



**Restoring Mosul University Library
Interview with Olivia Snaije**

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KENNEALLY: After the occupation by Islamic State in 2014 of the Iraqi city of Mosul, the university there immediately closed. When classes resumed, the study of literature and philosophy was banned, and many feared the chemistry laboratories would be used to develop weapons. The university library lay in ruins.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Mosul residents now recall the years of ISIS control as a dark age. The militants and the forces who liberated the city, including Americans, Turkish, and French, left behind an urban wasteland of rubble that will take years and require billions of dollars to repair. The university library, a professor told the BBC, still resembles a chunk of charcoal, though it has reopened.

Iraqis, with volunteers from Europe and North America, have begun to restore the devastated book collection. At the London Book Fair in March, leaders of that effort shared an update of progress. Olivia Snaije is a contributing editor to *Publishing Perspectives* who often reports on cultural subjects concerning the Middle East. She attended the panel presentation, and she joins me now from her Paris office with details. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Olivia Snaije.

SNAIJE: Thank you so much, Chris. Thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: It seems like a really interesting and important topic to be discussing today. The University of Mosul's library is, sadly, devastated, but is now recovering, and you've got the story on that recovery. I suppose the thing to do for our listeners, though, is to give some sense of the library itself and its collection before the ISIS occupation.

SNAIJE: Yes. I mean, Mosul has an incredibly rich history, and it is a city that's on the Silk Road, so it was a place where Muslims, Christians, and Jews from many ethnic communities lived together for centuries. So it was an incredibly cosmopolitan city.

The library was relatively modern. It was built in 1967. It was the largest in northern Iraq and one of the largest in the greater Middle East. I think they had 1 million or so books, and over 50% of them were in Arabic, and then there were



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other languages – books in English and other languages. In the 1970s, it was a modern, flourishing library, and definitely one of the most significant academic libraries in the region. I know they had something like 150 departments, so you can imagine the need for the huge diversity of books. They also had government publications that dated back to the founding of the Iraqi state after the Ottoman Empire, and they had ancient manuscripts and so on.

KENNEALLY: It really sounds like almost a treasure of literature and of documents throughout the centuries, and the collection has suffered, but not only because of the ISIS occupation. There have been a wave of tragedies that have hit the library.

SNAIJE: Of course. Not just the library – I mean, Iraq in general. I think it might be useful for listeners if I just very quickly go over a brief history of what's been happening in Iraq. For example, in 1979, Saddam Hussein took over, and then immediately they got into the Iran-Iraq War for eight years, which took a terrible human and economic toll on both countries, and there was no outcome. Then the economic plight in Iraq was one of the reasons that led Saddam Hussein to make his very bad decision to invade Kuwait in 1990. That led to the Gulf War and the beginning of the UN Security Council sanctions which the UK and the US had suggested, and that restricted all trade and brought this country that was formerly very rich to its knees. On top of that, you had the totalitarian regime, and Iraqi librarians and archivists were not free, so there was no investment in people, structures, or technology.

Then in 1998, the UK and the US bombed Iraq, and then in 2003, you had the US invasion. So there's been violence in the country since 2003. And as one person who knows Iraq very well said to me, he said that the country has really been in a state of isolation and frozen in time as far as the libraries were concerned since 2003. So ISIS was really the last destructive straw in this sort of tragic history that's been ongoing.

KENNEALLY: Well, there is some hope, though, today, because of this reconstruction project that is now underway. Tell us about some of the players who are involved and what they're trying to accomplish.

SNAIJE: Yeah. Well, there are several initiatives. One is being led by a formerly anonymous blogger who is no longer anonymous, but who had a blog called the Mosul Eye. He has been pushing for people to help donate books and rebuild the library.

And then the organization in particular that I wrote about, and they were at the London Book Fair this year, it's called Mosul Book Bridge. It was started by a



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lecturer at the university, Dr. Alaa Hamdon, and then he was joined by two professors in the UK. They work with various organizations, but one of the biggest or the most successful was their partnership with Book Aid, which is run by Alison Tweed. Book Aid is a UK charity that provides books and support to libraries around the world. They had mostly worked in Africa, but they're now in many places and helping Syrian refugees and other displaced people. So they set up a partnership with Mosul Book Bridge, and in 2018, they sent books to Iraq overland with a truck. They sent 3,700 books that were specifically chosen for the university library. What they do is they get academic publishers to donate books.

KENNEALLY: As you mentioned, the Mosul Eye blogger, Omar Mohammed, has been heavily involved. He has a published list online of the titles that people are looking for for the collection. What kind of books are needed, and how many books have been donated?

SNAIJE: Yeah, they need everything. I looked at the Excel sheet that Omar Mohammed published, and I think he had asked students to tell people the books they needed. When you look at the list, they really need everything. It's very wide-ranging, from books on veterinary science to management, electronics, history, pharmacology, and even Japanese. So they really need new, current books.

Yesterday, in fact, because I knew I'd be speaking to you, I actually was able to talk to a professor of library sciences at Mosul University. So I called him on the phone, and he told me that the university's reopened last year, and they have over 40,000 students. So I said, how are you managing? You have hardly any books. He said, well, they prepare photocopies for the students, and when they have the internet, they can use e-books from universities around the world and e-journals, and they're making do with books that other universities in Iraq donated to them, and they're starting to receive books from around the world – for example, from Book Aid, but also from France and Germany. He said that he would prepare a list of books that they need as well. So I guess he'll be sending it to me, but maybe we can put up the link on your site when he sends it. This is sort of an ongoing problem, and organization is difficult. It doesn't seem like there's just one specific person working on this. It's lots of different, smaller enterprises.

KENNEALLY: So, Olivia Snaije, the kinds of books that the librarians are looking for cover so many different kinds of subjects, but also it's important the language that these books are published in. I'm sure many donations are coming in English, but there's a real need for books in Arabic.

SNAIJE: Yes, of course. As I had mentioned, over half of the books in the library had been in Arabic, as is normal in an Arabic country. So how to get these academic



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books in Arabic? I asked Alaa Hamdon about that, and he said that in fact, getting these books would be important, and it had been difficult so far. It had been a slog. He had written to people in the Emirates and in Egypt, and he got some responses, but nothing happened. Without direct contact, it's difficult.

Also, it's important to mention that Arab publishers have been struggling in general, like many publishers, and there aren't that many academic publishers. In the Gulf countries, of course, the publishers have more means, but the publishing companies in the Gulf are much newer and sometimes have a complicated political relationship with Iraq. So it's not easy.

I spoke to David Hirsch, the former librarian at UCLA for Middle Eastern and Central Asian studies, who's now working on building the library in Dubai called the Mohammed bin Rashid Library. He said that Alaa Hamdon should contract the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies. But he also suggested, interestingly enough, that they should get in touch with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and maybe get some funding there. So anyway, that's another avenue to pursue.

KENNEALLY: Right. And what we should make clear to people is that while there is occasional internet access, and therefore access to digital libraries around the world, lacking that kind of consistent connection online, the physical books really still matter.

SNAIJE: Oh, absolutely. In London at this meeting, there was a network called the Nahrein Network, which is an organization – I think they're at the City University of London – and they're helping Iraq post-conflict with development and preserving its cultural heritage. A person there had visited Mosul, and he said that having the physical books was so important, because the internet was really still spotty. He also emphasized the value of having new and current books, because while he was there, he saw that someone had donated a book, for example, on electronics that was from the 1980s. (laughter) So this is really something that can't be emphasized enough, that they need current books.

KENNEALLY: Tell us, if you know, what is next in this effort to restore the library at the university. Are there publishers or publisher organizations becoming involved?

SNAIJE: Let's see. First of all, the building is apparently being restored by the UNDP, the UN Development Programme. So you have Book Aid, which is collaborating with publishers in the UK. And again, in London, there was a representative from Oxford University Press, Rachel Goode, and she's the global corporate communications and global social responsibility person. She said her colleagues



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had been super-excited about the partnership with Book Aid. So they see this as an ongoing partnership.

But really, there's not sort of one cohesive organization. So they really desperately need help from academic publishers, whether in the UK or in the US. I haven't heard of anything happening on the US side, although it may be happening. I just haven't heard of it. But that would be essential. And there are so many great academic publishers in the US, so that would be wonderful. And they can get in touch. I have some addresses we can talk about at the end where publishers can get in touch with people to donate books.

KENNEALLY: Maybe the best way for us to do that is to post all that information online on our own web page, beyondthebook.com. In the meantime, we should stay in touch with you, Olivia Snaije. We've been chatting today with Olivia Snaije from Paris. She's been sharing her reporting on the restoration efforts for the University of Mosul's library. Olivia Snaije, thanks so much for speaking with me on Beyond the Book.

SNAIJE: Thank you very much, Chris. It was a pleasure.

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