

IFLA's involvement in a project to digitally preserve Palestinian Newspapers, and the possible use of cultural preservation as a bridge between communities

What is IFLA? The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, or IFLA, is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. Its purpose is to promote high standards of provision and delivery of library and information services; encourage widespread understanding of the value of good library & information services; and to represent the interests of our members throughout the world. Our members might be national library associations, national libraries, or individual libraries and organisations. Currently IFLA has over 1600 members in 150 countries, and we represent over 750,000 library workers worldwide.

The story of why I am here to speak today is quite convoluted, but I shall endeavour to give a quick overview. In August 2000 IFLA held its annual conference in Jerusalem. The sensitivity of the venue and planning arrangements caused Arab States to boycott the Conference and there was no dialogue between the Israeli library community and the Palestinian library community. After discussions on the Conference sidelines, a statement about the Arab boycott was published for all IFLA members to read. In light of the concerns on behalf of parts of the IFLA members, the the IFLA Governing Board subsequently authorised a mission to assess the present situation of libraries and the library community in Israel and Palestine, with an emphasis on intellectual freedom issues and the viability of dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian librarians. After delay, the mission took place in April 2007.

IFLA's Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, or FAIFE, was tasked with preparing the mission, and I was one of the two participants, along with Mr. Frode Bakken from the Norwegian Library Association. For nine days in April 2007 Frode and myself held 25 meetings with Israeli and Palestinian colleagues and visited libraries in Tel Aviv, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Holon, Ramallah, Nablus. Due to the difficulty of entering certain areas, and the continuing deterioration of security in the Gaza strip, we were unfortunately unable to visit our colleagues in Gaza. This means that the impressions we gained all came from our visits to colleagues in Israel and the West Bank.

The findings of the mission can be found on the IFLA website¹. I would like to put aside general conclusions covered in more depth by human rights organizations elsewhere, and concentrate on libraries. During our visit we discovered that libraries in Israel operate to a high standard, although the public library system and school library system face issues of under-funding and the library association is not completely inclusive and weak. In the West Bank, however, we found that libraries there are experiencing the effects of:

- Under-developed library infrastructure, legal frameworks and organisation
- Reduced budgets
- Restrictions on freedom of movement

¹ Report from visit: <http://www.ifla.org/files/faife/publications/FAIFE-Mission-report-Aug2007.pdf>

- Outdated and under-funded library education, and a lack of knowledge of current library practices elsewhere in the world
- The 'greying' of the library profession
- Self censorship and restricted collection development as a result of interference in book deliveries
- Physical damage to library and information institutions (7)
- Communication between library professionals in the West Bank and Gaza is extremely restricted, limited only to telephone and email
- Communication between library professionals in the West Bank is profoundly affected by restrictions on freedom of movement, leading drastically reduced effectiveness of associations and committees

At the time of the visit conditions did not exist for effective co-operation between Israeli and Palestinian library colleagues, although we felt it could be said that was some willingness to increase co-operation in the future. Overall my main impression was this: Israeli librarians know virtually nothing about the situation of Palestinian librarians, and vice versa.

Following the visit we made some recommendations. Again, I will concentrate on just a number here. We recommended that IFLA should provide training in general modern library practice to the Palestinian library community, in the form of workshops to take place at various locations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This year we began this by funding training programmes for Palestinian school librarians.

IFLA should hold a conference on the subject of libraries and human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories – we held this extremely successful conference in March last year, and have since followed up with colleagues in Norway and the West Bank to look at an extended training programme from 2010.

Of most relevance here, however, was the recommendation that IFLA's core activity on Preservation and Conservation, PAC, should offer advice to the Palestinian Ministry of Culture on the need for digitisation of Palestinian cultural heritage. PAC focuses on issues of preservation and initiates worldwide cooperation for the preservation of library materials.

The project you will hear about today is perhaps a first step in implementing this third recommendation. Along with a colleague I visited the Givat Haviva peace library in 2007. During our visit we were introduced to the collection of local Palestinian newsprints from Israel and Palestine since the beginning of the 20th century and told of plans to digitise and make available the collection with the aid of UNESCO and a number of small donors. IFLA did not have the chance to revisit the progress of the project until earlier this year, when another project in Jerusalem also came to our attention. This project of digital preservation has been carried out at the Al Aqsa Mosque Library through the help of and in collaboration with the British Library's Endangered-Archives Programme. Again, the project deals with preserving Palestinian newspapers, although this time there were no plans to make the digitised materials available.

Through connections made from our previous visits IFLA encouraged participants in both projects to submit a proposal for funding a small exercise in information and experience exchange, whereby the

development of the Givat Haviva digitised collection would be analysed in a way that would turn the lessons learnt from this case study into a platform that would serve all existing and future projects of this kind. Knowledge and experience gained at the two institutes would be shared, standards discussed and a common semantic basis built in order to avoid duplication of work in the future.

Following preliminary meetings with all participants, a pilot project using a Greenstone software module in Arabic has been started to develop ways to enrich both collections, and hopefully find a way to involve other researchers and members of the public in the project. I shall let my co-presenters go into further detail, but suffice to say IFLA, with the help of funding from the Swedish International Development and Co-operation Agency (Sida) was able to provide funding to get the project off the ground.

What would IFLA like to see happen next? In the short term, we want to see success of the project you are about to hear about, and we wish to publicise it among our members – and hopefully gain support for the future. But in the long term, more co-operation between institutions in both the Israeli and Palestinian communities will clearly be needed for real success. Historical Palestinian newspaper collections exist in several archives in Israel and Palestine, not just in Givat Haviva and Al-Aqsa – they are also found at the Dayan Centre in Tel Aviv, Nablus University and there is a microfilm collection at the Jewish National and University Library here in Jerusalem. The political circumstances prevent many researchers and the general public from accessing this important heritage. Most Palestinians cannot gain access to archives in Israel, including Palestinian archives in Jerusalem, and are not able to use the material held in them.

IFLA believes that professional dialogue and the development of professional institutions in civil society can transcend political boundaries and help towards peace and reconciliation between people in situations of conflict. We would like to see increased communication and future co-op between Israeli and Palestinian librarians; even if our 2007 visit, and communications since then, mean that this is not yet something we can consider in the near future.

Nevertheless, as an internationally recognised, standards-setting library organisation IFLA has a responsibility to encourage librarians around the world to take bold steps towards increasing access to information across borders. Digitisation of archival material is one way of doing this, by preserving heritage and memories in a way that can be immediately shared across the physical and cultural divides. This is one of the very limited actions that the archivists, guardians of such valuable material can do to contribute to peace efforts and to bring nations closer to each other. The work that you will hear about in the presentations this morning is simply a very small, but extremely valuable, start to increasing access to cultural heritage across borders.

While it is clear that freedom of physical movement going to be an issue for the foreseeable future for Israeli and Palestinian citizens, it is also apparent that Internet access in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza is going to increase in the coming years. Librarians and archivists must take advantage of this, and begin to seek ways of increasing access to cultural heritage online for those who are unable to physically travel to where it is present. I firmly believe that those of us who work in libraries and archives wish to see our

collections open and available to use for as many people as possible. I do not need to tell anyone here at the Minerva conference that advances in digitisation techniques will enable us to do just this. What we need to do is marry the technological advances with some directed political will to overcome obstacles that are preventing people from accessing their cultural heritage. I hope that the small project we have begun with Givat Haviva and the Al-Aqsa mosque could be the first opening of a door to increased access. Time will tell. For now, I hope very much that you will enjoy hearing about the work that has just begun.