

# Progress with our Middle East records project

Recently in this space, I wrote about efforts by the National Archives and Library and Archives Canada to support collaboration between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in archiving and preserving the records of their shared heritage.

Librarian and Archivist of Canada Ian Wilson and I, together with a few professional staff members, traveled to Israel earlier this year and held meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian officials to discuss the need for practical records management training for their respective staffs. While there, we identified collections that provide documentation of both the history of the State of Israel and the history of the Palestinian people.

One important aspect of these efforts is that archives officials from both sides want to work together on these projects, which document the histories of their people.

The history of the two archives is quite different. The Israel State Archives was established in 1949, one year after the State of Israel was founded. The Palestinian National Archives was established in the late 1990s, after the Palestinian National Authority was formed in 1994.

I am now pleased to report that progress has been made in this endeavor. Earlier this month, officials who oversee archival and records management issues from both Israel and the PNA joined me and Mr. Wilson in Ottawa.

There, for the first time, these officials—representing both sides in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East—sat down at the same table and discussed their archival issues, even those on which they might disagree.

There was preliminary acceptance of a



partnership between the Israelis and the Palestinians for preserving the records in which both have an interest. A draft memorandum of understanding was drawn up with these goals:

- Digitize and make available to everyone newspapers published in Palestine during and prior to 1948. These newspapers are held in a variety of places in Israel and would be digitized by a joint Israeli-Palestinian team and placed on a public web site.
- Survey and digitize photographs documenting pre-1948 cultural life of Mandatory Palestine. As with the newspapers, these photographs would be digitized and placed on a public web site.
- Survey and digitize records from the British Mandate and Ottoman period—now in the Israel State Archives, but for the most part documenting matters involving Palestinian Arabs.
- Set up records management and archival training programs for staff from the Palestinian National Archives and the Israel State Archives.
- Form a nonpartisan team of archivists and records managers to inspect and inventory the records seized from the Orient House in August 2001. The Orient House was the administrative center of Arab Jerusalem; it was closed

by the Israelis after bombings in 2001 that were attributed to the Palestinians. Israel has since rejected repeated requests to return these records.

One of our principal tasks now is to find financial resources for these activities—not an easy task at this time.

The National Archives' efforts in the Middle East are a part of our international outreach programs. We seek to help other countries improve archival and records management practices so that the stories of their nations may be preserved and made available to their people far into the future.

We are encouraged by our progress with Israel and the Palestinians, pleased that our efforts may help to support full access to the records that guarantee rights of citizens, hold government accountable, and tell a national story.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States

*This column originally appeared  
in the June 2008 issue  
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*