

# From Ancient Egypt, To a New Renaissance

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

All too often, the news broadcast about the Arab world is negative, if not tragic—the plight of the Palestinian people being emblematic. Thus, when events of a happier nature take place, which establish a higher moral standpoint from which to approach a solution, they should be heralded with joy.

Such is the case with the inauguration of the historic Alexandria Library (called the Bibliotheca Alexandrina), in the Egyptian city of that name, on Oct. 16. Addressed to a group of 3,000 dignitaries and leading world figures gathered for the occasion, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's "Alexandria Call" (see box) embodied the message of dialogue, not war, that the library communicates. "Here, where we can witness the greatness of the past and the sublimity of history, we can

all call for a world full of understanding, co-existence, peace and security, because this is what makes our children smile. This is what spreads happiness and builds up aspirations for the upcoming generations. Long live the noble values and meanings that the Bibliotheca resurrects today in its inauguration."

"The noble values and meanings" of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina include, above all, the commitment to spreading the great ideas that mankind, throughout history, has developed, in the inexorable struggle to master the laws of the universe and improve the human condition. The Alexandria Library was not merely one among many ancient institutions, to be commemorated for the sake of antiquity: It was a model of the educational institutions required to create geniuses, today as much as then. It was also a model of inter-cultural dialogue, of the free and fruitful exchange of ideas among great minds, of cultures and civilizations encompassing vast expanses of time and space.

## The Vision of Alexander the Great

It was Alexander the Great who, having conquered Egypt, decided to found a city bearing his name, which was to be a commercial crossroads between East and West, as well as a

## The 'Alexandria Call'

*President Hosni Mubarak's Oct. 16 speech to 3,000 dignitaries at the opening of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, is excerpted here from Egyptian State Information Service.*

Today, we are celebrating the inauguration of Bibliotheca Alexandrina. By building it back in place, we are reviving human heritage in the area. Here, religions were revealed and prophets lived to sow eternal values of tolerance and co-existence. It was the launching pad of movements of liberation and enlightenment throughout history and time. The old Bibliotheca Alexandrina was a melting pot of all civilizations, cultures and knowledge for all peoples. The great value of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the recognition of its international role and the need to resurrect this value, especially at this critical moment of our history, drove in these diligent efforts to construct it back in its original place, where it disappeared 1,600 years ago.

The old one was a monolith of diligent scientific research and collective cultural efforts. It was an epitome of persistent efforts to combine and integrate all cultures and civilizations and to unify the world as we all try to do now. It had always been a global source of information to all scholars, of all religions and from all over the world. It

spread its spell over the Middle Ages, the Renaissance in Europe and then in the rest of the world. This unique historical event encourages us to talk about some noble human values. . . :

First: Maintaining inter-cultural dialogue and interaction is the only rational way to eliminate violence and tension and build bridges among peoples using knowledge and peaceful co-existence as common bases of communication.

Second: asserting the unity of human heritage which was created by all religions, nations and cultures on sound grounds of understanding, cooperation and partnership, rather than clashes, discord and monopoly.

Third: Underscoring the effective role of the Arab Islamic civilization in building up the human heritage. From the very first inception of human civilizations, knowledge moved forward, in a historical sequence and order, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Greeks, the Arab intellectuals and scientists and then to the European Renaissance, in an intertwined process void of any conflicts or clashes. This is clearcut evidence that human civilization is a full-fledged process combining all civilizations and can never be created by a sole nation or civilization alone. . . .

## History Has Taught Us Dialogue

Egypt was keen that the new Bibliotheca inherit the conceptual values of cultural bridging, intellectual diversi-

cultural and scientific center of the world. In 323 B.C., after Alexander's untimely death, the satrapy of Egypt fell into the hands of Ptolemy, and it was under the Ptolemies—Ptolemy Soter (323-283 B.C.) and his son Ptolemy II (285-246 B.C.), that the city was developed.

Alexandria was divided into three districts, populated by Egyptians, Greeks and Jews. Graced with ample, wide avenues and magnificent marble and stone buildings, the city was considered indestructible. There were four great buildings which stood out above the rest. The first was the Soma, which was built to house the body of Alexander, embalmed and encased in gold. Next was the Serapeum, with the Temple of Serapis for worship. Then, there was the Mouseion, located in the Greek quarter known as the Brucheion. This was actually a center of study, with lecture rooms, galleries and housing for hundreds of students, who could reside there and study. The students undertook to copy manuscripts, to edit them, to study them, and to conduct research of their own. The institution which provided them the material, was the fourth landmark, the famed library called the Alexandrina.

The library was organized in ten large halls, each of which corresponded to a branch of learning. In each hall, were thousands of manuscripts, carefully catalogued and classified. Ac-

cording to the historian Epiphanius (320-403 A.D.), King Ptolemy Philadelphus built the library and bade its caretaker, Demetrius of Phalarene, "collect the books in existence in every quarter of the world, and he wrote letters importuning every king and governor on Earth to send ungrudgingly the books (that were within his realm or government); I mean the works of poets and prose writers, orators and sophists, physicians, professors of medicine, historians and so on. One day, when the business was proceeding apace and the books were being assembled from all quarters, the King asked his librarian how many volumes had been collected in the library. He made answer to the King and said: 'There are already 54,800, more or less. But I hear that there is still a great mass of writings in the world, among the Ethiopians and Indians, the Persians and Elamites and Babylonians, the Assyrians and Chaldeans, among the Romans also and the Phoenicians, the Syrians and them of Hellas. . . . There are, moreover, with them of Jerusalem and Judea certain divine books of the prophets, which tell of God and the creation of the world and contain all other teaching that is for the general good. Wherefore, O King, if it is Thy Majesty's pleasure to send for these also, do thou write to the doctors in Jerusalem, and they will send them to thee.' "

ty and radiation of knowledge and information from the old one. . . . If we can say that the reconstruction of Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a leap forward, in a bid to maintain noble values, then this means that the pioneers of scientific and cultural renaissance in our society should work hard on highlighting the common features of different cultures and societies. They should also try to promote cultural and intellectual dialogue and exchange and broaden the level of understanding among people of different creeds. This would help us perceive and unveil the unseen motives behind other people's thoughts and actions.

We should all realize that the current political disputes and steep differences in economic and social visions are primarily fed with negative feelings of frustration and despair and would finally lead to a vicious circle of extremism and violence that will spread its spell over all of us and we will all suffer from its dire consequences.

Thus, this unique historical event should motivate us and strengthen our political will in achieving justice and equality in its broader sense. A framework of both single and collective societal interests should permeate. It should also shun any attempts to hegemonize, either by using military force or economic pressure.

History has taught us that the only way to settle disputes is dialogue, based on a balance of equal rights and commitments and respect to other people's opinions, values and cultures. The attempt to enforce unjust settlements

or situations would succeed at the beginning but in the end, it would sow the seeds of grudge and hatred in the hearts of the upcoming generations. It would further jeopardize the harmony, we are all seeking to achieve among ourselves. . . .

The reconstruction of this monolithic Bibliotheca embodies all meanings of civilizational bridging and human co-existence. This calls on us to hold tight to just and comprehensive peace, refuse the logic of power and call for the respect of legitimacy which reflects and maintains human conscience. Our region has always been suffering from bloodshed and conflicts. Now it is time to put this to an end. This applies to all parties because human blood is equally valuable. Man is just the same everywhere and at all times. So, violence should stop now and security should be set back on track. Rights are the grips of power and not vice versa. This would drive everybody to the route of just and comprehensive peace. . . .

This is the "Alexandria Call." Here, where we can witness the greatness of the past and the sublimity of history, we can all call for a world full of understanding, co-existence, peace and security, because this is what makes our children smile. This is what spreads happiness and builds up aspirations for the upcoming generations. Long live the noble values and meanings that the Bibliotheca resurrects today in its inauguration. It is here to voice them and to maintain them. . . .



*The glass roof of the new Alexandria Library, in front of the harbor of the ancient and famous city. The library was opened Oct. 16 with a speech by Egyptian President Mubarak to 3000 dignitaries from around the world; Mubarak stressed the strengthening of a "dialogue of cultures" by the revival of this largest and most celebrated of all centers of learning of ancient times.*

This great library became the center of learning of the world for over 900 years. It attracted the greatest minds like a magnet: Straton, Xenophon, Philemon, Euclid, Herophilus, Theodoros, Hegesias of Cyrene, Callimachus, and Eratosthenes, and many more. Among the librarians said to have been appointed to supervise the great institution, were Zenodotus of Ephesus, Alexander of Aetolia, Callimachus of Cyrene, and the great Eratosthenes of Cyrene. Others included Apollonius of Alexandria, Aristophanes of Byzantium, and Aristarchus of Samothrace. It was at Alexandria, that Eratosthenes conceived his experiment to measure the circumference of the globe.

Ptolemy Philadelphus purchased the volumes in the library of Aristotle, as well as various versions of the Homeric epics. He bought so many works that he had to enlarge the library to accommodate them, and in 250 B.C., new rooms were made available in the Serapis temple.

### **How the Library Was Destroyed**

The Alexandrina testified to political and intellectual leaders, who fully understood the crucial significance of the spread of knowledge, as the precondition for social and economic progress and stability. By the same token, it was thanks to the personal depravity and political wretchedness of later political leaders, in the Roman Empire and later, that the great library and museum were destroyed.

There are many historical versions of what happened to the library, at times contradictory. But what can be ascertained, for certain, is that the first serious blows to it came from the Roman emperors. In 48 B.C., in the war between



*The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina's circling wall bears inscriptions in all known human languages, ancient and modern.*

Julius Caesar and the Alexandrian fleet, fires ravaged the city. Lucan and Seneca (both put to death by Nero in 65 A.D.) described the fire that destroyed 40,000 books. Plutarch, in his biography of Caesar, gave a similar account: "When the enemy tried to cut off his fleet, Caesar was forced to repel the danger by using fire, which spread from the dockyards and destroyed the 'great Library.' "

Under the reign of Octavian, the Emperor Augustus, peace was reestablished after the civil wars, and the library was rehabilitated; many subsequent emperors tried to pose as its "protectors," so great was the Alexandria Library's fame. A turn for the worse occurred under Emperor Caracalla. This bloody Roman tyrant, who traversed his provinces, plundering and killing as he went, was made the subject of ridicule by the Alexandrians, in a series of poems and stories. To teach them a lesson, Caracalla proceeded into the city, and gave the order to his troops to enter houses and slaughter everyone indiscriminately. Blood ran down the streets in rivers. The library survived, but barely. It was reported, later, to be standing, but with no people in it. Further devastation occurred at the hand of Queen Zenobia in 270 A.D., and in 295, Diocletian laid siege to the city, slaughtering the people and burning the buildings. Diocletian gave the order to seek out what books remained and destroy them by fire.

Under Theodosius the Great (375-95 A.D.), the wave of destruction against Alexandria came under the pretext of eliminating paganism. With the Edict of Theodosius of 391 A.D., all the temples and pagan idols had to be destroyed. This included the Temple of Serapis, which was considered a heathen temple, and, apparently also, the library and its works, which were eliminated in 389 A.D. Three hundred thousand volumes were stolen and/or destroyed. Thus, when the Arabs arrived and conquered Egypt and Alexandria in

about 642-46 A.D., there were very few rolls left in the library to be destroyed. The accounts according to which the Arabs burned the library, have been shown to be fraudulent.

## **Rebuilding the Library of Alexandria**

It is fitting that it is an Arab government which has restored the Alexandrina, given the widespread belief in the story that the Arabs destroyed it. The library was, for centuries, in the center of a fight to the death between those forces—in different cultural traditions—which promoted the spread of knowledge as the means to uplift and develop human society, and those forces dedicated to the idea of the tyranny of the few, who would impound such knowledge to maintain control over the ignorant masses.

The idea to rebuild the library goes back to 1974, and is attributed to Egyptian historian Mostafa al-Abbadi, author of a definitive history of the library. The ambitious project was designed not only to commemorate the historic library, but to replicate it for the modern world. On June 26, 1988, President Mubarak laid the foundations for the building, accompanied by the director general of the UN Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which issued a call to individuals, organizations and countries to support the project. An International Committee for Supporting the Funding Campaign, was established at the request of Egypt. In 1990, \$230 million was pledged, mainly by Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Egyptian government underwrote the budget.

The design of the building is circular, to reflect the Sun, which is a central motif in Egyptian culture. As one government press release explained, “The inclination of the building therefore represents the rising of the Sun, while its face to the sea indicates the unlimited open space and distance which is the search for knowledge.” The building is encased within a granite wall, on which all the alphabets of the world have been carved.

The project leaders have striven to replicate the efforts of the Ptolemies, in gathering important works from all over the world. The library used its budget, donated by the Egyptian government, to purchase 350,000 books initially. With further purchases, and generous contributions by governments and institutions, the library has 4 million volumes, 50,000 maps, 100,000 manuscripts, 10,000 rare books, 200,000 disks/tapes of musical works, 50,000 disks/videos, and 100 CD-ROM titles. The complex includes a conference center with 3,200 seats, a science museum, a planetarium, a school of information studies, a calligraphy institute, and a museum.

The inauguration of the library has made the world considerably richer. The revived Biblioteca Alexandrina should become, like its namesake, a center of learning and research, with emphasis on the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. Scholars from throughout the world should flock there, as their ancient counterparts did, to study, deliberate, research, teach, and discover.