

Transcript: UNESCO in Iraq - Interview with Louise Haxthausen

Mehiyar 0:00

Hello, and welcome to the Nahrein podcast series. Today we're joined by Louise Haxthausen, director of UNESCO office for Iraq. Thank you for coming into the UCL office. How long have you had this position for?

Louise Haxthausen 0:12

I've had it for two years now. So it has been a very interesting period. 1/3 of Iraq was occupied by Daesh. And then progressively, we saw the liberation of the areas under the occupation, especially when we look at cultural heritage. This has been two very different moments, I would say, because the first period where Daesh occupation was ongoing we were very shocked, very frustrated by seeing the systematic, deliberate destruction of cultural heritage and unable really to do anything to ensure the protection of these sites at high risk. And now as the areas have been liberated, finally, we can move in and assist Iraqi authorities in protection, in conservation, and reconstruction of the heritage. But of course, the loss is very large scale loss and at the same time, the magnitude of needs is therefore enormous. So it will not be possible to recover what has been lost, but at the same time we can do, and we will do, our utmost to protect what remains and help the Iraqis again reconstruct when they wish to do so.

Mehiyar 1:31

And you're working now on the Revive the Spirit of Mosul. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Louise Haxthausen 1:36

The Reviving the Spirit of Mosul initiative was launched in February at the Kuwait Conference. It was announced by our Director General. It has the full support of Prime Minister Abadi, and also of the Secretary General Mr. Gutierrez. The background for launching this initiative is the fact that the scale of destruction in Mosul is enormous and the cultural and educational elements have been particularly targeted. The old city of Mosul has been destroyed, totally destroyed between 50 and 60%. And this is a result both of deliberate destruction and of intense armed conflict. Places of learning, of teaching, the two universities in Mosul, the Nineveh University and the University of Mosul, have suffered from deliberate destruction. We have all witnessed in the media,

the library in particular was burned, all the books were burned, by Daesh. So in response to this direct targeting of culture, of education, of learning and knowledge, UNESCO, as the UN agency dealing with education and culture, felt it had a responsibility to come up with a special initiative for the recovery of these two sectors in Mosul, and also had a responsibility to advocate that the reconstruction in Mosul would be one that puts the human element at its center. And here we believe that culture and education are key aspects of reconstruction with a human dimension.

Mehiyar 3:12

And of course, that was targeted by Daesh deliberately to eliminate any notion, any future notion of coexistence in Mosul.

Louise Haxthausen 3:12

Yes, and that's why we're talking about not reconstructing Mosul, we're talking about reviving the spirit of Mosul, because the spirit of Mosul is a spirit of coexistence, of tolerance. It's a spirit that brings people from very diverse backgrounds. Together, they have lived in the city of Mosul, and has also... has been the foundation that has made Mosul over the centuries an intellectual hub. So it is this spirit that we would like to revive through education and culture.

Mehiyar 3:58

So there's a focus here on the intangible heritage of Mosul...

Louise Haxthausen 4:02

...as well as both the tangible aspects. We believe it goes together. But it's true for the intangible aspects. So all these values around peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, tolerance, it is something where the entry point is Mosul. But these values have equal importance throughout Iraq, in this particular context of post-Daesh. And something that is really at the core of national priorities to see how these values can now be promoted after a period where one of the main objectives of Daesh was to fragment the Iraqi societies. Mehiyar 4:46 And a key part of your project has been to rehabilitate the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri, which of course has been done with generous support from the Emirati government. Louise Haxthausen 4:55 Yes, we see the reconstruction, the restoration of the Al Nuri Mosque complex, so the Al-Nuri Mosque itself, the Al-Hadba minaret as, as a priority, because it is a very symbolic project. So we are extremely grateful from the contribution by the Emirates for this project because of its symbolic nature. Because I think we can have no stronger project in terms of symbolic value of the reviving of this spirit of Mosul. The Al-Nuri mosque is Muslim heritage. But when you talk to the Maslawis everyone identifies with the Al-Nuri

mosque and the Al-Hadba minaret. The Al-Hadba minaret is part of the skyline of Mosul and what we heard immediately after the destruction of the Al-Hadba is people want to see it back. This brings back hope. It's an act of resilience. It's an act of resistance.

Mehiyar 5:54

And the Emiratis have donated \$50 million. What does that entail in terms of rebuilding the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri?

Louise Haxthausen 5:59

It entails several components. It entails first of all, the restoration of what remains of the Al-Nuri Mosque. It entails what remains of the Al-Hadba minaret and this would be a memorial for people to remember what happened at the site. It entails the critical reconstruction of the Al-Nuri mosque. When the Al-Nuri mosque was destroyed, it was building from the 40s . There was previous buildings of the Al-Nuri mosque and we are going to launch an international competition of architects to see what are the concepts that have emerged in terms of critical reconstruction of the Al-Nuri mosque, then it would also be the rehabilitations of the gardens on the complex, of all what is needed for the place to become again a place of worship for the Muslims. And we are also thinking of having an interpretation center and a small museum, which again, tells the recent history, tragic history that happened at the site, but also explains how this site became a central element of the cultural identity, again for all Maslawis. The original mosque dates back to the same period as the... as the Al-Hadba minaret from the 12th, 13th century.

Mehiyar 7:28

The process of rebuilding Al-Hadba is going to create a large number of jobs.

Louise Haxthausen 7:32

Yes, the way we have designed project for the reconstruction of the Al-Hadba, the construction of a replica of the Al-Hadba, and the reconstruction of the Al-Nuri mosque, is a project that is not only for the Maslawis, but with the Maslawis. So the idea is that this is not only a cultural heritage preservation project, it is very much a project that bring jobs in particular to young Maslawis, not only jobs, that also bring skills to the young Maslawis, so they are enabled to be the ones who reconstruct this essential element of, of the heritage. So what we are going to do is enable the providers of technical and vocational education in Iraq, the higher education institutions, particularly the two universities in Mosul, to deliver training diplomas, which in the field of construction, but with specific specialities around cultural heritage

conservation. And we would give the opportunity through this project to thousands of young people to engage in these courses, in these classes, and these degrees and with a strong element of practical experience, where they will be working on site, on the site of the Nuri mosque and so on. They will at the same time gain skills, and rebuild the heritage.

Mehiyar 9:07

If we can speak about reconstruction in Iraq in terms of national heritage, what do you think the key priorities are in the country? What is required from the international community to strengthen Iraq's national heritage? Iraq's national heritage is in part fragmented. Perhaps it's also a reflection of Iraq's politics. For those outside who'd like to help. What are your recommendations? What are the lessons learned from your experience being in Iraq?

Louise Haxthausen 9:31

I think because of the very rich heritage Iraq has, you know, going back to the Mesopotamian period, and until today, first of all, preserving, conserving, protecting that heritage is an enormous challenge, a challenge that is compounded by the fact that Iraq has suffered from conflict, from tensions, and again, tensions and conflict, where cultural heritage was directly targeted. So you cannot expect from any government to take on that responsibility alone. International solidarity, international attention to the cultural heritage of Iraq is absolutely crucial to ensure that that this, this heritage is properly protected, conserved, reconstructed. This responsibility also stems from the fact that when we talk about the cultural heritage of Iraq, it is very much also our, our common heritage as humanity. So that again, add to the fact that, you know, we all have a responsibility to help Iraqi authorities preserve their heritage. A key element of the governmental will and responsibility in relation to its cultural heritage and particular the cultural heritage that have been destroyed in Mosul, in Nineveh is a decision following a consultative process that the Iraqi authorities, Iraqi stakeholders would like to see their heritage reconstructed, in particular, the old city of Mosul, and in particular, the the Al-Nuri mosque and, and the Al-Hadba minaret. This is a decision, they had the option to say, no, we want to build a new city. But there is now a clear decision by the government that they would like to reconstruct. And that has been further reinforced by the fact that Iraq, has announced that the old city of Mosul is now put on a tentative list for future inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list. So that means that the process we are now going to help the Iraqi authorities with, is going to be something very challenging, because it has to be among the highest international standards. This project, in a way, will make history in the sense that it is climbing the highest standards of reconstruction and conservation. And at the same time, not doing this through an external intervention, but really enabling the Iraqis at different levels, the experts that are working on the cultural heritage sector in Iraq already, but also the local population, and particularly the young people, to be engaged in a process. In a

way this is a model, think of reconstruction in a in a post conflict country. And something that we would like to replicate, learn from as we engage in more broadly in the reconstruction process in Iraq, but also beyond in other countries.

Mehiyar 10:03

On that note, thank you very much, Louise, we look forward to hearing more about your work and we wish you success. This is a very important project. It's part of Iraq's national heritage. Thank you very much.

Louise Haxthausen 12:55

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to talk more about our work in, in Iraq and particularly in the context of the reconstruction in Mosul.

Mehiyar 13:04

It was a pleasure having you here, thanks.