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Gulf Affairs: How does UNESCO collaborate with Arab states in the Gulf region?

Nada Al Hassan: UNESCO collaborates at different levels with the Arab states in the Gulf region through its office in Doha, which is responsible for the Gulf cluster. This office ensures close collaboration with Gulf countries for the implementation of UNESCO programs. In the area of culture, UNESCO supports Arab states in the Gulf region in the implementation of the cultural conventions they have ratified and with their cultural activities at large.

The Arab states of the Gulf have all ratified the World Heritage Convention. By doing so they have committed to respect the requirements of the Convention in protecting their cultural and natural heritage, be it inscribed or not on the World Heritage List, through appropriate legislative and management modalities and protection measures, to ensure its transmission to future generations. This, in itself, is very important and very demanding.

UNESCO supports the Gulf countries as State Parties to the World Heritage Convention in implementing these requirements, in particular at the sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, through technical and policy advice and training. It also supports them in preparing new nominations for inscription on the

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World Heritage List. For instance, UNESCO has supported Saudi Arabia in preparing the nomination file of Al-Hijr Archaeological Site (Madâin Sâlih), advised Qatar on the preparation of Al-Zubarah nomination file, and we are currently supporting Kuwait in preparing the nomination file of the Kuwait Towers (Abraj al-Kuwait). We also involve civil servants and experts from the region in our training activities, regional and international policy-making workshops, and international meetings and conferences.

Gulf Affairs: What does UNESCO view as some of the most important cultural and heritage projects in the region?

Al Hassan: There are a number of interesting cultural and heritage projects in the region. Each country has its own style or focus. Of particular interest are the museums and cultural institutions established by Qatar Museums, which have considerably raised the level of cultural institutions in the Arab states to compete with similar institutions at the international level. The urban conservation and revitalization projects undertaken by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities in Manama and the interpretation and presentation of their archaeological sites, such as the site museum of Qalat al Bahrain, are valuable initiatives. The art fairs and shows such as Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial have become hubs for discovering new talent at the international level. In Saudi Arabia and Oman for example, the focus is on conserving historical sites and on studying and conserving historic cities and cultural landscapes. Much has been going on in the region in the past years—there is a real dynamism in some Gulf countries, directed either towards historic sites or towards creativity, or both.

Gulf Affairs: How would you characterize the heritage of the Gulf states? How does the Gulf identity shape its view toward its cultural heritage and preservation of culture? What is unique or interesting about the Gulf cultural heritage or identity?

Al Hassan: Cultural heritage in the Gulf states cannot be defined as a single entity or typology. It varies from region to region, from country to country, from rock-art prehistoric sites to ancient civilizations such as the Dilmun dynasty, from Nabatean sites, to Islamic cities and forts and later to human settlements linked to the pearl trade, to name but a few. This diversity counters the narrative about the Gulf states being one compact culture versus a multitude of influences and historical layers. Indeed, very rarely do people visit the Gulf states as a cultural destination, but this is changing now thanks to the change in the cultural policies of Gulf governments. Some are investing considerably in cultural activities, the revitalization of historical cities, and making their historical sites become destinations for visits.

As in any country in the world, public institutions make choices related to which cultural heritage they want to value and protect. What's interesting is how the options in the Arab states of the Gulf region are growing to include not only Islamic architecture but also ancient sites and pearl trade settlements. In Kuwait, there is even a strong interest for preserving architectural buildings from the Modern Movement period. Public policies are steadily embracing the diversity of cultural heritage in the Gulf region; this is very interesting indeed.

Gulf Affairs: What are the challenges and the opportunities related to the creation, conservation, and maintenance of the status of World Heritage sites in the Gulf region?

Al Hassan: Often sites with national or regional value claim a World Heritage status, but this is not the idea of the World Heritage Convention. When a country ratifies the Convention, it doesn't mean that they

need to inscribe all the cultural and natural heritage they have on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Cultural and natural heritage in one country is an invaluable asset that we have the responsibility to protect collectively. In this sense, and although UNESCO promotes the inscription of sites on the World Heritage List, I strongly believe that what is important for a given country is to conserve the legacy it has received from past generations, study it, and pass it on to the next ones, regardless of its international status. This being said, the challenge of nominating new sites for inscription on the World Heritage List is not an easy one. First of all, it is about inventorying cultural and natural heritage and creating a Tentative List that bears a potential outstanding universal value; second, it is about protecting those sites with the adequate legislation and ensuring their management; third, it is about preparing a solid nomination file that abides by very detailed and specialized technical requirements, with appropriate arguments and an appropriate narrative that demonstrate their outstanding universal value, authenticity and integrity.

A nomination file for the inscription on the World Heritage List is not a mere file prepared by a handful of experts. It is a process of reflection, identification, research, and demonstration, as well as a process by which management and protection measures are developed to be adequate to a potential World Heritage status of a given site.

When nomination files are prepared by national teams that engage in the process of justification, management, and protection, the results are much more interesting because there is a strong sense of national ownership. This is because the nomination process is a moment in time that fosters capacity building and institution building towards cultural heritage protection. This is also why UNESCO insists on the importance of participative and inclusive planning.

Gulf Affairs: What role do you see for local communities in the management and conservation of heritage?

Al Hassan: Local communities are viewed as the owners, users, and protectors of sites. Their role is crucial in ensuring good management and in keeping sites alive; they are the main beneficiaries of sites and they are their best custodians. Their involvement needs to start from the very beginning of any inscription process. This will allow building with them, not only an inscription file, but above all a management system in which they are actors and beneficiaries. Only then can you create a win-win situation between public institutions and local communities. Indeed, the World Heritage Committee has attributed a growing role to local communities in the processes and management systems of inscribed sites. The recently adopted policy on World Heritage and Sustainable Development places local communities at the center of World Heritage conservation and management.

Gulf Affairs: Have Gulf countries contributed to the conservation of heritage outside of the Gulf region, for instance, Arab or Islamic heritage?

Al Hassan: Numerous initiatives funded by Gulf countries have contributed to the conservation of cultural heritage in the Arab region, such as in the Old City of Jerusalem. Other contributions support UNESCO's response in the areas affected by conflicts and natural disasters. However, much more is needed in terms of contribution and exchange with other Arab countries, in particular in view of the ravaging conflicts in the Middle East, which destroyed much of their cultural heritage.

A meaningful contribution to the region's cultural and natural heritage is also undertaken through the

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work of the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage created in Bahrain in 2011. The Centre provides technical support to the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in the Arab region and undertakes a number of training programs and operational and technical assistance activities.

Gulf Affairs: What future directions and what improvements in the preservation of heritage would you suggest in the Gulf region?

Al Hassan: Again, I can't see that there is one type of cultural heritage in the Gulf states that requires one type of intervention. I would like to stress the importance of the authenticity of sites and call for limiting rebuilding and reconstructing lost structures with new materials. This is a practice that I have witnessed often at some sites in the region. I would also suggest not to overdo things. Very often, less is more, and doing a lot can transform authentic sites into Disneyland-like sites; here, I would raise the red flag. It is important not to fall into this trap. Moreover, historic cities such as Jeddah and the historic district of Dubai need to be conserved by avoiding gentrification and keeping life and economic activities in them, as opposed to turning them into open-air museums that are bound to die.

We face many challenges in the Arab states: our heritage institutions need great support, our managers and civil servants need training and exchange at the regional and international levels, our legislation needs improvement, and our local communities need to be more engaged, to start with through education curricula. This is a long road where the Arab states of the Gulf region can contribute considerably.