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## Interview: Mohsen Zahran

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# Alexandria Library to become new center of learning for the world

*Dr. Mohsen Zahran is Director of the General Organization of the Alexandria Library, in Egypt. He was interviewed by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach and Jacques Cheminade in December.*

**EIR:** What is the status of the work, and your expectations regarding the construction of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina?

**Dr. Zahran:** The building is 92% completed; actually, the building itself is 99.5% complete, but then there is the parking area, which is not yet ready. This is what makes the difference between 92 and 99.5%. The planetarium is finished; the structure of the science museum and the library is finished. As for the internal furnishings, the partitions, it varies from 50 to 70%. We started, at the beginning of this year [1998], finishing the partitions and the lower floors. The finishing starts from below, the greatest area, which is the amphitheater; it is about 20,000 square meters at the bottom, and goes to about 1,000 at the top. The higher you go, the less space you have to finish. According to the contract, the work should be done by the end of April 1999; it is a joint project between a British firm and an Egyptian firm, and it may be delayed a few months, also due to a lot of rain we had, which held up construction, and general bad weather, which even affected deliveries at the port. So, some of these things affected the schedule, causing a couple of months' delay, and we expect it to be ready by summer.

Phase one was the construction of the foundation, which started on May 15, 1995, and ended Dec. 31, 1996. Phase two, which took 15 months, went from Dec. 27, 1996, and should end by April 1999. According to a declaration of the Ministry of Education, the opening will take place in the last quarter of 1999. Like the French National Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale Française, it was opened by François Mitterrand before he left his office, and then was opened again by President [Jacques] Chirac, and the last portion, the research section, was opened last October, in 1998.

We do not want to open the library for the users right away; the opening of the finished building is one thing, then we have to train some of the staff, and train the users, too, because this will be an intelligent building, state of the art, connected with other libraries around the world.

The users have to be trained; this is not usually done. The user has to be trained to learn how to work with the system. For the first time in the world, this library will have an information system, state of the art, multi-lingual, multi-alphabet, more developed than the Bibliothèque Nationale Française system, which was designed in 1994. (In the information technology world, you understand what I mean, you are always a loser, because what you bought at the beginning of the year, a few months later, is obsolete! This will happen to us.) The library is near completion. They are putting in the finishings, painting, air conditioning, piping, putting up the systems.

**EIR:** The ancient library was a center of learning for the whole world, it was a place which drew great minds from everywhere. Are you planning to revive this aspect, by organizing international symposia, conferences here, for example, to draw scholars and researchers?

**Dr. Zahran:** As you can see in the model of the library, there is a conference center which Egypt has given to the library complex. You have the planetarium, the science museum on one side, and the library building. The library is not a "library," it is an advanced institution for research. It is not a traditional library, not the city library or a university library. It is not the national library. It is the Bibliotheca Alexandrina—if you know what the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was doing, you see. It has institutions, it has centers for scholars, it has places for people from the region, especially of the Middle East and Mediterranean region, to come together, to talk, to confer, to produce quality work, to give the world the excellence of knowledge, comparable to what the ancient library's scholars gave to the world then. Their giving is known to us, their luminaries are known to us, from Euclid, to Pythagoras, to Eratosthenes.

**EIR:** What about replicating the ancient works that were kept here? To what extent are you trying to replicate the collection that was here?

**Dr. Zahran:** We are trying to get copies of them. Anybody who has one of these copies, does not want to let go of it, because it is like having a museum piece. Imagine if you

owned the Nefertiti in Berlin, or the Rosetta Stone in London—but we will get copies. We got just recently from the Group of Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Athens, a copy of Claudius Ptolemy's book on geography, in color—most beautiful. The idea is, to have copies of such books, documenting the knowledge of the ancient times, through copies which could be displayed in the library for the dimension of history. The historical aspect will also be represented in some mosaics and artifacts that were found on the site, from the Ptolemaic and Roman eras, they will be in the museum.

But we will not dwell on history for the sake of dwelling on history. We have insisted on the revival of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina—What does that mean? revival of one building? an edifice? or the revival of the idea of the excellence of learning? People of good will, of scholarship, will come and produce quality work here. We will publish their work, and we can meet, and confer and radiate this knowledge to other minds, and other centers around the world. So the library has become a kind of an information center, a place where traditional and electronic media will be available, either on line or in hand [books], for their work.

**EIR:** How are you thinking about the planetarium and science museum?

**Dr. Zahran:** The planetarium takes the idea from the ancient library; one of the areas in which the library gave knowledge to the world, was in astronomy. So, we want to maintain this continuity, continuity in the field of knowledge of astronomy, of the quality of work. The planetarium and the science museum are for this, but using the technologies available, showing people what is happening in the universe, whether natural or man-made, with all the experience in space that we have.

The science museum will educate the public, adults and the young together, about the various sciences, and the various achievements in the science world, even about themselves. They will learn about themselves, about the wonders of nature, what the human body is all about. Yes, they have studied this in school, but we will have models, showing how the human body works. It is a kind of learning about the marvels of Creation, within and without.

The issues of environment and ecology will be treated; the issues of nuclear fusion and fission, what they are, what they do, the pros and cons. These are issues to be brought to the mind of the public, because not many people know what fusion energy is, or what fission is, what the implications are. This is public knowledge, this is what we mean when we say that the library is a public research library, regional library, this is part of the public service, for the public. There will also be a service for the blind, which will make available the same information for the blind, which is made available to those who have the blessing of having eyesight. There will also be a business center, to help development of industry.

Other aspects will include, of course, the audiovisual library, the music library, the general references, an international school for information studies, to educate and to graduate people in the language of information technology.

**EIR:** Does this mean you will offer courses in this?

**Dr. Zahran:** Yes, because you see, we have a deficiency here in this field. If we have libraries throughout Egypt that we want to reach out to, we have to have specialists who can do so.

We are talking about hundreds of years, and I will not be around that long. But, the library is something that will develop itself according to the demands of tomorrow. Perhaps some components needed today may not be required tomorrow. The world is changing. What is fifty years in the length of time behind us? Magnificent new strides have been made in various fields, in fifty or a hundred years. So, the library has to be conversant with that and reflective of that, not only, but also leading this.

**EIR:** Are you considering also involving the users in experiments, like those conducted by Eratosthenes, between Aswan and Alexandria, to measure the Earth?

**Dr. Zahran:** Yes, even beyond the place [where those experiments were done]. We should think of it as a university, where people can study even from outside, where courses are offered from here in a kind of outreach. We want to make available the facilities, and also diplomas to others not here.

**EIR:** What is the relationship between Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the universities in Egypt?

**Dr. Zahran:** This is important, because the chairman of the library is the Minister of Higher Education, and he is also the chairman of the board of all universities, so the linkage is a must, there is no way you can work without it. Without it, we could not make available our resources to our neighbors.

**EIR:** In the case of the Bibliothèque Nationale Française, there was no attempt to expand the library to users, to the young students, for the benefit of the nation.

**Dr. Zahran:** The BNF has a different role. I have visited it several times. We have someone there who is an adviser, a supporter in France of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. He is the director of the audiovisual center there. It is national; it is the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the National Library of France. We also have a National Library in Egypt, which has its own role. This [Bibliotheca Alexandrina] is not a library—it is not any library, it is beyond any reference library that anybody can walk through and consult.

Its role is seen in its name, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. It is like a house of knowledge that has to reach out. In the ancient library, as you know, scholars in Athens or Rome, did not consider themselves up to the standard until they came to

the Alexandrina, to be recognized by their peers; then, they would claim that they were experts in this line or that line.

**EIR:** The question that this raises for today is: Who are the peers? Who are the authorities who will establish such standards?

**Dr. Zahran:** This will grow with time. I always warn people, don't expect the baby to become a genius overnight, not to prejudge. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina will grow in time, we will have to give it time, to play the role of having peers, of having radiance, that takes time. We are talking about a span of time, 100, 200, 300 years, whatever it will be. The ancient library took that much time — it did not all of a sudden acquire its place in history in the first year, or ten, or hundred.

So, this is the role of the library, and this is the message we are going to give the generations that follow us, generations which will give the message to others, to follow and to build. Like a wall, you build your own course, course upon course, to build the edifice of human civilization.

**EIR:** We have recently published preliminary work on the great expeditions which took place under the aegis of the Alexandrina, at the time that Eratosthenes was the librarian and thereafter. I'm referring to the expedition eastward into Polynesia and further to the coast of the Americas, an expedition led by Captain Rata and Navigator Maui, who left inscriptions at various sites along the way. Among the inscriptions, there is one that actually writes out the proof of the experiment by Eratosthenes, which he elaborated to measure the circumference of the Earth. Another inscription, in Santiago de Chile, claims the land for the king of Egypt.

It is a fascinating story, because it shows that the knowledge existed, to allow them to attempt the circumnavigation of the globe, and to reach America —

**Dr. Zahran:** As Columbus did later —

**EIR:** Yes, but that that knowledge was lost, that's the point. The knowledge was lost in successive centuries, in the Roman period, and the destruction of the library in 48 B.C. was symbolic of that. That knowledge was lost, until it was revived in Italy during the Renaissance, when they revived that knowledge from here, from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, particularly from the work of Eratosthenes. That means, 1,700 years were lost, in the sense that what could have been accomplished earlier was postponed for many centuries.

This example has become known only recently, in the 1970s, when the inscriptions were deciphered and recognized as an Egyptian dialect spoken by the navigators. Are you familiar with this? Is this in any way included in your plans? It would be a magnificent topic for exhibits, because it is one of the greatest events in human history.

**Dr. Zahran:** Yes, yes, indeed. Although I did not know all this in detail.

**EIR:** Featuring such a development, would certainly fire the imagination of young people as well, coming here.

**Dr. Zahran:** You said the message was there, was left 1,700 years before Columbus. But the message was there; 1,700 years did not erase the message. The message, in time, is kept, for others, of knowledge and vision, like yourselves, to talk about and bring to light. We want to leave a message here to coming generations, to carry on the pursuit of knowledge.

**EIR:** There's also the political question, of whether the political institutions in power recognize the importance of this kind of research, and of making it available to the general population, or, if they try to suppress it. This fight has gone on throughout history.

**Dr. Zahran:** Knowledge is never lost, to my knowledge. Knowledge is never truly lost. It might disappear, it can be eclipsed, for one reason or another, but it will never be lost.

**EIR:** There is also the case of great works of great minds, that have not been lost, but have simply never been published, or translated, or republished, so that they are effectively not available, and largely unknown. For example, massive amounts of material of Gottfried Leibniz are still unpublished in the archives; or the works of Johannes Kepler, some available only in Latin, which not everyone can read today; many works by Nicolaus of Cusa. Many crucial works which have determined the course of human history, have not been published, and could be made available today. Is it the intention of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina to make possible publication efforts of this type, where these rare works could be published, in modern languages?

**Dr. Zahran:** We will do that with our translation center, and we will have our own publishing unit, to publish works that other publishers might not take, for commercial reasons. That would be one of the duties of the library.

I hope you will spread the message to colleagues, others, abroad, because the library is for everyone. We would like to have people contribute to it, books, knowledge, and equipment. For instance, talking about the science museum, there could be help from the United States. So far, the United States has distanced itself from the project, there has been no support from institutions, the foundations, the NGOs [non-governmental organizations], which could send equipment. The government of France has supported the project, but NGOs and other foundations in France could do more. We have the planetarium finished, but the equipment is lacking, for showing films, as well as software. Germany has given the Telelift, a transport system, worth 250,000 marks [roughly \$160,000]. By comparison, Norway has contributed \$6 million worth.

We will, of course, go our own way, and continue, regardless. It does not depend on this or that.