

UNESCO Experts' Meeting on the Safeguarding of Syria's heritage.

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Armed conflicts are one of the primary reasons that endanger heritage and the symbolic value of cultures. Both the protection of cultural legacy and the promotion of the plural interests and identities that intersect and construct heritage in times of war should be re-



Figure 1. The souks of Aleppo City. Before and after destruction (The Guardian Newspaper, January 2013).

inforced with an efficient strategy and effective actions. The unprecedented destruction of renowned cultural heritage sites in Syria has not remained unnoticed. The contentious violations that occurred during the hostilities of Syria's ongoing conflict have drawn the attention of international organisations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and ICOM (Fig. 1).

Following the constant media reports and aerial photos of heritage destructions in Syria, UNESCO held an experts'

meeting in Berlin to discuss its safeguarding. The meeting was envisioned as a follow-up to the implementation of the UNESCO action plan for the Emergency Safeguarding of Syria's Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2014). The three-day conference (2 - 4 June 2016) aimed to continue the work of the 2014 Paris conference, supported by the three-year EU-funded project on the Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage.

UNESCO invited over 230 experts from the Syrian government and the opposition, as well as other Syrian and international academics and professionals. The audience was composed of leading figures in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, preservation, architecture, and urban planning (UNESCO 2016a). Maria Böhmer, the Minister of State of the Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, opened the conference followed by Irena Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO. Böhmer emphasized that the international community is “concerned by the suffering of the Syrian people, [and willing] to help them regain their heritage, to shape the future.” (UNESCO 2016b). Bokova stressed the relevance of conducting “a comprehensive inventory of the damages, identify emergency safeguard measures to save what is possible.” (UNESCO 2016).

The experts’ meeting focused on the damage assessment of the Syrian cultural heritage sites, the development of new approaches and methodologies, and the definition of priority emergency measures for heritage safeguarding. Prior to the main conference, the Young Experts Forum allowed diverse young professionals and early-stage academics to organize a unique hub for the safeguard of the Syrian patrimony. The Young Experts Forum was established and organised by the German Commission of UNESCO in cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and the financial support of the Gerda Henkel Foundation. The Young Experts Forum issued the statement *Unite for Syrian Heritage* that was presented during the opening ceremony of the experts’ meeting. It is worth mentioning that the group of young scholars was not as diverse as the one of the main conference, as most of the participants were Syrian graduate and post-graduate students from German universities.

The second day started with the welcome addresses by Maria Böhmer, Francesco Bandarin, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture, Friederike Fless, President of the German Archaeological Institute, and Hermann Parzinger, President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. Lina Kutiefan, Director of World Heritage Sites and Foreign Cooperation at the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), gave a short presentation on the assessment of damages to cultural heritage in Syria. Kutiefan’s paper addressed the current actions taken by the DGAM of Syria’s government. Mechthild Rössler, Director of the World Heritage Center, presented UNESCO’s actions to safeguard Syria’s cultural heritage.

Subsequently, four presentations by Syrian professionals and archaeologists revealed the level of destruction in Syria by focusing on the reasons and dynamics of damage. They all looked at how international non-governmental organisations and Syrian national organisations responded to heritage destruction, such as documentation and damage assessment. The founder of the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA), Cheikhmous Ali, focused on the unprecedented damages of Aleppo’s old city (Fig. 2). He mentioned over 150 violations to the World Heritage Sites documented by his organisation. The situation is further aggravated, Ali stressed, as some non-governmental organisations in the areas controlled by the rebels stopped protecting heritage due to the lack of funds. Following, the Syrian archaeologist, Shaker Al-Shbib, illustrated the projects put in place by the Smithsonian Institute and the Pennsylvania Cul-

tural Heritage Center. These institutions fund in-loco training programs with heritage experts, museum curators, and civilians in order to raise awareness for the protection of cultural heritage in the areas controlled by the rebels. The third speech was by Ammar Kannawi, the former curator at the National Museum of Aleppo. He explained the need to establish a database and to document the destruction that occurred to the site of Ebla and the mosaic museum in Maarrat al-Nu'man in Northern Syria (Fig. 3). This series of professionals' presentations ended with the Syrian archaeologist, Houmam Saad, who presented the collaborative project with ICONEM to create 3D documentation of the World Heritage Site of Palmyra.



Figure 2. The Great Umayyad Mosque - Lens of Aleppo Alshapa - Sep. 2013

During the remaining part of the day the participants split into thematic roundtables that would inform them on the state of heritage conservation—built, movable, and intangible, the local communities, the actions carried by UNESCO, and the (inter)national responses. The four thematic groups were: (1) Local Communities, (2) Documentation, Archives: Damage Assessment, Technology and Innovation, (3) Capacity Building Activities and Future Needs and (4) preparing Future Safeguarding Plans for cities, archaeological sites, and museums. Each group had one moderator and one *rappporteur*. The participants could join any of the thematic groups since each session was simultaneously translated in English, Arabic, German, and French. Most participants showed interest in the fourth session on the future safeguarding and reconstruction plans. During this meeting, the discussion became particularly lively as Cheikhmous Ali suggested that the UNESCO capacity building training should target all parts of the conflict, not limiting its actions to the staff members of the DGAM. Nada Al Hassan interrupted the discussion, UNESCO's Chief of Arab States Unit, concluding that UNESCO could collaborate only with the member states that signed The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultur-

al Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954. During the discussion, Robert Żukowski and Bartosz Markowski, the two Polish conservators who had visited Palmyra in April 2014 after the withdrawal of ISIS, described the disastrous situation at the site. During the session, the participants stressed on the significance of preparing and implementing future safeguarding plans, in addition to monitoring such plans.



Figure 3. Violations to the site of Ebla - Northern Syria, 23-04-2013. The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (ASPA), April. 2013

Simultaneously, the other groups were discussing the initiatives aimed to document the damages to Syrian heritage. One of the key challenges that the authorities responsible for the Syrian heritage face, the discussion unveiled, is that not all of the historical buildings belong to the DGAM. Some registered and non-registered buildings belong to the Awqaf (the ministry in-charge of religious endowments), such as mosques and churches (Fig. 4).

The *rapporteurs* of each session presented the results of the discussions on the last day.

Group A, the group focusing on “Local Communities”, asserted the significance of raising the awareness among locals and including them in the safeguarding processes. In particular, finding ways for the social healing strategies in the post-war period is seen as an essential element of the recovery plan. One of the recommendations of the group is to establish a cultural heritage institute for Syrians in the host neighbouring countries to provide locals with training about tangible and intangible heritage. The group also recommended creating a working network of concerned, non-governmental and civil society organisations related to cultural heritage issues for people inside and outside Syria. Group A stressed the importance of establishing an inclusive participatory approach of

locals in the process of protecting heritage in a way that would respect the cultural diversity and the local values.



Figure 4. Protecting the façade of the National Museum of Aleppo city. The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (ASPA), 2013.

Group B “Documentation, Archives: Damage Assessment, Technology and Innovation”, recommended continuing the improvement of inventories on the national level and collaborating with UNESCO to coordinate and publically share the inventories on the UNESCO’s Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage. The group focused on the importance of including the different local administrations (such as *Amqaf* ministry) and populations in the documentation and damage assessment. The role of ICOM in updating the Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk was explicitly stated, in addition to the importance of collaboration with INTERPOL, DGAM, UNESCO and other national bodies in the neighbouring countries of Syria.

Group C “Capacity Building Activities and Future Needs” recommended establishing a committee by UNESCO and Syrian experts to coordinate all actions, efforts and initiatives related to Syrian heritage. The group hypothesized the creation of a nonpartisan platform for capacity building and information sharing; this topic had been intensely debated throughout the conference. The multi-disciplinarity and the inclusion of different professionals encouraged the group to suggest the finding of common ground in order to cooperate and safeguard Syria’s past. The Capacity Building group advised creating a network between the Syrian universities in a way that could lead to the replication of training activities.

Group D “Preparing Future Safeguarding Plans” considered deploying cultural heritage for the reconciliation of Syrians in the post-conflict period. In post-war recovery, the

Syrians are the major stakeholders and actors. The group pointed out the need to think timelessly and with priorities (cities vs. archaeological sites) to avoid any chaos in the post-conflict phase. Furthermore, the necessity of cultural heritage inclusion in the recovery plans as a vital component of Syria's rebuilding should be advocated for at the international level. The participants to this group insisted on supporting Syria's institutions (DGAM, universities, etc.), learning from previous international post-conflict experiences such as Lebanon, and considering refugees and displaced peoples as crucial actors in the definition of Syria's post-recovery plans. The group proposed the creation of a coordinating system at the international, national, and local levels. The experts specified the methodology through which the future safeguarding plans can be implemented (short, mid, and long-term plans), and to develop plans according to current accessibility (fully accessible, partial accessible by the civil society, and under-fire). The action points proposed by group D include: (1) UNESCO needs to coordinate with emergency relief and key humanitarian actors and other NGOs on ground; (2) define who are the stakeholders and establish a participatory approach to include NGOs, locals, scholars, universities, and students inside Syria and in diaspora in the planning process; (3) identify the no-go zones in historical settings (i.e. World Heritage Sites boundaries); (4) establish guidelines and train people who will access sites, and deal with security issues; and finally (5) advocate for cultural heritage among the locals and displaced peoples for the social and psychological healing.

A plenary session concluded the three-day conference. The Director of UNESCO Heritage Division and World Heritage Center Mechtild Rössler moderated the conversation among six speakers: Amra Hadžimuhamedović, University of Sarajevo, Margarete van Ess, German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, Lina Kutiefan, DGAM, Jacques Seigne, Director of the Scientific Research National Center (CNRS), Amr Al-Azm, Shawnee State University in Ohio, and Markus Hilgert, Director of the Ancient Near East Museum at the Pergamum Museum in Berlin (Fig. 5). Discussing the plans to safeguard Syria's heritage, the speakers asserted the importance of learning from previous post-war reconstruction such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and making sure that future rebuilding will be an inclusive process of all the stakeholders.

Final Thoughts

Overall, the conference brought together numerous Syrian heritage experts and academics from all over the world, in timely manner, allowing them to openly discuss future plans. The establishment of the Young Experts Forum was an important development in the working mechanism of the UNESCO, as the United Nations agency responsible of cultural heritage. In the future, participants' selection might aim at guaranteeing the presence of a more diversified group, as the inclusion of the young generations can be the first stone in (re)building the future of Syria. The UNESCO conference emphasised the need to unify, discuss, share and coordinate all efforts and initiatives to safeguard and preserve cultural heritage in Syria and beyond.



Figure 5. The plenary session that concluded the conference - by the author - 4 June 2016.

Over the past few years, UNESCO and its partners have been working on several levels to promote the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones, in particular in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Mali and Libya. After the “liberation” of Aleppo at the very end of 2016, UNESCO conducted a first emergency assessment of the damages of the old city of Aleppo. Later on, UNESCO hosted the *First International Coordination Meeting for the recovery of Aleppo’s heritage* in Lebanon in March 2017 to set up the actions plans for restoring the old city of Aleppo. However, the UNESCO efforts are limited to the international law which prohibits the United Nations specialized agency in heritage from collaborating with non-state actors. In other words, UNESCO could not provide capacity building training for entities that did not sign The Hague convention of 1954. This has showed how cultural heritage cannot be fully protected in the framework of the UNESCO work mechanisms. In my view, there has to be a parallel system that would initiate and fund projects to protect, conserve and rebuild heritage with no limitations, in a way that would neutralize cultural heritage and deploy it for post-war recovery plans in effective way.

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