

# INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk\*  
and Andrzej Jakubowski\*\*

---

## The Role of ALIPH in Protecting Cultural Heritage from War and Natural Disasters

**Alicja Jagielska-Burduk (AJB) and Andrzej Jakubowski (AJ):** On behalf of the editorial board of the “Santander Art and Culture Law Review”, we would like to express our gratitude for your willingness to contribute to this issue of the journal dedicated to the protection of cultural property in armed conflicts. We would be remiss if we did not extend our congratulations to you on your appointment as Director of Programmes at the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH). Could you kindly provide our readers with a brief overview of ALIPH’s history, structure, and mandate?

**Elke Selter (ES):** We are a foundation based in Geneva, Switzerland. The foundation is established under Swiss law, yet it enjoys an international status. A number of other organizations enjoy a similar status, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. ALIPH was established in 2017 as a result of an initiative by France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This followed a series of heritage destruction incidents,

---

\* **Alicja Jagielska-Burduk** is the holder of the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Property Law, University of Opole (Poland), and SAACLR Editor-in-chief.

\*\* **Andrzej Jakubowski** is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Law Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Poland); he serves as SAACLR Deputy Editor-in-chief.

## INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk and Andrzej Jakubowski

---

beginning in Mali and subsequently taking place in Syria and Iraq. In the period preceding ALIPH's birth, there was a strong conviction, specially supported by France, that the heritage sector, or perhaps even the world more generally, required a system that was agile, able to respond rapidly and with the necessary funding to protect and subsequently recover a range of sites. While there was a perceived need to address a gap in the existing framework, there was also a recognition of the value in forging close collaboration with established organizations such as UNESCO.

It seems reasonable to posit that the intention was to establish an entity that was closely aligned with the existing network but capable of operating in a somewhat distinct manner. Consequently, ALIPH was established as a public-private partnership, comprising both member states and private donors. The number of member states has gradually increased from the initial two. At the present time, there are eight member states: France, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Luxembourg, China, Morocco, and Cyprus; with Switzerland as the host nation. Hence ALIPH has a truly global reach. Additionally, private foundations contribute to the funding landscape. In addition, a number of other funders have recently become involved in our programmes, such as the European Union and the U.S. Ambassadors Fund. From a political perspective, this places us in an interesting position, as our members are globally well distributed from East to West, but it is a less heavy structure than with 190 or so members like a UN agency. Consequently, the aforementioned flexibility allows us to operate in a multitude of contexts.

Furthermore, ALIPH does not have a complex organizational structure. I am currently working at the Secretariat, which has a small team of about 20 staff members. Besides the Secretariat, there is the Foundation's Board and a number of committees. The primary committee for my work is the Scientific Committee, which is chaired by Mr Mounir Bouchenaki, a former Assistant Director-General of UNESCO and former Director-General of ICCROM. This committee includes experts from around the world, and is tasked with advising on applications for projects submitted to us.

**AJB: Could you explain how the Scientific Committee's membership is established? Apart from the general rule of Article 10 of the Bylaws that outlines specific criteria for becoming a member of the Scientific Committee, chaired by our esteemed colleague Mounir Bouchenaki. Accordingly, alongside the requisite**

**expertise at the international level in the safeguarding of cultural heritage in situations of armed conflict, it would be important to understand who is responsible for proposing candidates. Is it possible for any expert to reach out to ALIPH's Board and express their interest in joining the Committee?**

**ES:** Our foundation was established in 2017, and its operations commenced in 2018. The organization is therefore still in its relative infancy. Thus far there has been minimal turnover within the Scientific Committee. For this reason, the majority of the group remains unchanged. Recently, the number of members that could be on the Committee has been expanded, and two new members joined. The proposed candidates must first be presented to ALIPH's Board for approval. For the new members for example, these have been identified in dialogue between the Secretariat and the chair of the Scientific Committee, mainly aiming to address gaps in representation. For example, we have added an additional expert from Africa, in view of the ongoing Call for Projects for African heritage threatened by climate change. Furthermore, we felt that the Scientific Committee still lacked a sufficient representation of women. Hence our appointment of a woman expert from Lebanon to the Committee.

**AJB: So, the focus is on providing gender balance and global distribution within the Scientific Committee?**

**ES:** Yes indeed. I believe that it is necessary to consider the Committee's composition in order to ensure that it is able to reflect the full range of projects that we receive. It is therefore necessary to appoint individuals with an expertise encompassing the diverse contexts in which we operate and the diverse types of projects that we deal with. If we are to devote more attention to climate change, it is essential to include individuals with expertise in this field, rather than solely those with experience in conflict resolution.

**AJB: Thank you very much for this clarification. You previously referenced a topic of interest to us as well: the broader scope of activities and the new call regarding climate change. This is relevant because ALIPH's acronym is associated with threats related to armed conflicts. However, the foundation's mandate has become considerably more expansive. We would therefore be grateful if you could outline the plans of ALIPH in addressing the nature and origin of hazards to cultural heritage. How has the role and position of ALIPH within the broader**

# INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk and Andrzej Jakubowski

---

## **global constellation of various initiatives and activities on climate change been conceived thus far?**

**ES:** I was not present in ALIPH when the initial discussions took place on the climate change strategy. I am therefore unable to provide more detailed insights on those initial deliberations. From my perspective, it is evident that our organization has been effective in addressing the urgent issues that arise in the context of crises. While recovery projects operate on a different time scale and pace, our expertise in addressing immediate challenges has been a significant strength. Such functions can be deployed in crisis situations, whether these be wars or natural disasters. It is essential to be able to provide funding and assistance in a prompt manner, rather than a timeframe of six months or a year after an incident has occurred. Consequently, in recent years we have been increasingly called upon to provide assistance in the event of disasters, a role that was not previously within our remit. Last year, however, there was a series of major seismic events, including earthquakes in Syria, Turkey, and Morocco, a member state of our organization. Additionally, Libya was affected by devastating floods.

We did commence the implementation of projects in those three areas, two of which, of course, were also conflict areas, namely Syria and Libya. Subsequently, projects were initiated in Marrakesh following the earthquake. I believe there was a natural progression from conflicts to disasters to climate change, which in turn combines the more frequent and intense disasters that result from it with the more long-term impact on cultural heritage. It can thus be stated that the overarching idea is that action should be taken in all crisis situations, rather than solely in conflict situations, as they frequently occur concurrently or exacerbate each other. This is, I believe, the rationale behind the decision to focus on climate change projects.

**AJB:** **Considering this extended mandate of ALIPH what, in your view, is the most appropriate international approach to addressing natural hazards that have an impact on cultural heritage? How does the ALIPH activity fit into this context? The ALIPH Manifesto<sup>1</sup> concludes with a single sentence that encapsulates the foundation's guiding spirit: action. Furthermore, you referenced the necessity**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en/our-ambition> [accessed: 20.09.2024].

**for prompt responses to crises. In the cases of responding to such threats, it is evident that time is of the essence. We would therefore be grateful if you could clarify how many times this decision-making process, based on Article 9.8 of the Bylaws,<sup>2</sup> has been employed, and an emergency protocol invoked? Could you kindly provide us with some recent examples?**

**ES:** I believe there are a number of different factors at play. The section of Article 9.8 which delineates the principles of rapidly financing “the initial needs of projects aimed at safeguarding heritage from imminent danger” is, in fact, a relatively recent addition to the Bylaws, incorporated into the Bylaws during one of the more recent revisions. Only in June 2024, ALIPH’s Board has for the first time allocated funding to this mechanism, which has for the first time been used for Lebanon in September 2024.

However, prior to this, alternative mechanisms with a similar scope have already existed in our practice. In fact, rapid measures, while initially undertaken in response to the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, actually crystallized in face of the 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut and the crisis in Ukraine and took the form of action plans. Accordingly, ALIPH’s action plans represent a pre-approved envelope of funding for a specific situation or threat. This flexibility is exemplified by the case of Ukraine, where an initial envelope of US\$5 million was adopted, with subsequent additional funding good for another US\$6 million for now.

For the action plans, a streamlined approval process has been established, whereby evaluations are conducted and projects within the approved budget envelope must be consulted with the chair of the Scientific Committee and the president of ALIPH’s Board. Typically, approval is granted within a 24-hour period, allowing the funding to be made available within 24 to 48 hours, which allows to provide rapid funding to acute emergencies. The main difference with the system adopted under Article 9.8 of our Bylaws is that these action plans are adopted for specific situations. The Article 9.8 mechanism is globally applicable for acute emergencies and in that sense even more flexible.

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.aliph-foundation.org/files/20240627\\_ALIPH%20Bylaws%202024\\_EN\\_Signed%20Original.pdf](https://www.aliph-foundation.org/files/20240627_ALIPH%20Bylaws%202024_EN_Signed%20Original.pdf) [accessed: 20.09.2024].

## INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk and Andrzej Jakubowski

---

**AJB: Such expeditious responsiveness would be unfeasible in larger organizations. Here, the decision-making process is entirely distinct. This exemplifies the capacity of ALIPH to facilitate rapid decision-making.**

**ES:** In my opinion, the action plan mechanism works very well. Furthermore, it should be noted that the action plan is not just a pool of funds. It includes a document that defines the types of activities that are allowed for support under the action plan. Thus, the decision to spend the funds is not entirely discretionary. Funds can be allocated to certain types of activities. In the case of Ukraine, the number of projects approved under this envelope is about 230. Approximately 450 cultural institutions in Ukraine have received assistance through this mechanism, which enables the implementation of measures such as emergency storage. In Odessa, for instance, the provision of wooden panels to reinforce windows and tarpaulin to protect damaged roofs has been facilitated. Such measures are classified as emergency interventions. Consequently, the funding is provided in the form of small grants. This mechanism is not used for restoration projects, etc., but only to address urgent situations. Following the situation in Ukraine, plans have been adopted for conflicts elsewhere that are similar in nature. Most recently, a plan has been established for Gaza, which has been implemented since early this year. In this latter context, we have been engaged in the evacuation of collections in Gaza over the past few months, and we are gratified to report that we were able to provide assistance on the ground very early on.

The aforementioned system proved to be highly effective. The only limitation is that adopting an action plan is not so rapid at the outset. The initial step is to develop the action plan itself. It is necessary to present the rationale behind this decision. It is necessary to determine which types of activities could be subsumed under this category. It is necessary to obtain approval of the action plan through the formal process, with both the Scientific Committee and ALIPH's Board agreeing to allocate funds to this plan. Once approval has been granted, we are able to proceed with greater alacrity.

However, I observed that a considerable number of emergencies did not warrant the adoption of an entire action plan, for instance because only a small number of projects were expected to be supported by ALIPH. For example, the unrest in Haiti that has been unfolding. In this case, it would be unfeasible to adopt a fully funded action plan as in the case of Gaza or Ukraine. However, Haiti, or Sudan, or many other places, at times also require rapid funding in acute emergency situations. That is why in June 2024, we have activated the mechanism under Article 9.8

of our Bylaws. It allows us to operate very fast, without requiring an action plan for a particular situation. It has for now been used for Lebanon, but also for sites that have experienced major floods in recent months, in Myanmar for instance.

**AJ: Thank you so much for the detailed explanations. We would now like to direct our conversation to the central topic of this edition of our journal; namely the safeguarding of cultural heritage in the context of armed conflict. This is particularly relevant in light of the insights you have provided regarding the decision-making processes of ALIPH. Furthermore, you referenced the multitude of ongoing projects and emergencies, including those in Gaza. In light of this, we would like to ask you about the role of ALIPH in the implementation of activities on the ground.**

**ES:** In practice we do not implement on-site activities ourselves since we act mostly as donors, not operators. We rely very much on other parties who implement the projects we finance. Hence there is a certain degree of dependency on the proposals received and on the operational capacity of our grantees. We endeavour to ensure that our portfolio encompasses a range of perspectives on pluralism and diversity, particularly when we believe this to be essential. It is my honest opinion that it is often easier to implement such projects in a post-conflict environment than it is in the midst of an ongoing conflict. In the case of Mosul, for instance, we have established a programme called Mosul Mosaic, which aims to adopt projects that examine the Muslim heritage of the region alongside Christian heritage, Yazidi heritage, etc. A significant portion of our restoration work involves mosques, but we are also engaged in the restoration of two churches. We also endeavour to conserve civilian heritage and monuments, and to move beyond just built heritage to look at collections, manuscripts, libraries, etc. Sometimes, we actively seek to identify partners who may be interested in collaborating on projects related to other forms of heritage, for instance, to ensure this diversity of actions.

**AJB and AJ: This then is not merely a matter of issuing calls for applications for funding. ALIPH's approach is thus proactive, with a focus on identifying potential partners.**

**ES:** That is precisely the case. The emergency mechanism is perpetually accessible, and so are the action plans or the mechanism under Article 9.8 of the Bylaws. This means 365 days a year. Consequently, we are able to extend an invitation to submit an application at any time. In case of acute emergencies, we tend to get in

## INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk and Andrzej Jakubowski

---

touch with our partners on the ground, and work with them to allocate funding for the most urgent needs; but also non-partners are always welcome to get in touch.

But also for a calls for projects, we try to be proactive. Now that the focus for this year's call has shifted to climate change, which is a new topic for ALIPH, we needed to be proactive. We endeavour to engage with specific countries and forms of heritage to identify potential projects of interest. It is not possible to predict whether they will eventually apply or not, but efforts are made to ensure as much as possible that a diversity of projects is received. It is not our intention to limit the scope of the project to Swahili heritage on the East African coast, for instance. It is imperative that a diversity of issues and sites be considered. We engage with authorities and organizations and encourage them to submit applications, and when necessary we provide assistance with the completion of the application process. In this regard, we may be considered as a technical donor. We seek to adopt a more proactive approach, rather than simply awaiting applications.

**AJ: In this context, we would like to inquire about ALIPH's response to the emergency situation in Sudan. At the beginning of September this year plunder of the largest museums took place, including the National Museum in Khartoum and other museums in other cities such as Omdurman. Lootings of archaeological sites also occurred. We can learn from ALIPH's website that some actions have already been undertaken. This is a matter of great concern to many of our readers in Poland, given the long-standing collaboration between Polish and Sudanese museologists and archaeologists. Moreover, Poland is currently represented on the Nubian Committee within UNESCO. Could you please comment on the current situation in Sudan and the emergency plan that you are implementing there?**

**ES:** Sudan represents one of the most challenging contexts at present for our work. This is due to the fact that the majority of partners that we were previously working with – including the Polish Archaeological Mission (with whom we have a joint project for Old Dongola) – have now departed, as have the local authorities (National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums) who are now based in Cairo. Consequently, it is challenging to undertake operational activities on the ground. As has been previously indicated, ALIPH is reliant on the operational capacity of our grantees. Hence the absence of personnel on the ground limits our ability to undertake any action. Indeed, considerable effort has been expended throughout the year in identifying the operators on site who are still capable of undertaking specific tasks. Four projects were adopted at the end of June, which are examining



a number of sites, including Meroe, a World Heritage Site, with a focus on flood protection and the prevention of looting. ALIPH is also in contact with the Polish mission to ascertain whether it would be feasible for a contingent from Old Dongola to return to the site and facilitate the commencement of operations by the local teams, given the considerable impact of the recent rainfall. Indeed, it is not merely the effects of war that have caused damage; the region has also suffered from heavy rainfall during the recent season. A considerable number of sites have sustained significant damage.

**AJ: Thank you for providing further insight into this complex and challenging issue. Could we now refer to the emergency in Ukraine, given the mention of 200 ongoing projects (if we have correctly apprehended the situation).**

**ES:** The majority of these projects have already been completed, given that many of them were initiated in response to urgent situations. The typical duration of these projects is between one and three months. Since the commencement of hostilities, the number of ongoing projects has reached approximately 230 now.

**AJ: Could you please elaborate on the primary focus of these projects at the time?**

**ES:** Our efforts have been concentrated in three areas. A significant portion of our activities has been dedicated to museums and collections. In essence, the objective is to safeguard museum collections; establish secure storage facilities; and provide a range of support services, including storage and packing materials. Furthermore, we have enjoyed a productive collaboration with the National Rescue and Restoration Centre in Kyiv, a governmental authority responsible for the preservation and restoration of all public collections. We have developed a specialized type of vehicles for their use, a sort of ambulances for heritage. In essence, these are small vans equipped with packing materials and conservation materials, which their teams utilize to reach remote locations and all along the frontline, to provide assistance with packing and emergency repairs. However, in recent times they have also been employed to assess collections that were packed two years ago, preparing them to remain in that state for an extended period. The second area comprises built heritage, the majority of which has been either emergency protected or stabilized. The objective is to prevent deterioration. Restoration work has not been a primary focus, as it is too soon to do so. We do have also supported the documentation of built heritage as a significant aspect of our work. Conse-

## INTERVIEWS

Elke Selter talks to Alicja Jagielska-Burduk and Andrzej Jakubowski

---

quently, a considerable amount of 3D scanning and other forms of documentation have been conducted. A third area of focus has emerged more recently, comprising projects funded by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) to support archives and libraries. This third area entails the development of inventories; documentation; protection and safe storage; and digitalization. What we have seen this year in Ukraine, is mostly a stepping away from only acute emergency work towards a preparing for a more prolonged state of emergency and the need to ensure that collections as well as heritage buildings are sufficiently stable and secure.

**AJB and AJ: It is our sincere hope that the next stage – which we understand to be the reconstruction and recovery of cultural life, institutions, and heritage sites after the conflict – will take place very soon.**

**We would like to express our gratitude for your time and for this most enlightening interview.**