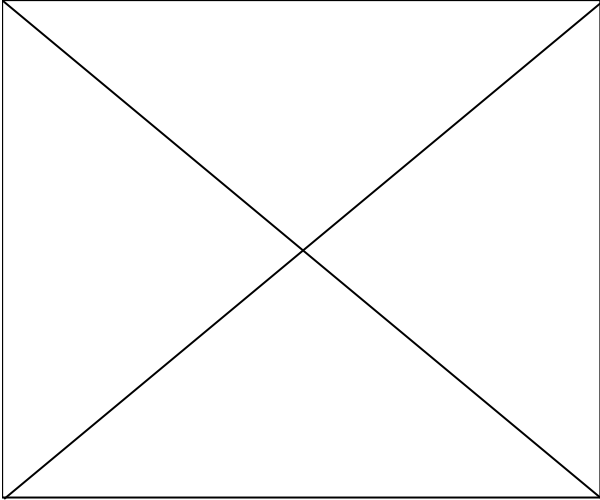
In order to master reading, up to two hours a day, or more, of practice are needed. In his book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell argued that the magic number to excel in any field, is 10,000 hours of practise. Accepting this premise, it would take an individual up to 13.7 years of reading two hours a day to hit Gladwell's target.

But what is the number of hours that we must spend reading each year to be described as a "reading nation"?

Researchers studying reading performance results among students at the highest achieving school districts across the United States found that the most successful were the ones that asked their students to do a daily independent reading assignment. Students were expected to read for 30 minutes a day, translating into 180 hours per year. Multiply this by the number of school years, 13, gives a total of 2,340 hours of independent reading. This is how reading becomes a habit that lasts a lifetime.

In most public schools in the Arab world, and in many private ones, reading is taught from text books provided by the ministries of education. In a study I conducted in over 150 Arabic language classrooms I found several areas of concern.

First, a common complaint amongst teachers was: "We must finish the book, or we will be punished by the ministry." When schools or education ministries impose a specific textbook as the school curriculum or manual, they are really offering teachers and students the shortest, easiest and fastest way to failure.



Second, it was observed that in Arabic classes, teachers in general provided distinct and rigid grammar and spelling instructions, rather than engaging their students in reading and writing. Finally, classroom shelves were devoid of any optional children's books, magazines, novels, dictionaries or reference books.

Clearly, the responsibility of creating a strong reading culture should be shared by the whole nation and not just the government. Schools, parents, cultural institutions, corporations and local communities are all stakeholders in this venture.

Schools need to upgrade antiquated curricula. Educational systems cannot be bought, they must be locally built and customised for the needs of the teachers and students. Reform initiative success has to be measured by students' performances, which are dependent on the quality of teaching and books available at each school.

Parents at home need to read to their children on a daily basis, surround them with books and magazines in every room of the house and not allow more than 30 minutes of television a day, as recommended by the American Pediatrics Association.

Meanwhile cultural institutions and corporations can reach out to the community by setting up educational initiatives and providing financial aid in the form of sponsorships.

Ultimately, governments still have the most significant role to play. It is the duty of the governments to allocate significant funding to the Ministry of Education's budgets to promote reading, improve libraries and ensure qualified teachers are hired.

Today, reading in the Arab world is like the mythical Ghoul that petrifies young children. Genuine progress is possible but only if serious investment, say for the next 10 years, is poured into all aspects of reading: from publishing houses and authors, to upgrading classroom libraries and providing access to reading materials to both adults and children.

Ministries and educational institutions need to come together to finance national reading campaigns throughout the entire year to promote reading. Parents and educators, for their

part, need to engrain in children the habit of setting aside time towards reading. If such wide-ranging initiatives are undertaken, reading may once again become a pastime for many Arabs. It could become the driving force for necessary cultural renaissance that complements the political awakening the Arab world is currently witnessing. Perhaps then we can banish the old saying by finally saying: "Reading is a loyal friend." [Next page](#)