

# Nurturing archives in the Middle East

Whenever and wherever possible, the National Archives promotes the importance of preserving and managing significant national records—an essential element in sustaining democracy and in creating a candid account of a nation's history.

Developing archival skills and a record-keeping focus were the major reasons for my recent trip to the Middle East, joined by Ian Wilson, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, and **Michael Carlson**, Director, Electronic and Special Media Records Services Division (NWME). This trip grew out of meetings with Dr. Wilson and other members of the global records management and archival community over the past year.

One focus of these earlier meetings was opening a dialogue with the Israel State Archives and the Palestine National Archives on the possibility of collaborative archival and recordkeeping projects. The shared documentary heritage of the two organizations and the need for practical records management training for their staffs created a unique opportunity for both NARA and Library and Archives Canada (LAC) to explore this proposal with our Israeli and Palestinian colleagues.

This effort was further discussed during the annual meeting last November of the International Conferences of the Round



Table on Archives (CITRA). The Israel State Archives, with the support of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, invited Dr. Wilson and me to meet with its principals in Jerusalem. The

head of the Palestine National Archives also agreed to a lengthy meeting with us during the visit.

What did we learn during our trip?

Although the heads of the Israel State Archives and the Palestine National Archives have never met, we were able to meet separately with each of them to discuss their respective archival situations and to elicit pledges of interest in cooperating with U.S. and Canadian archivists.

We were then able to identify collections that jointly documented aspects of the history of Israel and of the Palestinian people, such as rare and fragile Palestinian newspapers from the 1940s and selected records from the Turkish and British Mandate periods. All are eligible for digitization so that they may be accessed on the Internet.

The Israel State Archives was established in 1949, a year after the State of Israel was formed, but the Palestine National Archives has only been in existence for about 10 years, following the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994.

A severe lack of funding and regional instability has made progress toward a truly vibrant records management and archival program difficult for the Palestinians. Training for the many records custodians they have is a priority for them,

as is putting the archives on a sound legislative footing.

A wider meeting of representatives not only from Israel and the Palestinian Authority but other Middle East countries and Europe will be held this spring in Ottawa to establish an organizational structure and steering committee for this program, as well as to decide on strategies for funding these projects. We have identified a number of U.S. Federal and Canadian funding sources as well as international sources.

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This visit to the Middle East is part of NARA's program of international outreach.

We have strengthened our relationships with the world's other great democracies and we have increased our training programs to help less-developed nations improve their archival and records management practices.

As democracy continues to spread around the world, the National Archives is taking a strong role in helping these newer democracies preserve and manage the records that contain their national histories.



ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States



Photo by Jean-Marc Carisse

In a 2005 photo, Ian Wilson, Librarian and Archivist of Canada (left), shakes hands with Archivist Allen Weinstein after signing a memorandum of intent aimed at closer cooperation between NARA and Library and Archives Canada. Since then, the two national archivists, as well as members of their senior staffs, have been in close contact and have exchanged visits regularly. Their recent trip to the Middle East is the latest in a series of collaborative efforts.

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