PRESS RELEASE

The Louvre Museum and ALIPH are mobilizing alongside the Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon to rehabilitate the National Museum of Beirut

31 August 2020 – The National Museum of Beirut, located three kilometers south of the port, was heavily damaged in the explosion of 4 August 2020. The blast destroyed the building’s windows and doors, causing considerable damage to its security systems, and leaving the protection of the museum and its collections to its guards. The Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon (DGA), which reports to the Ministry of Culture, also had its administrative offices and storage rooms severely impacted. It has estimated that emergency repairs and the refurbishment of the security system and storage rooms in compliance with standards could cost nearly one million dollars. To finance these efforts, the DGA submitted a project for emergency relief to ALIPH (International alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas) titled “Beirut Assist Cultural Heritage (BACH) – Plan for the recovery of the National Museum and DGA Headquarters”. This project for the rehabilitation of the National Museum and the DGA headquarters will be overseen by the Louvre Museum.

Following the explosion of 4 August, the ALIPH Foundation, founded in 2017 in Geneva at the initiative of France and the United Arab Emirates, implemented an action plan for the stabilization and rehabilitation of Beirut’s heritage with an initial envelope of 5 million dollars. With financial support of slightly over 200,000 dollars from ALIPH, the Louvre Museum and the DGA have launched the first phase of the rehabilitation of the National Museum of Beirut to address pressing emergency measures. The aim is to secure the building and collections as quickly as possible by repairing the doors, windows, and security system.

To this end, the Louvre Museum is mobilizing the expertise of its staff to come to the assistance of the museum. Teams from the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities and Department of Architectural Heritage and Gardens are already in Beirut working alongside the DGA. A direct management system allows the Louvre Museum to oversee the funding granted by ALIPH. The DGA and the Louvre are currently finalizing an assessment and inventory of needs. Work began on Monday, 31 August, which marked the eve of the centenary of Greater Lebanon.

The Louvre’s Department of Near Eastern Antiquities has longstanding professional and amicable relations with colleagues from the Directorate General of Antiquities and Lebanese museums. The Louvre immediately expressed support for its colleagues as a signatory of the Statement of solidarity initiated by ALIPH alongside a number of other international and cultural institutions: https://presse.louvre.fr/statement-of-solidarity-with-lebanon-and-support-to-recoverthe-damaged-cultural-heritage-in-beirut/.

The National Museum of Beirut displays over 1,800 objects on three floors, spanning prehistory through the Ottoman period. Built by the architects Antoine Nahas and Pierre Leprince Ringueut, it was opened in 1942. During the Civil War that began in 1975, the museum was located on the Green Line, the demarcation line that separated East and West Beirut. This location led to the museum being destroyed by bombs and occupied by fighters from various armed groups. Following the war, a large-scale rehabilitation project allowed the museum to regain its splendor and it became an important site for the conservation of ancient and medieval Lebanese heritage, particularly for Phoenician collections. This rehabilitation, carried out in two phases, in 1997 and in 2017, turned the museum into a strong symbol of revival and national unity around a unique collection of archaeological objects bearing witness to a joint history—one shared by all Lebanese people, beyond distinctive identities and communitarian divides.
The Louvre’s Department of Near Eastern Antiquities and the Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon are collaborating on several projects, particularly on the site of Byblos, where together they are conducting archaeological excavations. In 2021, France and Lebanon will celebrate the centenary of the excavations undertaken conjointly by Lebanese and French archaeologists in Byblos: having first “broken ground” on the site on 20 October 1921 under the supervision of Pierre Montet, the excavations continued under the supervision of Maurice Dunand until 1973, before being interrupted by the Civil War. Byblos, the most visited site in Lebanon, was the subject of archaeological research in 1860 with the Phoenicia Mission led by Ernest Renan. As of 1921, it was the first and the most important excavation site in the State of Greater Lebanon, which will celebrate the centenary of its creation on 1 September 2020. The objects unearthed at Byblos represent a major portion of the collections of the National Museum of Beirut.

Photo – National museum of Beirut © Julien Chanteau
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