

## **Executive Director's Report November 2023, Board Meeting**

Like I did in 2022, I have divided my Fall Executive Director's Report into three sections so that I might share observations and make recommendations for the Board to consider as you plan for how ASOR will emerge from the recent conflict in the Middle East and continue to emerge from the COVID pandemic.

**If ASOR does nothing else during this Annual Meeting, I think that we should focus on being a family who loves and supports one another (the first section below).**

The following is the structure of my report:

1. *ASOR as a family.*
2. *Review of ASOR's finances* and a discussion of how you can plan for the long-term and not just focus on surviving. ASOR is growing despite global conflicts and unrest.
3. *Brief comments on ASOR 2025—Strengthening Our Foundation | Expanding Horizons—A Call to Action.*

### **1. ASOR as a Family**

The Middle East and North Africa are engulfed in conflict, death, distrust, suffering, and pain. This description is not hyperbolic—the countries in which ASOR works and has members are being torn apart. Now more than ever, we need to ensure that ASOR and the Annual Meeting constitute a safe place and safe space where people can come together and learn from each other.

I suggest that it is helpful to view ASOR as a family and not just as an apolitical organization. ASOR fosters academic and friendship connections across political, ethnic, country, and religious boundaries. ASOR strives to be a place where our members interact with counterparts from countries that might be at war or may not recognize each other's right to exist. Over decades, these contacts and connections have moved beyond tolerance and have resulted in true collaborative friendships where people work together to promote better understanding through the study of the past and cultural interactions now seemingly at odds.

Over the last eight years, it has been my privilege to work with colleagues across the Middle East and North Africa as part of ASOR's Cultural Heritage Initiatives. Several moments stand out to me in particular... I remember having a conversation with a Muslim professor of Hebrew studies at Mosul University. Less than a year after ISIS had occupied Mosul, we had an in-depth discussion in Hebrew (I unfortunately cannot speak Arabic), and he told me about risking his life to protect Jewish heritage. He did this because he felt passionately that the Jewish heritage of northern Iraq was part of what defined what it meant to be a contemporary resident of Mosul. He expressed similar views about Assyrian, Chaldean, and Ezidi heritage.

Another moment that is pivotal for me is working with Amazigh, Jewish, and Ebadi (a type of Islam) colleagues in southern Tunisia. If you haven't done so, I hope you'll review some of the essays on the ASOR website about this work (see among others, [First visit to a Jewish home; Spring 2023 tour](#); [Pluralistic Heritage in Djerba](#)). Two events in particular stick out for me—one in Djerba and one in the area of Tataouine. During the Lag B'Omer pilgrimage in the late Spring 2023, we helped organize a gathering of Amazigh, Muslim, and Jewish women in a Jewish home in Djerba. Some of the Amazigh women from the Tataouine area had never traveled this far, and none had been in a Jewish home. There were also female academics from Tunis. I of course

could not stay for the conversation between the women, but I witnessed the interactions before and afterwards. Unfortunately, the day ended in tragedy as Ariel Hadad (who was the nephew of our host [Yael Hadad]) was one of two Jewish worshippers murdered in the terrorist attack at the festival in Djerba. Yet, all the participants, including the Hadad family, agreed the assault only emphasized the need for these types of cooperative conversations.

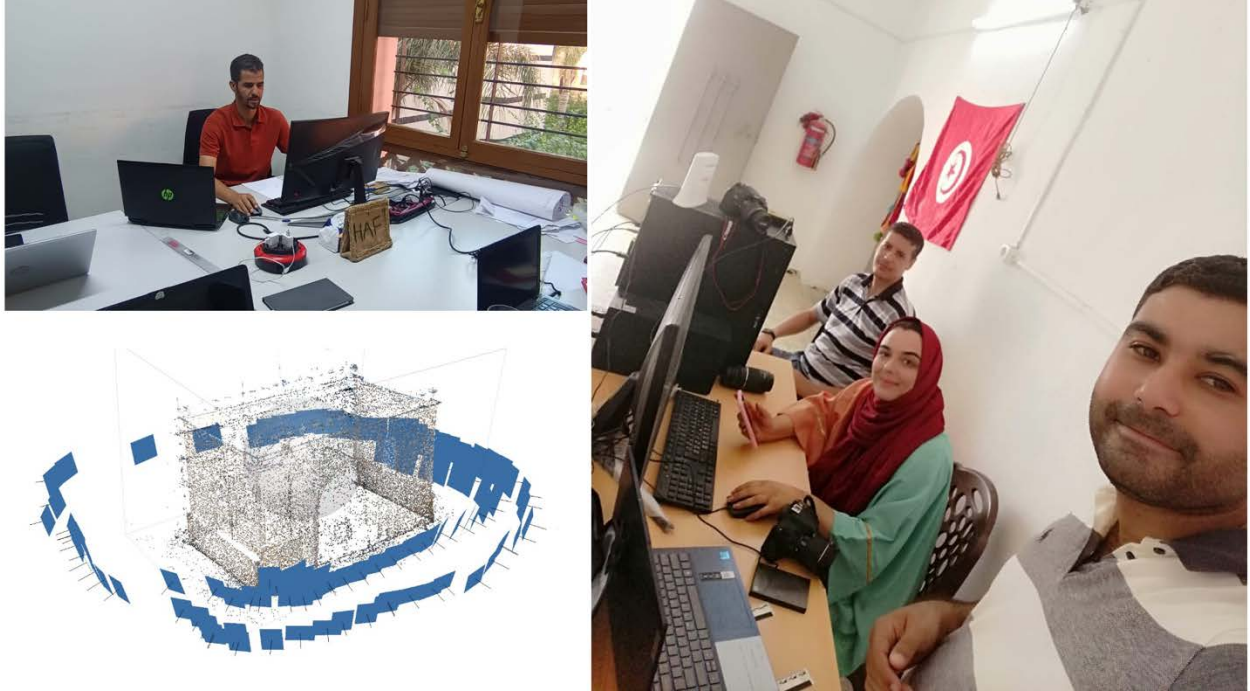


Description, clockwise starting from lower left: Andy Vaughn working with Muslim Scouts to clean the Jewish cemetery in Tunisia; Hanan Charaf and Tunisians documenting heritage sites; map of countries where ASOR has carried out GIS training; gathering of women in Jewish home in Djerba; ASOR sponsored mural from Djerba illustrating pluralistic interactions; Carol Meyers with Tunisian Scouts demonstrating ancient dress; ASOR delegation and colleagues from Burkina Faso and Niger; photogrammetry training in Morocco.



Description, clockwise starting from left: KPG and Augustin (from Burkina Faso) documenting Jewish tombs in Soliman, Tunisia; colleagues from Niger and Burkina Faso, Hanan Charaf, and Jared Koller celebrating completing cemetery documentation; Balima (Burkina Faso) using photogrammetry on Jewish tombs.





Description, clockwise starting from lower left: photogrammetry rendering from processing laboratory in Douiret, Tunisia; Abdelkarim from Morocco processing images; partners from Tataouine region and Douiret lab (Belgacem, Assia, Saffaoune). Lab in Douiret continues to be used and provides enhanced internet connectivity for a community previously without such service.



Description, clockwise starting from lower left: damaged synagogue in Tataouine, Tunisia; Andy and Hanan with partners in Sefrou, Morocco (Said and Mohammed) who are making Clifford Geertz's field notes available to descendants of those observed; wedding celebration of an ASOR partner (Assia) in Douiret, Tunisia; members ASOR partners from women's collective in Douiret; Muslim and Jewish partners from Djerba, Tunisia

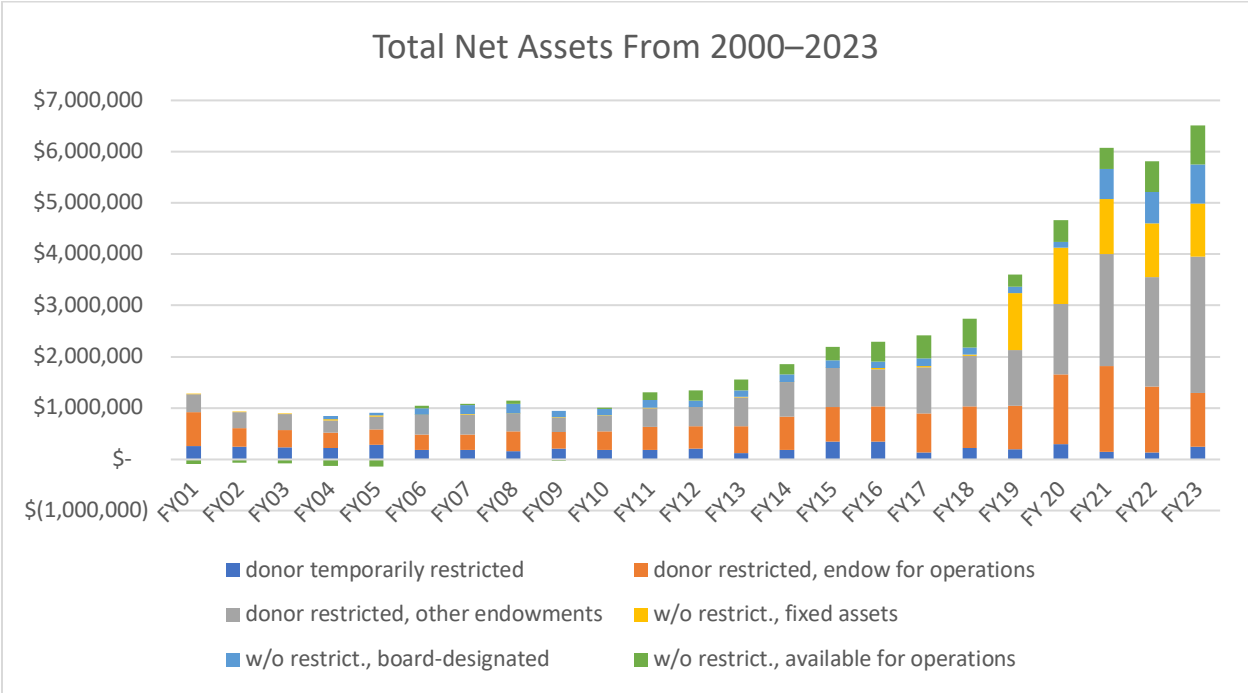
**How can we show that we are a family?** I think that it might be easier for us to focus on academics and business. It might be easier for us to ignore the pain in the Middle East and North Africa and try to keep our minds on archaeology, heritage, and academic papers. Yet, I think that this is a moment where we need to remind ourselves of all the times that we have shared through our work. Like a family, we will have disagreements and different political views. Yet, also like a family, we should work on communication and share our love and concern for each other. I encourage all of us as trustees to take the lead in this effort. If we do nothing else in this meeting—we should focus on mending bridges and creating safe spaces for conversations. As trustees, we should be leaders who listen and encourage others to observe and listen. We all have a long history of working across boundaries, and we must emphasize the need to come together as a family to support each other rather than to focus on putting out fires or winning debates.

**2. Review of ASOR’s Finances with an Eye Towards Future Planning and Fundraising**

After the above section, it seems almost trite to talk about finances. Yet, as you have heard me say before, “No margin, no mission.” ASOR’s financial position remains strong, and it was bolstered by a strong stock performance in the first half of 2023. The chart below shows that net assets are growing, and they are poised to provide a solid foundation for ASOR.

Thanks to ASOR’s donors, to your support as trustees, and to federal grants, ASOR was able to fund \$250,000 in scholarships, fellowships, grants, and awards in 2023. A fundraising initiative to celebrate our organization’s 125th anniversary (ASOR 2025—Strengthening Our Foundation | Expanding Horizons) will enable ASOR to continue to grow. Recent corrections in the stock market make this a good time to create new endowments or add contributions to current endowments.

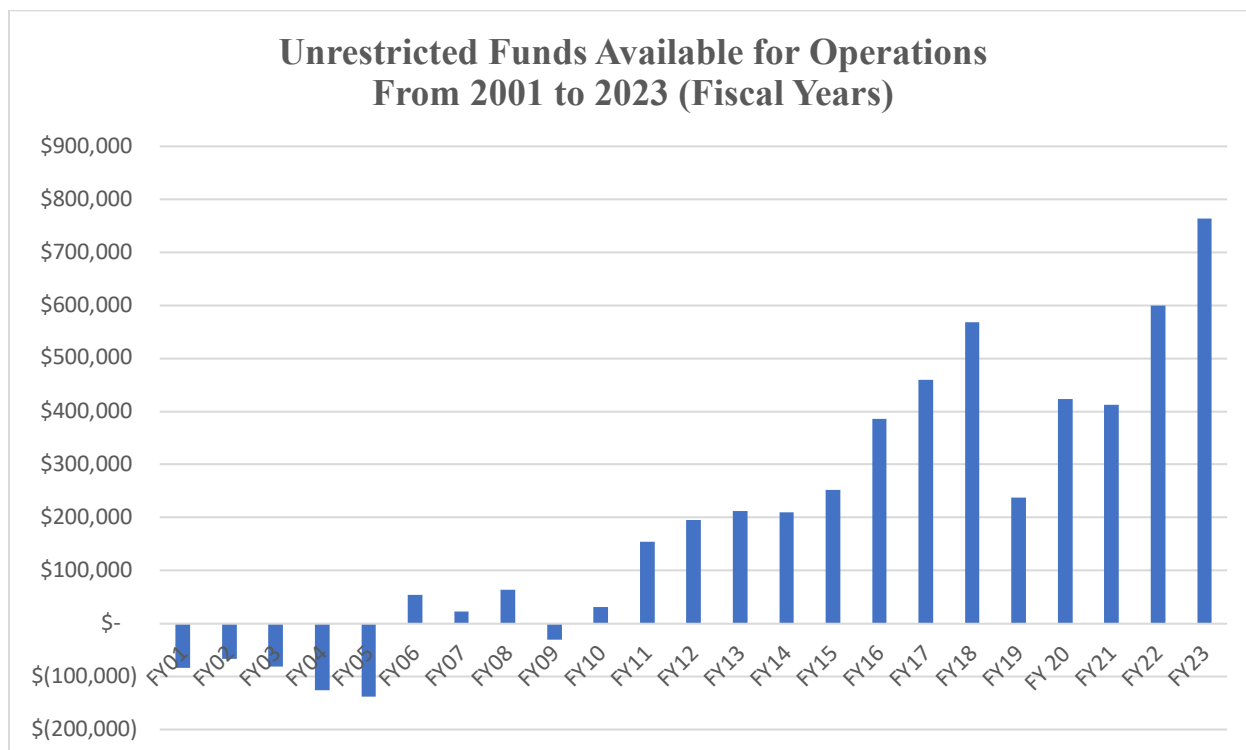
The chart below shows how ASOR’s assets have grown over the last twenty years. Even with a world torn apart, we are in a solid position and poised to add to our assets with endowments that will advance our core programs and the goals set forward in the strategic plan.



- Donor temporarily restricted: See Note F in audit. These are designated funds that must be spent for a donor-specified purpose.
- Donor restricted, endowment for operations: See Note G in audit. 5% distributions support operating budget. Often these are the hardest dollars to raise.
- Donor restricted, other endowments: See Note G in audit. Currently 5% (Platt is 6%) distributions based on last 12 quarters. Named endowments (e.g., Meyers, Seger, Strange-Midkiff, Dana, Platt) are the drivers that enable ASOR to award \$250,000+ annually to support our members. The 1% administrative fee also supports operations.
- Without restrictions, fixed assets: See Note D (primarily the James F. Strange Center).
- Without restrictions, board-designated: See Page 2 (Balance Sheet) of audit. These are otherwise unrestricted assets that have had restrictions placed on them by the Board. As such, the Board can change or remove those restrictions—Building Fund, Publications Fund, Kershaw Fund (newsletter).
- Without donor restrictions, available for operations: See Page 2 (Balance Sheet) of audit. This is the amount available for operations without restrictions. We sometimes refer to this as our “rainy day fund.”

***Assets Available for Operations—what allows you (as trustees) to plan for the long-term***

You will remember that ASOR’s eviction from Boston University necessitated the use of several hundred thousand dollars of unrestricted funds for operations to help with the purchase of the James F. Strange Center. The COVID pandemic then placed further strains on operations. Yet, you were bold and authorized awarding scholarships for memberships and Annual Meeting registrations to everyone with a need. ASOR received two forgivable PPP loans (\$118,700 each), and membership scholarships and the loyalty of your fellow members helped ASOR reach all-time membership highs (about 2200). Memberships were flat between 2021–2023 (after > 12% gains in 2021).



The chart above shows a surplus of about \$68,000 in FY22, plus the second forgivable PPP loan. The increase in unrestricted assets available for operations was even higher in FY23 (\$160,000). Optimism should be tempered in part because some of this increase is due to a timing issue regarding staff salaries paid by federal grants (especially the salary of the executive director). In FY23, the percentage of time documented for the executive director for federal grants was much higher than budgeted. Some of that time will be reversed in FY24 because the DRL 2021 grant required less allocated time from the executive director. In addition, the percentage of time documented for federal grants for the executive director will be lower in FY24 because Andy is spending more time on the ASOR 2025 fundraising initiative. We thus may see a reversal of \$40,000–\$50,000 in the amount available for operations due to fiscal year timing issues. Another large factor in this increase is a successful Annual Meeting and very favorable Annual Meeting contract. You will notice that the Annual Meeting “broke even” for the first time ever in FY23. The 2023 Annual Meeting will not be as advantageous financially, especially considering the war in Israel and Gaza and the high rate of cancellations due to this conflict.

Regardless of all these caveats and contingencies, you will have unrestricted assets for operations of over \$700,000 even after timing issues are considered in FY2024. You can (and should) plan for the long-term. We certainly do not want to waste this surplus, but you do not need to plan and think like we did in the 2000s when the unrestricted funds available for operations often had a negative balance.

### **3. ASOR 2025—Strengthening Our Foundation | Expanding Horizons—A Call to Action**

I am repeating a refrain from last year... ASOR’s strong financial position and our amazing track record of giving away scholarships, fellowships, and grants over the last five years mean that you can adopt programs for the long-term, and you can support and encourage others to support our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary fundraising initiative so that we can have an even more impactful future.

*Scholarships, Fellowships, Grants*—You awarded \$250,000 in 2023. ASOR’s growing endowments has made this possible, and continued growth in endowments will make it sustainable. Not only do these scholarships, grants, and fellowships advance the goals in the strategic plan, but they draw new members and new donors. Increasing gifts to endowments and current-year scholarships for memberships and registrations will be critical for seeing these programs grow and become sustainable in the future. Fundraising for these endowments is a crucial piece of **ASOR 2025**, our fundraising initiative. Legacy gifts will also be extremely important—we have seen our Legacy Circle grow, and further growth could be transformative for these endowments to support ASOR’s members.

As stressed above, our work has never been needed more. You, as trustees are collectively the reason that ASOR is unique among learned societies and growing and increasing in our relevance in this fractured and torn world. Your dedication to our shared mission is inspiring. You give of your time, talents, and resources.

I look forward to continuing to work with you, my ASOR family. My appreciation and thankfulness for your support and encouragement have never been greater. I truly look forward to seeing how we can move past the pain that we are all experiencing at the end of 2023, and to seeing how we can move forward positively as a family into our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary.