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Arabic Typography Today

The previous chapter looked at the manuscript traditions of the Arabic text styles and their transition into typographic forms. But if one were to walk the streets of the Arab world today (Fig. 3.1), the Arabic script is present mainly through its typographic interpretation and the manual and lovingly crafted work of Arabic calligraphers is seldom seen. The Arab world has evolved to a point where its calligraphy, once its highest form of art, is now confined to museums and the occasional use here and there. That there is a loss there, there is no doubt, for the main problem lies in the poor transition of manuscript forms into typographic ones.

This chapter misses an important element: the role of Kufi styles in Arabic typography. To put it simply: the Kufi styles offer the richest playing fields for typographic design. The reason they are not featured prominently here is the fact that till today, the Kufi styles are still very much ones meant for headlines or short pieces of text. This is not to say that that form of typography is not worthy of investigation, but this whole dissertation is an investigation into continuous long reading. This is an area where the Kufi style of typefaces rarely enters.

This chapter is not a review of good design, but a review of the reality of design today¹. Most of it focuses on the generalities of type styles in use rather than the specifics of typeface popularity. The discussion steers clear of the quality of design, which is often very poor. The reason for this is simple. A good designer can design aesthetically pleasing typefaces in any style he or she may see fit to design in. The legibility study is concerned with the style as a reference, rather than the effect of good design on legibility. Though that would be a very interesting approach to take, it is one that is outside the scope of this study. As will be discussed later, the typefaces used for testing are all by this same designer, and designed to good aesthetic level. So, that factor is maintained constant, and the focus remains on the style.

Within the overall frame of this research, this chapter is dedicated to the question: what are Arabs reading today? Or to put it more accurately, which typefaces are Arabs reading today, for this study is more concerned with the visual rather than the linguistic nature of text. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, Licko's statement that people read best what they read most is relevant in this study. And so, it is important to take note of the current typographic culture for it forms the basis for the collective visual memory in the minds of Arab readers today.

¹ This review is very much the point of view of the writer, seen through the lens of 8 years of working as the Arabic Specialist at a leading type foundry. Though there might be some variation in how one designer assesses the field versus another, the views expressed here are quite consistent with those expressed by leading practitioners in the field of Arabic type design.





Fig. 3.1 Examples of type on signage with different styles in use.

General Picture

A quick look at the body of available Arabic typefaces used in Arab-speaking countries reveals the following. The number of available typefaces is quite small in relation to the size of the market they service and the number of quality designs is extremely small, though the situation is quickly improving. This is evident in the increasing number of Arabic typefaces honored by the Type Directors Club in New York. Those were: Palatino Sans Arabic, Thuraya, and Tabati in 2011, Aisha in 2010, Palatino Arabic, Al Rajhi, and Fresco Arabic in 2008, Midan and Nassim in 2007, Adobe Arabic in 2006, MS Uighur in 2004, and Arabic Typesetting and Falafil in 2003 (TDC, 2012).

Of the numerous calligraphic styles that have developed around the Arabic script, it is mostly the Naskh and the Kufi styles that have migrated into typographic forms. The Naskh style of calligraphy has several typographic interpretations that vary in usage and complexity. Text faces are almost always an interpretation of Naskh. These are usually in either the Simplified or Traditional forms. Headline and display faces are usually based on either Naskh or one of the Kufi styles. Other calligraphic styles that are also represented are Ruqaa and Maghribi, though these exist in much smaller numbers.

Furthermore, and in stark contrast to Latin type design, Arabic typeface families are usually quite small in their number of related variants. Most families are simply made up of a regular and bold. A few families also include lighter and heavier weights and there is only a handful of larger families and type systems. With regards to companion styles, the idea of using an oblique variant is not fully developed in Arabic typography. There are some typefaces that have an oblique companion but the use of a secondary style for highlighting parts of text has not been widely embraced by the public.

Arabic type design has picked up its pace in the last few years where the number of type designers has dramatically increased and the international interest in Arabic is quite high. This interest in Arabic type design is high in both local and Western circles. However, there is still a technical divide between practicing calligraphers and font technology. Very few calligraphers have crossed this gap and the most notable figure is Mamoun Sakkal. In the meantime, the demand for “new” designs is quite high, and this is especially evident in branding design and advertising while the realms of book design are usually more conservative.

Close Up: In Books

Arabic book typography is quite homogeneous in appearance. The majority of book faces in use belong to the Traditional Naskh category (Fig. 3.2), with Linotype’s Lotus being one of the most popular. A minority of books is set in typefaces that fit the Simplified Naskh description. The Quran is either typographically set in Dynamic Naskh or, most commonly, penned by calligraphers in traditional manuscript Naskh and then photographically reproduced. The majority of non-Quranic books are set in Traditional Naskh, and a small number are set in Simplified Naskh (Fig. 3.3).

Arabic book typography tends to be quite straightforward and lacking in the complex typography that Latin book typography has. This might be due to the shortage of large typeface families that would allow the use of related variants to create hierarchical structures within the body of text. Many typographic niceties that are associated with the Latin script are non-translatable into Arabic. All caps settings, small caps, and true italics are devices that support the creation of rich typographic content. Though these are missing from the realms of Arabic typography, it is still

important to note that the concepts of page design, related stylistic variants, grids and margins, and style sheets were already in place in Quranic manuscripts for almost a millennium now.

Surviving samples show clear signs of sophisticated book design skills such as in binding and gilding techniques and the use of ruling to create the margins and a baseline grid. The development of related stylistic variants, such as Naskh and Thuluth, that would serve for body text and headlines showed a high level of appreciation for the contribution of calligraphy to manuscripts. Moreover, the development of hierarchical structures such as the use of Kufi for Sura headings, Naskh for body text, and Thuluth for large titles is testament to a highly refined understanding of the graphical and calligraphic elements in book design.

Some of these practices remain today, and one can often find chapter titles, headlines, and forewords that are set in styles that are different from the main text face used. However, the hierarchical structure within the text is usually achieved by a change in size or in the use of a bold variant. Given the scarcity of high quality Arabic typefaces and skilled book typographers, Arabic typography still needs to go a long way before it can achieve the standards of excellence set in manuscript design.

Close Up: In Newspapers and Magazines

The topic of Arabic newspaper design and typography is scantily covered. Whether this is indicative of the raw unsophisticated approach to newspaper design in the Arab world, or is due to the lack of interest or expertise in the topic, one can never be sure. In the most likely case, it is a combination of both.

The uniformity of Arabic book design is echoed in Arabic newspaper design as well. Other than the lack of significant variation in size and layout, the near unanimous usage of Linotype's Yakout results in the fact that many newspapers feel almost identical in look and tone of voice. A pan-Arab survey of typefaces used in newspapers reveals that thirty-three of forty-three newspapers are set in Yakout or in exact replicas that are differently named (Nemeth, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, Yakout was developed by Linotype for the specific purpose of simplifying the production of newspapers. Its ubiquitous use today testifies to the success of that strategy, and the service that it had offered. However, one can only wonder if the supremacy of Yakout, and simplified Naskh in general, over newspaper design would have continued unchallenged until today if the Arabic type design scene had been more active in the second half of the twentieth century.

Of the typefaces used in newspapers other than Yakout and its replicas, one stands out. Marwan, designed by Walid Tueni for an-Nahar newspaper in Lebanon (Fig. 3.4), is one of the most legible and sturdy typefaces available. Its design is solid and with open letterforms. It follows in footsteps of Yakout with its simplified structure but its baseline is strictly straight and horizontal. This strict horizontality is a feature of many of the Simplified Naskh designs, though its effect is quite rigid and static.

The lack of variety in text faces in Arabic newspapers is also echoed to a lesser extent in the headline faces. Newspapers headlines were written by calligraphers in the seventies and eighties but the desktop publishing revolution changed all that. The headlines found today are often either the Linotype display faces or very close variations of them (Nemeth, 2006). In most cases, these typefaces are based on Simplified Arabic structures but they have an exaggerated baseline that serves to darken the color of the title. This method of emboldening has questionable aesthetic results since the letterforms sometimes disappear into the thick horizontal band and legibility suffers as a result.

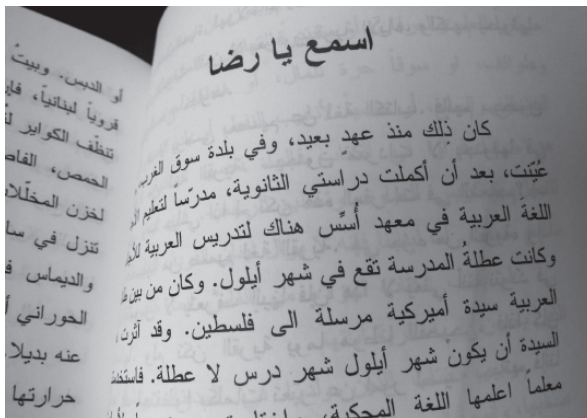
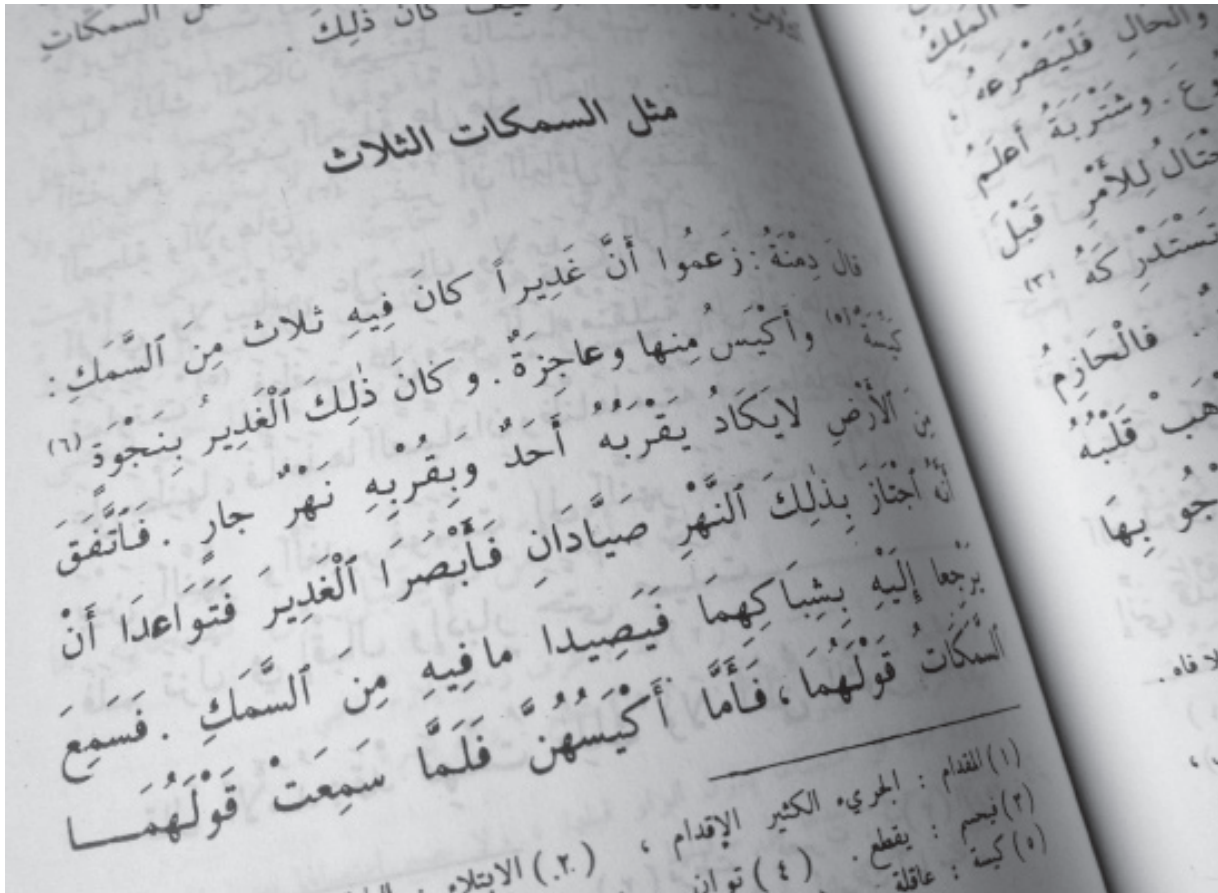
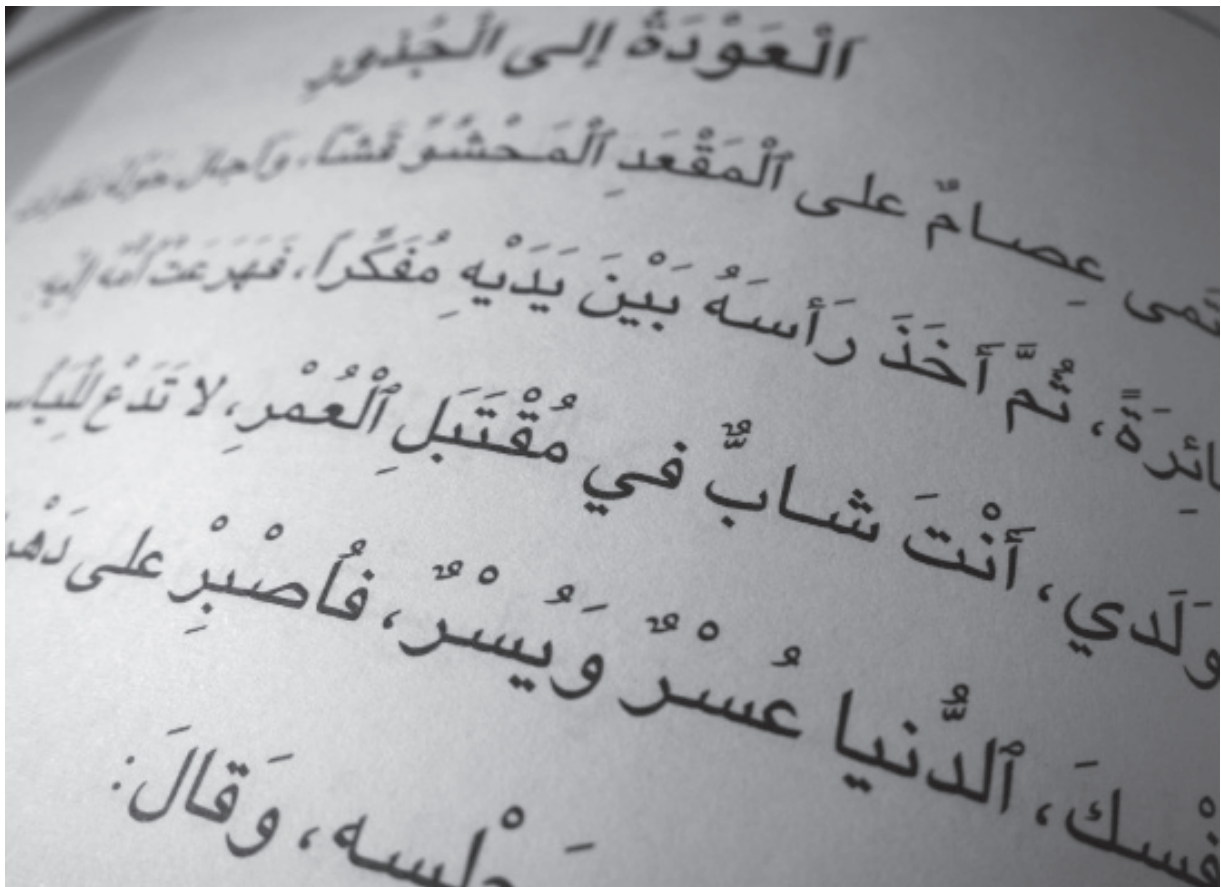
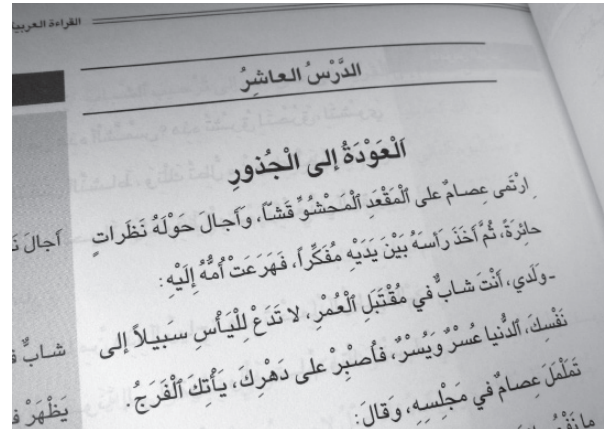


Fig. 3.2 Example of literary novels. Top example is the same text as one of the 6 paragraphs to be used in the experiment.

Fig. 3.3 Examples of type in school books. Example shows fully vocalized Simplified Naskh for the literary text to be read.



Another characteristic of newspaper headlines is their compressed proportions. This only serves to aggravate the situation, as the result is a quite tightly spaced and badly compressed typeface that is almost analogous to a wide band with randomly protruding strokes. Of course, there are exceptions to this, such as the headline typeface of an-Nahar and Linotype's Qadi designed by Walter Tracy in 1985.

It is interesting to note that Arabic language newspapers in the seventies and eighties used handwritten Ruqaa for their headlines. In comparison to today's newspapers, their effect was more lively and casual. This was interesting on a visual level, but newspapers need to maintain a level of seriousness and authority. This was lacking in the Ruqaa headlines, and the right tone of voice is better achieved through a well designed Naskh typeface that is both anatomically correct and easy to read.

Moving over to magazines, the typographic landscape suddenly widens (Fig. 3.5). The restraint, or lack of experimentation, in typeface choices in books and newspapers is here abolished. Though most magazines are consistent in the use of Simplified Naskh for body text, the field of titling and display design is consistently changing. Magazines employ the full range of typographic choice in their titles, sometimes pushing the limit too far. The lack of extensive large typeface families makes the job of choosing compatible display and text faces rather tough. The result is often a cocktail of various typeface designs that are not well suited to one another and the overall design standards of magazine design today are not at the same level as other fields such as branding design or TV motion graphics design. This is a reflection of the lack of typographic expertise in this field. Magazine typography is definitely an area where there is a lot of room for improvement.

Close Up: In Branding and Advertising

Branding and advertising in the Arab world is certainly challenging. Up until recently, the scarcity of quality typefaces and the lack of variation within the typographic spectrum meant that designers are faced with the task of trying to create different tones of voice and brand identities using only a handful of typefaces. When the available typefaces are so few, and used so frequently, it is often the case that their shelf life is much shorter than what one can expect in Latin (Fig. 3.6).

In terms of which typographic styles are used, Naskh-based typefaces are very common though the majority of the new designs in the past decade are in the Kufi style of typefaces (Fig. 3.7). The typographic spectrum is changing very quickly and recent years have seen an increasing demand for custom designs. This is especially the case in branding. This is one of the fastest growing sectors in Arabic type design, though the exclusivity of some of the designs means that the repertoire of available typefaces is not growing as quickly.

Close Up: On Screen

The realm of Arab TV broadcast exceeds expectations. Though one might imagine that one would be faced with the usual onslaught of low quality typefaces, there are a few of good quality designs that have managed to set the bar high in terms of on-screen legibility. Of these, the Al-Arabia typeface by Mourad Botrous stands out. Its distinctive final form of Heh has created an easily recognizable trait that would prove a valuable aspect of the channel's branding. Kufi-based designs are occupying a large portion of on-air time and space. The mono-linear and geometric nature of



Fig. 3.4 Newspaper typography relies mostly on Simplified Naskh. The text is set in Marwan.





Fig. 3.5 Magazines often use a mixture of Simplified and Traditional Naskh typefaces, as and Kufi in some headlines.







Fig. 3.6 Packaging brings in many different typographic lettering styles. The adaptation of logos into Arabic has mixed results.





Fig. 3.7 Advertising design employs different typographic styles and brings together display and text designs onto the same page.



Fig. 3.8 TV graphics are often reliant on the Kufi style of typefaces.

Kufi lends itself to low resolution and also results in a modern look that TV stations very much favor (Fig. 3.8).

In terms of web design, the browser support for font linking has opened up the door to typographic variation on the web. Prior to that, Arabic users had access to only 2 different typeface designs on Windows, a number that is shockingly small. At the time of writing, the use of web fonts has not yet gained traction in the Middle East as it is still very new technology and full browser support for Arabic web fonts has only been around since the summer of 2011.

As for smaller screens and hand-held devices, the field is still very open. Linotype library typefaces like Frutiger Arabic and Neue Helvetica Arabic, both designed by the author, have made it into car navigation systems. The most extensive Arabic typeface family designed specifically for mobile devices is Google's Droid Naskh and Droid Kufi by Pascal Zoghbi for the Ascender library. The widespread use of smartphones is opening up a new medium in digital communication that requires further research and typographic investigation.

Close Up: Multi-Script Families and the Relationship to Latin Type

It would be highly inaccurate and unrepresentative to talk about Arabic typography today without going into the discussion of bilingual design. By nature of communication in countries like Lebanon where the majority of advertising and branding is done in English or French, or in the gulf countries where English is a recognized official second language, it was only a matter of time that multi-script families would come

to the scene. The first typeface family to address the relationship of Arabic and Latin was Linotype's Koufiya (Fig. 3.9), which was originally designed in 2003 and publicly released in 2008. Linotype's Arabic library is currently the largest library offering Arabic and Latin matched typefaces (Fig. 3.10), and the popularity of these typefaces attests to the rising demands of multi-script typography within the Middle East.

Arabic Letterforms Past and Present

This chapter offered a glimpse of Arabic typography as it stands today in the Middle East. It is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive review. It is an introduction to what Arabic typography is, rather than how it should be. Though that question is of great interest to this researcher, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation for the point here is illustrate the setting in which the legibility studies are taking place. The realities of Arabic type design and the visual culture that Arab readers are immersed in informed the design of Afandem, a new typeface system created especially for the legibility studies to be done. The process of the design, and the details surrounding the design choices are documented in the next chapter.

