

## **MELA Committee on Iraqi Libraries: Aims & Strategies**

The MELA Committee on Iraqi Libraries herewith expresses its willingness to co-operate with international efforts to recover looted Iraqi antiquities, manuscripts, books and other cultural properties, and to assist our Iraqi colleagues. Many of our members, individuals with much appropriate experience and knowledge, are eager to contribute, and especially eager to reaffirm the bonds of international scholarship. In the above context, the following are what we see as our principal goals.

### **1. Collecting information.**

#### **1.1 Information on damage to libraries in Iraq.**

It will be up to our colleagues in Iraq, with the assistance of UNESCO, IFLA and other international bodies, to carry out an assessment of the damage to Iraq's libraries and their collections and to set their own priorities for reconstruction. Pending such an assessment, it is important to keep track of and share and discuss with colleagues news and information about the damage to Iraqi libraries and about ongoing international efforts to assist libraries in Iraq, as such information becomes available. A Web-based international forum for such exchanges of information is the IraqCrisis List, moderated by Charles E. Jones, a member of our Committee. The forum is multi-lingual and invites contributions from colleagues around the world; all postings are archived and available on the IraqCrisis website:

<https://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/iraqcrisis>

#### **1.2 Bibliographic information on manuscripts and rare books in Iraqi collections.**

The meeting of international experts concerned with the cultural heritage of Iraq, held in Paris on April 17, 2003, led to a call from UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura for the recovery not only of archaeological objects but also of "bibliographical objects" -- books and manuscripts -- that may have been looted from Iraqi collections. In order to make it possible to identify such items, we believe it is important to set up an international, Web-based inghouse for bibliographic information, derived from available catalogs and other published information concerning items that were part of the rare books and manuscript collections of affected libraries in Iraq.

An initial list of such catalogs and related publications has been compiled with entries contributed by members of the MELA Committee. Additional contributions and any suggested annotations to the bibliography by colleagues would be gratefully received. The bibliography is posted at:

[http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq\\_bibliography.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq_bibliography.html)

The cataloging utility OCLC Inc. has approached our Committee with an offer to help design, seek funding and implement a means by which the bibliographic information in the published catalogs can be turned into a searchable and publicly available database. In consultation with colleagues here and abroad, we are exploring this and other possibilities.

#### **1.3 Bibliographic information on published objects from Iraqi Museums.**

In addition to collecting information on books and manuscripts, the Committee is assisting our colleague Charles Jones, who has taken on the task of compiling a bibliography of museum catalogs and related publications that include descriptions and photographs of works of art and archaeological objects that

may have been looted from Iraqi museums. The bibliography, analysed by Iraq Museum inventory numbers (more than 10,000 items in the latest version) is posted at:

[http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq\\_bibliography.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq_bibliography.html)

## **2. Communication and cooperation with others who share our concerns about libraries in Iraq.**

In the above and in other initiatives, MELA's Committee on Iraqi Libraries is determined to maintain communication and cooperation with concerned colleagues in North America, Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere, with other professional organizations (MELCOM International, ALA, CILIP, MESA, BRISMES, etc.), with international bodies such as IFLA and UNESCO, and with other concerned parties, in order to pool information and expertise and to try to avoid needless and wasteful duplication of efforts.

## **3. Contact and communication with Iraqi library professionals.**

It is important that, as soon as possible, we seek to establish contacts with Iraqi libraries and librarians, who can provide information concerning their immediate needs, about the losses and damages suffered by their collections and institutions, and regarding their own priorities for reconstruction and the future of their libraries. One possible source for information and contacts is Dr. Jassim M. Jirjees, a past president of the Iraqi Librarians Association, who is presently at the Center of Archives and Research in Abu Dhabi. As a first step, we must make sure that our Iraqi colleagues know about and approve of what we are doing.

## **4. Drafting letters to US government officials and other bodies.**

The MELA Board has asked the Committee to draft letters to U.S. President Bush, to other government officials. These letters express MELA's response to the destruction of libraries, manuscript collections, and archives in Iraq; call for effective measures to protect and preserve remaining collections; call for urgent technical assistance and financial support to be provided to these libraries and to the Iraqi librarians who now face the difficult task of assessing the damage and of rebuilding their institutions, collections and services; call for measures to recover looted items and to block illegal trafficking in books and manuscripts that may have been stolen from Iraqi libraries; and call for a full and independent investigation in order to understand how such a catastrophe for Iraq's and the world's cultural heritage could have happened, in the hope that future events of this sort can be averted. Copies of these letters will also be sent to the professional organizations and international bodies mentioned in par. 2 (above).

## **5. Assistance in rebuilding and restoring library collections in Iraq.**

Once conditions in Iraq have sufficiently stabilized and needs and priorities are better known -- and in coordination with other international initiatives -- MELA and its members will seek out ways to contribute our expertise to assist in rebuilding these Iraqi institutions and their collections. Among the initiatives to be considered: tracking down and making available to our Iraqi colleagues surrogates (microfilms, photocopies) of lost rare and unique materials, and carefully designed efforts to assist in building new library collections and library infrastructure. While this will no doubt be a complex and expensive process, which an organization such as MELA does not have resources to undertake on its own, we believe that as library professionals collectively and many of our members individually we have expertise and experience to offer that may be of value to such efforts.