

The last crusade for Egypt's 'Indiana Jones'?

Protesters threaten job of antiquity council leader and archaeology projects

By Stephanie Pappas

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The Great Pyramids of Egypt are among the massive archaeological interests in Egypt.

The political upheaval in Egypt has thrown Egyptian archaeology into a state of uncertainty — expeditions have been disrupted and Zahi Hawass, the head of the country's antiquity council, is now coming under fire from protesters.

Known for his flamboyant style – including an Indiana Jones-style fedora – and his boosterism of Egypt's treasures, Hawass is the face of Egyptian archaeology. As secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), Hawass is in charge of approving any archaeological research that goes on in Egypt.

And he's now the central figure in a war of words, with some archaeologists taking verbal shots at him for what they see as a corrupt system, and others, in interviews with LiveScience, [defending](#) his character and his actions.

Protesting Hawass

Hawass was given a Cabinet minister position shortly before Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned, and the association has not served him well in the aftermath of the regime change. On Monday, about 150 archaeology students and workers protested outside Hawass' office, demanding he resign, according to news reports.

Some of the protests have centered around Hawass' handling of a Jan. 28 break-in at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Hawass originally said that no artifacts had been stolen during the break-in; later, he announced that 18 items, including some belonging to King Tutankhamen, were missing.

But on a [Facebook page](#) calling for a protest at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo at 2 p.m. local time on Friday, demonstrators also called for an end to "corruption" and "nepotism" in the SCA.

"Archaeologists demanding proper wages, contracts and end of corruption, end of Zahi," wrote Cairo archaeologist Nora Shalaby on Twitter Feb. 14.

Wage protests have occurred around Egypt in the wake of the successful bid to oust Mubarak. According to a news report Monday by the BBC, workers were striking in industries as varied as health care, banking, public transport and tourism.

Support for Hawass

Condemnation of Hawass is by no means universal. Several archaeologists contacted by LiveScience were unwilling to comment on the record about the protests. Those who did, however, praised Hawass' work.

"Since Zahi is so well known outside of Egypt, he's a good target for reporters looking for a sensational story," Peter Lacovara, the curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern Art at the Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta, told LiveScience. But that narrative ignores Hawass' contributions to Egyptian archaeology, Lacovara said.

"No director since Auguste Mariette, who founded the service in 1858, has done more," Lacovara said. "He modernized the ancient, arbitrary and uninformed bureaucracy that had existed before and moved the offices from a dusty, remote slum into a modern office building in central Cairo and one that operated swiftly and efficiently."

The SCA does keep a tight reign on public information about Egyptian digs, said Jay VanRensselaer, a Johns Hopkins University photographer who has served as a dig photographer for Egyptologist Betsy Bryan since 1996. But VanRensselaer said he had nothing negative to say about Hawass, whom he called "very friendly and very kind."

"Zahi has done an incredible amount of good for Egypt and for the monuments and for raising appreciation in Egypt of what they have," VanRensselaer told LiveScience.

Future of fieldwork

VanRensselaer was in Luxor, Egypt, when the protests began. He caught a flight to Cairo on Jan. 28 and spent the night in the crowded Cairo airport, waiting for a flight out of the country.

"Sometime over the night they had shut off the Internet and [cell phones](#) so we didn't know what was going on," VanRensselaer said. When the phones came back on the next morning, he called his wife in Maryland – at 3:00 a.m. Eastern time.

"She said it was the one time a 3:00 a.m. [phone call](#) was very welcome," he said.

The entire Johns Hopkins team evacuated Egypt within a matter of days after VanRensselaer left. A team of University of California, Los Angeles archaeologists also left the country. Foreign researchers with field seasons scheduled for the future are now watching and waiting.

"We need to see how things settle out," said Stephen Davis, a professor of religious studies at Yale University who directs two ongoing digs at early Christian monastic sites in Egypt. Davis' field season is scheduled to start May 1, he told LiveScience, but he's "fully prepared" to adjust if his field season is delayed or canceled.

VanRensselaer said he has "complete faith" that the new Egyptian government will continue to allow foreign teams to work in the country. Yale's Davis isn't sure if the SCA will recover from the upheaval in time for his spring field season, but he's adopted a wait-and-see attitude about the possibility.

"I think to try to push for these answers too early is not the right approach," Davis said. "There's a lot of things happening that are bigger than my dig right now."