

Vulnerability of Libraries and Archives and Restoration of What's Been Damaged¹

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First the bad news: There has been significant damage to book and archival collections in the region. This picture illustrates one such tragedy:²



Most of the media coverage, academic and professional, as well as assistance money have gone to recover and restore ancient objects and to design plans to rehabilitate museums and

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² Government archives, Baghdad, Saadun St., 2003. Photo by author.

archeological sites. Little attention has been paid to paper and parchment concerns.

But the news is not all bad. I can point to several positive developments over the past several years.

I'll try to cover three aspects of the topic in this brief talk and fill in during our discussion period. First: I'll make some generalizations about the current situation in the region; next, I'll suggest actions we can take. Finally, if there's time I'll tell you what keeps me up at night.

Part I. Going out on a limb, I'd say that the destruction of archives and libraries by terrorists since 2011 has not been as bad as we might imagine from the media. Yet there have been salient events that draw attention to books, manuscripts and archives. Probably the most noteworthy attack occurred in 2003 at the Iraqi National Library and Archives, when elements of Saddam's Baath party torched the modern archives of Iraq, completely incinerating much of the record of Baath party rule held there. Fortunately, archives in other facilities were rescued and brought to the US for treatment here at the Smithsonian and at the Hoover Institution,

The other major Iraqi loss occurred in 2014, with the devastation at the antiquities museum in Mosul in 2014. Most of us have seen videos of the ISIS fanatics taking sledge hammers to statues and stealing smaller objects from displays. It's certain that many objects from Iraq's ancient past have leaked into international black market trade. Still, there are no credible reports that the museum's formidable research library was disturbed.

Also in Mosul, the university library seems to have been spared wholesale destruction, even though ISIS has closed several departments. My suspicion is that various department libraries as well as the main university library have been looted and the books smuggled out for sale. In January of this year, Associated Press reported the “ransacking” or “looting” of Mosul’s main public library, as well as the libraries of the Dominican monastery, Sunni mosque and shrine libraries, and “a 265 year-old Chaldean church.” Materials that were not destroyed were carted away by ISIS, according to the unconfirmed report. This highlights a consistent problem in the region as a whole, and especially in Mosul. We are unable to confirm reports because people are unable to get word out of the city and the media has also been kept out. In March this year they destroyed two mosques and their collections: Hamu al-Qalu and al-Sabunji, both 19th century institutions.

Reports last February pointed to the burning of “the Mosul library,” but we have no more than secondary accounts of this incident. Getting authoritative news is one of the problems we face. I’ll mention it later on.

Similarly, a rather optimistic report from Baghdad cited efforts at restoration there and that a state-of-the-art new national library will open next year. We can only hope that at least some of these reports are correct.

One of the greatest tragedies to date occurred with the destruction of the Waqf Library in Aleppo, Syria in May 2013. Shelling between government and rebel forces damaged, in fact destroyed, this venerable manuscript collection, the companion to the National Library in Damascus. This treasure disappeared

and no one in the media, Arabic or Western, even noticed!! This is the best example I know of media inattention and indifference to libraries.

News from the fighting in Libya is sparse. I can cite the August 2012 destruction of the Sufi shrine and library in Zlitan, west of Tripoli. Sufi shrines throughout the Islamic world, like monasteries, often contain manuscripts of value to the faithful and to scholars. The destruction at Zlitan went all but unremarked by any media.

Although our attention is on the depredations of ISIS and the seemingly random fury and feuds in Libya and Yemen, we should not forget another threat to library treasures: the governments themselves. Here I take Egypt as an example of the indifference and inefficiency of the antiquities administration. These qualities have led to recent tragedies at the 200 year-old Institute d'Egypte, where an accidental fire nearly destroyed the building and much of its contents. No proper prevention or emergency procedures were in place, so a fire of unknown origin ravaged the building and its contents. Recovery of materials was difficult and in some cases impossible. In another case, the 130 year-old national library and Islamic museum was badly damaged, almost destroyed, by a blast that occurred across the street at a police station. Although the damage to the old national library was inadvertent, facilities for protection and rescue of its contents were pitiful. This led to significant loss of manuscripts.

The bureaucratic situation is so critical that the Egyptian government has announced the privatization of the new antiquities facility, to be called Great Egyptian Museum. But

because of the administrative barriers between book and archives and the other antiquities, the new facility will not handle the many thousands of manuscripts held in the National Library nor the documents in the National Archives, according to press accounts.

Confusion about the role, the contents, and even the location of the Egyptian archives is another example of neglectful administration. Prof Khalid Fahmy summed up the confusion this way after the Muslim brotherhood took over the government in 2012. The National Archives do not contain many of the national-security documents that the Brotherhood and the intellectuals believed were there; almost all of them are held elsewhere, in the Ministry of Interior. Prof Fahmy says, “I know this will sound a bit odd, but from my experience, I think the Brotherhood didn’t even know that the National Library is the national library, rather than a publishing house. There is a big conflation in Egypt, even among intellectuals, about what the National Library is about, let alone the Archives. I don’t think the Brotherhood really had a clear policy [about the library and archives].”³

Taking Iraq as another example of feckless government handling of library treasures, I might point out the *sturm und drang* of bureaucratic wars between the various ministries, institutes and museums that prevent forward movement of funding, collection management, staff training, and public service. One solution to these problems is public shaming by the Western media and most importantly by the local media and non-governmental organizations with an interest in heritage preservation.

³ Hersh, Joshua. “The Battle of the Archives,” *New Yorker*, Sept. 4, 2013.

Lastly, I might point out that Iraq and Egypt are not the only countries lacking a coherent inclusive policy toward libraries and archives. My inquiries point to Syria as another blatant example. Its General Directorate for Antiquities and Museums takes no account of paper or parchment in its thinking about protection. At a conference held in May this year the Syrian army admitted that it had placed no special units to guard the National Library or other libraries in Damascus, a city under siege and continued threat of infiltrations by opposition fighters or terrorists.

Part 2: But the situation is not all bleak. The international community has been mobilized, including universities, museums, art dealers, governments and even the police. Many scholars have singled out museums as active mid-points and end points for illegal trade. But this may be a bum rap. Museums have responded unambiguously through the International Council of Museums which has prepared and updated its illustrated Red List of antiquities to alert customs authorities, police, museums, and dealers to antiquarian trafficking. The latest Red List is limited to Iraq.⁴ One hopes that the effort can be extended to other countries in the region soon.

In other efforts, high resolution space imagery is being used to pinpoint locations of cultural heritage sites. According to reports, this technological assistance directed allied bombing flights away from sensitive targets in Libya, during the overthrow of Gadhafi in 2012.

⁴ <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/red-list/iraq/>. Last accessed Oct. 2, 2015

Despite these excellent efforts, the UN's UNOSAT project is a good example of what gets my goat. The project has done wonderful work documenting destruction of Syrian antiquities using satellite data. But in its comprehensive report on historic buildings of last December, it ignores libraries and archives utterly. Why is this? What can be done about it?⁵

Similarly, there is the new US-based CyArk project. CyArk was founded to ensure imagery of heritage sites is available to future generations, while making them uniquely accessible today. "CyArk operates internationally as a non-profit organization with the mission of using new technologies to create a free, 3D online library of the world's cultural heritage sites before they are lost to natural disasters, destroyed by human aggression or ravaged by the passage of time." This is an admirable objective that has been carried out in Egypt and Jordan. But unfortunately there is no commitment to libraries in any of their work, as far as I can tell.⁶

Even the most advantageous technological advances have their risks. The American Association for the Advancement of Science has called attention to the unintended consequences of high resolution commercial imagery and has issued guidelines for its use. With their tech savvy adherents, jihadists can access and use this imagery as easily as heritage workers

I must mention the effort of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimaniyah. Although we may regard their new annual symposium as just another group of talkers, it has the promise of bringing together the disparate elements of the Iraqi heritage

⁵ <http://www.unitar.org/unosat/maps/SYR> (Last accessed October 2, 2015)

⁶ <http://www.cyark.org/> (Last accessed October 2, 2015)

community which are now at loggerheads with each other. This would be an excellent venue to reconcile the paralyzing administrative fissure between libraries and museums, both in the Kurdish region and throughout Iraq.⁷

IFLA's interest in preservation extends to thirteen centers worldwide. It has just designated Qatar as its partner for the Arabic-speaking countries. The centers are to "ensure that library and archive materials, published and unpublished in all formats will be preserved in accessible form." I should mention that Qatar's National Library has been exemplary in acquiring and digitizing rare materials of all kinds. Its website should be of interest to anyone researching in the field of Middle Eastern research library materials.

Among the important digitization work being done in our own country, I can mention a few initiatives that go beyond talk and panels. The Hill Museum of St. John's University in Minnesota has been justly praised for its work in rescuing and/or digitizing MSS from Iraq, Mali and elsewhere. The Museum is currently working on MSS from Lebanon, Iraq, Jerusalem, Egypt, and Malta, according to a museum spokesman. Here in Washington, D.C. the restoration and exhibition of Baghdad's Jewish archives deserves mention. Although somewhat controversial, the archival preservation work is vital. It can be referenced at the site of the National Archives, where preservation, digitization and exhibition is taking place. Also controversial but at the same time of great importance is the archival work at Hoover Institution. Records of the Baath Party, 10 million pages of

⁷ <http://ais.edu.krd/news/ais-hosts-first-annual-iraq-cultural-heritage-symposium> (Last accessed October 2, 2015)

them, have been digitized and are currently used by many scholars for books and academic publications.

Great work is being done by the University of Delaware's Winterthur Museum, the University of Chicago, and Pennsylvania University, to name just three US universities who are involved in documentation and training of Syrian and Iraqi conservation personnel. There are also groups like the US chapter of the Blue Shield and the CHAMP initiative based at Lackland AFB, which link the interests of our military and archeological communities.

In addition to universities, many American government organizations, museums, NGOs, and foundations have come forward with assistance. The United States Institute for Peace, USAID, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, and the J. M. Kaplan Fund, are just a few examples I can cite.

As to eBay... Well, we have to be careful of it for many reasons. For our purposes here we might search "Islamic manuscripts," "Ottoman manuscripts," or "Persian manuscripts" to see the rich variety of items that would tempt any collector or, in the case of the Quran, even a moneyed pious person. There is no doubt that many stolen works are on offer, as well as many forgeries.

Part 3. Suggestions for action. The first thing we can do is to verify news reporting before we transmit it. There is often rapid reaction panic when we hear of a Mosul or Palmyra. Gossip and exaggeration travel far and fast. Incorrect reports confuse specialists who are trying to track the fate of persons or objects associated with headline news. Vetting our news through reliable sources is vital. One such source is the American

Schools of Oriental Research, which issues weekly bulletins and special reports for Iraq and Syria.⁸

We would also do well to keep abreast of the lucrative black market trade and antiquities trafficking. In an excellent article in the *International Business Times*, Kathleen Caulderwood describes how US Immigration and Customs (ICE) tracked, commandeered, and returned to Egypt \$2.5 million worth of ancient artifacts in one massive haul. We learn too that legal firms make it their business to track and intervene in these cases.⁹ It is also good to follow the Lawyers' Committee for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, whose purpose is to "promote the preservation and protection of cultural heritage resources in the United States and internationally through education and advocacy."

How do we keep abreast of affairs in detail and get involved? It may sound ironic, but attending conferences and panels like this one is a good way to follow affairs and involve ourselves. As I mentioned above, there are conferences all over the country and indeed around the world which tackle the critical issues. Most of them seem not to include books, archives and libraries in their presentations. When I attend these events, I like to raise my hand to ask about book concerns. I work the hallways and hotel coffee shops to chat with presenters about the issue. We can suggest panels, interviews, and even protest events such as the one at the White House in March 2015. We can include our concerns on blogs or social media pages.

⁸ <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/weekly-reports/> (Last accessed October 2, 2015)

⁹ <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-returns-25m-egyptian-antiquities-experts-call-tougher-punishment-smugglers-1892622> (Last accessed October 2, 2015)

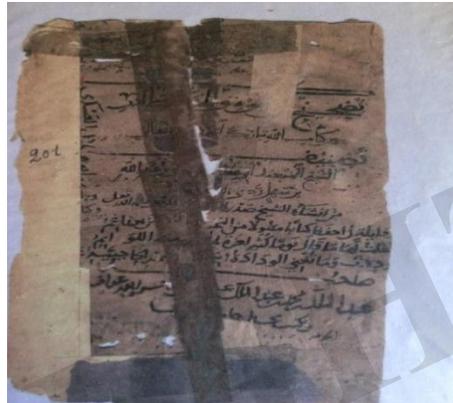
The American research institutes in Middle Eastern countries might provide news and authoritative updates, but unfortunately these cash-strapped bodies are rarely concerned with protection, preservation and conservation of books and archival papers, which is sadly ironic since their scholars and grantees are beneficiaries of these treasure houses for their dissertations and publications. If we belong to these organizations, we can make sure that our concerns are included in their conferences and grant proposals.

Public outcry is also effective. Items have been pulled from auction at the urging of activists, and the Jewish archives mentioned above have stayed in the US for treatment and display thanks to the insistence of the Jewish community and the tumultuous conditions in Iraq.

We can support the important training and documentation work of the Heritage Task Force of the Syrian National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition, that is, the Syrian interim government. They work in close association with University of Pennsylvania and international bodies to train preservationists. But as far as I know their activities to date do not include libraries and archives.

Part 3-Conclusion. What keeps me up at night are specific vulnerabilities such as the precious library of the Grand Mosque in Sanaa, Yemen and the library of St. Catherine Monastery in the Sinai. National libraries all over the Middle East, including the National Library of Syria, may also be targeted. We have seen that churches, monasteries and Islamic shrines have been destroyed and dozens more are at risk. Rare manuscripts exist in places you wouldn't believe, like the libraries of Saharan

Chinguetti, which the American Embassy and Meridian House here in Washington have taken an interest in rescuing.¹⁰



Chinguetti manuscripts, Photos courtesy of US Embassy, Mauritania.

¹⁰ Photos courtesy of Public Affairs Office, US Embassy, Nouakchott. March 2014.