



**Middle
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April 19, 2016

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Dear Sirs,

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to register our concerns regarding the ongoing digital transfer of the Israel State Archives (ISA). While we acknowledge the importance of digitization, the procedure followed at the ISA is being conducted in haste. Moreover, the new guidelines for accessing primary documents present several obstacles and serious constraints for academic research. Whatever their purposes, the guidelines, when followed, could easily result in violations of academic freedom, whether intentional or not. It is imperative that Israeli officials reconsider the digitization procedures, as well as the new guidelines for access so as not to restrict the ability of scholars to conduct thorough primary research, make new discoveries and share them with the wider communities of researchers.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Within the next week, the ISA will end its policy of offering researchers access to paper files in the viewing rooms as the archive is being digitized. The change to a digital archive is being advertised as a modernizing project. However, the process of digitizing vast amounts of material, as well as new restrictions related to access suggest that more than a benign upgrade is intended. Based on the objections of many Israeli students, faculty, deans, and others, the problems lie in the details of the digitizing process.

There are roughly 400 million documents in the ISA's possession. About 100,000 documents can be scanned per day. The number of documents that have already



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been scanned is disputed. According to some reports, the scanning of 10 million documents have been completed. This represents 2.5 percent of the entire archive. *Ha'aretz* is reporting that only 5.5 million pages have been completed. Based on the most optimistic projections, the ISA is promising that the completion of the digitization will take 15 years. Yet, glitches and other technical difficulties are already slowing the transfer process.

More troubling is the fact that as the documents are being transferred, researchers will not have access to the paper files in the archive. Only documents that have been scanned will be available to researchers. Ironically, this is tantamount to the ISA's taking the archive offline as it goes online. Furthermore, according to the new guidelines for access, the military censor will now have to approve every document before it can be released to a researcher. Additionally, the censor will have the right to re-classify documents that had previously been declassified. As others have noted, these changes will make it increasingly difficult and restrictive to conduct historical research in Israel.

What the ISA is proposing in terms of its digital transfer program and the access to documents, as well as the specific requirement that the military censor approve every document requested by researchers, represents a grave abuse of academic freedom. Current and future researchers working in the Israel State Archives will be deprived of rich materials buried in a digital repository either because the original paper versions are no longer accessible or because they remain under the purview of military censors.

For many whose scholarship is dependent on archival research, an unfettered digital database that replicates the experience of paper files in an archive is the only kind of digital transfer that should be pursued. CAF welcomes the efforts to digitize the ISA's holdings, but the current process and new restrictions will limit the ability of researchers to carry out their scholarly inquiries. We urge you to reconsider this initiative before the ISA blocks the freedom of information, which remains a basic tenet of democratic society.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We await your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'B. Baron' with a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Beth Baron
MESA President
Professor, City University of New York

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Amy W. Newhall' in a cursive style.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director
Associate Professor, University of Arizona