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# Green Nation Building

## Children's book authors in the Arab world

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### Abstract

This project examines how children's book authors in the Middle East, particularly parents in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, are using their books to teach kids about environmental sustainability. This is in light of these nations pushing for school reforms to be made in an effort to normalize environmental conservation in society (in a process known as nation building). A central argument of this project is that these children's book authors are often overlooked as influential educators and instead a focus is too largely placed on policy analysis coming from national vision policies regarding school reform. This project provides a brief literature analysis on the children's books themselves, identifies the teachings embedded within them, and discusses why the books themselves are noteworthy tools for nation building.

While studying abroad last semester and while on an Syracuse University Honors research trip for my Honors thesis I came across and collected children's books that related to environmental sustainability. After reading them I became curious as to how much emphasis was placed on these works in national pushes for teaching environmental sustainability in schools. Through online literature review and analyzing the books myself, I decided to write an article discussing the presence and importance of these books. I had actually already met with one author while in Bahrain, and cited statements from them as well (with consent, of course), in addition to referencing pre-existing online interviews with the other focal authors in this project. I married this content with scholarly works that I had found online and produced this project in the form of a brief written article. The project is undoubtedly a geography essay, which I wrote and researched using geographical techniques I have learned in my major. I have referred back to my faculty advisor for my thesis project, Dr. Timur Hammond, for insight and review of this project as well.

### Introduction

Education is a crucial element in nation building, as it holds the potential to reshape and instill an imagined vision of nationalism and development into a nation's youth. Education, when practiced with purposeful directives, could embed within students fundamental understandings and perceptions of society that a state may strive to make banal. Consider the stringent oversight exercised by the Israeli state in approving textbooks for classroom use, aimed at establishing a specific historical and spatial narrative of the nation as desired by the government in the minds of the learning population (Adwan, 2023).

It's worth noting that the driving force behind nation building can vary considerably. There is power in a state's shared perspectives or what constitutes a fact to the people, and this can serve as a catalyst for maintaining or building what is considered national sentiment. It would be remiss to view education solely as a tool wielded by political institutions to actualize a vision of modernity.

Take Oman, for example, where protecting date palms and recycling food scraps is said to have taken root in the elementary teachings of Omani children, as carried out through knowledge passed down from grandparents and parents to children while outside of school. (Hakam, 2016; Al Buloshi et al., 2015). While Oman's Vision 2040 emphasizes the expansion of in-school education on environmental sustainability within Omani society, the use of education through heritage teaching as a tool for green nation building is evidenced to be an established concept (Hakam, 2023). Here, there is a rich takeaway in the fact that influential interactions between family and children have long built sustainable culture in Oman, untethered to the policies of the national education system.

Indeed, recent efforts to promote nation building through education in the Arabian Gulf have manifested through developments in state schooling systems and

curriculum changes. (Al Shamrani et al., 2015; Huang, 2022). The national visions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) nations have each outlined the societal integration of environmentally sustainable practice as a crucial goal in developing human capital and a knowledge-based economy.<sup>1</sup> Tunisia's Vision 2023 outlines similar goals, in partnership with the World Bank Group's 2023 five-year Country Partnership Framework (Saied, 2023). Beyond calls for political and curricular reforms in schools, these national vision frameworks do not explicitly detail a holistic plan for how to teach environmental sustainability to Khaleeji youth. As seen in Oman's traditional green teachings, education as a tool for nation building can be, and is, utilized by common, intimate members of society: parents. This aspect, I argue, should not be overlooked.

Focus is greatly placed on top-down scripting from national vision plans when geopolitical scholars examine how the G.C.C. is developing environmental sustainability education and practice.<sup>2</sup> There is a noticeable absence of scholarly discourse identifying the stakeholders driving the more personal educational interactions within Arab society, namely impassioned mothers and fathers, who are authoring salient children's books. This article aims to address this gap and provides a brief review of the sustainable values being introduced by them within their books. This article highlights Samir Al Khayari's *Zainab Goes to the Souq*, Noura Feteih's *Adam and the Giant*, and Mona Al Alawi's *My Seeds* in a concise discourse analysis, offering insights on how these children's books are used as a tool for nation building.<sup>3</sup> I draw on author statements available online and my own interactions with these children's books and their authors.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, 2023; Bahrain 2030, 2023; Kuwait National Development Plan 2020-2025, 2023; Oman Vision 2040, 2023; Qatar National Vision 2030, 2023; Saudi Vision 2030, 2023; UAE Vision 2021, 2023; and 'We the UAE 2031' Vision, 2023.*

<sup>2</sup> See Al-Shamrani et al, 2015; El-Saharty, 2020; Mitchell et al, 2018; Haung, 2022; and Bantekas, 2023 as examples.

<sup>3</sup> Translation assistance from Modern Standard Arabic to English was generously provided by my Arabic language instructor, Ms. Noura Shahrouri, of Amideast, Jordan.

<sup>4</sup> At points referencing Al Alawi's statements about *My Seeds*, I am referring to comments made in a meeting with the author in May of 2023. All other author statements were retrieved digitally from pre-existing book talks and or author interviews.

## Sustainability Education in Children's Books: Tunisia

The inside of Librairie LaCorniche, a small bookshop adjacent to Monji Bali Square in Tunis, Tunisia, was tightly packed with tables and shelves of books in French and Modern Standard Arabic. Sectioned into different subject groups, I was surprised to see that children's books, particularly books that taught environmental sustainability, consumed two thirds of the store. *Zainab Goes to the Souq; Waste and Recycling; Wasting Energy; Celebrating Tunisia's National Day of Care for the Environment*, among others in Samir Al-khayari's "Nature Friends" children's book series,<sup>5</sup> were the books that overwhelmed the children's book sections, being sold in both languages. I asked the shopkeeper if I could hear more about the books that I saw:

"Why are there so many short stories about recycling here? Is it something that you as a store are particularly passionate about?" I asked the working mother of two.

"We see lots of families every day and sell school supplies and toys, to kids. When we saw these books, we knew it would be something important and maybe interesting for kids to read. Tunis has a lot of people and it is good for the kids to learn to respect our home," she said.

Their commentary made the Tunisian government's environmental sustainability goals seem humanized and supported not just by policy makers. I was inspired to explore Al-khayari's book series. Consider *Zainab Goes to the Souq*, where the book introduces the importance of using reusable bags for shopping without sophisticatedly discussing Tunisia's issue of plastic pollution in the Medina. It is a vibrant example of a children's book author using storytelling as a means of teaching young readers ideas that have the capacity to reform Tunisia's collective sustainable practice. The story itself is digestible and relatable, as it follows the story of a young Zainab and her mother in a local market discussing why reusable bags reduce the amount of plastic bag litter.

In an interview with Dar Nahir Publishing, Al Khayari spoke of his inspiration being the potential he sees

<sup>5</sup> My summary of Samir Al-khayari's *Zainab Goes to the Souq* was drawn from a physical copy of the story that I purchased in Tunis. The aforementioned books in the "Nature Friends" series were also purchased in person.

in the “innocent,” or the youth of Arab society, inclusive of the children in his family.<sup>6</sup> Writing these stories is an avenue for Al Khayari to introduce children to the importance of appreciating the environment in a natural, elementary manner before learning about more advanced earth science concepts in secondary school. It exemplifies how the passion of Al Khayari introduces an integrated stakeholder approach, inspired by his family, to entrench green practice in nation building and utilize the opportunity of Tunisian youth. Al Khayari’s *Zainab Goes to the Souq* was not a product of Tunisia’s national vision policy investment, but instead an asset to an intimate grassroots movement for developing a sustainable Tunisia.

### Sustainability Education in Children’s Books: Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

Ms. Noura Feteih of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, approached green nation building in a family-oriented manner by writing *Adam and the Giant*. The main character, Adam, is a young boy who encounters a cloud of air pollution and energy waste, learning about the dangers of harming the environment. He then demonstrates to readers how to lessen their contributions to air and ground pollution and how to conserve water and electricity. Inspired by her own inquisitive son, Feteih recognized an opportunity to channel her son’s curiosity into a proactive mindset. In an interview with the Saudi Gazette, Feteih emphasized that she views Saudi youth as valuable “ambassadors for learning” (Salem, 2023). She believes that a relatable children’s book can empower kids to see themselves as part of a greater good, stating that Adam and the Giant has the potential to teach children ways in which they can “assist their families, society, and the world” (Salem, 2023). At the core of the story lies the importance of resource conservation, a tangible lesson for children to cherish and practice in the face of climate change, such as turning off common household appliances. As Feteih explained, “Adam is a metaphor for the human race, while the giant refers to global warming” (Salem, 2023). Embedded within the narrative is a call for children to

continue asking their parents about the environment, alongside a directive for parents to nurture their children’s curiosity as a means to cultivate a more environmentally conscious and innovative Saudi Arabia.

In Bahrain, Mona Al Alawi’s *My Seeds* introduces another valuable addition to children’s literature in the G.C.C., educating kids about sustainable thinking with a particular emphasis on combating food waste and returning compostable or viable seeds to the environment. The narrative follows a young girl and her mother, as she learns the significance of giving back to the environment rather than solely extracting from it for food. In this heartfelt story, the young girl is taught how to preserve and replant seeds, with the guidance of her mother and a mango seed. Through poignant dialogues, the value of environmental resources is likened to the care and love bestowed by a mother upon her child. Seeds are compared to a developing fetus, underlining how children can witness the growth of something that will one day contribute to society if they replant discarded seeds. Ultimately, the daughter witnesses the flourishing of a mango tree, bearing fruit for all to enjoy. The story aims to touch hearts while also providing practical guidance on how to return food waste to the environment and cultivate environmental consciousness. Published by the Bahrain Women’s Association for Human Development (BWA), the story is complemented by a children’s card game that teaches the various food scraps and seeds that can be saved and replanted. This educational material has been incorporated into primary school activities organized by the BWA.<sup>7</sup>

Consisting of mothers, grandmothers, and female students, the Bahrain Women’s Association, based in Manama, stands as a leading non-governmental organization committed to acquainting children to Bahrain’s environmental challenges related to water and energy waste, food waste, coastal pollution, and water scarcity.<sup>8</sup> Al Alawi drew personal inspiration from teaching her own children how to save and replant seeds while crafting *My Seeds*, recognizing it as an interactive

<sup>7</sup> See *Introductory overview of the ‘Environmental Citizenship’ program*; “في بي بي بي: فنطاولملا” جم ان ربل في في رعتلا ةحمللا” on Youtube, describing *My Seeds* learning activities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHVVtw62QyE&t=125s>

<sup>8</sup> See the official website of the Bahrain Women’s Association for Human Development: <https://bahrainws.org/>

<sup>6</sup> See the interview with Al Khayari, retrieved from Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=665074661453193>

lesson that serves as an initial step towards introducing kids to conservation practices. Aligned with the BWA's mission, which focuses on raising awareness about Bahrain's environmental challenges and imparting practical solutions to children and youth in the country, *My Seeds* plays a pivotal role. This initiative showcases how green education, with a specific emphasis on children as future change-makers, is being championed by dedicated mothers in Bahrain, operating in tandem with, and sometimes beyond, government directives. This serves as a noteworthy demonstration of how mothers in Bahrain are actively working towards fulfilling their role as catalysts for future environmental reform.

## Conclusion

The national visions of the G.C.C. and the Arab world emphasize political reform and infrastructure development as crucial avenues for nation building. However, the development of human capital through the advancement of environmental sustainability education is not bound to these avenues alone. As evidenced by the publishing of children's books by dedicated parents from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, this development is also stemming from community action. Noura Feteih, in her statement to Arab News, emphasized that learning to be environmentally responsible extends beyond classroom instruction. Instead, instilling environmental consciousness and sustainable practices can also be achieved through conversations within the home (Al Khudair, 2020). A lack of credit has been given to the children's book authors, primarily parents and community educators, who have pursued the same mission of the national visions but in a more intimate, ground level way.

Both governmental initiatives and the efforts of influential children's book authors have actively contributed to green nation building through education. The effectiveness of both approaches extends beyond the scope of this article. However, it is crucial to recognize the more personal methods of educating children about environmental sustainability when evaluating the actual progress of nation building in these nations. An excessive focus on the effectiveness of education-based policies in teaching environmental sustainability may counteract the broader goals of green development and innovation that the G.C.C. is setting itself to achieve. Expanding the scope

to acknowledge the contributions of children's book authors could prove beneficial in managing the most integral aspects of green nation building. The mothers of the Arabian Gulf, fathers of North Africa, and the families and teachers involved in creating and consuming children's books play pivotal roles in advancing the agenda of educating youth about environmental sustainability. Dismissing their involvement in nation building not only hinders the pace of human capital development but also excludes motivated and engaged stakeholders who could significantly contribute to national projects.

## Appendix

Figure I: This is an excerpt from Al-khayari's *Zainab Goes to the Souq*, where the purpose of these pages is to outline the importance of using reusable bags to curb plastic waste. Sourced from a physical copy of the book that I purchased in Tunis in May, 2023. Page 8 reads as follows: "*The plastic bags used to carry purchases will double the amount of plastic waste that pollutes the ocean. [A reusable bag] will be convenient for us and will last a long time, while not harming the environment.*" Page 9 reads as follows: "*Her mother was impressed by her daughter's words, so she bought a beautiful basket made of palm fronds. The mother began to wander among the souq of goods, selecting what they needed.*"

Figure II: These are pages 22 and 23 from Mona Al Alawi's *My Seeds*, where the purpose of these pages is to detail how returning seeds back to the environment could help feed fish and birds or become fertilizer for the soil. Sourced from a physical copy of the book that I obtained in Manama in May, 2023. Pages 23 reads as follows: "*Mother: We can collect fruit seeds for birds, or throw them into the sea, because they can be food. They could be beneficial as food or could be regenerated by them. As for fruit peels, we can make homemade fertilizer from them.*"

Figure I



Figure II



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