

Guidance Note
On
Digital Documentation for Endangered Archaeology and its Protection
in the Middle East and North Africa

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1- Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is home to some of the world's best-preserved cultural heritage, including terrestrial and maritime archaeological remains, from prehistory to the Islamic period and modern times. There are many UNESCO World Heritage Sites, innumerable large and small well-preserved and buried archaeological sites, as well as historic towns, city centres, and monuments that are of considerable value to local and national and international communities and scholars. These "places of cultural significance enrich people's lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences" (The Burra Charter 2013). There are different classifications of values associated with cultural heritage, its uses and the relationship between people and the cultural heritage. These include historical, aesthetic, scientific, functional, societal, and economic values, which make the preservation of these places a duty of present generations for the future.

Protection of cultural heritage is also part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN in 2015, is a call to all countries for action to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. The changing environmental, social, and economic factors for different stakeholders and the society are affecting how built heritage is conserved and protected (Mason and Avarami 2019). The 2030 Agenda acknowledges the role of culture in the development process and asks all countries to "strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" to make "cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (Goal 11 of SDGs).

1.1 Threats to MENA's Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage sites across the world, including the MENA region, are at risk from multiple natural and human causes. Data collected by the [EAMENA](#) project show that cultural heritage sites in the MENA region are under threat from factors such as agricultural expansion (especially bulldozing for new fields), natural erosion, construction and (urban) development, looting, armed conflict, and more (Bewley et al., 2016). These factors are common challenges for all modern countries, and analysis of satellite imagery shows that the scale of impact has grown and the pace of destruction has accelerated in the last few decades.

These global risks to the the world's cultural heritage are complicated by a requirement to balance cultural heritage protection with the need, and human right, for shelter, food, and income. With the world's population increasing, including in the MENA region, providing housing, food and water, work, and healthcare, is a clear priority for governments and funding agencies over and above cultural heritage protection. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact not only on intangible, but also tangible

cultural heritage, affecting the ability to actively monitor and manage many archaeological sites (Kono 2020). There are also reports of increased looting in the region because of the economic situation worsened by the pandemic (Matthews 2020; Porterfield 2020; Sylvain Mercadier, Mohammed Shiaa, and Koli 2020).

1.3 The need for a policy on digital documentation.

In the context of the increasing threats to cultural heritage, and the internationally recognized need to work for its preservation, there is a need to develop new methods to assist cultural heritage professionals. One increasingly important method is to use digital recording systems, creating spatially referenced databases of heritage assets, allowing rapid assessment of the value of those assets, the condition of their preservation, the presence of ongoing threats, and their location within the context of new development plans. Such comprehensive digital documentation allows heritage professionals to work with their partners in government to develop long term priorities and strategies, as well as to establish the best responses to mitigate the impact of development needs. This document seeks to establish guidance notes to develop policies for the development of such sustainable digital documentation tools.

The stimulus for this Guidance Note was discussions and debates between heritage professionals during [the Protecting the Past Conference](#) series (2015-2019), especially Tunis in 2017 (see Appendix 1), organised by the EAMENA project (see Appendix 3) and its partners, including the Global Heritage Fund (GHF), ICCROM-Sharjah, ALECSO and many other partners in the region.

The aspiration for this guidance note is to promote a strategic regional approach for the use of digital heritage documentation for mitigation of threats to heritage, focused on the Middle East and North Africa. It builds upon the cumulate knowledge and experience of the heritage authorities and departments of antiquities of the relevant partner countries. The EAMENA project contributes technical and methodological developments combining state-of-the-art remote sensing for heritage documentation and recording, as well as on-site assessment, where possible. It uses remote sensing to identify, document, and monitor cultural heritage sites, recording the information in a bespoke Arches database, freely available in the online [EAMENA database](#).

1.4 Target Audience.

The Guidance Note has multiple audiences, including key decision-makers in MENA governments, leaders of the MENA national heritage organisations, and international funding agencies. It is intended to assist in making decisions and developing policies through the wide regional experience and expertise on digital documentation of cultural

heritage represented by the contributors to this Guidance Note. In particular, this document can also assist heritage leaders in making a strong case to senior decision-makers in the MENA governments, as well as to international and national funders, for implementing and funding new national structures for managing endangered archaeology by identifying the strategic needs in the cultural heritage sector of the MENA region.

2- Digital Documentation of Cultural Heritage

Policy Statement:

The promotion, adoption, and implementation of digital documentation to improve the protection of the cultural heritage is a priority for National Heritage agencies, across the MENA region.

Documentation is an essential tool providing comparable data which can be used for the protection, conservation, restoration, and reconstruction of cultural heritage. The cultural heritage sector should take advantage of rapidly developing and improving digital technologies for the documentation of cultural heritage at local, regional, and national levels. Digital technologies, such as online databases and remote sensing, can offer rapid, cost-effective, and sustainable approaches for documenting heritage resources. Furthermore, inventories at the regional or national level provide evidence to assist with the enforcement of national and international antiquities and heritage laws and conventions. However, many countries in the MENA region still do not have digital and integrated national inventories for their cultural heritage that can be used for heritage protection and research.

Holding an agreed baseline archive of documentation allows assessment of the heritage assets present, allowing assessment of their value, the significance of individual examples, and how best to strategise and prioritise their preservation. Adding an assessment of the condition of sites and their exposure to threats improves the capacity of heritage agencies to manage their heritage resource. Where multiple heritage datasets exist, systems should be developed to ensure that all forms of data can be accessed.

Digital documentation can also improve our interactions with cultural heritage in different ways, including understanding, valuing, protecting, conserving, and enjoying it. The *Protecting the Past Conference 2017* in Tunis stressed the role of digital documentation in 'raising awareness of the importance of the cultural heritage to the general public in the region' (See Appendix One).

Actions:*For governments:*

- Develop digital national heritage inventories for MENA countries as an urgent priority for the sector.

For national heritage agencies:

- Record baseline information for maritime and terrestrial archaeological sites, historic buildings, and landscapes, including threats and disturbances.
- Identify, document, and analyse hazard and disaster risks as an integral part of any heritage management platform for cultural heritage.
- Ensure the accuracy and validity of the information in existing and future inventories and/or databases, as these records may form the basis of what may become legal documentation.
- Develop interoperability tools for the compatibility of platforms and datasets and to ensure that disparate datasets and data standards may be seamlessly accessed and usable.
- Provide quick and easy access to data through digital documentation for national heritage authorities, scholars, and communities to use, to help raise awareness about the nature of the cultural heritage and the threats to it.
- Provide an opportunity for learning, interaction, and active engagement with cultural heritage through digital documentation.
- Promote the use of Object ID for museums and collections to document their artefacts: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/objectid/>

3- IT Infrastructure**Policy Statement:**

Support digital documentation of cultural heritage by improving and enhancing the IT sector and bridging the digital gap in the MENA region.

There has been significant development in the IT sector in some MENA countries in recent years, but there are still countries, communities, and institutions in the region that are not able to access, or afford, all the benefits of digital technology; access to a stable internet is not universal. There is however, a wide, and fast-growing mobile internet availability in some countries and 4G networks are expanding rapidly in the MENA region. This highlights a digital divide between these communities and their counterparts in other regions of the world. There is a large potential in the MENA countries, with a young, well-educated population and flourishing IT sectors, but national heritage agencies do not always benefit from this expertise in the wider population and economy.

Conflict situations, including Yemen, Libya, and Syria, and economic crises in a number of other countries, have also had a negative impact on the IT sector, and consequently on digital documentation of heritage. This sector needs rapid development to allow practitioners to fully develop digital cultural heritage management platforms and inventories, where they are lacking. There are publicly available platforms for databases (e.g. Arches, developed by the Getty Conservation Institute and the World Monuments Fund). These can use open source materials such as QGIS, Google Earth, Bing and Apple Maps to provide access and data as part of interactive relational databases that are suitable as national heritage inventories. This approach is likely to be the most cost-effective and allows for research potential, beyond modern national boundaries. An alternative approach would be to develop bespoke national heritage databases but these require considerable development costs, individual training requirements and potentially expensive maintenance needs.

The application of new technologies to different forms of cultural heritage demonstrates enormous benefits in terms of effectiveness, cost reduction, and visibility. The challenge is in how cultural content and documentation produced by new technologies, can be stored and made available, and how that access and keep up/maintenance will remain sustainable in the long term without proper IT infrastructure.

Actions:

For governments:

- Support the cultural heritage sector by developing and building on the existing IT infrastructure as a national priority in MENA countries.
- Support IT infrastructure with help from international heritage funders as a part of long-term strategy for heritage preservation.

For national heritage agencies:

- National cultural heritage agencies and Departments of Antiquities consider developing their IT departmental and IT infrastructure as a high priority, by using and expanding existing knowledge in the MENA region.

4- Capacity building and awareness raising

Policy Statement:

Enhancing the capacity of national heritage stakeholders through training for heritage professionals and awareness raising of the general public and communities as a sustainable way of protecting cultural heritage.

Heritage resources provide an opportunity for learning, interaction and active engagement ([ICOMOS 2017 Delhi Declaration on Heritage and Democracy](#)). Knowledge exchange is a key process that can bring together research institutes, local heritage stakeholders, and wider groups and communities to exchange ideas and expertise, and thus make an impact on the economy, society, culture, and public policy regarding heritage resources. Local community involvement will raise community awareness of the significance of cultural heritage. Capitalising on the economic benefits of heritage and the inclusion of local communities in these heritage benefits will help to reduce the threat of looting and destruction of sites.

Cultural heritage also provides an important focus for strengthening community identities and social cohesion, vital in areas where recent conflict, or the arrival of significant refugee populations, may be acting as social disruptors. Bringing archaeology and heritage into school level education is an important step in developing identity and cultural awareness.

Active engagement can also bridge the digital divide. Access to online resources and digital skills are necessary for archaeologists and heritage professionals. Enhancing the digital capacity of national heritage authorities and other heritage and research institutions is required for implementing digital documentation in many countries in the region. Training should equip local professionals to understand and better protect their cultural heritage by creating and enhancing digital documentation tools and giving access to digital records. Training local professionals promotes the heritage-based economy and contributes to the UN SDG for economic growth. There is also a gender gap in terms of access to IT and new technologies (UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) 2019). Training should be available to all, giving equal opportunities to all by enhancing the capacity of all communities in the MENA region for documenting, preserving, and promoting their cultural heritage. Digital tools can also be used to facilitate heritage education for the younger generation at school and university level.

Actions:

For governments:

- Promote cultural heritage through digital documentation as part of national curricula in schools.

For national heritage agencies:

- Involve local communities and raise awareness to protect cultural heritage.
- National heritage agencies to consider training for digital documentation for their staff as a key priority.

- Include knowledge exchange as an integral part of collaboration with international organisations and projects.
- Offer equal training opportunities to women, younger generations, and local communities to bridge digital gap in heritage documentation and promotion.

For national heritage agencies and international projects:

- Invest in changing and updating educational course methods and materials, as technology is rapidly changing.

5- Open Access (OA)

Policy Statement:

Advocate and support Open Access (OA) to archaeological data in the MENA region as a long-term strategy to increase public engagement with cultural heritage and improve heritage protection.

While open access to national heritage inventories and archaeological data is becoming a widely accepted approach in many countries and international institutions, in many MENA countries open access has not been integrated into national heritage policy, though the national inventory for Jordan (MEGA-J) is available online, as are selected sites in Tunisia. However, there are concerns that making geospatial data for archaeological and maritime sites publicly available might lead to illegal activities and looting. Nevertheless, providing open access to digital records and archaeology data can benefit scholars, local communities, and heritage professionals in both research and heritage protection. Open access also creates a platform for knowledge exchange and democratises access to and interaction with heritage information. Where there are specific sensitivities, focused measures should be targeted to protect this particular data by creating different access levels for user groups.

Actions:

For national heritage agencies:

- National heritage authorities consider the risks relating to open access for archaeological data.
- Encourage, as a medium-term strategy, access to archaeology and heritage data at the national level can be 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary'.
- Provide access to data as part of a system for decision-making and user-agreements with appropriate terms and conditions to protect intellectual property.

For national heritage agencies and international projects and organisations:

- Protect all sensitive data with creating different access levels for different users.
- Projects at all levels (international, national, regional) should commit resources at the planning stage for making data open-access and ensuring that it remains so in the long term.

6- Funding

Policy Statement:

Support governmental funding for national and local heritage organisations for digital documentation to create national inventories. Support these organisations to attract major cultural heritage funding from international funders, where national government funds are not available for long-term initiatives to prevent and mitigate risk, before damage occurs.

While there is an increasing need to develop and enhance digital capacity for documenting cultural heritage in the MENA region, funding has been a challenge for most national heritage authorities and research institutions. Funding opportunities from international funders usually focus on short to mid-term projects, rather than investing in national digital inventories as a long-term strategy for the preservation of cultural heritage in MENA.

In some countries in the region, including but not limited to Yemen, the central government funding for cultural heritage preservation is very limited. The ongoing pandemic and economic crisis have also exacerbated the situation for national funding, thus heritage organisations in these countries need to apply to external funders to support digital documentation of their cultural heritage.

The pace of heritage destruction in the modern world, mostly led by development pressures and growing populations, is exacerbated by conflict, climate change, and natural disasters. These headline news items have shifted the attention of many international funders towards supporting rapid responses to cultural heritage and communities. While this has been extremely helpful for providing emergency and stabilisation measures and initiating reconstruction processes, longer-term support for assessing, reducing, and mitigating risks and threats through scientific documentation and risk assessment needs to be considered by major heritage donors as an equal priority for the region. Investment in the IT infrastructure of heritage organisations in MENA and building capacity for their local staff in digital documentation is a vital component of long-term strategies.

Actions:

For international funders and national governments:

- Enhance digital capacity of national heritage stakeholders, organisations, and Universities in the MENA region by making it a priority for national and international funding.
- Make sustainability of digital documentation, data longevity, and upgrading digital records and national heritage inventories part of long-term fundraising strategies.
- Digitisation of non-digital records, upgrading existing digital data, and data validation processes to be prioritised in long-term funding strategies.
- Identify or create funding opportunities to support not-for-profit organisations, and local communities, in addition to governmental agencies.

For international funders and projects:

- Improve fundraising ability and grant application development as part of capacity building initiatives for the cultural heritage sector in the region.
- Involve international organisations and research institutions in MENA archaeology in collaboration with national and local partners for developing grant applications and projects.

7- International Collaboration**Policy Statement:**

Advocate international collaboration and knowledge exchange as a key to improve and promote digital documentation.

In a rapidly changing world that is facing substantial environmental, social, economic, and political challenges, international and regional collaboration is a sustainable way for the protection of heritage resources for the future. Most of the challenges for digital documentation and protection of endangered cultural heritage can be better addressed and mitigated through a fair, ethical, and constructive partnership among international, regional, and local actors and stakeholders, including public and private sectors, research institutions, NGOs, and interested communities.

The long-term sustainability of digital platforms could be enhanced by the agreement of common standards, in terms of data and software development. Many of the challenges faced by MENA countries are shared and held in common with their neighbours, and can be addressed by working in partnership.

Actions:

For national heritage agencies, international heritage organisations, and international research projects:

- Encourage international collaboration in the dissemination of information and adaptation of standards and guidelines for digital recording, documentation, and knowledge exchange among heritage agencies in MENA.
- Foster inter-regional collaboration among research institutions and heritage agencies for better understanding, monitoring, and mitigation of the common issues affecting cultural heritage in the MENA region through developing regional strategies, and exchanging knowledge, information, and good practices.

8- Legal Issues

Policy Statement: *Review laws and legislation pertaining to cultural heritage to reflect current cultural heritage needs and practices.*

Effective protection of cultural heritage is not possible without appropriate and updated legal frameworks and legislation. At the national and regional levels, cultural policies and legal frameworks are required for protecting cultural heritage against negative impacts of development, deliberate destruction, and looting and illicit trafficking of cultural heritage.

Evaluating existing national antiquities laws can start by reviewing the changing context in each country, and understanding the mechanism for law enforcement and legal sanctions.

The inclusion of built heritage in legal frameworks and national legislation in order to protect architectural and urban heritage from destruction and impact of development is an urgent matter to be considered.

Another urgent issue is that in many places Maritime Cultural Heritage (MCH) is not recognised and protected within national legislation (a situation found not only in the MENA region but around the world). Where MCH is acknowledged then it is often tagged on to other legislation that is primarily concerned with terrestrial heritage and/or archaeology, or, more frequently, environmental legislation that also includes the sea. Many countries that do not have national legislation covering MCH and lack the capacity and expertise to implement such legislation should it exist, have signed the 2001 UNESCO Convention as a first step toward protecting and regulating MCH. In the MENA region, 13 of the 19 countries that have a coastline have signed the UNESCO 2001 Convention (see Appendix 2).

Actions:

For national heritage agencies and their legal departments:

- Evaluate the current state of legal frameworks for heritage protection, especially for archaeology
- Where missing, update heritage law to include protection of the built heritage.
- Support digital documentation and establishment of the national heritage database in legal frameworks or decrees.
- Update and integrate maritime heritage in a legal framework of protection and management that addresses maritime specific threats such as dredging, fishing and waterfront urbanisation.
- Support regional and international collaboration to develop and exchange best practices in legal frameworks related to the protection of archaeological and built heritage.

9- Way forward

This document is the first step in a long process of developing a strategy for digital documentation in the MENA region. Its purpose is to provide guidance and suggested actions to aid and improve digital documentation in the region. It is recognised that not all policies and actions contained in this document will be relevant or appropriate in all countries or circumstances. However, it is hoped that it can develop and be adapted at national levels according to the requirements of each of the partner countries to serve as a starting point and basis for national policy guidance.

10- Acknowledgements.

This guidance note was produced as part of the EAMENA-CPF Impact project, funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund (CPF). We are immensely grateful to the CPF for their support.

It was coordinated and compiled by Robert Bewley and Bijan Rouhani (EAMENA project, University of Oxford).

Thanks to all the staff on the EAMENA and MarEA projects, and representatives from partner institutions in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Tunisia and Yemen for their inputs and comments on this document, including the:

Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DoA)

Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Palestine (MoTA)

Department of Antiquities of Libya

National Heritage Institute of Tunisia (INP)

Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon (DGA)
State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (SABH)
General Organisation of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen (GOAM)

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12- Appendices

Appendix 1: Protecting the Past 2017 Statement

The key needs to be addressed are encapsulated by the following resolutions agreed by the delegates at the end of the Protecting the Past conference in 2017:

- The cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa faces unprecedented levels of damage and destruction.
- The implementation of digital documentation to improve the protection of the cultural heritage is a priority, across the region.
- Digital documentation should be used in innovative ways to raise awareness of the importance of the cultural heritage to the general public in the region.
- There is an urgent need for more resources to undertake the necessary documentation, to international standards, by training people, developing appropriate infrastructure and sharing skills and expertise, across the region.
- We urge the political decision-makers to protect the cultural heritage and use all the necessary legislation to protect it.”

Appendix 2: Maritime Cultural Heritage Legislation in the MENA region – a brief overview

The United Nations Law of the Sea governs control over maritime regions. Following the Second World War, the United Nations International Law Commission codified existing laws and drafted four conventions, which were adopted at the first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS I) in 1958. However, it was not until the Third United Nations Conference (UNCLOS III) with the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (UNCLOS) which came into force in 1994, that full jurisdiction of territorial waters was determined; defining the Territorial Sea (more commonly Territorial waters) as extending 12 nautical miles off the coast (see Fig.1 and Fig. 2). This convention also created the *Contiguous Zone* (CZ) — demarcated by a 24 nautical mile buffer zone; in this zone the state can exert limited control for the purpose of preventing or punishing breach of its customs, laws and regulations. The *Exclusive Economic Zone* (EEZ), is a 200 nautical miles buffer zone, in which coastal states have sovereign rights with respect to marine scientific research, natural resources and other economic activities, e.g. energy production from water and wind.

UNCLOS has been ratified by all United Nations states apart from 15 countries, including Syria. In the UNCLOS conventions the Maritime Cultural Heritage (MCH), was not specifically protected (apart from articles 159 and 303). This was rectified with the adoption of the 2001 [UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage](#) that enables States to better protect and manage their submerged cultural heritage.

Maritime Cultural Heritage (MCH) and Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH) is not necessarily recognised and protected within national antiquities legislation. If it is acknowledged then it is often tagged on to another form of legislation either concerning terrestrial heritage and/or archaeology, or more frequently environmental legislation that also includes the sea. Many countries that do not have national legislation and lack the capacity and expertise to implement such legislation, have signed the UNESCO 2001 Convention as a first step toward protecting and regulating MCH. In the MENA region 13 of the 19 countries that have a coastline have signed the UNESCO 2001 Convention. Of the CPF supported MENA countries only Yemen and Iraq have not yet signed.

UNESCO has recently focused on encouraging [best practice](#) in MCH/UCH but there remains scope for improvement. UNESCO is also in the process of training trainers in the Arab region to develop capacity for heritage managers with respect to MCH.

The international treaties (UNESCO and UNCLOS) when coupled with national legislation addressing MCH/UCH can form a strong legal framework for ensuring the sustainability and protection of the resource. Nonetheless, implementation of the law(s) and building the necessary expertise remains an ongoing issue. For instance, Lebanon, which has accepted the UNESCO convention and drafted national laws, still faces transgressions

such as illegal UCH trafficking in its EEZ and unregulated coastal urban developments, dredging and fishing that damage and in some cases destroy maritime heritage (Semaan, 2020). As such, a concerted effort, to build capacity and ensure implementation is necessary. In addition, MCH/UCH can benefit from wider protection and management achieved not only through the inscription of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, but also through [Marine Protected Areas](#) (MPA) that assimilate MCH/UCH in its remit. MPAs are particularly relevant for ascertaining and combining the mutual value and significance of natural and cultural heritage.

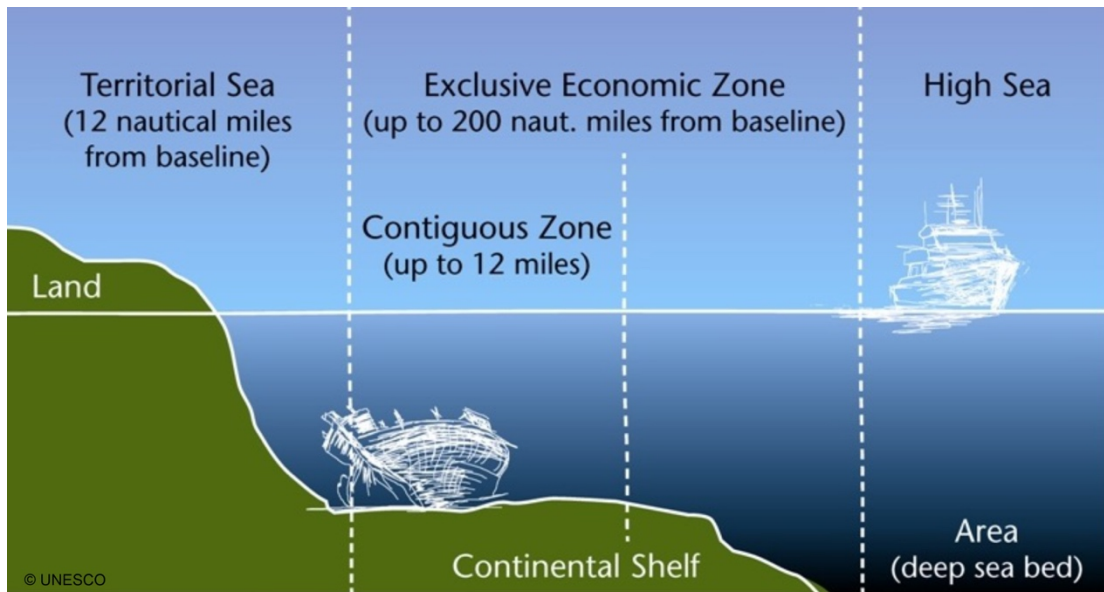


Figure 1-Definition of maritime regions: Territorial Sea; Contiguous Zone; EEZ, High Sea or International Waters.

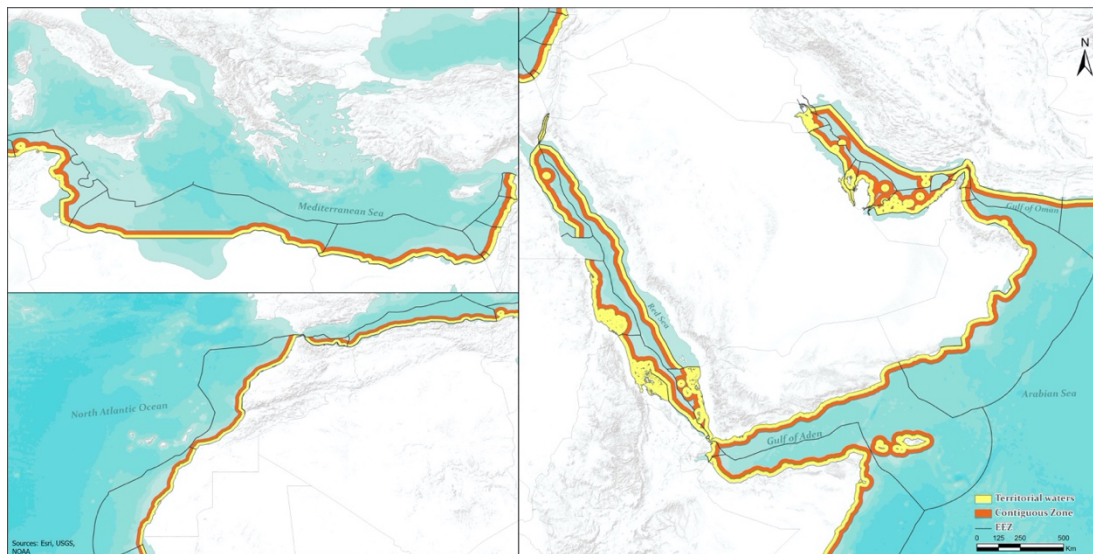


Figure 2- Spatial extent of maritime regions within MENA.

Useful resources in Arabic:

- Emad Khalil book (Arabic) -
كتا الآثار البحرية والتراث الثقافي الغارق (عربي) Maritime Archaeology and Underwater Cultural Heritage book
<https://honorfrostfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Arabic-Handbook.pdf//honorfrostfoundation.org/publications/other-publication-projects/>
- CMAUCH YouTube lectures -
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Appendix 3. The Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) project.

The Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) project, supported since 2015 by Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, and with additional support from 2017 from the the British Council’s Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) is led by the University of Oxford in partnership with the Universities of Leicester and Durham; it also works very closely with the Maritime Endangered Archaeology project (MarEA), based in Southampton and Ulster Universities. The EAMENA project records cultural heritage sites in the MENA region, in collaboration with local and national heritage authorities in the partner countries. Since 2017, and through a training scheme funded by The British Council’s CPF, the EAMENA project has trained over 160 archaeologists and heritage professionals in eight countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen.

