

Community
Reports

22 APRIL 2020



المعهد المصري للدراسات
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

Egypt: COVID19- and antiquities
officials, reluctance and confusion

Dr. Hussein Duqeil



WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG

Eipss.EG Eis_EG

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

Egypt: COVID-19 and antiquities officials, reluctance and confusion

Dr. Hussein Duqeil

As Egyptian tourism was beginning to recover from its depression over years, the outbreak of the coronavirus has led to full deterioration of tourism activity in the country.

Although this crisis has negatively affected global tourism in general, its impact on Egypt has been more severe, especially that Egypt relies heavily on tourism revenues, estimated at 15% of the nation's annual income. Last year, tourism revenues achieved were estimated at \$12.6 billion, as well as more than 3 million workers who have been directly or indirectly related to tourism.

The number of tourists in Egypt reached 12 million in 2019 and was expected to reach 15 million tourists in 2020. Therefore, Egypt's loss in this respect is extremely great and difficult to compensate for via any other resources.

The archaeological and touristic areas in general have received a painful blow after the outbreak of the coronavirus in Egypt; starting with the decision of the Ukrainian government – the most significant exporting market for tourism to Egypt – to suspend its tourism trips to Egypt, and thus Egypt lost about 1.5 million tourists; as well as the decision to suspend Chinese tourism trips to Egypt, with a loss exceeding 350 thousand tourists; the Italian tourism, where Italian tourists exceed 500 thousand, and other countries worldwide that canceled their reservations for the season, which indicates a continued deterioration of tourism in Egypt for a period of time.

The cancellation of about five international tourism exhibitions, which used to significantly contribute to revitalization of the tourism movement, has also casted a shadow over the fragile sector, which is usually affected by all public events, both internal and external. Therefore, and based on the officials' statements, about 70% of Egyptian tourism activities have been affected, including hotels, tourism companies, transportation companies, services, aviation, and bazaars, among others¹.

The reality indicates that antiquities officials in Egypt did not pay any attention to the outbreak of the coronavirus in the country from the very beginning; however on the contrary, some of them accused all those who had called at an early stage for suspension of tourism in Egypt that they were traitors

and wanted to destroy the country, as Mustafa Waziry, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities who said that there are invisible hands that reject the progress and development of Egypt, and therefore they spread malicious rumors among Egyptians².

The story of the coronavirus with the Egyptian antiquities began mid-February when the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization announced in a joint statement, discovery of the first COVID-19 infected case, for a Chinese young man from Wuhan, the epicenter of the virus³. As a result of this announcement, specifically on the sixth of March, Egyptian tourism experts confirmed cancellation of many tourist reservations from several European countries due to outbreak of coronavirus in Egypt; and a number of officials revealed that the cancellation of reservations had already begun and that they came from four important tourist markets, including Germany, Britain and Greece⁴.

However, the Ministry of Antiquities' officials continued to receive the Chinese tourists as if they were challenging the Egyptian people, who objected to receiving foreign tourism at that time, especially from China. Anyway, a plane carrying 165 Chinese tourists arrived at Cairo Airport on 6 March⁵ despite the fact that on the same day it was announced that 12 positive cases of the novel coronavirus had been discovered amongst the crew of a Nile cruise ship going from Aswan to Luxor, and that the infection was transmitted from a Taiwanese female tourist of American origin who was on the ship⁶.

On 8 March, Minister of Health Hala Zayed, accompanied by Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Dr. Khaled El-Anany visited the Karnak Temple in Luxor, and together they asserted that tourism is "safe", in an attempt to send a message of reassurance, in humiliation of the minds of Egyptians. The two ministers pointed out that there was no need to exaggerate reactions towards the COVID-19 infected cases in Luxor, despite Zayed's assertion that the Nile cruise in which infected cases were discovered was the epicenter of the disease outbreak⁷.

On March 10, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities Dr. Mostafa Waziry denied canceling any tourist or recreational activities in Egypt and announced that the tourism sector is operating regularly⁸. In continuation of the unjustified intransigence of the Ministry of Antiquities, Waziry indicated on March 12 that thousands of visitors and tourist delegations visited many archaeological sites in Luxor, including the Karnak Temple, Luxor Temple, and the Valley of the Kings and Queens on the West Bank⁹. Despite the COVID-19 outbreak in Britain that affected normal life

April 22, 2020

there and suspended all public activities in the United Kingdom, Waziry denied that the Tutankhamen exhibition in London – that had been inaugurated in November 2019 – was ever affected, adding that “the exhibition still significantly attracts the English audience” and that it was not affected by the state fear in Britain¹⁰.

Because of this intransigence and confusion in the Ministry of Antiquities officials in addressing the risks of the spread of the coronavirus, their actions to combat the virus came late. In attempt to remedy the effects of the crisis, particularly after the government decided to close schools for two weeks and suspend all sports activities and private and public gatherings; only then did the Ministry of Antiquities send instructions to archaeological sites and museums to follow proper health procedures, as the workers until that moment (March 17) were continuing their work in full capacity, without reducing their number like other institutions. The Minister of Tourism and Antiquities also stated at the time that tourism in Egypt was in full swing, and emphasized that it would return stronger during the coming period, and that the inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum would not be postponed and that the project would be completed by the end of 2020.¹¹

Moreover, the Minister of Tourism said Italian tourists preferred to stay in Egypt for two more months until summer, in anticipation of the widespread of the coronavirus in their homeland.¹²

However, on March 21, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities announced closure of all museums and archaeological sites all over the country, starting from Monday, 23 March, for sterilization, disinfection and application of safety and prevention measures.¹³ Waziry stressed that the ongoing construction activity in the Grand Egyptian Museum is proceeding at a normal pace and that it was not affected by the outbreak of the coronavirus, adding that the Ministry was committed to continuing work on all other projects, especially those that will be opened soon, such as the Baron Empain Palace in Heliopolis, the Royal Vehicle Museum in the Bulaq neighborhood and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Fustat, as well as other projects¹⁴.

On March 24, the Ministry carried out sterilization and disinfection activities for archaeological sites, including those in Kom Ombo, Abu Simbel, Jabal Al-Silsilah, Aswan Governorate, Dandara, Qena, temples of Karnak and Luxor, Habu City, Temple of Hatshepsut, Deir al-Madinah, and Valley of the Kings in Luxor Governorate; and in Cairo the Saqqara archaeological area, Al Moez Street, Salah El-Din Al-Ayoubi Castle, the Amr Ibn Al-Aas Mosque, the Abu Sergah Church, the Hanging Church and

the Coptic Museum¹⁵. The work was completed on March 26, where the museums sector at the Supreme Council of Antiquities performed sterilization and disinfection activities in various museums all over the country.¹⁶

By March 26, the Antiquities Ministry had not suspended excavation activities. Dr. Zahi Hawas (as head of a local archaeological mission) then announced that excavation work continued in Luxor and Saqqara, among five other local archaeological missions that were also operating in Minya, Giza, with emphasis on taking all precautionary measures to tackle the novel coronavirus, as Hawas said that all operating workers wear medical masks, as a way to prevent infection¹⁷. Meanwhile, 240 foreign archaeological missions operating in Egypt suspended their activity permanently due to the spread of the virus. Foreign missions also froze announcement of any archaeological discoveries until the completion of quarantine procedures in Egyptian governorates¹⁸. In a clear violation of the decision of foreign missions, the Ministry announced on April 9 discovery of basic deposits and warehouses related to the palace of Ramses II Temple in Abydos, Sohag Governorate. Waziry said the mission affiliated to the New York University revealed models of tablets engraved with the throne name of the king Ramses II painted in blue and green, in the southwest corner of the temple¹⁹.

On 26 March, the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities met at the headquarters of the Grand Egyptian Museum, with members of the museum's board of directors, to discuss the latest developments in the project and its work plan during the coming period in light of the COVID-19 preventive measures, without announcing any decisions to suspend the museum works; rather, the Board of Directors decided to reduce the number of workers in the project while continuing the work in preparation for completion of the project on time²⁰. But the strange thing is that when the minister wanted to discuss with the Microsoft company team responsible for creating and designing the website of the Grand Egyptian Museum, he conducted the meeting via video conference, which may have happened at the wish of Microsoft²¹!

On March 30, the tourism sector's crisis and risk management committee, headed by Minister Khaled El-Anany, welcomed desire of some tourists to stay in Egypt²². On the same day evening, in front of the pyramid of Khufu in Giza the Minister sent messages to the Egyptian people and all peoples of the world to stay home and protect themselves and their families, greeting, thanking, and expressing respect for doctors, nurses and health care workers who protect Egyptians by fighting the virus.²³

On April 2, Dr. Mostafa Waziry, Secretary General of the Ministry of Antiquities, said that excavation and restoration work was still going on systematically, with taking necessary precautions. He stated that many foreign tourists refused to return to their countries²⁴, preferring to remain in Egypt until the end of the corona crisis, explaining that they feel safe and secure with respect to their health in Egypt than in their own countries.

On April 3, the ministry announced provision of virtual visits to archaeological sites and museums in various governorates, with the aim of supporting tourism and encouraging Egyptians to stay at home in light of the outbreak of the virus²⁵, which is of course a good step that we hope will continue even under natural conditions, like other countries.

On April 4 only, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ordered postponement of events and inauguration of major national projects to the next year (2021), given the circumstances and repercussions of the process of combating the spread of the coronavirus, including the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum and the Egyptian Civilization Museum²⁶. In the wake of this decision, voices of all officials have completely dimmed!

¹ Arabi21, Corona dashes hopes for a revival of the tourism sector in Egypt, 14 March 2020

² Al-Dostour, Cancellation of Tourism Activities in Egypt Because of Corona, March 11, 2020

³ Sky News Arabic, the first case of Corona in Egypt ... when did he come? where did he stay? February 15, 2020

⁴ Al-Jazeera, tourism and the exchange rate ... Egypt's largest economic loss due to Corona, March 6, 2020

⁵ Masrawy, Airport sources reveal details of a flight that arrived from China, with 165 onboard ... and the reason for their visit, 6 March 2020

⁶ Sawt al-Ummah, Coronavirus carriers announced in Luxor Nile ship respond to opposition claims, March 6, 2020

⁷ Youm7, the ministers of tourism, health and aviation send a message of safety to the world from Luxor, 8 March 2020

⁸ Falso, the fact that tourism and recreational activities in Egypt were canceled due to coronavirus, 10 March 2020

⁹ CNN Arabic, Egypt intensifies preventive measures for tourists against the emerging coronavirus in Luxor, March 12, 2020

¹⁰ Youm7, Was the Tutankhamun exhibition in London affected by access of COVID-19 to the British government ?, March 13, 2020

¹¹ Al-Shorouq, Antiquities: procedures for dealing with visitors continuously, 17 March 2020

¹² CNN Arabic, Coronavirus .. Egyptian Minister: Italian tourists demand to stay in our country until summer, 17 March 2020

¹³ Akhbar Al-Youm, To confront Corona ... closing all museums and archaeological sites in Egypt, 21 March 2020

¹⁴ Masrawy, were the works at the Grand Museum affected by outbreak of Corona? March 23, 2020

¹⁵ Al-Bawaba News, sterilization of the antiquities in Abu Simbel, Hatshepsut, and the Valley of the Kings against coronavirus, March 24, 2020

¹⁶ Al-Mal, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities complete the sterilization and disinfection of museums to counter "Corona", March 26, 2020

- ¹⁷ Youm7, Did the coronavirus stop the archaeological excavations in Egypt? Zahi Hawas answers, March 26, 2020
- ¹⁸ Asharq al-Awsat, "Corona" partially freezes archaeological discoveries in Egypt: only 5 local missions out of 280 groups operating with precautionary measures, 5 April 2020
- ¹⁹ CNN Arabic, Egypt announces discovery of deposits and warehouses of Ramses II Temple in the ancient area of Abydos, April 9, 2020
- ²⁰ Al-Ahram, Al-Anani meets with members of the Board of Directors of the Grand Museum to discuss the latest developments in the pictures project, March 26, 2020
- ²¹ Al-Shorouq, Minister of Antiquities reviews developments of the construction of Egyptian Grand Museum site, 27 March 2020
- ²² Veto, Learn about the decisions of the Ministry of Antiquities if tourists stay in Egypt, 30 March 2020
- ²³ Youm7, The Minister of Antiquities greets doctors in front of Khufu and invites people all over the world to stay at home, 30 March 2020
- ²⁴ Al-Shorouq, Antiquities: Tourists refused to return because Egypt is safer than their countries, April 2, 2020
- ²⁵ Al Ain News, To prevent the spread of Corona ... Virtual visits to the monuments and museums of Egypt, 3 April 2020
- ²⁶ Asharq al-Awsat, Egypt: Inauguration of major national projects has been postponed until 2021 due to Corona, 4 April 2020