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## **The Fouad Debbas Collection (Lebanon) in the Core of a Regional Emergency Preparedness Strategy**

**Yasmine Chemali**

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Joint Meeting in Wellington, New Zealand.*

The Fouad Debbas Collection is one of the most important photographic collections in the Middle East. It contains more than 40,000 images from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Turkey, and Egypt, dating from the beginning of photography in the 1860's until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

The collection includes albumen prints in portfolios or mounted in albums, postcards classified by publishers and subject matter, glass plates and magic lantern slides, stereoscopic views, negatives, cartes de visites, and cabinet cards, as well as maps, books, and a notably famous manuscript from 1853/5-1860/2 written and illustrated by the Countess de Perthuis.

The mission of the Fouad Debbas Collection is to ensure accessibility and visibility to the images as an open-source for research and knowledge, while securing an optimum storage environment for the photographs themselves.



*Teatime scene with the Saalmüller family in Brummana, Lebanon, gelatin silver bromide  
glass plate negative, The Fouad Debbas Collection©.*

Located in Beirut, the collection is stored in a facility specially equipped for its needs in terms of housing (acid-free enclosures and envelopes), storage (adequate shelving system), lighting (UV filters), climate (air conditioning, dehumidifiers and water-leak detectors), and security (controlled access, fire extinguisher and smoke detector).

Collections in Lebanon and neighboring regions face many risks, including the humid climate of the country damaging vulnerable archives and collections, the “Damocles sword” of a new regional armed conflict, the lack of governmental support, and the absence of emergency preparedness programs. Also problematic is the way that the Arab people have become used to recovering from disasters, especially in a country that suffered a 15-year civil war and faces many other threats to national security.

The idea of developing a common strategy for emergency actions is a result facing of those risks. Lebanese institutions do not have emergency preparedness strategies and cooperation between institutions does not exist. Confusion about the future course of action at the very moment of a disaster should be avoided, and having an emergency plan in place would save a considerable amount of time. Bringing together photographic collections to work together in listing affiliated professionals, training volunteers, involving civil protection partners, establishing priorities in collections, and setting up a kit of supplies and tools, as well as looking for a secured location: all those endeavors are part of a common strategy at the regional level that is presented and detailed in this paper.

In March 2012 the first meeting of the Modern Heritage Observatory (MoHO) took place in Beirut. Partners in this initiative are the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), Arab Association for Arabic Music (IRAB), the Arab Centre for Architecture (ACA), and the Cinémathèque of Tanger. It aims to advocate for the preservation of modern cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa, with an emphasis on photography, music, architecture, video, and film. The project partners have come together to mobilize for joint action to impact policies and legal frameworks, and to generate political commitment towards modern cultural heritage. Through the creation of a network between professional bodies from the region, the project seeks an exchange of experience and expertise, and the elaboration of strategies for joint advocacy actions. The Modern Heritage Observatory provides an ideal framework in which to develop a common strategy for an emergency preparedness plan through its regional meetings, trainings, and workshops.

***Step 1: How to assess risks and decide priorities for your collections.***

The situation in Lebanon is complex and paradoxical: on one hand Lebanese are used to dealing with emergency situations, but on the other hand they do not seem very concerned by the idea of preparing for risks or disasters. There is a feeling of *wait and see* about what will happen. In this context, this is quite hard to plan an emergency response with Lebanese people. This is why one of the first steps of an emergency preparedness strategy is to assess real risks that threaten collections in order to make the appropriate decisions. Putting pressure on cultural institutions by shocking them with the possibility of a threat is a good way to awaken them to the necessity of emergency planning.

Risk assessment can take the form of a survey conducted by each institution, with questions such as: What weather conditions or sources of natural disaster are associated with the geographical location of your institution? What are the potential sources of disasters (airport, railroad, oil refinery) near your institution? What could be internal causes (structural collapses, unstable materials in the collection, theft and vandalism) of damage? Once the survey is completed, each institution should also analyze its own collection and storage room(s). The feasibility of a common disaster preparedness strategy for the Middle East region will not be guaranteed unless it targets collections of approximately the same size, which are constituted of the same type of artifacts.

According to Stefan Michalski, a senior conservation scientist at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), there are nine agents of deterioration that can cause damage or loss to collections. These are as follows: 1 - direct physical force, 2 - thieves, vandals, and displacers, 3 - fire, 4 - water, 5 - pests, 6 - contaminants, 7 - incorrect temperature, 8 - incorrect relative humidity, and 9 - dissociation. This list was developed by CCI and is available online at [www.cci-icc.gc.ca](http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca) (Michalski, 2004, pp.51-90). To this list, it seems crucial to add one more agent: 10 - armed conflict.

In order to better understand better the risks faced by collections, the creation of one or several scenarios for each deterioration agent is essential. This permits the different risks to be scored, and for institutions to see where their priorities lie.

The Magnitude of Risk is then the sum of four components. According to approach outlined by ICCROM and CCI, for each specific risk assessed, a list of questions arises:

A. How soon? is the rate or probability of damage.

B. How much damage to each affected artifact? describes the proportional loss of value.

C. How much of the collection is affected? represents the fraction of collection at risk.

D. How important are the affected artifacts? concerns the value of artifacts at risk.

**A. How soon?**

- 4: about once every year /in about 1 year
- 3: about once in 10 years/ in about 10 years
- 2: about once in 100 years/in about 100 years
- 1: about once in 1000 years/in about 1000 years

**B. How much damage?**

- 4 : total or almost total loss of artifact (100%,  $\frac{1}{1}$ )
- 3: significant but limited damage to each artifact (10%,  $\frac{1}{10}$ )
- 2: moderate or reversible damage to each artifact (1%,  $\frac{1}{100}$ )
- 1: just observable damage to the artifact (0.1%,  $\frac{1}{1000}$ )

**C. How much is affected?**

- 5: all or most of the collection (100%,  $\frac{1}{1}$ )
- 4: a large fraction of the collection (10%,  $\frac{1}{10}$ )
- 3: a small fraction of the collection (1%,  $\frac{1}{100}$ )
- 2: one artifact (0.1%,  $\frac{1}{1000}$ )
- 1: even less than one artifact (0.01%,  $\frac{1}{10,000}$ )

**D. How important are the artifacts?**

- 3: much higher than average significance (100x the average)
- 2: higher than the average significance (10x the average)
- 1: average significance for this collection
- 0: lower than average value for this collection ( $\frac{1}{10}$  the average)

The Fouad Debbas Collection has accomplished this exercise and the results according to each scenario clearly highlight the major risks to the collection (see below).

Deterioration Agent 1: Physical Forces. This deterioration agent is not currently a priority for the collection. However, Lebanon is located on fault line (see IRIN 2009 and UISF 2009) and could have an earth tremor. In the storage room most of the artifacts are paper-material, housed in boxes. Seismic tremors could most probably negatively affect some of the glass plate negatives or more vulnerable materials. Results: A:2, B:1, C:2, D:1. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **6**.

Deterioration Agent 2: Fire. If a short circuit happens in the Debbas showroom (where a business in light fixtures is located) a fire could travel up to collection storage on an upper floor. There is currently no fire suppression system such as an FM200 in the collection storage room. Results: A:2, B:4, C:5, D:2. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **13**.

Deterioration Agent 3: Thieves, Vandals and Displacers. This deterioration agent is not a priority for the collection. However, the following scenario is possible: during a public exhibition a visitor is offended by the caption “Beirut, Syria” as it is often noted on historic postcards and albumen prints. The visitor would “correct the error” by erasing “Syria” and writing “Lebanon” instead, but the frame would still provide protection for the photograph. Results: A:3, B:1, C:1, D:1. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **6**.

Deterioration Agent 4: Water. A drainage malfunction from a dehumidifier in the collection room could produce a leak during the weekend. Four water leak detectors are installed in the storage room and the collection manager is immediately alerted thanks to the building management system (BMS). Results: A:2, B:2, C:1, D:1. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **6**.

Deterioration Agent 5: Infestation and Pollutants. This deterioration agent is not currently a priority for the Fouad Debbas Collection. However, the air is very polluted in Beirut (see Baaklini 2012 and Bard 2012). The Debbas building is also not a dedicated museum space but an office building with a cafeteria. A fly could get into the building through an office window and travel to the collection room: flyspecks could later be found but those would be on the storage enclosures and not on the artifacts themselves. Results: A:1, B:1, C:1, D:0. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **3**.

Deterioration Agent 6: Light. Ultraviolet (UV) light filters cover all lights in the storage room and in the adjacent corridor as well. Nevertheless, one photograph could be exposed to UV light while being handled in the digitization lab. Results: A:3, B:1, C:1, D:1. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **6**.

Deterioration Agents 7 & 8: Incorrect Relative Humidity (RH) and Temperature. The Fouad Debbas Collection has made great effort concerning climate control and maintaining a good environment for its photographs and archives. However, due to the humid climate of Beirut and to the HVAC system chosen (air conditioning and dehumidifiers), the collection is threatened by some fluctuations of RH and/or temperature during power cuts, which are frequent occurrences in Lebanon. Results: A:3, B:2, C:2, D:0. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **7**.

Deterioration Agent 9: Dissociation. This deterioration agent is not a priority for the collection, as materials are currently stored in one room only and have a good classification system. However, the listing and inventory of all photographs and archives are not 100% reliable, and

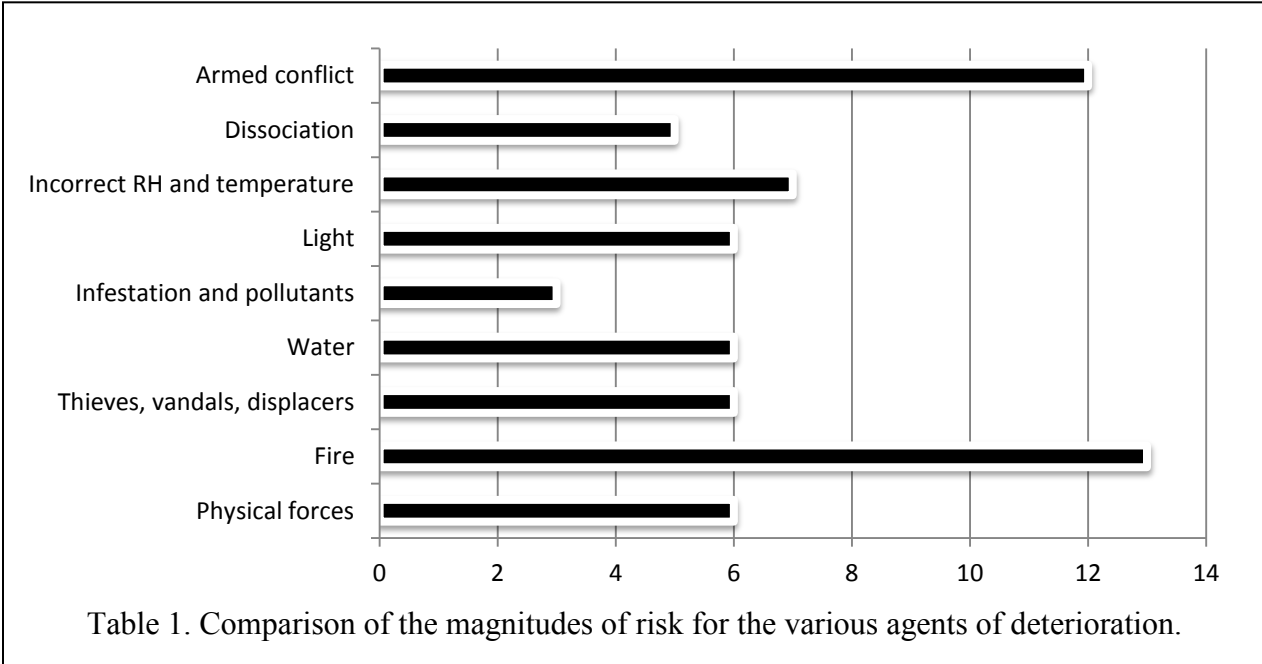
there is sometimes no correlation between what is written on the inventory and what is found in the storage room. This deterioration agent was added to Michalski’s list because we believe that this can be a recurring problem for private collections or institutions which are not museums. Results: A:2, B:2, C:1, D:0. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **5**.

The tenth deterioration agent, armed conflict, could be considered as a hazard or “source of danger” in various societies (Michalski, 2004, p.52) but reflects the reality for Lebanese institutions. The Fouad Debbas Collection formulated two scenarios in order to illustrate two different risks that have a high probability of occurring.

1. During a conflict, the army requisitions the Debbas building, equipment, and vital supplies. The staff is unable to enter the collection room due to restrictions on movement imposed onto the civilian population. Electricity is cut off and the risk of attack reaches its climax. The building could be devastated. Results: A:3, B:3, C:3, D:3. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **12**.

2. Tires being burnt block the highway behind the building. A dark thick smoke is entering the building: noxious particles are everywhere and infiltrate the collection room. Results: A:4, B:2, C:3, D:1. Total (Magnitude of Risk): **10**.

The result of the risk analysis within the Fouad Debbas Collection is that the primary concern is for three major deterioration agents: fire, incorrect RH and temperature, and armed conflict. Calculating the Magnitude of Risk is an efficient tool to trigger awareness for preservation and risk management (see table below).



<b>Magnitude of Risk Due to the Specific Risk Assessed</b>	
14-16	<b>Catastrophic priority:</b> total loss is possible in a few years or less. These scores arise typically from very high fire or flood probabilities, earthquake, bombing, and fortunately, are rare.
11-13	<b>Extreme priority:</b> significant damage or loss to a significant portion of the collection is possible in a few years. These scores typically arise with very high rates of significant deterioration from bright light, UV, or damp.
9-10	<b>Urgent priority:</b> significant but limited damage of the collection is possible in a few years. These scores typically arise from security problems and in institutions where preventive conservation is not a priority.
7-8	<b>Moderate priority:</b> moderate damage to some artifacts is possible in a few years, or significant damage or loss is possible after many decades. These scores apply to the ongoing improvements even conscientious museums must make after addressing all of the higher risk issues.
4-6	<b>Low priority:</b> small damage to some artifacts is possible after many decades.
1-3	<b>Museum maintenance</b>

These surveys and methods are some tools used to assess risks and decide priorities; but they are useless if the inventory of the collection is not complete, if the storage conditions are unknown, and if condition reporting for artifacts is not done.

### ***Step 2: Why knowing the collections is crucial.***

Having a clear inventory and retaining records and all information relating to the collection will benefit any for future actions. Such documents will help in case of emergency recovery. Physical characteristics such as size, weight, or vulnerability should be reported in a database as well as the object's location in the storage or exhibition spaces. In case of an emergency, knowing where artifacts are located will increase their accessibility. Signs or color codes should be used for each priority level, and a file constructed for each object. For example, establishing the location(s) of the *priority items* and marking storage boxes with stickers that reflect this priority can be a good method to of saving time when a disaster occurs. Again, priority markers indications should never be evident to a visitor, but known within with institution.

Guidelines for condition reporting should also be established. In order to get an accurate evaluation of the general condition of the Fouad Debbas Collection, the decision was made to examine in detail 10% of the collection: unmounted and mounted photographs, cabinet cards, stereos, postcards, etc. A general assessment (counting of items per album, portfolio, or box) of the collection was first done. Afterwards a representative 10% of photos were chosen for the more in-depth examination. Over the next few months, a large number of condition reports were completed. In order to be precise as possible, four levels of condition were described. The results for the selected samples were obtained and extrapolated for the whole collection. From those extrapolated percentages and the type and extent of deterioration encountered, decisions were made as to collection priorities in case of an emergency.

Ideally, determining why one album is more important than another should not be an obligation nor a choice, but at the very moment of a disaster collections managers should know that some

artifacts are less valuable than others. Impartially evaluating collections is not an easy task, but is still necessary. Listing artifacts according to their value can be an option, using scores from 0 to 3. In this system 0 would be for a photograph or other item that can be found in every collection, while 3 would be for a unique piece, a very important artifact in the history of art, technology, or science. Level 2 would describe meaningful artifacts but which exist in other collections and 1 for artifacts that are a somewhat superior to an item classified as 0. No classification should be definitive, and the list should be revised and updated according to the evolution of the art market value, new discoveries relating to the object such as a signature or stamp, new acquisitions by the institution, and/or new publications. And importantly, this list should stay confidential to the public.

***Step 3: Identify partners and conduct trainings.***

The common emergency preparedness strategy presented here is in line with recent initiatives supported by the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development and the International Centre for the Study and Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). From December 3-15, 2012, the Prince Claus Fund supported cultural heritage rescue training in Lebanon (ICCROM 2013). For twelve days, archaeologists, architects, military, and humanitarian volunteers learned to recover cultural heritage through lectures and a hands-on recovery workshop, which simulated an actual disaster scenario. The training, called “Lebanese for Lebanon,” was initiated by Anna Dal Maso, a participant of ICCROM’s International Course on First Aid to Cultural Heritage in Times of Conflict. Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Biladi was also an important partner in the “Lebanese for Lebanon” training. Biladi is dedicated to promoting cultural and natural heritage to youths. Its main mission is to re-establish the link between young people and their heritage, which can serve as a tool for establishing dialogues in conflict situations.

Along the same line, the Modern Heritage Observatory (MoHO) strategy for emergency response should target partners from different backgrounds which share the same concern towards cultural heritage. Civil protection partners should support the strategy: police are needed for the maintenance of public security and order, the fire service for rescue and general damage protection, and technical services for ensuring that infrastructures such as electricity, water, and gas suppliers, as well as transport and IT systems, are operational.

In Lebanon, where there is a clear lack of governmental support the role of NGOs is crucial. Wherever there is an emergency in the country, the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) intervenes. Established in 1945, following the years of civil war, this humanitarian organization has reoriented its services to address postwar requirements. Led by volunteers, the LRC provides relief to victims of natural and man-made disasters, and helps people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies. Save Beirut Heritage (SBH) is a cultural heritage organization based in Beirut. Created in 2010 by activists as a Facebook group highlighting and vocalizing the dangers facing Beirut's ancient sites and traditional buildings, SBH aims to preserve Lebanese architectural heritage, especially in Beirut. The organization, which is equipped with a 24-hour hotline, lobbies the Ministry of Culture and other decision-makers through petitions and public demonstrations.



Not to be forgotten, an emergency response project needs many trained volunteers, in addition to the current MoHO members, who can assist in protecting an emergency site and the artifacts. The situation of the Fouad Debbas Collection is not unique: this private collection does not have enough staff to form the sufficient and available team necessary to deal with the collection in case of a disaster. For each partner institution, specific roles should be identified as described in Heritage Preservation's *Field Guide to Emergency Response, A Vital Tool for Cultural Institution* (2006).

Once partners are identified, trainings, workshops, and regular hands-on drills should be developed. These would be held within the MoHO partner-institutions, which include the Fouad Debbas Collection, the Arab Image Foundation, the American University of Beirut, the Arab Center for Architecture, the Institute for Palestine Studies, the Foundation for Arab Music Archiving, and Research and Fondation Liban-Cinema. The teaching component aspect of this common emergency preparedness plan is essential because participants should immediately know how to react when an emergency occurs. This teaching can take the form of group discussions, regular hands-on drills or role-plays. They should include topics such as: how to handle valuable artifacts stuck in mud, how to act with civil protection forces. Teaching materials should be available in Arabic: the Arab Image Foundation has already translated Heritage Preservation's Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel as well as a number of videos and presentation by experts from ICCROM and the US Committee of the Blue Shield (a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts).

### ***Summary***

In this region, we cannot afford to sit and wait until disasters come along. We need to prepare for an emergency situation by creating some useful materials such as a toolkit containing supplies and equipment, report forms in order to assess damages, evacuation plans for people and artifacts as well as for collection archives and documentation, and to identify an accessible and clearly designated storeroom to host the damaged collections once evacuated. The principle function of a disaster supplies toolkit is to contain first-aid sanitary materials, personal protection equipment, basic stationery, and packaging material for evacuation purposes. In case of a disaster, partner-institution can help one another by renting its toolkit, whole or in part. But why renting? Because each institution should have, at all times, an emergency toolkit available, fully stocked, and ready to use at any moment.

This paper is presented here as a work in progress. It is not a proper emergency model plan for an institution, but a strategy to gather our forces in the Lebanese region, and to encourage collaboration and dialogue between collecting institutions, civil forces, NGOs, and product/service suppliers.

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