

Culture Heritage in Time of Conflict: the Need for Prevention Plan

Abstract:

The history of libraries and archives in Middle East goes back to the early history of civilization. The recent history of the Middle East libraries and archives has featured events that have destroyed its collections of great importance. In recent years, conflict in the Middle East has expanded in such a way that seriously jeopardizes the cultural heritage throughout the region. In many cases, entire collections have been lost or displaced due to the devastating events taking place in the region. Countries particularly affected by this violence include Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, among others. In other cases, political conflict has severely restricted researching from accessing the materials. One key step in the preservation of the cultural history is to create a standardized disaster management plan and to work on the digitization of the collections, particularly those which are most at risk. The questions I will address in this research are what should Middle Eastern libraries and archives do if they do not already have disaster management and recovery plans in place? What is required in order to initiate a disaster management plan? What should be done to preserve these invaluable collections?

“The whole civilization belonging to all humanity is being destroyed”

Archaeologist Cheikhmous Ali describes damage to Syria’s heritage sites¹

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“Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritages are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa’s Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world’s heritage”².

History provides many examples of destroyed or burned libraries as a part of ethnic cleansing during times of war. History shows that the victims of any conflict are always the people, a nation and their heritage. For example, in 1992, the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo (NULBH) was burned as a result of heavy bombardment during the civil war. It was estimated that 90 percent of the collection and the library’s catalog were damaged. The damaged collections included 1.5 million books and manuscripts in English, Russian, Arabic, German, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Persian and Hebrew³.

Additionally, the Iraq war in 2003 resulted in the burning of the Iraq National Library and Archive in Baghdad. In this instance “between 30- 35% of Iraq National library’s collections were saved”. These books were saved because they were relocated in next door to the al-Hak mosque. Additionally, Saddam Hussein seized thousands of manuscripts from libraries and archives for his private collection; however, Iraqi citizens were able to hide some of the books and manuscripts in their houses. Citizens were able to save over 250,000 books from destruction⁴.

The above cases are not the only instances of damaged libraries and archives in recent history. For example, the German and Allied forces during World War II (WWII) destroyed many libraries in Europe, including a number of public libraries in Italian territories. It is documented that the Germans destroyed more than two million printed texts and that 39,000 manuscripts disappeared. This destruction includes the public and the national libraries in Torino in 1942 and the Biblioteca Palastina in Parma. In France, the Nazis destroyed 42,000 volumes in Beauvais in 1940. In England, the bombing raids during 1940 and 1941 reached libraries such as the public library in Coventry and over 100,000 books were destroyed. The University of Berlin's library lost 20,000 volumes as a result of the war. In 1943 in Naples, the German troops burnt the university library and the same troops set the Library of the National Assembly in Paris on fire and destroyed 40,000 documents. In Poznan, Poland, the Raczyński library and the library of the Sciences Society and the Cathedral Library were destroyed and burnt. Additionally, the Warsaw National Library lost 700,000 documents during the war⁵.

The war and conflict in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Mali demonstrate depict the horrors of war making it appear almost impossible to carry out policies to protect the cultural heritage. However, experts in the field of preservation and librarians played a great role to save the cultural heritage in Europe during WWII. During WWII, the German and American armies developed two organizations, the Kunstschutz and Monument Men, who were able to safe guard the cultural treasures from the war. This historical event is well documented, but has not been

applied in Iraq because the war is fought in a different environment. However, that does not mean one cannot create guidelines based on the WWII experience to help minimize the chaos and destruction caused by war. The looting and destruction of the cultural heritage continues and therefore, it is essential to establish a disaster management plan to reduce the damage to the archives and libraries in the conflict zones.

During WWII, those who were involved with libraries, archives, and museums campaigned and worked closely with the American military in order to save as much of the European cultural heritage as possible. The militaries of Germany and the United States hired experts to work for the art and cultural heritage protection agencies. These contractors worked to serve the military during the war. Some of these individuals had army ranks and were therefore able to strengthen their leadership and influence in the implementation of the protection policies.

These experts worked on educating the public on the importance of preserving the cultural sites and workers distributed posters to alarm the German army and educate the soldiers to respect and protect the cultural heritage. These groups also assisted civilians who disobeyed the Nazi orders and helped them enter art museums to remove artworks bring them to safe storage places. However, evidence also shows that the Germans were interested in preserving the cultural heritage in France. For example, after the fall of France the Kunstschutz organization received an order from the German military to investigate the important chateaux and report on the amount of damage. The Kunstschutz had permeation to order any German soldiers found in one of the damaged building to vacate if there is any repair work needing to be done.

Why libraries and archives become a target in time of war?

According to Edgardo Civallero, one of the reasons behind the burning libraries and books is that “majorities try to impose on minorities, to force their pride to eliminate their memories, to dominate their reality⁶.” According to Civallero, “the winner tries to sweep away the defeated ones’ future, to compel them to resign, to force them to lose their identities to be assimilated⁷”

In 1966 in Florence, a flood destroyed millions of books, manuscripts, and works of art in several libraries. This incident attracted the public’s attention and resulted in experts strategizing about how to protect libraries and archives from natural disaster. In that time discussion about disaster management planning did not yet exist. The flood was tragic, but it also was a learning point. People in the field learned what steps to take to prevent the same amount of loss and destruction in the future; for example, how to treat materials and avoid mold. In the 1960s freezing was not yet introduced as a method used to prevent materials from mold; however, in the 1990s, freezing materials became a common step in saving books and manuscripts from water damage. Hilda Bohem’s 1978 work, *Disaster Prevention and Disaster Preparedness*, was the first to describe the basics of a disaster plan and what institutions need to do in order to establish one⁸. Graham Metthews in “Disaster Management: Controlling the Plan,” addresses the basic steps of a disaster plan: prevention, preparation, reaction and recovery⁹.

Most of the publications that address disaster plans discuss what should be done in case of natural disasters. Little has been written about what can be done to preserve books and materials in libraries and archives from conflict or violence.

The literature also discusses what international organizations, such as UNESCO and Blue Shield, have been doing in the area of disaster management.

UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created a project called Memory of the world; its objective is to demonstrate that the world heritage belongs to all and should be protected and preserved “for all and, with due recognition of culture mores and practicalities, should be permanently accessible to all without hindrance.” Furthermore, it aims to raise awareness of the legal issues surrounding the protection of cultural heritage items and sites.¹⁰

Blue Shield¹¹

Blue Shield is an international committee established in 1996. The main goal of the committee is to protect the world’s cultural heritage in time of war. The committee has representatives from International Council of Museums, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, and the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Association. Blue Shield regularly issues statements on its website and provides information on developments in the war zone and addresses the outline of recovery in the case of war . These two organizations created disaster management plans for libraries, archives and museums, but they did not address what this paper is targeting: the prevention component of disaster management plans in the case of war¹².

In fact, the world in the last several years witnessed the destruction of many libraries, archives and cultural institute and sites. As a result of war and conflict, the Middle East witnessed the destruction of many important libraries and cultural institutions such as the Iraq National Library and Archive, al-Awqaf Library, Central Library of the University of Baghdad, Library of Bayat al-Hikma, Central Library of the University of Mosul and other libraries and archives spanning from 2003 to 2015.

In 2012, Libya witnessed the destruction of the Sufi shrines and libraries in the cities of Zliten, Misrata and Tripoli¹³. The attackers destroyed different Sufi shrines and burned a mosque's library; however, no report was published about the size and extent of damage¹⁴.

According to the U.S Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), as of November 2014, over 90 percent of Syrians' cultural sites, including libraries and archives, , are inside the areas of conflict. Since 2011, the conflict has reduced many of the country's ancient treasures, many of which are on UNESCO's World Heritage list, to piles of rubble.

In 2014 in Cairo, the Egyptian Islamic Arts Museum was targeted by a car bomb resulting in the loss of 74 pieces from the seventh-century pre-Islamic era to the end of the 19th century; 90 pieces of Egypt's National Library were damaged and several rare manuscripts and papyri were damaged in the attack¹⁵.

As evidenced by these tragic and devastating incidents, local institutions and international organizations must work together to take action to prevent further destruction of the Middle Eastern cultural heritage.

My plan is to examine the extent of disaster management planning that has already been done in academic and national libraries and archives in the Middle East and to assess the existent to which the plans include the prevention of materials in the case of future conflict.

The result of this survey will be published in an article. To date, here is the data: a survey of 11 questions were sent to 22 countries and 340 persons. 116 people working in libraries and archives answered the survey, but only 92 answers were qualified to be analyzed.

Example of the survey results

Table 1 shows the countries that responded to the survey and table 2 shows the job titles of the respondents.

Table 1 : Countries that participated in the survey questioners.

Country	Frequency
Afghanistan	1
Algeria	5
Egypt	7
Iran	30
Iraq	2
Jerusalem and West Bank	8
Jordan	4
Kuwait	2
Lebanon	9
Libya	2
Morocco	2

Oman	2
Qatar	5
Sudan	1
Syria	1
Turkey	2
United Arab Emirates	3
Unknown	6
Total	92

Table 2: Job Titles of Respondents

Occupation		Percent
	Director	37.6
	Librarian	36.6
	Archivist	3.0
	Assistant professor	5.0
	Other*	9.9
	Total	92.1
	Did not answer	7.9
Total		100.0

Experience of Disaster

Answer		Percent
	No	55.6
	Yes	5.6
Did not respond		38.9
Total		100.0

The goal of the survey was to raise awareness of the need to take a step forward with disaster management planning and to ensure the safety of the library and archive holdings, not to indicate which libraries have successful plans and which do not. It is necessary for the international community to work closely with local organizations and specialists to create disaster management plans to help prevent further destruction and damage to the cultural heritage found in the Middle East's libraries and archives.

Do we wait till we receive help?

This paper will lay down recommendations and steps that libraries and archives need to take in order to help prevent a more conflicts and destruction of their collections.

- Libraries and archives in the Middle East should develop comprehensive disaster management plans.

- Disaster management plans that are available in existing literature or on the internet can be used as starting points for developing library-specific plans.
- Library staff should be engaged in developing the plans and trained to implement them on a regular basis.
- Libraries and archives need to work on cataloging their materials and describing their collections, especially when the materials cannot be replaced.

Conclusion

Prevention and preparedness is the key to preserving library and archive collections. Furthermore, no plan will be successful in times of conflict or disaster without adequate and regular training of staff members.

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2. UNESCO World Heritage Center, 2013. In <http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/> (accessed October 9, 2013).
3. Zgonjanin, Sanja. "The Prosecution of War Crimes for the Destruction of Libraries and Archives during Times of Armed Conflict." *Libraries & Culture* 40, no. 2 (2005): 128-44. EBSCO
4. Civallero, Edgardo. "When memory is turn into ashes ... memoricide during XX century." *Information for Social*

5. *Change* (2007): 7-22. Web. 1 Oct. 2013. <http://eprints.rclis.org/10459/1/when_memory.pdf>. p. 5
6. Ibid., p 7,8,9
7. Civallero, Edgardo. "When memory is turn into ashes ... memoricide during XX century." *Information for Social Change* (2007): 7-22. Web. 1 Oct. 2013. <http://eprints.rclis.org/10459/1/when_memory.pdf>, p.4
8. Ibid., p.4.
9. Davis, Sherly A., Patricia Smith-Hunt, and Kristen Kern. "Disaster Planning and Recovery for Cultural Institutions." *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*. Accessed December 10, 2013. [Http://dx.doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS3-12004407](http://dx.doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS3-12004407).
10. Graham., Matthews. "Disaster Management: Controlling the Plan." *Managing Information* 1, no. 7-8 (July 8, 1994): 24-27.
11. UNESCO. "Memory of the world." Accessed December 11, 2013. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/about-the-programme/objectives/>.

12. Blue Shield is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross It is the protective emblem specified in the 1954 Hague Convention (Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict) for marking cultural sites to give them protection from attack in the event of armed conflict. The Blue Shield network consists of organizations dealing with museums, archives, audiovisual supports, libraries, as well as monuments and sites. The mission of all involved with Blue Shield is to work for the protection of the world's cultural heritage. See, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/~NewsContentP/18/31051/Books/Egyptian-Libraries-Investigations-Series-Who-is-pr.aspx>
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http://www.unesco.org/culture/legalprotection/war/html_eng/index_en.shtml.

14. See UNESCO press dated August 28, 2012

15. Aljazeera website Augst 28, 2012 retrived December 17, 2014
<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2012/08/201282665348545366.html>

16. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/arts/design/sorting-through-the-rubble-of-museum-of-islamic-art-in-cairo.html?_r=0