

Transcript: Mosul Book Bridge - Interview with Dr. Alaa Hamdon and Dr. Caroline Sandes

Mehiyar 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're with Dr. Alaa Hamdon from Mosul University, and Caroline Sandes from ICOMOS, an archaeologist based in London. We're here to speak today about very important work that Mosul Book Bridge has done for rebuilding Mosul University Library after devastation brought on it on the war against the Islamic State. Hello, how are you?

Alaa Hamdon 0:26 Hello, how are you? Thank you very much.

Mehiyar 0:28 Could you tell us a bit about Mosul Book Bridge?

Alaa Hamdon 0:31 Okay, thank you Dr. Mehiyar for giving me this chance to talk about Mosul Book Bridge. The story of Mosul Book Bridge started in March 2017. And before I talk about Mosul Book Bridge, I want to give you a brief about what's happened before that, because I had to escape from Mosul in 2014 when ISIS or Daesh controlled the city, so I had escaped Turkey and then I found a scholarship in Aberdeen. And then I back from there to Erbil to help my community and help my university. In 2016, end of 2016, it was a big shock for me, when I have seen the library building has been burned by ISIS and Deash on the media.

Mehiyar 1:20 This is the central library of Mosul?

Alaa Hamdon 1:22 Yeah, this is the central library of Mosul. I have seen it on the media first time in end of 2016, as I remember, it was October or something like that, or November. So it was a big shock for me. And I was upset and angry and sad, all that mixture of feeling at that moment. And I didn't know what to do at that moment. And then I had idea during the time I had idea to start or establish campaign to rebuild the library or support the library. That idea just came up at March 2017. And they sent a call for everyone, my colleague, my friend, everyone in the war, to help me to rebuild the library and I called at that moment the campaign is Mosul Book Bridge. And then first person who responds to this campaign was my colleague, Dr. Caroline Sandes from UK ICOMOS. She's archaeologist. She is the first one who respond to that campaign. And I think she can tell you the rest of her story.

Mehiyar 2:28 How did you get in touch with Caroline?

Alaa Hamdon 2:29 Caroline, they just connect me with her through UK ICOMAS, one of our colleague, and she offered help.

Mehiyar 2:39 What does ICOMAS stand for? Alaa Hamdon 2:40 ICOMAS is International Council of Monuments and Sites. I'm a member of the International Council of ICOMAS and Caroline, she's a member of UK ICOMAS. That's how we got in on the Mosul Book Bridge and the campaign. And I think, I believe she can tell you the rest of her story.

Caroline Sandes 3:03 Yes, in back February 2017, I got an email from the President of ICOMAS, from Alice, asking for help for Mosul Library. And because I have a background in working in bookshops, and also in academia, I reckon I could help. So from the eye contact standards, offered my help. And-

Mehiyar 3:26 And this is primarily to collect and donate books to rebuild the library itself.

Caroline Sandes 3:30 The thing I realized was that if you just asked for books, people will give you any old stuff that they want to get rid of. And that obviously university library needs new books, not old, out of date books. So I hunted around for charity that might be able to help and because I'd heard of Book Aid International, so I contacted them and they responded and said yes.

Mehiyar 3:49 Book Aid International is based in London.

Caroline Sandes 3:51 Yes, that's right. And then usually- Mehiyar 3:53 And how did it help?

Caroline Sandes 3:54 Well, they're not, they normally- they provide books for libraries, often usually in Africa, places like that. And so Alison asked me to go for a meeting and we talked about it. And they were-

Mehiyar 4:04 This is Alison Tweed, the CEO of Book Aid International.

Caroline Sandes 4:07 And she, and so she, they said yes, they would be willing to help. They could get the books, they could get the academic books, new academic books. And it was just a matter of sorting that and also the logistics were going to be quite difficult.

Mehiyar 4:20 And these are books donated by publishers based in the UK.

Caroline Sandes 4:23 Yes, yes.

Mehiyar 4:24 And after your campaign, the first set of books were delivered.

Alaa Hamdon 4:29 Yes.

Mehiyar 4:30 When was that?

Alaa Hamdon 4:30 After the company started in March 2018. First consignment arrived [in] Mosul which it was about 7,000 books from Book Aid International. It's arrived [in] Mosul in March 2018. And I was so happy at that time, because this is first consignment and I believe recently they are preparing the second consignment for this partnership. Young Academy of Scotland, also some colleague from Young Academy of Scotland, also they joined us, to our campaign. Because I sent a call to Young Academy of Scotland because I'm a member of that Academy as well. So Kate Walker and Alice Konig from Young Academy of Scotland also joined us, to the campaign. And they, they offer a lot of help. And they start, they established the first website for the campaign and is sponsored by Young Academy of Scotland. And we are aiming to establish partnership between Mosul University and other academic, UK academic libraries, and student NGO. Anyone can support the Central Library.

Mehiyar 5:43 Could you tell us a bit about the actual library, the building itself and what has happened to it? The devastation wrought on this building and I've heard recently that a UNDP grant ... UNDP assistance German government grant started and is currently refurbishing rebuilding the site that was destroyed.

Alaa Hamdon 6:03 The building has been burned by ISIS or Daesh in 2015, and all books, most of books has been burned. It was about 1 million, more than 1 million books. It's mostly gone. And then the building had been affected by air strike as well [in] 2016. The engineers department in Mosul University, they believe or they think the building is not anymore qualified for renovate or refurbish and UNDP they offering to renovate and refurbish the building. And I think they made a provisional survey for the building lately. And they found out they can reinforce the building in good way, technically, so the building could be ready to renovate and refurbish very soon. So UNDP and university, they accept lately for a few days, I think to renovate the building. So hopefully the building will be ready by 2020. But until that time, a lot of support needed. And a lot of-

Mehiyar 7:16 There is a temporary building at the moment?

Alaa Hamdon 7:21 There is a temporary building at the moment, which is very small, and there is no space for books and shelves and the staff. The temporary building needs also logistical items and stuff and instrument and also the staff need to be trained again, especially after the period of ISIS, Daesh control.

Mehiyar 7:39 And that's not part of the UNDP grant is it?

Alaa Hamdon 7:41 No, no, no UNDP part is just only renovate and refurbished the building.

Mehiyar 7:46 So it means your work becomes exceptionally important when it comes to the rebuilding because the physical aspects of the rebuild- rebuilding has been done by UNDP.

Alaa Hamdon 7:56 Yes, true.

Mehiyar 7:56 But everything else hasn't yet been planned?

Alaa Hamdon 7:59 To tell, to tell the truth, there is nothing on the radar saying there is some people or some organizations support that. So that's why we are doing this.

Mehiyar 8:09 What are the objectives of Mosul Book Bridge going forward now in the context of UNDP project?

Alaa Hamdon 8:15 We are aiming to, to many target[s]. The first target is to provide the logistical item for the library, such as shelves, instrument, an-

Mehiyar 8:30 equipment?

Alaa Hamdon 8:30 -equipment. This is very important, especially if UNDP has done their part of renovating the building and refurbish the building. So the building has to be ready to receive the books and the staff. And the second part we need, we need support to train the staff with the new equipment and instrument, because as you know, recently, nowadays, all the library or most of the library, they have like electronical assistance, training for archiving and documentation. So our staff need this kind of training to be ready to restart or reopen the library again and to be fascinated by students and academics and...

Mehiyar 8:31 And then just to go back how many students and staff researchers did the library cater to?

Alaa Hamdon 9:29 I don't have the specific number but Mosul University, it has about more than 30,000 students and more than 5,000 staff or academics sorry, and also we have really high number of postgraduate students which, which they need the library. Not only in Mosul University, but there are a lot of postgraduate students and students outside out of the university from private college, private school, they each use the library as well.

Mehiyar 10:05 You're a recipient of a Nahrein Network, British Institute for the Study of Iraq scholarship grant. And that is based at Oxford University. This is, uh-

Alaa Hamdon 10:14 With EAMENA project.

Mehiyar 10:16 This is, what does... could you tell us a bit about that?

Alaa Hamdon 10:19 EAMENA project is short for Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa. This project or program, mainly, they doing documentation for

archaeological and cultural heritage sites in Middle East and North Africa, and also they doing training as well for the national researcher in each country. So I am here for doing research related to Hatra and Nineveh. Hatra in Nineveh governorate, near to this, uh, Mosul cities, about 100 kilometers south of Mosul city. This site has been neglected and ignored and marginalized for many years.

Mehiyar 11:04 Caroline, how, how will you coordinate with Doctor Alaa? Once he goes back to Iraq?

Caroline Sandes 11:09 Well, we'll probably carry on emailing because that's been added. And with my colleagues here, Kate and Alice, we're probably going to look at what support we can send from here. So that might be training or checking, looking for electronic resources and things like that.

Mehiyar 11:30 And have you been in touch with the director of the Mosul University Library?

Alaa Hamdon 11:35 Yes, I already had contact with him. Before I come here, we put some headlines about my campaign, our campaign, and also headlines how to, we can reactivate some other strategies for the library, to support the library. And I'm still in contact with him via emails and phone calls sometime. So hopefully, when I go back there, we'll have a lot of meeting about some certain subjects.

Mehiyar 12:13 And Caroline, you've been part of Mosul Book Bridge from the beginning. And you've seen the interest from UK organisations and academics and others, keen interest in supporting Mosul in the rebuilding of the Mosul University Library.

Caroline Sandes 12:31 Yeah, the British Library have shown some interest in helping, obviously, there's some historic newspapers and things that need sorting.

Mehiyar 12:38 Sorting out in terms of?

Caroline Sandes 12:39 Well in conserving and proper-

Mehiyar 12:42 And these are, these are, the, some of the collections that weren't damaged by the...

Caroline Sandes 12:47 This is 1920s, from sort of early Iraq, which is quite rare. So it's important they, they need work. The library also needs a whole cataloging system and there's needed, need for training for that. And certainly, Young Academy Scotland, we had a meeting last month with a library with professionals in Scotland quite keen to help with that, and perhaps send someone out to look at the situation and to do a skills-

Mehiyar 13:15 To assess what's needed.

Caroline Sandes 13:18 So it's all, it's all very much needs to be put together at the moment but they're lots of ideas and offers of support, but it's a matter of trying to coordinate.

Mehiyar 13:28 And this is what Mosul Book Bridge does also, is to help organize and coordinate among a number of different groups and institutions, organizations.

Caroline Sandes 13:40 Exactly. Yes. So yeah, it's quite difficult knowing exactly what the situation is, in Mosul. It's good that you're here that we can-

Mehiyar 13:51 Well, I wish you luck, you're going to go back to Mosul and continue this great work.

Alaa Hamdon 13:57 Thank you very much. I'll, hopefully, I will back by 8th of March [in] Mosul and hopefully I will continue with my colleagues to go on in Mosul Book Bridge. And hopefully we aim, we aim for something good and good achievement. I want to say one thing, if you allow me, to say for one minute, it's my dream to stand in front of the door of the library and the library open again. I can see that every time I go to bed and I see libraries open again, for the student and researcher and academics. Hopefully one day this will happen. Thank you very much.

Caroline Sandes 14:33 What Alaa says will be great, it'll be great to see it open again. And I think education is the future. So it's really important.

Mehiyar 14:39 Well, that's great. Well, I wish you luck with your work.

Alaa Hamdon 14:42 Thank you very much.

Mehiyar 14:43 Keep us updated at the Nahrein Network. For anyone who's interested in supporting Mosul Book Bridge. There is a website.

Caroline Sandes 14:55 Yes, mosulbookbridge.org.

Mehiyar 14:56 mosulbookbridge.org. So anyone who wants to contribute or donate books, they can come contact you and of course offer support for the other things we've spoken about.

Alaa Hamdon 15:05 Of course, and we'd be very thankful for any support or any help from anywhere.

Mehiyar 15:10 And your work obviously is all voluntary. So this is a true civil society organization. Thank you very much.