Designing Arabic typefaces: Between modernity and tradition

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Abstract

With the globalization of visual systems in the Middle East arose new demands in the Arabic graphic design. The imported western commercial and cultural products had created in the Arabic societies new hybrid needs and contradicted visual languages. Unfortunate, western design methodologies and models like constructivism have hardly been understood, even from educators or designers. Modern typography is usually mistaken with calligraphic talent. The controversial European styles like Arts Nouveau have been arabized from designers, who are still dealing with Arabic letterforms as a result of sacred Islamic art. It seems that the western aesthetical norms should be used en mass. Even when we identify its negative impact of the westernized Hebrew and Sanskrit scripts, many of type designers are still using matchmaking techniques in order to create Arabic typefaces out of Latin letterforms: Arabic and Latin types should look identical! (AbiFares, 2007) It is understandable to find international brands like Coca Cola, Kodak, and KFC looking for identical corporate Arabic versions. Their products need to be promoted in unified appearances with dialect language and local touch. But in case of creating a new Arabic typeface for body text, letterforms should be designed according to Arabic reading's habits. Therefore, this paper will focus on the majority of Arabic readers, and reject both of the above-mentioned methods. A new approach for designing Arabic typeface will be presented with the hypothesis that a mixture between old Arabic letterforms could create economical types without causing conflicts with global visual norms.

Keywords: Arabic typeface, latin typeface, body text, letterform, kufic, naskhi, identity, visual language.

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1. Introduction

It could be significant to argue about the numerous attempts to globalize every local norm, because it endangers national identities with its cultural, economical, political etc. patterns. But the importance of the factor recognition's *speed* within visual communication design of letterforms mustn't be overlooked. Each reader, regardless her/his ethnic and language, wants within short time to comprehend the verbal content of what is printed on a paper or displayed on the screen without losing much time or efforts. Nonetheless, we can change frequently the design of products, or replace fashion with new once, but we aren't capable to reform a language or alphabet in short period of time. However, this paper will focus on the fundamental treatments of Arabic letterforms and its relationship to culture, society and history. Issues such as reading's habits, and today's visual language will be taking into account.

2. The Nature of Arabic Typefaces

Many of the old Arabic typefaces deliver the subjective aesthetic intentions of its maker in illegible way, but paradoxically they have been treated as functional forms! The contradicted terms that often appeared in the history of writing like: readability / visibility, rationality / emotionality, practical / impractical, etc. are interpreted differently from one culture to another, or from one period to another period. Humankind needs thousands of years to invent practical *abstract* forms that can accurately translate all, or furthermost components of verbal language into visible fixed letters, such as our current paper. Many script-historians and typeface developers classified letterforms into stiff and rounded and even into emotional and rational. It is interesting to hear that our Arabic calligraphy have been described as emotional organic forms, and the ancient Greek or Old South Arabian scripts are marked with rational because of their stiffness, sharp edges and clear open contours.

The Arabic script is a Semitic script, which means is written from right to left. The Aramaic, the Syriac and Nabataea Alphabets, are the origins of today's Arabic Alphabet. (Abdalla, 1997) Even they were developed according to economical criteria, and have been used for long periods, their letters based on organic forms. The question about the organic or stiffness nature of Arabic letterforms can find its answer in the history of writing, where various stages and sequences of form-developments have been differently undergone, which encourages us to ask: Do all scripts have something common; each seeks the same goal, namely, to be *legible* letterforms or recognizable images? There are many scripts have been consciously developed to combine both functions. Even its developers knew the clear difference between the language of images and the one of letters, they create pictographic forms to be more recognized like the hieroglyphic. For centuries, the ancient Egyptian script, with its iconic appearance has been recognized and readied. At this period the number of illiterate exceeded 94%. After certain changes in the politic and in the society stand new demands for organic forms that could be easy to written and to identify. The new needs motivate writers to develop the *Hieratic*. Its forms were simpler and abstractly constructed and almost lost the hieroglyphic pictorial sense. It seems that every period and every culture may have its different visual perception and *iconicity degree*. (Fig. 5) Letterforms have been developed according to the understanding for user's needs, and not always according to criteria of *readability*. Same like the hieroglyphic, are the Turkish Diwani and the Persian geometric Kufic. They are two different styles with two different functions, but its letterforms and calligraphic or epigraphic treatments were illegible and reflect consciously the power of the rulers and the crown, and this show that letters could be designed as images to carry political messages.

Other aspect makes Arabic script unique, the direct link between sound and visual forms. Unlike in the Latin alphabet, Arabic letters are joined together to form a word. The joining system that called *Kashida*, which could appears as a long horizontal strip between letters on the baseline. (Fig. 2) Who had the experience of hearing Koran readers singing its verses, certainly will understand the reason behind prolonging the Kashida? Hence, most of Arabic letters have two or four different forms,

depending on its position, if it is at the beginning or middle or end of a word. (Fig. 3) There are main 17 characters and by adding dots above or below the characters contributes to the 28 vocal letters of the Arabic alphabet. An interesting feature of Arabic script is the absence of capital letters; it's all about the fluidity of lowercases.

However, the Arabic Alphabet is divided in two contradicted ducts: A) Stiff and more geometric, known with Kufic, as the name suggests is derived from city of Kufah in Iraq, one of the earliest Islamic cultural cities; B) Organic and more rounded and known with Naskhi and its name has been taken from the word *nasakha* which means to copy or transcribe. Both are in use since the first days of Islam in the 7th century AD in two different functions: Kufic for the Quran, Naskhi for conventions text. With the time Naskhi became the chosen script for the Quran and replaced the Kufic script, which has been chosen for decoration in build. Reasons behind this switching could be many, but it was clear that calligraphers have been ordered to transcribe documents in beautiful letterforms and in short period of time. Arabic calligraphy became more readable by the 11th century, and continues its powerful aesthetical developments till the 19th century.

3. Modern Arabic Typefaces and Tradition

It will be interesting if we could understand the reason behind J. W. von Goethe's descriptions of how beautiful the Arabic calligraphy, or to know the motivations behind Gentile da Fabriano's re-usage in the 15th century of Koran verses that have been written in Pseudo-Arabic Mamluk Naskhi, or Kufic in his paintings without understanding its meaning; Why Arabic styles have changed over the years, but the old script itself is still connected to the idea of beauty, power, and faith? Today we are continue repeating what Prophet Mohammed have said: 'God is beautiful and loves beauty', and maybe thus became an important part of Arabic calligraphy. It began with the words of Allah that has been written in the most decorative and beautiful scripts to show love and gratitude! Perhaps from here the idea of *beauty* has been incorporated with the way Arabic has been written. Everything transcribed is being presented in a decorative manner to convey Arabic aesthetics. And possibly this is the reason why most researchers claimed that today's Arabic designers are in straggle between being good Muslim calligraphers and following the cultural value of handicrafts, and the aesthetical norms of today. And this combination could reflect *what is signified as artistic* in the Arabic world.

Two other factors could be considered in this issue: the relative short life usage of removable types in the Middle East, and the high number of illiterate in the Arab societies. Around the 1860s, started Latin and Arabic typefaces to be printed in the Middle East. Typefaces like *English-Grotesque* or Grotesque Slab like *Claredon* or *Giza*, were peculiar at this period, but gradually had started to be in demand. (Fig. 6, b) It is important to mention in here that the nineteenth century in the west, closed with the promise of affordable reading material, available for the masses. While in the Middle East only foreigners and high or middle class could benefit from.

Almost till the 1960s, the Grotesque and the Serif were in use in different Middle Eastern countries, like in the Egyptian, Algerian, Lebanese, Iraqi newspapers, without manipulation on the used Arabic types at this period, the calligraphic Thuluth, Naskhi, and Diwani. Grotesque typefaces were mainly published in French, English, and somehow in other foreign languages. Interesting here to mention the outstanding beautiful street signage of the 1940s in the Arab world, were Arabic street names written in calligraphic style, in a bigger size than the below placed Latin typefaces.

Between the 1940s and 1970s the development of Arabic typefaces was so slow. With some exceptions, like the attempts of the Lebanese designer Nasri Khattar in 1950s with his unified Arabic – also known with Neo Naskhi. Maybe the rapid change in the politic from socialism to imperialism could be the reason. Especially after president Sadat in 1976 i.e. the announcing his new policy of Infitah=the Opening toward the west. At this period, most of the Arabs were interested to get ideas from the West rather from the East; even-though the newly arrived west European forms could be found in the Arabic old styles. Till the end of the 1970s, and with the increased usage of offset print

machines, Arabic designers neither were desired to create *modernized readable typefaces body-text typefaces*, nor to develop alternation's forms that combined or reflect Grotesque styles with Kufic. Luckily, some type designers emphasized that a typeface shouldn't be formed out of today's fashioned global criteria, but mainly to fulfil the future of local, social and economical requirements.

Very late, but finally happened, by the middle of 1980s started western modern typography its path into Arabic graphic design. Functional aesthetics found important supporters like Boutros Aswad, Rayan Abdullah, and many other colleagues in Iraq, Syria, who had anticipated the future of Arabic typography in the constructivism: clarity, and truth. But this message hasn't reach most of designers at this period. It was not surprising to find an Arabic designer creates pseudo-product out of imitated imported designs that often doesn't meet today's diverse requirements and needs of the mass of Arabic readers. Unfortunately most of the typefaces at this period- with exceptions of some typefaces from the English company Letraset and the Dutch company Mecanorma were created after *artistic* criteria. It was obvious that few Arabic designers still attracted by the well-constructed forms of the Grotesque. Paradoxes, the form of the Grotesque remembered us with the geometric Kufic. (Fig. 2.a, b) In fact, the Pseudo-Kufic appeared before the European renaissance, and has been used from the 10th till the 16th century in European art.

Somehow, by the 1990s appeared new designers who refused to continue being busy with the poetic sides of the form. New generations started to discuss issues related to austere functions within visual art, and design. Arabic Typography has changed after transferring of western typographic concepts and styles. The increased usage of *Rotis* typeface from O. Aicher, N. Brody and the spreading of his graphic treatments and new types, and the creations of D. Carson with overlapped types functioned as textures had an important impact on Arabic designers. The next decades shows improvements in understanding of modern and post-modern typefaces and typography. The idea of Rotis typeface that combined Grotesque with Roman Serif in one typeface family, encouraged Boutros from Lebanon to extended his typeface's styles and enclose Kufic and Naskhi in one typeface family.

It was essential to start new era with the full enthusiasm under the umbrella of post-modernism and end the long period of using unified Grotesque forms. The 2000s Arabic typography, which is never stopped its intensive use of Humanistic Serif, Mamluk Naskhi, etc., continue actively combining Roman typefaces of the 16th and 18th Century with the Naskhi in bilingual body text, and even in magazine headlines. The high readability's degree of the Serif-Roman *Garamond* (1528), the Serif transitional Roman *Baskerville* (1724) or the old style *Caslon* (1754) with the Mamluk Naskhi (1400s) are still in demand. They are neither old-fashioned nor illegible.

4. Between Display and Body Text Typefaces

The creation of a new typeface is the systematic approach that considers different functions of the future forms. It is essential before start designing to identify and classify the aesthetical function and many other austere functions. (Crow, 2010) Each typeface delivers meanings to comprehend, and also certain emotions to be felt by its readers. The amount of *objectivity* to *subjectivity* in the entire alphabet should be identified and measured carefully. A Typeface is like a group of people; they're different insides and spirits will appear in diverse bodies and actions, but all of them sharing common features and habits. They are created to transform certain ideas and information into visual forms, and same while to donate Happiness / Sadness, Vitality / Laziness etc. Therefor a typeface incorporates out of a group of characters that share common look and feeling.

We can consider the visual identity of a typeface as economic when it consists of series of thoughtful, frugal fundamentals, which are repeated in unified rhythmic. Designing economical Arabic typeface distinguish itself from ornamental typefaces. The first one is based on non-unified letter width or x-height, the second one is like designing a uniform, letters could be only identified through small differences. Finally, the individual physical state for each letterform will be seen within the entire design system (Kolko, 2011).

Maybe it will be convenient to start with identifying the *spirit* of the typeface and ask: should the new types reflect more emotional or more rational effect. Here designers should outline first the purpose of the typeface: is the new typeface will be considered as Display or Body Text or Calligraphic Type. Display typefaces such as Street Signage, and Magazine and Newspaper Headlines; are clear combination between *emotionality* and rationality. In many cases in Arabic world, emotional needs comes of the cost of austere functions. It is will known within the visual language that any big form or shape will be seen more as an image rather than a type. Big size letters, no matter they will be designed for street signage or newspaper headlines, will present quickly their properties (Fig. 7). Rationality of the types appears more in small point sizes and on small screens like mobiles and electronic machines. They usually readied from a short distance and needs short period of time. However, designers shouldn't neglect their subjective expressions by designing any kind of types (Aicher, 1989).

Unlike body text typefaces are the display and the free styled types. They reflect the personality of the institution and are clear in Logo design, especially as Brand Names, and Shop Signage. In the Arabic Culture the free styled including the calligraphic typefaces is everywhere. Because of their unlimited variations, they could be found in wedding's invitation cards even in the apartments numbers and building names. They give its readers more time to enjoy their decorative looking (Armstrong, 2006). The Body Text typefaces are the most difficult types to deign. It owned powerful effects in small and big point sizes. The readings quality of the Latin body text types like the English Baskerville or the Italian Garamond can be compared with the quality of the Arabic Mamluk Naskhi, and the Neo Naskhi. They deliver unlimited amount of verbal information and emotions in a very short period of time. Their letterforms are proportionally and rhythmic, well constructed and easy to identify. Therefor the connotative emotions and meanings of the text appeared and felt unconsciously during the reading process. They are the added value of any typeface that provides aesthetical appreciation. Finally a good letterform will base on two criteria: the good relation between black and white and the sufficient care for optical sensation. The first criterion is based on the fundamental fact that human being during reading doesn't perceive letters as individual forms, but as whole words i.e. as an image. The key here is the generated visual effect that stands out of the space, leading and kerning. The design should take in account the *Kashida* that can easily create unpleasant critical darkness on the base line, and causing unpleasant reading's process.

5. Design Concept

The previous developments of Arabic typefaces and typography couldn't show a change in the growing understanding in the society for the abstraction of *pure* typographic forms, rather only in the amount of their basics. However, the starting point was strongly integrated in the thinking of unfamiliar elements (from the west or from the east) for the process liberation of form and equality, by which traditional, and other aspects are to be understood. Despite the huge form differences between Renaissance Roman and Grotesque types, between Arabic rounds and stiffeners scripts even between old Hebrew and hieroglyphic scripts, all have much in common which is form construction. (Fig. 7) All typefaces are created out of a combination between geometric and organic shapes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The amount of straight lines to curvy shapes circles, and certain mathematical ratios donates stiffness or roundness. All typefaces based on certain build system but having different individual treatments. The main characteristics of the new body text typeface have to accomplish the importance of clearness (Abdalla, 1997). The factors *speed* in relation to *pleasure*, are the magical keys by any reading's process, and maybe could be measured as following:

Readability / Legibility:	Visual Syntax + Semantic Understanding + Aesthetic Experiences
Visual Syntax:	Distinguishing between incomparable
	Identifying similar Features
Aesthetic Experiences:	Emotions of saved images
	Aesthetic Judgment (Beautiful/Ugly)
High Quality of Readability:	Visual Syntax + Semantic Understanding + Aesthetic Experiences
	Speed + Changing per time

The readability and legibility complement each other. Legibility is that composing text clearer through technical treatments by the type design itself like the amount of contrast in letterforms, and as well by the later typographical treatment like increasing the point size or adjusting the kerning. Readability cares more for the identifying process of codes. It concerns for the originality of the letterform as a cultural code that should be easily decoded. Both, the readability and the legibility are parts of the solutions that could deliver clearness and pleasure by reading. They are the sum of the processes, in which the used time in identifying words, understanding its content will be added to the aesthetical experiences (Aicher, 1989). The visual syntax is the distinguishing between incomparable forms and the way of identifying similar features within the entire typeface family. Our aesthetical experiences in this context are the amount of emotion of saved images of letterforms compared to with our new aesthetical judgment for the readied text. The high quality of reading will be reflected through the properties of legibility i.e. the legibility grids of the text. The Question in here: Is where to find the proper resources for developing new Arabic body text font, in the Grotesque or in the Kufic or in both of them? Today's Arabic type designers are divided into two main groups. The first group chose to follow the global system of matchmaking techniques. The members of the second group are following their own beliefs, where the majority of them still showing their confusions toward the purposes of their design. In many cases, both groups are still mistaken typography with calligraphy, or showing misunderstanding for the history of Arabic script, and for contemporary visual languages. The expression values consider different aspects that exceed the pervious usage of the structural Grotesque or geometric Kufic. Contemporary graphic design aims to accomplish users emotional needs, which is not only the minimalism, but also the post-modernism that allow mixed forms, and hybrid styles. This way of mixing or remixing of typefaces could draw new useful and beautiful norms in Arabic typography. Forms can't be developed in distance from their users like depending only on Latin letterforms. The majority of the Arabic people, nonetheless their social classes, are not familiar with constructivism, modernism, or any other concepts or philosophy that related to the western rationality or even romantic (Conzalez, 2010). The ultimate goal of the future design should create industrial forms that could be used in many media of visual communication. Industrially usable typeface means that its letterforms are compatible with old and new media; its forms could cope with the extremes in small and in big point size. The digital newspaper's and the small screens of the mobile phones and tablets represent challenges for any typeface designer. The contemporary Arabic reading's techniques habits need creative solutions.

Conceivably the constructivism as a design concept can open new visions for the Arabic typeface design, where we can define in the exemption from traditions and prejudices through constant transformation from decorative forms into simple forms, and by rejecting the old academic and traditional rules that do not set to optical reasons, but to inflexible form. (Aicher, 1989) These can be implemented by the following:

- Creating acceptable forms for the spirit of the Zeitgeist.

- Distinguishing between the special purposes.

- Selecting of perfect shapes i.e. geometric drawn that deliver clear and simple recognisable features.

- Contrasting the typographic treatments in order emphasis of the content.

- Choosing a proper measurement's scale i.e. (X-Unit) that could serve different purposes.

- Creating harmonious balance of the space and the contrast according to visual readings habits, which could be found in recognizable structure and geometric organization.

This set could bring a lot of new issues for today's Arabic type designers. Post-modernism typography will support such thoughts. In a way contemporary design is not surrounded any more by boundaries such as requirements to unify styles in the strict sense of forbidden mixtures of typefaces or minimal design. The main issue is the function; the accuracy and the creation's order that deliver unified optical clarity expressed elements. Finally, Arabic typeface designers could benefit from the following:

- The rapid change in the quality of today's typography and the mix between historical and non-historical typefaces has less to do with the readability, rather with our present understanding for the abstract forms or for visual identity. (AbiFares, 2013)

- A visual comparison between Archaic Kufic and English Grotesque will show similarity. For today's display and body text types, counter forms need to be increased, and the thickness should be reduced and varied.

- The main mission for each typeface designer is to finding new visual features that appropriate in the first place to his target audience. Designers should look for outstanding features that could almost build every character in the system. The features will appear as general identity of the typeface. So here terms of "unifying" in one hand is to understand as a key for an expression of the systematic combining elements, on the other hand, it means, in the simplest sense, the repetition of features. This can lead to create letterforms with individual values.

- Timeless characters will be always in need, and could be globally understood.

- We have to point out a common mistake by graphic designers, which is the consideration of older types as *ordinary*. However, such views need to be proofed in the design practice. Each typeface, that newly appeared in the market, regardless of whether it is historical or non-historical, will be immediately tested and put into use.

- The visual identity of a typeface can be compared with the identity of its today's and future's users: It could reflect their beliefs and the spirit of its time and place.

Fig. 1. Between emotionality and rationality by typeface design.

Fig. 2. A, b, c, d (from the top): A); Quadrat Kufic; B) Geometric Kufic; C) Naskhi with long Kashia; D) Mamluk Naskhi.

Fig. 3. Direction Sign by D. Maag, Typeface by R. Abdallah, Dubai, 2010.

Fig. 4. Arabic Alphabet.

Fig. 5. Development of Hieroglyphic scripts.

Fig. 6. A, B. (from left): Diwani from King of Egypt Faruk, 1950. B) Grotesque, Groppi Café, Cairo Egypt, 20 century.

Fig. 7. Comparison between Naskhi and Serif; Kufic and Fraktor.
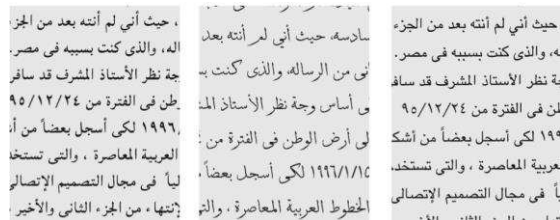

Fig. 8. Arabic Body Text: Images on the side Naskhi from the 1980s, Egypt; In the middle Naskhi from 1940s.

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