

## Safe havens for human rights archives at risk in the Middle East and North Africa Region

21 March, 15h-16h30 (CET), online, Switzerland

### 1. Introduction

Human rights archives are the result of joint and collective efforts made by journalists, citizens, activists, victims and survivors who have witnessed conflicts and violations and who worked on documenting their struggles. These archives can include, among others, photographs, recorded testimonies and storytelling, written databases of missing people, video archives held by local journalists and activists, and so forth. In the aftermath of conflicts, and to achieve lasting and sustainable peace and real reconciliation, societies shall deal with past human rights violations and address grievances of victims and survivors in order to eradicate all the injustice and marginalization and sorrows. In this context, archives are key elements in this search for justice, reconciliation, and truth, which is often referred to as the 'dealing with the past' process. Archives are also important in countries where democratic institutions and the rule of law are yet to be established. They can be used by activists, victims, and survivors to seek justice at the international level. Therefore, such documentation might be at great risk of destruction either from continued conflicts or by those who want to destroy evidence and insulate themselves from prosecution. This became a central topic in the Middle East and North Africa region which witnessed atrocities and is still witnessing violence and conflicts. While in some countries such as Syria, huge offline and online archives have been created and several civil society initiatives have been launched to collect and store archives and to use them as evidence to seek justice, many other countries in the region are still struggling to retrieve archives, safeguard the nation's memory and reveal the truth about past abuses.

A number of institutions, during the past years and decades, have developed interesting initiatives to offer safe havens for archives at risk. As the international practice around safe haven solutions for archives at risk has identified a number of ethical and practical challenges, an international working group supported by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and accompanied by swisspeace has developed [the Guiding Principles for Safe Havens for Archives at Risk](#). These Principles were endorsed by the International Council on Archives in October 2018 and the Association of Latin American Archivists in 2019. To celebrate the launch of the Arabic version of its [website](#) and to reach out potential sending and hosting institutions in the Middle East and North Africa, the initiative plans a webinar on this subject matter.

## 2. Goals and question

This event aims at shedding light on the value and potential use of human rights archives and at raising awareness on the crucial need to secure and protect human rights documentation in fragile and unstable contexts in the Middle East and North Africa. This event will also provide insight on concrete actions to implement the Principles in practice and provide sensible safe haven solutions in the Middle East and North Africa.

The meeting will address the following topics:

- The value of human rights archives in fragile contexts
- Potential risks that might threaten human rights archives
- Experiences from the Middle East and North Africa where human rights archives have been safeguarded and used
- Possible options offered by hosting institutions to safeguard human rights archives at risk

## 3. Participants

The panel includes experts on the topic of human rights documentation from the North Africa and Middle East region as well as representatives of sending and hosting institutions of archives at risk. The experts will provide insight from their experiences and expertise and will engage in interactive discussions with the attendees.

The event will bring together representatives of civil society organizations and activists who work on this topic from across the region.

The following persons will be part of the panel:

- Jussi Nuorteva, Director General and National Archivist, The National Archives of Finland
- Monika Borgmann, co-founder and co-director, UMAM Documentation and Research Center, Lebanon
- Mazen Darwich, Director, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

Moderation:

- Sahar Ammar, Program Officer, swisspeace, Dealing with the Past program