

11. Protecting heritage during a crisis

A case example from Syria

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Heritage creates people's memory as well as their existence. The *Knooz Syria* archive represents the history of the press and printing in Syria from the mid-nineteenth century up to the 1970s. When its founders began collecting materials, they did not predict the crisis that wracked Syria beginning in 2011. Forced to flee Damascus, they left behind tens of thousands of newspapers, books and documents representing more than 200 years of extended history. With the help of the Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands, they were able to move an important part of the collection to a safe place. Work continues to move the remaining parts and to archive it electronically. This essay examines the creation of that archive, the threats it faces and the possibilities for its future.

In developing countries, safeguarding heritage is often not seen as a priority. People have many other outstanding problems and concerns that prevent them from thinking of this 'luxury'. But in fact, heritage is quite important, for it creates people's memory and documents their existence. An interest in Syrian heritage pushed those of us at *Knooz Syria* to start obtaining a mixed collection of heritage items such as newspapers, magazines and personal items in an effort to preserve the history and memory of the Syrian people.

Knooz Syria is a press website established in 2005.¹ Our intent in establishing an archive as part of *Knooz Syria* was

to obtain, preserve and safeguard Syrian heritage so that it can be available to the public. While the current political climate of Syria has endangered our collection, we remain hopeful that with the help of partnerships with cultural organizations and funds (such as the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development), we can safeguard our archive and digitize our collections in an effort to preserve them.

Given that we work in the press field, our concentration at first was on newspapers and magazines published and circulated in Syria from the earliest days of the Syrian press through today. The idea of *Knooz Syria* came from our deep knowledge of the Syrian press. We observed that there is no other documentation of the heritage and history of the Syrian press, which started approximately in the mid-nineteenth century. We started collecting information with the aim of documenting this history and explaining it to the Syrian public.

A history of the Syrian press

For four centuries Syria was a part of the Ottoman Empire. Printing was introduced to our region (Geographic Syria) in the mid-eighteenth century, which is relatively late, and during this period the local newspapers appeared. When we say 'local' we refer to those printed in Arabic; however, there were others that covered local news of the region issued in Ottoman language (Turkish in Arabic letters).

After the First World War, Syria entered a stateless phase; then, for the first time after 400 years, an Arabic government was formed, which after less than two months became a monarchy. A few years later Syria came under a French mandate. France divided Syria into three countries (Damascus, Aleppo and Alawites) and two provinces: Druze Mountain and Iskandarion (Hatay).

However, popular pressure led the country to be reunited under what was known as the Syrian Union, which turned into the Syrian State and later the Syrian Republic. After gaining independence from France in 1946, Syria entered a new era of military coups, followed by a union with Egypt in 1958 (called the United Arab Republic). This union was later dissolved, and the Ba'ath Party came to power. Many coups took place before the country's leadership finally settled in 1971.

¹ See www.syria-news.com.

The Syrian press never witnessed any stable situation during these decades. Few newspapers managed to exist continuously for many years. Most of them were closed temporarily and others suspended entirely.

Collecting Syrian heritage

The Syrian press archive at *Knooz Syria* is not focused on complete collections but rather on documenting issued newspapers, journalists and writers, and their work. Notably, some newspapers related to well-known writers started and were closed within a year but were historically more important than other newspapers with a longer printing period. Significance here is based on rarity, the story behind the newspaper and the name of its owner.

It is essential to study journalism as a science and to study its methods and progress compared to the development of the press in the region and the world. Comparisons can be made in terms of freedom of speech, international work standards, style and method. One goal of our preservation project is to identify the daily events that took place in the area and in Syria during this period to shed light on important and not well-known happenings. It is not possible to find a newspaper in Syria that was issued in the early years of the twentieth century and lasted until 1970; none exists. However, the press movement remained active as some newspapers and magazines closed and others opened.

While collecting the archive material we focused on newspapers and magazines that cover the period between the mid-nineteenth century (the establishment of the Syrian press) and the 1970s (the beginnings of the current regime). This collection does not necessarily cover every day of this period, but we worked hard to cover most of the days with various sources. Our end goal was to reveal Syrian heritage through the local press and to document the lives and works of well-known writers. The press archive we collected includes more than 90 percent of the magazine and newspaper titles that were published and distributed in Syria over more than 100 years. The quantity of these newspapers and magazines exceeds 200 titles, which includes some titles of which we assume we are the sole possessors.

The collected archive contains all kinds of original examples and editions of the Syrian press since its beginning, and its rarity comes from being the only journalist archive in the whole region combined in one place. There is no museum or exhibition or any other organization in Syria that owns such an extensive press heritage. Even the Al Assad Public Library possesses only a small sample of books and editions.

We see this collection as valuable for the Syrian community. Additionally, it enhances the position of *Knooz Syria* as a

media outlet and increases its credibility by helping to improve the position of the electronic press in Syria. The collecting of this large amount of press material gives the collection depth and, in our point of view, makes it an extension of the national press. The most important goal of this activity is protecting Syrian heritage and safeguarding it for future generations. It is, from our point of view, a rich, important and effective heritage, not only for Syria but for the entire Middle East.

Through the process of collecting newspapers and magazines, we came across other valuable categories related to Syrian heritage and could not resist collecting them as well. These collections need further classifications and verifying, such as a collection of original stamps and financial samples issued between the mid-nineteenth century and today, and original samples of paper and coin currency exchanged in Syria during this period.

A big part of the archive is a collection of photographs and postcards for every region in Syria. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the rarest collections of photographs covering Syrian landscape. Another collection includes foreign travel books that feature paintings of Syrian regions produced before photography was widespread.

These collections cover diverse aspects of the modern history of Syria and the region. Through them, we can know more about everyday life in Syria and can enrich our understanding of the region's cultural heritage.

Acquiring materials

We have collected different materials with the intent of explaining the evolution of stages of human and cultural life in the region to the public. To assemble all of this information and create a useful collection, we spent quite a lot of time and expense in order to identify and acquire items in many Syrian cities. We obtained this collection through two methods.

The first method was dealing with antique merchants in many regions. Usually these merchants buy the whole belongings of a family's house, where the owner is recently deceased and the children want to share the inheritance. We agreed with them to buy all the newspapers, documents and old books.

The second method was putting advertisements in newspapers about our willingness to buy these materials. We hired some employees to follow up on this matter, and we were offered some personal belongings from people who wanted to sell them. We bought these personal items and added them to our archive after evaluating them.

This acquisition of materials lasted from 2007 to 2011. We made hundreds of purchasing agreements, funding them through profits from advertising revenue on the *Knooz Syria* site. Those same funds also went towards classifying and archiving these materials. The initial plan was first to digitize the archive in order to preserve, study and explain it, then to present it to the public in different formats.

The Syrian crisis: a major danger for the archives

The situation in Syria was calm and stable when we started assembling the archive, and we did not take into account that the crisis might break out. When the crisis in Syria began, an economic crisis started as well. As a result, most advertising on *Knooz Syria* stopped, and due to the lack of financial resources, we could not continue implementing our plan.

And with the development of the crisis and the growth of the conflict, Damascus, the place where we keep our archive, was exposed to shelling and bombing and security was in a state of disarray. We worried that this rich archive we had collected would be lost. Suddenly and unexpectedly, in 2011, we found ourselves, as an independent press institution, exposed to danger. We were promptly obliged to move to Turkey, hundreds of kilometres away, leaving behind tens of thousands of newspapers, books and documents. We were in chaos, our country was in a state of war, and our archive was in danger.

We were in a race against time. Although the archive has not been damaged, it is exposed to two major potential dangers. The first is the danger of burning caused by an explosion or shelling. The reality of the conflict in Damascus – as in Homs, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and other places – means there are explosions, mortar shelling and aerial bombardment. This means it is very likely that the archive could be hit or burned. It is kept in a small normal building in the downtown area and is unprotected. If the building burned it would mean the loss of the whole archive.

The second danger is the risk of the archive being stolen or ruined with the entrance of the army or the armed militia of the opposition. Their occupation of many houses makes the probability of them arriving where the archive is kept quite likely, considering the development of the conflict in Damascus. If this occupation were to happen, the archive will definitely be damaged or stolen.

We were lucky when one of our friends introduced us to the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development. We communicated with staff there and discussed together the possibility of protecting the archive in Damascus. The plan

we agreed upon was to distribute the archive in many warehouses so as to reduce the risk to the entire collection. We tried to choose warehouses in relatively safe areas, even though all areas are subject to random shelling. We transported the most important part of the archive to Turkey to protect it and to later prepare it for digitization.

It took us more than two years to accomplish this transport operation to Turkey, and to move the quantity we agreed on, due to the escalation of actions in Syria as well as the closure of most borders and a lot of other obstacles and difficulties. We thank the Prince Claus Fund because through its support, an important part of our archive is safe and the other part is distributed to a few warehouses. We hope to be able to transport it outside of Syria as soon as possible.

Future plans

The first step in rescuing the archive, through our partnership with the Prince Claus Fund, has been accomplished. This institution has greatly aided in safeguarding part of the heritage of our country – a heritage that was threatened in a state of war that has no clear end. Our second step is preserving it by transforming the archive part by part into its electronic version, for this is the only way to keep it safe for generations from weather and fire damage and from becoming another casualty of the war.

The archive, both in Syria and Turkey, is still not organized. What we have done during these years is a preliminary archiving and a simple description of the items. As our goal is introducing our archive to the public, we created special pages and accounts on social media networks. We introduced a small part of our archive on Flickr and Instagram to give a glimpse of our heritage to our curious audience,² and the work on them continues. We have also presented dozens of articles on Facebook and Twitter.³ There has been a steady increase in the number of people following our pages about Syria's legacy. In addition, we present many articles in a special section of *Knooz Syria*. Readers have reacted greatly to it, and it has tens of thousands of reads. Now what we want is a detailed description and inventory for each item in this huge archive, classified by a trained archivist. Since the idea is to arrange the paper archive for easy access and preservation, it is important to convert that paper archive to an organized digital archive.

Conclusion

Although the situation in Syria hindered our progress, these difficult conditions gave us the motivation and the will to complete the project, thanks to the help of organizations

² See www.flickr.com/photos/knooz_syria/sets/ and http://instagram.com/knooz_syria.

³ See www.facebook.com/Knooz.syrianews and www.twitter.com/souriahistory.

such as the Prince Claus Fund. With the help of the fund, we will be able to establish a good infrastructure and sufficient experience for the future to fully archive and digitize this collection to preserve this threatened heritage. We will be able to document a part of our heritage to introduce to Syrians, to future generations and to the world. Our goal is to have our whole archive digitized and also to have the first electronic journalism archive in the Arab region and to pave the road for using it to its full potential.

Our hope is to find suitable partnerships to help us succeed in transforming this archive to an electronic one that would

protect an important part of Syria's heritage from loss so that it remains as an 'everlasting' document. We hope a digital archive will allow the future generations to know details related to Syrian life during an important era of their history, one that could be lost without the needed care and attention.

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