



Fig. 1. Pyramid of Cheops, El Giza, Egypt. Image by DIADRASIS



## FROM A DREAM TO A TEAM: THE EGYPTIAN HERITAGE RESCUE TEAM (EHRF)

**AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief**

Chairperson Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation, EGYPT  
a.hamid.salah@gmail.com

*Egypt's Heritage is at risk. The prevailing instability and the recent social and economic problems have created dangerous conditions in areas with heritage collections, which might suffer damages or even be irrevocably destroyed. The author of this article presents the story of the creation of "The Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation", a non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage by training professionals on first-aid actions following disasters as well as conducting rescue activities such as the intervention at the Museum of Islamic Art after the car-bomb explosion on January 24th 2014.*

### **Keywords:**

Egypt – rescue – heritage – disaster – risk – emergency

### **1. THE STORY**

Egypt, with its unparalleled rich history, has a huge and diverse heritage to be protected and preserved. It includes vestiges of a civilization going back to the late prehistoric era (5000 BC), moving through to the Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic periods. Egypt's Heritage has always been at risk. Due to the unpredictable security conditions and the drastic social and economic developments that followed the January 25th Revolution (2011), the protection of heritage receded as a priority. The absence of vigilant supervision made things worse. During the last four years tombs have been pillaged and many historical sites looted. In February 2011 25 artifacts were stolen from the Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square in Cairo, to be followed some months after by several other institutions vandalized, among them The Institut d'Egypte, the Archeological Museum of Mallawi in southern Egypt and several others.

During a live TV program on March 4th 2011, a high ranking official openly declared that the archeological storerooms of the Giza Plateau were about to be looted within a couple of days. This was the strangest declaration to ever be heard by a decision maker, who completely dissociated himself from any responsibility, bluntly announcing the "news", not even showing intentions of trying to take preventive measures! Utterly shocked, the TV presenter asked in complete dismay: "where are the security forces commissioned

to protect our antiquities?" to which the high official answered: "there is no more police in Egypt"...

The next day a group of concerned and strongly alarmed young citizens, including myself, met for the first time in the back stage offices of this government official. We were all thinking of just one thing, how to fight for our heritage. However, to meet with such a high ranking official was not an easy matter, as he would only see "important" persons. But after the January 25th the atmosphere had changed and civil servants became more sensitive to the demands of the youth of Egypt. So finally, after three hours we were taken to see him in his spacious office. While waiting we had decided to recommend moving the endangered artifacts to a secure location. It took us one hour to convince him. He finally accepted and referred us to the inspectors in charge of the Giza Plateau, who should plan and coordinate our rescue mission. We were happy to work under their instructions as, other than our noble intentions, we were completely inexperienced in such matters..

The next day we joined them on the plateau, where the packing material had been prepared. The storage areas were actually the pharaonic caves under the great Pyramid (Fig. 2 & 3). When going down we noticed, next to the pyramid, some army armored cars. I was so delighted that I went up again to thank them for guarding us. To my great surprise though, I found out they were to leave soon!



Fig. 2. Storage areas in the pharaonic caves under the great Pyramid. Image by Sarah Marei.

Shocked and scared, I ran down into the caves, where the evacuation of the artifacts had already begun, only to find out that the brick walls blocking the entrance of the caves had been demolished, disclosing a second protective device, sealed steel doors. These of course had also to be unsoldered... Once done, we worked frantically to pack all the objects as quickly as possible, because we felt scared and feared attacks. It took us a whole day, at the end of which we managed, with great relief, to deliver our precious cargo to the new safe location provided by the authorities. At that moment my colleagues and I felt so gratified, as we felt we had been useful in saving some of our heritage! Already at the time I had second thoughts about the way this transfer was effected. True we had worked under the orders of the experts of the SCA; but I felt that the job had not be done according to scientific criteria. For one, I could not remember handing any detailed inventory of the artifacts to the warden in the new location...

My concerns grew more when one day, about two months later, I read in an Interpol communication that the storerooms of the Giza plateau had been burgled. I immediately contacted the official who had supervised the move, only to hear that unfortunately it was the new location that had been plundered!

I was stunned and awoke to the painful realization that good intentions are never enough; without proper knowledge one might damage instead of protecting... This is how I decided to look for this knowledge. I found out that ICCROM in Rome provided a course on “First Aid to Culture Heritage in Conflict times”, applied and was accepted.

While studying I realized that this course was not simply a matter of gaining knowledge; it also implied my responsibility to convey it to my superiors back home; I dreamt of founding an Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team (EHRT).



Fig. 3. Storage areas located in the pharaonic caves. Image by Sarah Marei.



Fig. 4. First National course on First Aid to Culture Heritage in Emergency Times held in Cairo. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.

I could not wait for my return to Egypt and discussed the idea with my professors at ICCROM. The course director, Aparna Tandon immediately agreed to support me: “we will not leave you alone” she said.

When the course finished, my responsibilities started... The Egyptian context, with its different resources, challenges and opportunities, should be considered so as to tailor the ICCROM program to our needs. After a primary survey, I came up with a first draft that was discussed and finalized with ICCROM.

Our second step was to select the course participants, making sure that their capacities matched the course purposes and objectives. We aimed at regrouping government employees and NGO members, to ensure future cooperation between public and private sectors. After two months’ work and numerous meetings and interviews, thirty three participants were selected. What remained was the most important step, obtaining financial support. It had been brought to our attention at the end of the course that Prince

Clause Fund (PCF) usually supported such ventures; I applied and they promptly responded, accepting to subsidize our project.

The course methodology involves theoretical studies as well as planned practical in-situ visits and simulated sessions; it therefore creates an integrated response towards risks linked to conflict situations. It is meant to increase capacity in dealing with circumstances that create a direct hazard to cultural heritage during natural disaster, political instability, civil unrest and conflict. It develops a museum and site managing ability to assess risk preparedness, provides knowledge for planning and develops skills for disaster mitigation and emergency interventions. Apart from addressing natural disasters, it provides a most effective tool for the efficient prevention of looting, theft and illicit traffic of cultural heritage.

This course does not rely only on conveying theoretical knowledge but includes, at the end of the program, a final simulation which will allow participants to put



Fig. 5. First National course on First Aid to Culture Heritage in Emergency Times held in Cairo. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.





Fig. 6. Training program “Disaster Preparedness and Risk Mitigation for Museums in the event of Disaster or Conflict”. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.



Fig. 7. Training program “Disaster Preparedness and Risk Mitigation for Museums in the event of Disaster or Conflict”. Image by Waleed Yossef.

into practice what they have learned. It ends up with a practical exercise in salvaging and providing first aid to collections. Trainees will have to demonstrate their skills in documentation as well as professional management capacities: developing team work, respecting the chain of command and learning to communicate with the authorities and deal with the press...

By June 2012, the first National course on First Aid to Culture Heritage in Emergency Times was held in Cairo (Figs. 4 & 5) through a cooperation between the newly formed Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team (EHRT), ICCROM and the Ministry of Antiquities. It lasted three weeks, during which twenty nine Egyptians, out of a class of thirty three, graduated as qualified First Aiders to Culture Heritage.

Upon completion of this course the EHRT team gathered to plan its future. It was decided to organize it as an official NGO, “The Egyptian Heritage Rescue

Foundation” (EHRF), which could eventually become the nucleus for a Department for Disaster Risk Management and Emergency Response, within the Ministry of Antiquities. Our NGO was officially registered in November 2013.

Also in 2013 the EHRF, together with UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOM and the Ministry of Antiquities, launched a training program: “Disaster Preparedness and Risk Mitigation for Museums in the event of Disaster or Conflict”. In December 2013 seventeen trainees from eleven MoA museums and six from four museums of the Ministry of Culture graduated (Figs. 6 & 7).

Unfortunately, while we were still planning, the Mallawi Museum was vandalized and looted. We were terribly distressed by this unfortunate event which however, instead of discouraging us, strengthened our conviction to organize and to better prepare the protection of our heritage.



Fig. 8. Training of Trainers course held in 2014. Image by Waleed Yossef.



Fig. 9. Training of Trainers course held in 2014. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.

Fig. 10. First National course delivered by Egyptian Trainers. Image by Waleed Yossef.



It became clear that we needed a qualified first aid team in each city and museum; this was quite a challenge as we had to convince national as well as international authorities that the EHRF was capable of implementing a training of that scale, in a reasonable time period.

We proposed a Training of Trainers (ToT) program (Figs. 8 & 9) in three phases: a first course taught by trainers from ICCROM, ICOMOS, ICORP and available Egyptian experts; a second stage, where eleven trainees who had attended this first course would be given one month to prepare the modules, collect the data and adapt the international methodology to develop a training program matching the needs of targeted Egyptian institutions. In the third and final phase these eleven individuals, in order to qualify as trainers, would have to confirm their ability in training: they would be required to deliver on their own,

under the supervision of ICCROM and the Ministry of Antiquities, a national course for training fifteen participants from five cities located in Upper Egypt. Through this program, at the end of a three month period we had managed to produce eleven ToT and fifteen qualified First Aiders, this time entirely trained by Egyptian experts (Fig. 10).

On January 24th 2014, a car bomb exploded in front of the Cairo Security headquarters, opposite the Museum of Islamic Art and the National Archive Library. Both of these cultural institutions were heavily damaged by the blast. Apart from the direct impact, the hanging ceiling of the museum collapsed and its debris smashed the display cases, further destroying invaluable artifacts. To add to our misery, water tanks related to fire extinguishing systems exploded, causing irreparable additional damage. The Minister of Antiquities called on the Egyptian Heritage Rescue



Fig. 11. Members of the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team working at the Museum of Islamic Art after a car bomb explosion in 2014. Image by Essam Khattab and HebatAllah AbdelHamid.





Fig. 12. Members of the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team working at the Museum of Islamic Art after a car bomb explosion in 2014. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.

Team to lead the rescue mission. Together with the staff of the museum, the 11 EHRF ToT and all of the trained first aiders it managed to organize a salvage operation according to international standards, not only recovering the minutest fragments of destroyed artifacts, but also photographing, documenting and providing proper storage for whatever was left of the museum collection. The Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team was also involved in saving the collections of the National Archive and transferring manuscripts to the modern concrete building in Boulaq (Figs. 11 to 13).

In December 2014 the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation, with the technical support of ICCROM and funds from HSBC, organized a second course on

Disaster Risk Management and First Aid to Cultural Heritage in Emergency Times. Five new teams from five different cities in the Delta graduated, thus raising to eleven the number of teams trained from towns in both Upper and Lower Egypt (Figs. 14).

The dramatic events following the January 24th blast alerted the Egyptian Authorities as to the importance of the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation in protecting Egyptian Heritage and confirmed the need for collaboration and cooperation between public and private institutions. As a result, in 2015, a new department of Disaster Risk Management was officially established at the Ministry of Antiquities and has since worked in collaboration with the EHRF.



Fig. 13. Members of the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team working at the Museum of Islamic Art after a car bomb explosion in 2014. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.



Fig. 14. Members of the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Team working at the Museum of Islamic Art after a car bomb explosion in 2014. Image by AbdelHamid Salah El-Sharief.

The EHRF involvement in the Egyptian scene did not make them forget their obligations towards our Arab region. In November 2014 the EHRF participated in training Syrian Antiquity personnel in Lebanon and in January 2015, in cooperation with UNESCO, ICCROM-ATHAR, ALECSO and the Ministry of Antiquities, it organized the first Regional course on “Building National Capacities for Managing Risks to Cultural heritage in Case of Emergency”. Participants from Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Sudan, Libya and Egypt were trained.

From 2012 to date, all the staff trained by the EHRF, whether as TOT or as First aiders to Cultural Heritage, are volunteering in a very important endeavor, that of developing a risk map of the Egyptian Cultural Heritage... Apart from that, all ninety seven of them are ready to voluntarily assist whenever and wherever our legacy is endangered.

Our story started with a dream, this dream became our goal and the goal became a plan... This plan, Rescuing Egyptian Heritage, has become our life.

## 2. ANNEX: THE COURSE

The Main course modules that we delivered in our abovementioned courses are based on ICCROM modules. They are:

### 2.1. MODULE OUTLINES

#### Module 1. the concept of Culture Heritage

The module focuses on Heritage, which is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage is both inspiration and irreplaceable sources of life.

#### Module 2. Disaster Risk Management

The main objective of the module is to provide an overview of the various aspects of disaster risk management of cultural heritage. In particular, the Module provides interdisciplinary training to:

- Undertake an integrated risk assessment by analyzing the vulnerability of cultural heritage to disaster risks;



Build an integrated system for disaster risk management of cultural heritage, incorporating mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery measures;

Formulate risk management plans for cultural heritage that correspond to the urban and regional disaster management plans and policies; and

Establish an international scientific support network for risk management of cultural heritage in order to build the institutional capacity needed to formulate comprehensive risk management plans that are based on the characteristics of cultural heritage and the nature of hazards in the regional context.

### **Module 3. Documentation Techniques of culture property**

Participants will be presented with the fields of documentation, so as to get more out of the tools for documentation, such as digital cameras, hand held devices such as smartphones and tablets, measuring tape and other tools as well as:

Making an inventory

Collecting data

Collecting maps

Collecting photo.

Specifying themes and subthemes

Creating information sheets

In his Module the importance of documentation in an emergency will also be discussed. Quite often, in case of an emergency, collections will have to be (temporarily) moved. In order to keep track of where objects are, simple and effective documentation is vital. This session will discuss methods of such documentation.

### **Module 4. Emergency planning and response**

A Framework for First Aid Actions: this module will present an open framework of action for providing first aid to cultural heritage since emergencies are highly influenced by the context.

It starts with Context analysis and goes through on-site survey, security and stabilization actions, triage, salvage and first aid to cultural heritage. Practical sessions are included in each topic, to ensure understanding and efficient performance, should any of the trainees be involved in an emergency situation.

### **Module 5. First Aid applied to structures and buildings**

This module deals with the stabilization of heavy objects, archaeological remains or building parts that face the imminent threat of a collapse or could be damaged by another unavoidable source. Examples include shoring of walls, temporary structural supports, erecting temporary shelters, covering exposed surface etc.

A systematic triage, condition assessment and documentation should accompany first aid for buildings.

Understanding of the main architectural and constructional attributes of Egyptian Museums.

### **Module 6. Emergency Evacuation and storage**

Comprises packing, transportation and relocation of cultural objects to another temporary location. It involves systematic documentation and safe handling of objects/items during transfer from one location to another. Through this topic the participants will be able to prioritize culture materials for evacuation. They are required to think critically and develop efficient tools for documentation, plan workflows for evacuation and create temporary storage. The training emphasizes on making the best use of available resources as most of the museums and storage areas in Egypt lack efficient tools and resources for this kind of work.

#### **Storage in Emergencies**

Both evacuation and salvage can involve setting up a temporary storage, as the original location might not be safe. Setting up such a space includes a documentation plan for locating objects and a configuration for appropriate fixtures and furniture in order to diminish future risks.

Using the materials provided, participants will suggest a layout for the collection within a specific space and justify their choices for the location chosen for the objects, the use of floor space, room height and location system, the choice of storage materials and priorities in the evacuation.

#### **Final Simulation**

This exercise will allow participants to implement the theory that was provided in the previous sessions. It focuses on 'teamwork', salvage and first aid to collections, on how to handle documentation, the chain of command, how to communicate with the authorities, how to deal with the press, etc.

Participants should organize themselves and gather as much information as they can about the set up

situation. Participants should think of a strategy for dealing with the situation and should be organized into teams for its practical application at the museum.

The exercise will conclude with a debriefing, the purpose of which is to identify those specific actions or situations that went well, as well as those that might require additional thought and planning, to ensure success in the future. Debriefing is a critical tool in the process of team-building, especially if accurate information is given about the difficulties or issues encountered, leading to applicable responses. A

debriefing should also include the emotional reactions people may experience as a result of being involved in a serious emergency.

During the debriefing instructors will encourage participants to reflect upon their previous experiences, if any, in responding to an emergency and to consider how they would react now, should they find themselves in a similar situation.

Received: 29 December 2015

Published: 31 May 2016