

## Preserving Islamic Manuscripts In Conflict Zones

Thesigers | December 2, 2015

Thesigers Director and CEO

Michael A. Innes recently participated in a three day workshop entitled *Islamic Manuscript Collections in Conflict Zones: Safeguarding Written Heritage*. Held 5-7 October at the Royal United Services Institute on Whitehall, the event was organised by the Islamic Manuscripts Association with the support of the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, Harvard University, Boston College, and the Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands (CEMML), Colorado State University. The course introduced participants to the legal fundamentals of cultural property protection and practical aspects of managing, protecting and preserving at-risk materials. Speakers included a mix of academic, legal, military, diplomatic and private sector specialists from Austria, Canada, Holland, Italy, Libya, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere.

Thesigers has substantial experience working with manuscript and document

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collections in conflict zones, where political contentions often extend to text-based materials. There are specific risks associated with accessing and working with primary sources in distressed environments. Managing these risks requires careful planning.

Some illustrative challenges that Thesigers staff have observed:

- Researcher access to primary sources of information is constrained in several ways. "First line data" in difficult locations can be found in a variety of formats, including paper-based, orally transmitted and electronic media. Each of these which requires distinct approaches, methods and techniques for collecting and preserving source materials. Libraries and archives are often heavily under-resourced or entirely suppressed, leaving extant materials poorly stored, vulnerable to a range of environmental stresses, physically dispersed and/or held in private hands.
- Severe risk of loss or destruction is often exacerbated when manuscripts and documents take the form of more modern hardcopy materials like newsprint.

Unlike ancient clay tablets or palm leaf manuscripts, modern manuscript and document-based materials tend to be neglected as forms of cultural heritage or cultural property, and as a result are not generally given the same consideration or protections.

- Different communities of interest ascribe distinct forms of value to manuscripts and documents in warzones. For some, they are cultural property - historically worthwhile materials to be preserved and protected, or commodities to be traded on the lucrative criminal art and antiquities markets. For others, they are sources of information with forensic implications, for example in the criminal prosecution of human rights violations or in mapping the conflict landscape by security services.
- Conflict zones present two pronounced challenges to professional practice. First, the inherent hazards and dynamics of violent conflict place enormous stresses on the standards and requirements of researchers. Second,

those standards vary significantly from one community of interest to the next - wartime and post-war settings can sometimes feel like competitive research environments, where academics, journalists, public and private sector researchers are all seeking access to the same or similar source materials.

Course URL:

<http://www.islamicmanuscript.org/courses/islamic-manuscript-collections-in-conflict-zones.aspx>

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