International Certification Study: The Arab Countries

By Jiri Stejskal

In the last issue we examined the situation in the Netherlands and Belgium, and now we will take a look at the certification of translators and interpreters in the Arab countries. Collecting information on the credentialing procedures in the Arab-speaking area proved to be quite a challenge, and the information below may not represent the actual situation with the desired degree of accuracy. I would like to express my gratitude to the following individuals for the support I received when collecting materials for this article:

- **Moustafa Gabr**, translator training consultant working in the State of Kuwait, Fellow of the Institute of Linguists, author of several books and articles on translation and translator training (moustafagabr@yahoo.com);
- **Mustafa Askari**, translation manager, HORIZONS Media & Information Services Corporation (mustafa_askari@hotmail.com);
- **Nina Behrens**, Arabic conference translator/interpreter working in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, graduate of the School of Translators and Interpreters in Beirut, Saint Joseph University (nkbehrens@aol.com);
- **Stephen H. Franke**, certified as a military Arabic linguist by the U.S. Army (mutarjm@aol.com);
- **Viviane Sacy Tannoury**, M.A. in conference interpreting from ETIB (Arabic, French, and English), ATA member (t22304@yahoo.com);
- **Zenab Khouder**, Arabic translator/interpreter working in Austin, Texas, member of the Austin Area Translators and Interpreters Association and ATA (zenab71@aol.com);
- **Hassan Sleem**, secretary of the Sworn Translators Association in Lebanon (sleemsts@inco.com.lb); and
- **Mohamed Boukhir**, third vice-president of the Association des Traducteurs Agréés près les Juridictions, graduate of King Fahad School of Translation Tangiers (newtra@menara.ma).

> "…In countries without a rigorous certification system and education of the public about the T&I profession, the socioeconomic status of translators and interpreters lags far behind that of practitioners of professions established through strict credentialing procedures…"

The socioeconomic status of translators and interpreters in the Arab countries is quite similar to that of the T&I professionals in the United States. Moustafa Gabr points out that throughout the Arab countries, "contributions made by the translator, though essentially significant, are hardly appreciated," and that lack of financial, moral, institutional, and legislative support "leaves the door open for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to join the profession and discredit the output and, therefore, the image of the translator."[1] It is quite apparent that in countries without a rigorous certification system and education of the public about the T&I profession, the socioeconomic status of translators and interpreters lags far behind that of practitioners of professions established through strict credentialing procedures, such as that of CPA in the United States.

With an estimated 186 million native speakers, Arabic ranks sixth on the list of world languages arranged by the number of speakers, following Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, English, and Bengali, respectively. It is not without interest that among the five leading languages, only two, Spanish and English, have a recognized form of certification for translators and interpreters. Arabic is spoken in 22 countries[2], and, therefore, there are many Arabic dialects. Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, was originally the dialect of Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. An adapted form of Classical Arabic, known as Modern Standard Arabic, is used in the media, mosques, and in communication among Arabs from different Arab countries, as well as in communication with the outside world.[3]

In this series, we have described three basic types of linguistic qualification, where translators and interpreters can be certified by a government, a professional association, or by an academic institution. All of the above are available to linguists in the Arab world; however, there are certain limitations. Academic credentials appear to be the most readily available throughout the region. Certification by the government is available in only a few of the 22 Arab-speaking countries, and, finally, certification by professional associations is in its early stages of development and only time will show whether any such programs will become widely recognized.

Academic Institutions

The certification program offered by the Arabic and Translation Studies Division of the Center for Adult ➡

and Continuing Education at the American University in Cairo, which offers nondegree professional certificates in translation, was described in detail in the September 2001 issue of this magazine. Moustafa Gabr, a translation teacher at the American University in Cairo, paints a bleak picture when it comes to academic credentials for translators and interpreters. His observations concerning several academic programs appear below.

A survey conducted at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, at Ain Shams University in Cairo (the second biggest national university in Egypt) to explore the adequacy of the translation program being conducted there, showed the following findings:

- 63% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the translation program conducted at the undergraduate level; 17% expressed no opinion; 20% expressed satisfaction with the program.
- All departments of English offer translation courses at the undergraduate level as a compulsory subject, but what is actually offered is quite arbitrary and depends almost entirely on personal initiatives on the part of teachers.
- The relevance of what is being offered in these courses to actual market needs is virtually nonexistent.

In another survey conducted in the State of Kuwait, the views of 50 Kuwaiti translators on the translation education they received at their colleges were explored. Some graduated recently; others have been translating for many years. All of them, without exception, expressed deep dissatisfaction and frustration with the translation classes they attended at their colleges. A total of 46 translators reported that they had not received any further training in translation after graduation. The remaining four claimed that they attended a translation course at the Community Service Center at Kuwait University, but that it was no different from the other courses they had attended as undergraduates. Interviews were also conducted with 12 Syrian translators, who expressed similar dissatisfaction with the translation education they received in Syrian universities.[4]

The School of Translators and Interpreters of Beirut at Saint Joseph University, a member of the International Federation of Translators (FIT) and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), is one of the first translation schools in the Middle East, established in 1980, known in French as the "Ecole des Traducteurs et Interprètes de Beyrouth" or ETIB. Before then, specialized schools for training translators did not exist in the Arab world. ETIB follows the European schools of translation model. The languages of the school are Arabic, French, and English. Eligibility requirements, which also apply to other private universities in Lebanon offering similar programs, are reportedly quite strict (i.e, applicants should rank among the top 30 candidates in a very selective linguistic and general knowledge test). The training varies from three years to get a B.A. in languages and translation, and five years to graduate with a M.A. in translation and conference interpreting. The curriculum includes linguistic courses, general and technical translation, global issues, law, economics, history, geography, business writing, and the study of religious texts. The curriculum at ETIB also includes specially tailored courses that focus on the terminology of the UN conferences to prepare the students for work with international organizations. The school is also offering courses on the use of the latest translation tools. Recently, the Saint Joseph School of Translation and Interpreting introduced a Ph.D. program and continuing education seminars, with guest speakers coming from different parts of the world in order to share their expertise in their respective fields. Further information on ETIB is available, in French, at www.usj.edu.lb/form/inst.htm. Other Lebanese institutions of higher education offering programs in translation and interpretation include the University of Holy Spirit in Kaslik-Jounieh, Lebanese University (public) in Beirut, Islamic University in Beirut, and American University of Technology (also in Beirut).

Another school in the Arab world that is also a member of FIT is the King Fahd Advanced School of Translation in Tangier. Established in 1986, it is the sole institution in Morocco dedicated to translator training. The school aims to train translators and interpreters to a high level of professional competence. Through contracts already established with translation centers in Europe, the Middle East, and the U.S. and Canada, the school further aims to provide conference and seminar facilities together with research opportunities in related fields. In addition to its teaching activities, the school has hosted conferences in the field of translation in conjunction with AUPELF and FIT. The school offers "Cycle Normal," leading to a diploma in translation. In the future, the school will offer "Cycle Supérieur" (more advanced training), leading to a higher degree in translation or interpreting. Languages now available at the school are (in the 2002-03 academic

year): Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and German. Further information is available, in French, at www.etudiant.ma/esrf.htm.

The University of Jordan in Amman offers M.A. courses in English↔Arabic Translation. Further information is available, in English, at www.ju.edu.jo/faculties/index.htm. Other possibilities for T&I degree and certification programs include Yarmouk University in Irbid and the community college system in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Each community college is sponsored and supported by a major national university. Some of the national universities (governed by their respective Ministry of Higher Education) in Saudi Arabia and UAE offer academic programs for B.A.-level degrees in translation and interpreting. Among such institutions are:

• King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, College of European Languages and Translation (CELT);
• King Abdulaziz University (KAAU) in Jeddah;
• King Fadh University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dhahran;
• United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in Al-Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE;
• Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) system, a multi-campus network in UAE; and
• Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) Interpreter and Translator Training Program for training translators working with the Saudi Military.

Certification by Professional Associations

For certification of translators and interpreters by a professional association, the Arab Translators Network (ATN) is currently an option. When querying professional Arab translators,

however, it turns out that the level of awareness concerning this certification program is close to zero, and many express skepticism. It is of interest here, however, because ATN describes the eligibility requirements and grading procedures needed for certification, and even though this particular program currently might be in the realm of wishful thinking, it does offer a glimpse into what direction any future efforts might take. The primary objective of the ATN is, as per the organization's website,[5] "to enhance the skills and efficiency of Arab professional translators through translation training courses, computer training courses, interpreter on-the-job training, certification tests, dictionaries, glossaries and other tools." ATN allegedly offers certification testing in the following languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Turkish, all both into and from Arabic.

A written test will be administered by ATN's representative nearest to the candidate's location.[6] The purpose of the test is to assess the candidate's ability to translate from and into the selected language combination. The candidate will be permitted to use a computer, dictionaries, glossaries, and other reference materials in order to simulate his or her actual working environment. The candidate will be expected to complete the test in no more than four hours. A certificate of accreditation will be issued to the candidate who successfully completes the test. Successful candidates become certified members of the Arab Translators Network, and the "ATN Certified" mark can be placed on his or her "member business card." Such a person will also be recommended to any party contacting ATN in search of a translator. All registered

members of the Arab Translators Network are eligible to take the test (there is a $25 testing fee). Copies of translated passages, with the name of the candidate removed and replaced by a code to ensure neutrality, will be sent to three graders. The graders will grade the test with a "PASS" or "FAIL," not a score. Graded sheets may be mailed to the candidate at his or her request. Translators and interpreters certified through ATN can use a stamp, "Arab Translators Network Certified Translator," if such a claim does not conflict with any rules or regulations in the particular linguist's country. Queries concerning ATN and its certification may be addressed to test@arabtranslators.net.

Government Certification

In Syria, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are primarily responsible for the certification of sworn translators. To become a sworn translator in Syria, candidates have to be tested and attend training classes organized by the respective ministry. The Ministry of Justice makes frequent competition announcements for this purpose, and any university graduate can participate in this competition, regardless of his or her specialization. Successful candidates are certified as sworn translators and are authorized to open their own offices and work as "approved" translators.

In Lebanon, according to Lebanese law, any translator who desires to act as a sworn translator must be at least 25 years old and must hold a university degree in translation or interpretation, English language and literature, or any relevant diploma accepted by the jury. Sworn translators in Lebanon are certified by the Ministry of Justice based on their qualifications and the ➡

market's needs. In order to practice as a sworn translator, the candidate must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice, the sole authority entitled to issue such licenses. Successful candidates' names are then published in the *Official Gazette.* The commission of a sworn translator is valid for a period of five years, and can be renewed based on a new oath taken before the High Appellate Court. Each sworn translator is held responsible for the accuracy of his or her translation. The Sworn Translators Association in Lebanon, established on August 9, 2000 by virtue of a government decree, serves as a professional organization for translators who work not only in English, Arabic, and French, but also in other languages, including Greek and Farsi.

In Morocco, the first Act on the conditions for registration in the list of translators and interpreters was passed 80 years ago, on October 17, 1923. The Act was subsequently amended by the Acts of June 22, 1928, and March 30, 1960. Act No. 50-00, relating to certified translators and interpreters for the courts, was passed on June 22, 2001 and became effective in July 2002.

Pursuant to the above-mentioned Act No. 50-00, candidates for certification have to fulfill the following eligibility requirements (*inter alia*):

- To be a Moroccan or a national of a state which has concluded an agreement with Morocco allowing nationals of both countries to practice translation in each other's territories;
- To hold a translator diploma[7], awarded by a Moroccan university, or an equivalent recognized degree;
- To be at least 25 years of age; and
- To have passed the competitive examination and end-of-training test.

Successful candidates in the competitive examination have to complete one year of training in a sworn translator's office (one having at least five year's seniority) and pass the end-of-training test.

The certification body in Morocco is the Ministry of Justice. The certifying committee includes the following members:

- A representative of the Ministry of Justice, who serves as the chair;
- One first president of a court of appeal and one general prosecutor to a court of appeal, designated by the Ministry of Justice;
- The president of the Translators Association or his or her representative; and
- One certified translator, designated by the Ministry of Justice upon the proposal of the president of the Translators Association.

The committee has the following tasks:

- To organize the competitive examination and end-of-training test;
- To study the applications for registration on the list of certified translators;
- To update the translators list; and
- To exercise disciplinary power.

Professional Associations

Apparently, there aren't many professional associations for translators and interpreters in the Arab countries; in any case, they currently do not have a web presence. Of the six organizations listed below, only the Jordanian Translators' Association is a member of FIT:

- Association des Traducteurs dans l'Union des Écrivains Arabes;
- Iraqi Translators Association;
- Jordanian Translators' Association (JTA);

- Sworn Translators Association in Lebanon;
- Association des Traducteurs Agréés près les Juridictions (ATAJ); and
- Association de l'Amicale des Anciens de l'ETIB.

Before the Act No. 50-00 came into effect in July 2002, Moroccan certified translators were organized in the Association of Sworn Translators-Interpreters of Morocco (Corps des Interprètes-Traducteurs Assermentés du Maroc, or CITAM). After Act No. 50-00 became effective, the professional nonprofit Moroccan Translators Association (Association des Traducteurs Agréés près les Juridictions, or ATAJ) was founded on October 24, 2002 in an attempt to comply with the recent reforms in the Moroccan judicial institutions and to keep pace with the ever-changing world environment. Under the same Act, all translators certified for work with the Moroccan courts must be members of ATAJ. ATAJ is the sole representative of translators before the public authorities and Moroccan and foreign bodies regarding any translation issue.

The ETIB Alumni Association was created less than 10 years ago, and is currently trying to establish quality standards in the T&I market in Lebanon. The association's objective is to become a union which would defend the rights of T&I professionals. The Syndicate of Translators of Lebanon is another group for those who work in translation, but do not have any academic training.

The International Certification series is nearing its conclusion. In the next issue we will look at the credentialing possibilities for translators and interpreters in the United States. As the editor of this series, I

aspects *can* be clarified—to help our industry "speak in the same language" about what has so far been vague and seemingly ineffable. It is only through using consistent definitions that we can assure that the general level of quality in the marketplace will improve over time. Doing so is a principal duty of any professional organization.

With members who are able to consider the issues we address from both sides of the freelancer/company relationship, we are truly a rarity. No group anywhere is better positioned to improve the quality standards of our industry than is ATA's Translation Company Division. Through the completion and adoption of the *TCD Quality Standards,* and beyond that to the undertaking of whatever ambitious projects we address next, we look forward to your help and support. The Best Practices Committee continues to welcome participation from all who are interested (contact Evan Geisinger, committee chair, at evan@elanex.biz). Discussion is also welcome in the Members-Only section of ATA's website: post messages on the TCD forum with headlines starting "BP-QS" (for Best Practices Committee-Quality Standards).

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encourage readers to submit any relevant information concerning certification or similar programs, as well as comments on the information published in this series, to my e-mail address at jiri@cetra.com.

Notes

1. "The Challenges of Translation in the 3rd Millennium: A Bifocal Approach," a paper presented by Moustafa Gabr at an international conference held in May 2002, at Notre Dame University in Lebanon, on the challenges of translation in the third millennium.

2. The Arab-speaking countries are: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen.

3. For more information on the linguistic and cultural varieties of Arabic, see "Cultural Awareness and the Arabic Interpreter" by Aziz El-Nasser Ismail (August 2002 *ATA Chronicle*).

4. Excerpts from "The Challenges of Translation in the 3rd Millennium: A Bifocal Approach." The text is not a verbatim quotation—it has been modified slightly by the author of this article and then approved by Moustafa Gabr.

5. www.arabtranslators.net

6. The description of the ATN certification program was taken directly from the ATN website and modified slightly to conform to current U.S. English style.

7. Currently, the "translator diploma" is awarded by the King Fahd Advanced School of Translation. About 70% of the sworn translators practicing in Morocco are graduates of the King Fahd Advanced School of Translation.

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