



# BOOK SMART, CYBER SAVVY

Qatar-based online entrepreneur Jinanne Tabra has parlayed her own childhood experiences, trying to learn more about the language of her father and her lifelong love of books, into a business, one that is helping thousands of Arabic speaking children around the world discover their linguistic roots. **Rachel Morris** met the founder of what many are calling the 'Arabic Amazon', Araboh.com

### LINGUISTIC ROOTS

As a child of Arab lineage growing up in the United Kingdom, with a Scottish mother and an Iraqi father, from a young age Jinanne Tabra felt she was losing her grasp on the essence and fluency of her Arabic language heritage. However, when her family moved to Iraq for a year, when Tabra was in primary school, she recalls how this period formed the foundation of her nascent Arabic language skills – and in many ways gave rise to her future entrepreneurial vocation.

In fact, Tabra turned the legacy of her early linguistic difficulties – which she later found out she shared with many other families in the Arabic-speaking diaspora around the globe – into the genesis of her now flourishing online business.

"Araboh.com really stemmed from my own struggles with the Arabic language," Tabra furthers. "I had a tough time learning Arabic in Scotland when I was younger, and I wanted to change that experience for other families and children living around the world. I have always loved to read, as a child I remember taking a flashlight to bed with me so that I could read under the covers when I was supposed to be asleep."

The genesis and what she calls her "light bulb moment" for what would become Araboh.com, came for Tabra from a conversation with her mother, now a librarian in Qatar, about the distinct lack of Arabic language books for children. Tabra, whose family returned to the Gulf several years ago, was then studying business administration at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar at Education City.

Taking the idea for the website to her teachers, she used the resources available at the Doha campus of the world-renowned business school to help her incubate it.

The online bookstore, which has since sold thousands of books around the world, has grown by more than 200 percent since being launched in 2008, obviously hitting the sweet spot many young entrepreneurs crave – that nexus between a growing demand for a service or product and ease of availability.

"I launched Araboh because I realised that if I'd had access to fun Arabic books and could have grown to love reading in Arabic as much as I did in English, my Arabic today would probably be a whole lot better than it actually is," says Tabra, who admits there are not enough engaging, fun and interesting Arabic language books for children on the market. "I believe there is a need for the best Arabic educational tools to be made available for families living in non-Arab countries."

### RAPID SUCCESS

In just three years, Araboh.com has grown to become one of the biggest portals of its kind in the world. Tabra, as founder and managing director, now employs 13 staff (several part-time) and sends books as far afield as Japan and Australia.

With thousands of titles, the main base of the operations is being moved to the United States (US). Tabra had initially set up the logistics side of the business in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where there is a free zone for businesses.

The site now sells not just Arabic language educational and other books for children, but also DVDs to customers in more than 50 countries worldwide.

The company sources books from all over the world including top name publishers such as Scholastic, Academia International and Asala. Like Amazon.com, Tabra's company draws from sources around the world so customers can come to one place. Recently the Al Jazeera Children's Channel DVDs *Lulu and Marmar* have been very popular with visitors to Araboh.com, proving the Qatar-based channel's wide influence.

The site also sells Shakespeare's works, translated into Arabic.

"The majority of our customers are Arab families in the US," Tabra says. "We also sell books to adult Arabic learners - everyone from Japanese college students to US military serving in the Middle East. We have also supplied libraries around the world, everywhere from Australia to Japan, from Norway to Brazil."

The name, 'Araboh' also harks back to Tabra's childhood. In the Gulf Arab countries, adding the suffix 'oh' to a name is a term of endearment and is an informal way of referring to someone, usually a child. She added 'oh' to the word Arab as a way of showing the company and its products are about communities and families.

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The quirky name obviously hit a chord. Tabra has since been named by *CEO* magazine as one of the 'Top 30 under 30' in the Arab world in 2009. But her journey from the early days as a budding student businesswoman has not been without its obstacles, especially in the fledging world of e-commerce and internet marketing. "When Araboh first launched in 2008, there was almost no such thing as e-commerce in the Middle East and just convincing a bank to sign us up was a challenge," she says.

Tabra also had to deal with sceptical Arabic language publishers who had never done business this way before." Explaining to Arabic publishers that we needed images and data on their products because we would sell them online was pretty foreign - it ended up being easier for us to scan, weigh and write a summary on every single book ourselves when we started out," Tabra says.

"The lack of an entrepreneurial community in Qatar was also a challenge when I started thinking about a start-up in late 2007. I leaned on my entrepreneurship mentor, Professor George White, at Carnegie Mellon a lot, but I wish I had known of other people in Qatar, especially women, who had established businesses and who I could turn to for advice.

"As Araboh has grown over the past few years it has begun to take on a life of its own - I quickly learned that if you're not very careful with how you run your business, it can start to run you. In Araboh's early

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days, I was doing a little bit of everything - but spending all day on spreadsheets and e-mails was slowly killing my passion for the business. I'm not the type of person who's ever going to be passionate about managing cash flow or organising inventory, so in order for me to stay passionate about the business and to continue to give it 100 percent, I have come to realise that I can't do everything."

One key discovery for Tabra was surrounding herself with people she trusts and can rely on so she can spend more time on new products and new directions for the company. "I am very lucky to work with a team of people that I trust to take care of some high-level business issues so that I can spend more time developing the business and creating educational solutions for families and children," she says. "I would encourage any business owner to have enough self-awareness to delegate

responsibilities that can pull you away from the reason you started the business in the first place."

### MANAGING GROWTH

But Tabra, despite the early teething problems, admits she still faces both personal and the expected business challenges as head of her own company. "Today our challenges are very different. The company is now based in the US where most of our customers are, we're working to overcome challenges like the high cost of shipping products from the Middle East," Tabra says.

"On a personal level," she adds, "one of the ongoing challenges I face is still my own abilities in Arabic. I run an Arabic website promoting the Arabic language, but if I receive an Arabic business e-mail - it is very difficult for me to reply in the language that I am trying so hard to promote. I would need every email I write to be proofread, twice. So I communicate primarily in English, but I'm conscious that it is a bit of a double standard."

Another challenge has been facilitating a secure, easy-to-use online payment system, which is naturally the cornerstone of all e-commerce portals. "Online payment facilities that serve MENA have improved slightly since we launched in 2008," explains Tabra, "but the industry is not nearly where it needs to be. A lot of local e-commerce companies are using services like Authorize.net and 2CO, which are pretty much the same as Paypal, work well, but their fee structure is expensive, which makes it tough to scale an e-commerce business using their systems. Alternatively, some banks have set up payment gateways of their own, but a



True to the inspiration and founding spirit of Araboh.com, Jinanne Tabra and her company are touring Arabic festivals in Qatar and the UAE to promote reading and language skills among the youth. Images courtesy Araboh.com

**“Our majority of our customers are Arab families in the US. We also sell to... everyone from Japanese college students to US military serving in the Middle East.”**



lack of quality service and support from the banks can make it very difficult to do basic things like issue refunds.”

Araboh.com now processes all of its payments through the US company First Data, which Tabra says is ranked by *Fortune 500* as number one in financial data services and is trusted by companies such as Starbucks and Wal-Mart. “Aligning ourselves with First Data makes our customers feel more comfortable buying online,” she says. “We don’t actually hold credit card data on our site at any point in the transaction, when a customer checks out - they are essentially redirected to First Data’s secure server where their card is processed. It works very well; the process is straightforward on the customer end because it looks and feels like you never leave the Araboh website, but it allows us to pass the credit card responsibility on to a company that is much better equipped to secure it than we would be.”

#### EXPANSION PLANS

Tabra then reveals that Araboh.com is continuing to grow and this month, when the company will launch its new website, she says the changes reflect listening to her customers and what they want, bearing parents in mind the most.

“With the new site, Araboh is so much more than just a bookstore. We have created areas customised for teachers and librarians to help them get the most out of their Arabic resources and curriculums,” Tabra explains. “We built a great kids corner packed with educational games, interactive activities and free downloads that will put the fun back into learning Arabic.

“My favourite area on the new site is the ‘Parents Section’. Millions of parents living overseas have no choice but to teach their kids Arabic at home, but they don’t know where to start, what resources to use or how to progress. So we have developed step-by-step guides for every grade level that parents

#### ENTREPRENEUR PROFILE

Name: Jinanne Tabra  
Company: Araboh.com  
Position: Managing Director and Founder  
Founded: 2008  
Staff: 13 (some part-time)  
Education: BSc from Carnegie Mellon University Qatar and next month will start Masters in International Education Policy at Harvard  
Website: [www.araboh.com](http://www.araboh.com)

can follow at home, along with free resources they can download and fun ideas to keep learning fun and interesting. It’s going to make a big difference to a lot of families.”

Araboh.com and Tabra are also undertaking a series of visits schools in Qatar and the UAE and hosting Arabic language festivals in the region to promote the language among children. There are also more changes in store for Araboh.com post-summer, according to a tight-lipped Tabra, who says the key to a successful online business is continuing to evolve and use technology.

“We have a very exciting announcement lined up for fall 2011. We will be launching a brand new Araboh service that will be the first of its kind in Arabic literature, and I believe the first of its kind to come from an Arab company. We will be launching a beta version of the service in the US before taking it global in 2012. That’s all I can say at the moment.”

Tabra, who splits her time between the US and Qatar, says the entrepreneurial landscape in Qatar and the Middle East is changing rapidly. She says she has seen great leaps in terms of access to information and technology since starting her fledgling web portal in 2007 and 2008, making it easier for young people like her with a ‘big idea’.

“A lot of this has changed in the past few years - the QITCOM Conference held in Doha (in May 2011 hosted by ictQATAR) recently is a great example, and there are several business competitions that now encourage regional innovation,” she says. “Now when I’m in Doha it seems like everyone I meet is working on a start-up of their own or has an idea they are waiting to run with - this wasn’t the case a few years ago, it is exciting!” ■