Public Libraries in Saudi Arabia under the Ministry of Education

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Abstract.   This article sums up the recent development of public libraries in Saudi Arabia under the Ministry of Education.

At the beginning an introduction about the emergence of public libraries is given. The study deals with various aspects of public libraries including organisation, staff, buildings and collections. The present state of the services and facilities available is also discussed, as well as administrative and managerial problems. The study concludes with suggestions regarding the main problems raised therein.

Introduction

From the dawn of Islam, mosques played an important educational, cultural and social role in the Muslim's life, besides being places for worship.[1] The mosques, as educational centers, acted as schools in which scholars taught basic and advanced courses in a variety of subjects such as Quranic recitation, Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Tradition (*hadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), inheritance (*mawārīth*), and theology (*tawhīd*). In addition, some other humanities, social and pure sciences were taught as well as Arabic grammar, history, geography, algebra, geometry, arithmetic, medicine and astronomy. To teach such a variety of courses, there should be a reasonable book collection. Therefore, mosques were the first places for book collection and consequently became the model for early Islamic libraries. The early mosque libraries were actually Quranic libraries where copies of the Quran were

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(1)   Mohammed Makki Sibai, *Mosque Libraries: An Historical Study* (London and New York: Mansell, 1987), pp. 6-34.

deposited. Gradually mosque collections grew tremendously in subjects and numbers mainly through two channels:

1.   Donations made by scholars, rulers and wealthy individuals.

2.   Endowments for public benefit.

This system was adopted by the Great Mosque of Makkah, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the Azhar mosque in Cairo, the Umayyad mosque in Damascus and by the majority of mosques throughout the Islamic world.

For example, the first book collection donated to the Great Mosque of Makkah was by Mohammed al-Meknasi in 1085 (A.H. 488).[2] The donated and endowed collection, along with others, formed what is now known as the Library of the Great Mosque of Makkah. So, the first libraries in the Hijaz were the mosque libraries which were initialy small collections of copies of the Holy Quran, and gradually the holdings became more comprehensive to include different fields of knowledge. The mosque libraries, along with the private libraries were the origin of librarianship, not in Saudi Arabia alone, but in the Islamic world as a whole. Mosque libraries and private libraries were open to the general public. They, along with the school libraries which were established later, played an intellectual, cultural and social role in Hijazi life.

Culture and learning in what is now known as Saudi Arabia preceded the unification of the country in 1932, particularly in the Western Province or Hijaz where the holy cities Makkah and Medina are located. These important cities had been known as commercial centers before Islam, due to their important location on the international caravan route between Yemen and Syria. This importance increased after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, when they, in addition, became religious and learning centers.

With the establishment of the Ministry of Education (ME) in 1953, education in Saudi Arabia began a new era. Within a few decades, public education, which was free in all stages, but not compulsory, covered almost every part of the country.

Due to the numerical increase in general readers, the need for public libraries was felt, particularly in the major cities and towns. The first initiative in establishing

(2)   Annajm Omar bin Fahd, *Ithaf al-wara*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Makkah: Umm al-Qura University, 1983), pp. 487-88 (in Arabic).

public libraries came from individuals. For example, Sheikh Abdul Rahman
Al-Sa'adi, a scholar and an author, established a library in Unayzah in 1940.[3] In 1946
Prince Musa'ad Bin Abdul Rahman founded a relatively well-organized library in his
palace in Riyadh to be used by the general public.[4] In addition, some private lib-
raries were established by individuals or group of citizens in different cities in Saudi
Arabia in an attempt to fulfill the needs of the increasing numbers of general readers.
A considerable number of the present public libraries under the ME were originally
established in this way and then merged into the public library system of the ME.

The number of public libraries administered by the ME in 1992 is sixty libraries
distributed among fifty-eight cities and towns all over the country. As is shown from
the library distribution map (Fig. 1), Riyadh is the center of libraries. It houses three
public libraries belonging to the ME, besides some other public libraries and several
academic and special libraries and information centers. Some other large cities, such
as Jeddah, Makkah, Medina, Dammam, Buraydah, Unayzah and Abha also have
some academic or special libraries, with one or more public libraries under various
governmental bodies, private foundations or individuals (see appendix).

Public Libraries Administrations

Public libraries in Saudi Arabia are administered by four distinctive governmen-
tal bodies:

– Ministry of Education (ME)
– Ministry of Pilgrimage and Endowments (MPE)
– General Presidency of Islamic Research, Ifta and Propagation (PIRIP)
– General Presidency of Holy Mosques (GPHM)

In addition, there are three important libraries established either by individuals
or private foundations:

1.   Dar al-Jouf lil-'ulum, established in 1962 by Abdul Rahman Al-Sudairy in
Sakakah in al-Jouf province.[5]

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(3) Abdullah Abdul Jabbar, *al-Tayyarat al-adabiyah al-hadithah fi qalb al-Jazirah al-Arabiyah* (Cairo:
     The Arab League, 1959), p. 194 (in Arabic).
(4) Bakry Sheikh Ameen, *al-Harakah al-adabiyah fi al-Mamlakat al-Arabiyah al-Saudiyah,* 1st ed.
     (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1973), p. 184 (in Arabic).
(5) Saad A. Al-Dobaian, "Dar Al-Jouf Lil-'Ulum," *Arab Journal for Librarianship and Information Sci-
     ence,* 12, No. 3 (July 1992), 5.

2.   King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies Library, established in Riyadh in 1983.

3.   King Abdulaziz Public Library, established in Riyadh in 1988 by Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister, and Head of the National Guard.[6]

These libraries, though they are not governmental, are more developed than modern public libraries and provide better services to the general reader.

Scope

This article is limited only to libraries under the Ministry of Education. In other words, the libraries under the supervision of the Ministry of Pilgrimage and Endowments and the General Presidency of Holy Mosques are out of its scope.

Objectives

This study intends to shed some light on the development and current state of public libraries under the jurisdication of ME, including organization, staff, buildings, collections and services.

The other objective is to suggest some practical solutions to the problems raised by the study.

Organization

Although the concept of books and libraries in what is now known as Saudi Arabia goes back to the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the public library in the Western sense is still inapplicable to most of the public libraries in Saudi Arabia, particularly those under the Ministry of Education. The history of library development can be traced back to the establishment of the Directorate of Public Libraries (DPL) in 1959 as a department within the ME to be in charge of their organization, planning, extension, coordination and supervision.[7]

The DPL controls some of the functions of the public libraries; for instance, it provides centralized book selection, acquisition, classification and cataloging. It is supposed to be responsible for the recruitment of library staff. On the other hand, the DPL is not in charge of the day-to-day work of libraries which is directed by the educational district administrations in the regions in which the libraries are located.

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(6)   Saad A. Al-Dobaian," King Abdul Aziz Public Library," *Arab Journal for Librarianship and Information Science*, 12, No. 4 (October 1992), p. 4.

(7)   Hisham Abbas, "A Plan for Public Library Development in Saudi Arabia," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1982, p. 37.

Distribution of Public Libraries in Saudi Arabia
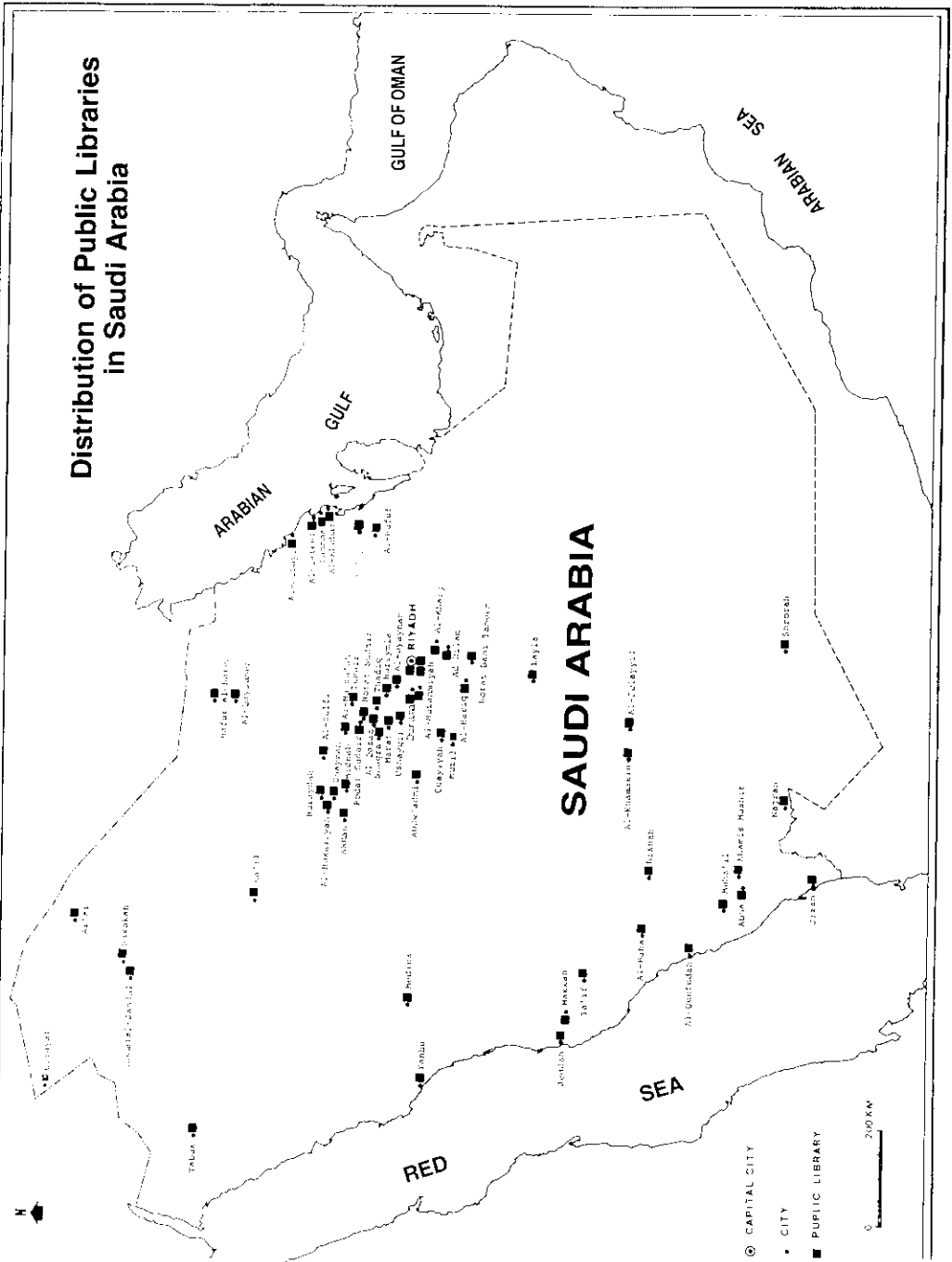
Staff

In 1992, the number of employees working in the public libraries under the ME was 220 (Table 1), with an average of 3.7 persons per library. The majority of those employees are merely assistants and clerks with high school certificates or inter- mediate diplomas. A minority have college degrees in different subjects. Table 1 shows that the number of "qualified" staff is 33 or about 15 percent per library. It is important to point out that the term "qualification" as used above is a relative one; in other words, all are not professionals. However, it does mean that about 50% of them have had short training programs to cope one way or another with the basic library requirements. The others have bachelors degrees in library science. So, the relatively low level of formal education and lack or absence of inservice job training among library staff is significant.[8]

Table 1. Library Staff.

Qualified		Non-Qualified		Total	
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
33	15	187	85	220	99

Source: Derived from a survey conducted by the author and from an official document supplied to the author through Isma'il I. Al-Isma'il, Director of DPL.

Buildings, Furniture and Equipment

The majority of the sixty public libraries are located in separate library build- ings. Forty-three libraries or 72% are housed in government facilities. Some of the libraries enjoy good locations, but others do not have special parking lots.

Table 2. Library Buildings.

Government		Rented		Total	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
43	72	17	28	60	100

(8)   Ali I. Namlah, "Man Power Deficiency in Saudi Arabia: Its Effect on the Library and Information Profession." *International Library Review*, 14 (1992), 8.

Despite the fact that some of the library buildings were planned, designed and constructed to be libraries, they were poorly designed and planned. Besides, the facilities were not based on the needs of the local community or environment. The differences among buildings are mainly in size. Therefore, the public library in Riyadh (Al-Ma'ather) for example, is the same as the Dammam public library. Some libraries were housed in government-owned buildings adjacent to other Ministry of Education buildings or sometimes share the same building with other ME offices, such as al-Naseem Public Library in Riyadh or al-Qunfudah Public Library.

Seventeen out of sixty, or 28%, occupy temporary buildings. It is obvious that the temporary buildings are small in size because they were built to be private residences. Consequently, they are insufficient and not functional. If the public library buildings are to be sufficient, functional and to fulfill the library objectives, the planning team of the library facilities should include experienced professional librarians in addition to architects, designers and consultants.[9] Such facilities should be based on a careful analysis of the needs of the community to be served. All public library buildings, especially permanent ones, are reasonably furnished and have enough chairs, tables, shelves, card-units, desks, cupboards and so on. With regard to maintenance, both the permanent and the temporary library buildings are poorly maintained. None of the public libraries are computerized and few have audio-visual materials or equipment.

Collections

Books
The total book collection in all public libraries is over one million volumes as indicated in Table 3.

The largest book collection is held by the Riyadh Public Library in King Faisal St. with about 60,000 volumes, followed by the Dammam Public Library with 49,000 volumes, and Ta'if and Buraydah Public Libraries with 40,000 volumes each.

(9)   Mohammed H. Zehery, "Library Service in Kuwait: A Survey and Analysis with Recommendations for Public Library Development," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, North Texas State University, 1975, p. 169.

Perhaps the smallest book collection is held by the newly established Thadiq Public Library founded in 1991 with 4,000 volumes (see appendix). Over 97% of the books are in Arabic. The size of book collections is still extremely small in relation to the size of the city population and the increasing demand for library materials. Due to the tight financial situation, the DPL has not acquired new books for the whole ME public libraries for the last few years. Thus, the books in these libraries are actually old.

Table 3. Number of Books.

Arabic Books		Foreign Books (Mainly English)		Total	
No. of Vols.	Percentage	No. of Vols.	Percentage	Vols.	Percentage
977,447	97.7%	23,010	2.3%	1,000,457	100%

Source: Directorate of Public Libraries (ME)[10]

The range of the main classes in the library collection is as follows:

— Islamic religion
— geography and history
— social sciences
— literature

The smallest collection is in the fine arts. Foreign language books (mainly English) range from nothing or nine in some libraries such as Jizan, Huraymla, Qunfudah to more than 8,000 in the Jeddah Public Library, and in al-Ma'ather Public Library in Riyadh and 3,000 volumes in King Faisal St. Public Library in Riyadh. Children's books and periodicals are limited in terms of content and range. Although some public libraries in main cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah, Dammam, Medina and Ta'if have special reading rooms for children, in most cases they do not have enough titles nor specialized librarians, or special tables, chairs or shelves.

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(10) Unpublished document dated 29/12/1991 (23/6/A.H.1412) supplied to the writer through Isma'il I. al-Isma'il, Director of Public Libraries, Ministry of Education, Riyadh.

Periodicals

Magazines and newspapers are heavily used by the library patrons. All sixty public libraries subscribes to 17 national titles, two newspapers and fifteen general weekly or monthly magazines. Some libraries receive a few other titles on a gift basis.

Table 4. Number of Periodicals.

Arabic		Foreign		Total	
No. of Periodicals	Percentage	No. of Titles	Percentage	Periodicals	Percentage
1097	99%	12	1%	1109	100%

The number of foreign titles received by the libraries are twelve, most of which come on a gift basis.

Non-Book Materials

Both the collection and equipment have not yet found their way to ME public libraries (except a few films in some libraries).

Development of the Collections

There are two methods of developing book collections in public libraries in Saudi Arabia.

Purchase

The selection and purchase of books for the public libraries is the responsibility of the Directorate of Public Libraries, if funds are available. The DPL usually appoints a Book Selection Committee which selects and acquires the books mostly available locally, and books from national book publishers. Most of the books purchased are in Arabic.

There exists no written policy or guidelines for book selection; it is entirely left to the members of the Book Selection Committee. Books in languages other than Arabic are rarely purchased; about 2% English language books are purchased mainly for reference, such as encyclopaedias, dictionaries and the like.

Donation

Although gift and exchange is an important channel for the development of a library collection, no such program exists for the Saudi public libraries under the Ministry of Education. These libraries are mainly dependent on the acquisition of

books by purchase. The donation of books is very limited. The public libraries do not encourage individuals to donate books; some of them do not directly accept the donation of books. Some of the public libraries accept the books donated by ministries, government organisations and national universities. It seems it is a general procedure that public libraries accept donated books only if they come via the Directorate of Public Libraries.

An exchange program among the Saudi Public Libraries does not exist for two reasons:

1. The Directorate of public libraries purchases multiple copies of the same titles, same editions and same number of copies for all public libraries under the Ministry of Education.

2. The librarian is responsible for any book sent to any library by the Directorate of Public Libraries, and he is also responsible in case of its loss.

Classification and Cataloging
The Directorate of Public Libraries is responsible for the central classification and cataloging of books for all public libraries under the Ministry of Education, and this is done at the department in Riyadh. The books are classified according to the adapted Arabic version of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system. The books are catalogued according to the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules 2 (AACR2). After books are processed, they are sent to public libraries all over the country.

Services
The main purpose of the public libraries is to serve their patrons. To achieve this purpose, it is not enough to acquire, catalog, and maintain the library materials, but such materials must be made readily available for the reader whether inside or outside the library. In Saudi Arabia public libraries, especially those of the ME, are far from fulfilling this goal.

Due to the shortage of library personnel, library service hours are curtailed. They ranged from thirty-five to sixty a week, five days a week. The libraries which have enough staff open for two periods; seven hours in the morning and six or seven in the afternoon. The majority of the libraries open during the official government working hourse from 7.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Roughly until 1985, most of the libraries used to open morning and evening because the ME paid the library staff for overtime opening hours. However, this is not the case any more due to the tight financial situation.

The libraries do not lend materials because the Ministry of Education regulations prohibit that. Therefore, the emphasis in the public libraries is primarily on reading inside the library.

The library patrons are mainly government employees, teachers and students who are working or studying in the morning.

Accordingly, the number of library readers attending the library evening hours is much greater than in the morning. For these reasons, the public libraries should open at least fourteen hours a day, including weekends. On the other hand, reference and advisory service is not reliable because of the lack of professional librarians and the lack of new reference books. A photo copying service is available in a few public libraries. The public libraries do not provide services to women or special groups such as the blind or handicapped as they are not equipped for this goal.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This article, as previously indicated, is an attempt to pinpoint the current state of Saudi public libraries under the ME.

As already mentioned, the present state of public libraries under the ME is unsatisfactory by any standard. Among the problems which hinder library development is the administrative structure. Obviously, there is double supervision. The DPL, as previously indicated, is supposed to be responsible for all public library affairs. The fact is that the educational administration districts (in charge of education affairs in the districts) practice direct supervision over the libraries in their regions. In particular, they assign the library staff and supervise the day-to-day work of the libraries without coordination with the DPL. In addition, the public libraries face a severe shortage of trained library personnel. Absence of library professionals in the DPL itself and among the high administrative staff who supervise the DPL is another problem. Other problems are the absence of library legislation, lack or even absence of finance, absence of any sort of coordination or library cooperation,[11] absence of any motivation for library personnel, poor physical facilities, absence of services offered to women and handicapped, and limitation of services for children.

Such problems are related to every aspect of public library development; they are serious ones and need patience, long and careful planning and a systematic

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(11) Hisham A. Abbas, "Public Libraries and Librarianship in Saudi Arabia," *Arab Journal for Librarianship and Information Science,* 2, No. 2 (April 1982), 8.

approach for tackling them. Accordingly, the solution should be a comprehensive one as follows:

Changing attitudes. Perhaps changing the attitudes of the high ranking decision makers, especially in the ME and Civil Service Bureau towards the library profession comes in the first place. In other words, governmental recognition of the educational, intellectual, cultural, social and economic role the library could play in modern society is—in the author's view—the first step in the process of reforming the current situation of libraries.

As Abbas puts it, "a direct government role in the formulation of an official national policy for libraries is a prerequisite."[12]

Establishing an independent body. The author strongly believes that setting up an independent government ministry called the Ministry of Culture to be in charge of the various cultural activities, supervised now by different governmental and quasi-governmental bodies, to be the official umbrella for all the national cultural organizations, such as public libraries, literary clubs, the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts, the book industry, archaeology and museums, would be the best solution.

If, for some reasons this Ministry could not be set up, the Department of Public Libraries and the Department of Archaeology and Museums should be transferred from the Ministry of Education to the supervision of the Presidency for Youth Welfare (PYW).[13]

Setting up an employment system to promote the library profession and to bring the desired reforms. It is necessary to have a special and attractive employment system similar to that of the national teachers. The existence of such a system will ensure that library science graduates and trainees will not avoid the library profession to join the military forces or the teaching profession because of the high salary and good status these sectors provide. At the time being, the library science graduate who joins the library profession in the public sector (if there is an opening) will get 25-35% less than his colleague who joins the military or teaching sectors. The low status of the library business reflects the view of society towards the library profession in general.

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(12) Abbas, "A Plan," p. 53.
(13) Saad A. Al-Dobaian, "The Book Industry in Saudi Arabia: A Descriptive and Analytical Study," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Loughborough University of Technology, 1985, p. 193.

Setting up a national professional association for library and information. A crucial matter in the advancement of all aspects of the library and information sector including setting up library legislation, standards and policies. Library associations can also play a tremendous role in regard to the interest of the national libraries and coordinate the efforts of the organizations and individuals regarding the advancement of the library profession in the country.

Appendix
The Public Libraries under the Ministry of Education in the Various Cities and Towns of Saudi Arabia .

	Library	City	Date of Establishment	Population in Thousands
1.	Public Library (King Faisal Street)	Riyadh	1966	1417
2.	Public Library (al-Ma'ather)	Riyadh	1986	1417
3.	Public Library (al-Naseem)	Riyadh	1986	1417
4.	Jeddah Public Library	Jeddah	1974	1312
5.	Makkah Public Library	Makkah	1976	742
6.	Dammam Public Library	Dammam	1962	172
7.	Medina Public Library	Medina	1969	550
8.	Ta'if Public Library	Ta'if	1969	283
9.	Buraydah Public Library	Buraydah	1944	154
10.	Unayzah Public Library	Unayzah	1952	50
11.	Ha'il Public Library	Ha'il	1975	101
12.	Jizan Public Library	Jizan	1974	79
13.	Al-Majma'ah Public Library	Majmah	1973	21
14.	Abha Public Library	Abha	1974	60
15.	Al-Hufuf Public Library	Al-Hufuf	1960	250
16.	Al-Khubar Public Library	Al-Khubar	1974	150
17.	Al-Kharj Public Library	Al-Kharj	1976	97
18.	Shaqra Public Library	Shaqra	1966	18
19.	Tabuk Public Library	Tabuk	1972	150
20.	Al-Zulfi Public Library	Al-Zulfi	1972	29
21.	Muha'il Public Library	Muha'il	1983	9
22.	Al-Bukairyah Public Library	Al-Bukairyah	1973	15
23.	Huraymla Public Library	Huraymla	1969	5,5
24.	Hota Bani Tameem Public Library	Hoto Bani Tameem	1956	15
25.	Hota Sudair Public Library	Hota Sudair	1957	9
26.	Al-Muzahmiyah Public Library	Al-Muzahmiyah	1965	10
27.	Arras Public Library	Arras	1970	30
28.	Al-Baha Public Library	Al-Baha	1975	50
29.	Adwadmi Public Library	Ad-Dwadmi	1977	32
30.	Layla Public Library	Layla	1977	5
31.	Sakakah Public Library	Sakakah	1978	55

Appendix (contd.)

Library	City	Date of Establishment	Population in Thousands
32. Al-Qunfudah Public Library	Al-Qunfudah	1963	11
33. Najran Public Library	Najran	1976	53
34. Yanbu Public Library	Yanbu	1977	52
35. Khamis Mushit Public Library	Khamis Mushit	1978	164
36. Qurayat Public Library	Qurayat	1980	43
37. Al-Khamasin Public Library	Al-Khamasin	1981	5
38. Ushayqir Public Library	Ushayqir	1954	7
39. Al-Hariq Public Library	Al-Hariq	1953	3,6
40. Rodat Sudair Public Library	Rodat Sudair	1970	9
41. Quayiyah Public Library	Quayiyah	1976	9,4
42. Muzil Public Library	Muzil	1977	4,5
43. Midnab Public Library	Midnab	1974	15
44. Bishah Public Library	Bishah	1977	22
45. Domat al-Jandal	Domat al-Jandal	1980	14
46. Durama Public Library	Durama	1981	6
47. Al-Qasab Public Library	Al-Qasab	1981	3,5
48. Ad Dilam Public Library	Ad Dilam	1964	14
49. Marat Public Library	Marat	1982	4
50. Tumair Public Library	Tumair	1982	4,8
51. Al-Jubayl Public Library	Al-Jubayl	1988	28
52. Al-Oyaynah Public Library	Al-Oyaynah	1987	2,5
53. Ar'ar Public Library	Ar'ar	1989	65
54. Hafur Al-Baten Public Library	Hafur Al-Baten	1987	52
55. Al-Qaysumeh Public Library	Al-Qaysumeh	1988	15
56. Al-Uyon Public Library	Al-Uyon	1988	27
57. Al-Qateef Public Library	Al-Qateef	1988	167,5
58. Al-Sulayyil Public Library	Al-Sulayyil	1988	7,8
59. Sharorah Public Library	Sharorah	1988	15
60. Thadiq Public Library	Thadiq	1991	3,7

Source: Most of the data is desired from official documents supplied to the writer through Ismail A. al-Ismail, Director of Public Libraries, Ministry of Education.

المكتبات العامة التابعة لوزارة المعارف في المملكة العربية السعودية

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الرياض، المملكة العربية السعودية

ملخص البحث. تعالج هذه المقالة بشكل موجز الوضع الراهن للمكتبات العامة التابعة لوزارة المعارف. ففي البداية تعطي خلفية تاريخية عن ظهور المكتبات في العالم الإسلامي مع شيء من التركيز على الجزء الغربي من المملكة حيث ظهرت أوائل المكتبات. بعد ذلك تتعامل الدراسة مع الجوانب المختلفة للمكتبات كالتنظيم، والعاملين، والمباني، والمجموعات موضحة أوجه النقص فيها. كما تلقي الضوء على الجانب الإداري والخدمات والتسهيلات التي تقدمها المكتبات لروادها. وأخيراً، تختتم الدراسة بعدد من الاقتراحات التي تعالج المشكلات التي أظهرتها الدراسة.