

## The Restriction of Public Access to Records in the Israel State Archives - Call to Action

### **A call to restore access and viewing of documents in the Archives' Reading Room, and for an urgent public and professional consultation**

Recently, a systematic change is taking place in the Israel State Archives (ISA): the Archives have launched a new Internet site, where for the first time roughly 2% of the Archives' records (8 million, out of 400 million pages), are being made accessible online to the public. At the same time, the Archive has closed its reading room and will, as of now, be preventing all access to physical records, as a matter of permanent policy. Concurrently, the Israel Defense Forces' Military Censor is being incorporated into the existing apparatus for permitting and denying right of access to the materials in the ISA.

We researchers, scholars, and representatives of civil society organizations welcome wholeheartedly the digitization initiative. This is an important step, as it permits quick access to the digitized materials, grants the possibility of utilizing digital research tools to process materials, and serves the interest of digitally preserving valuable documents and records.

However, as experiences all over the world teach us, digitization processes are not merely technical. It is necessary that these processes be carried out whilst conducting wide-ranging professional consultations and out of an awareness of their consequences. In recent years, considerable experience has been gained in the digitization of book collections; however, the digitization of archival materials is a significantly more complicated process.

The recently implemented measures are problematic for two main reasons: 1) they prevent researchers from accessing archival materials that have not yet been scanned, 2) the amalgamation of the idea that online, internet-based access means a digitization of all archival materials overlooks the important distinction between the declassification of documents for the purpose of reading versus the declassification of those documents for the purpose of publication.

Firstly, when every viewing is regarded as an internet "publication", research work becomes impractical: ongoing research in archival materials often necessitates the surveying of hundreds and thousands of pages in a short span of time, occasionally only to find a small relevant selection, and to order dozens more files. In the current scheme of things, there will be no way to ensure the capacity to survey such volumes of documents at an appropriate pace, if each archival file will only reach the researcher after being digitized and checked by the Military Censor. The exclusivity of the online "publishing" channel, as a means of accessing archival materials could also have far-reaching consequences with regards to preventing access to documents due to issues of copyright, privacy, and more. Therefore, restoring the possibility of accessing not yet scanned archival materials is crucial to productive archival research, and should, once restored, remain available permanently.

Secondly, the public and exclusive nature of the new internet-based reading platform places all open archival materials under the authority of the Military Censor, in whichever areas the Censor designates. This means that all materials in the areas defined by the Military

Censor, **including materials that have already been declassified by the ISA**, will become confidential. Their renewed publication will be permitted or denied according to the considerations of the Censor, in addition to the existing procedures for material declassification.

Therefore, the dire and direct meaning of this combined move of closing the reading room and leaving the ISA's internet site as the only channel for accessing archival materials is a complete denial of public access to particularly important materials, according to the decisions of the Military Censor. **This greatly exceeds the existing causes for classifying materials in the 1955 Archives' Law.**

In our conversation and correspondences with the State Archivist, Dr. Yaakov Lozowik, he has made clear that the decision to close the ISA's reading room is due to resource constraints; specifically, the lack of sufficient resources to have the Archives' storage facilities engage in the dual tasks of both digitization of materials and reading room operations. However, to the best of our understanding, **the impact of these actions taken by the ISA on the public's ability to access archival materials is too severe to be justified by simply a lack of resources.**

Moreover: one of the main existing obstructions preventing the declassification of materials which are of interest to the public, to historians, and to researchers more broadly are the insufficient resources currently allocated to considering the declassification of previously confidential materials. The actions presented by the State Archivist, and now being implemented by the ISA, do not involve a significant change to this aspect, which is already poorly staffed.

**However, despite its importance and uniqueness, the decision to close the reading room was taken with no public consultation whatsoever**, not even in the discussions and conversations that did take place with regards to access to the ISA's materials in recent years. Even those, like ourselves, who make regular use of the archives, only became aware of the intention to prevent access to physical records in early March, through a partial and unclear photocopied announcement which was placed on the reading room tables. The public discussion about this issue is important not just in and of itself, but is also conditional for understanding the needs of the ISA's users, as well as for considering the professional perspective of researchers who deal with these issues. Nonetheless, none of these groups, neither public, nor researchers, were party to any discussions leading up to this decision.

**The move to increase the public availability of the records available at the ISA by allowing online access to the documents is welcome and even necessary. However, the decision to merge the launch of internet viewing access with the prevention of in-person access to important historical documents and files, which are vital for education about Israeli society's past and present, is a serious and unwarranted mistake. Furthermore, the decision that this access will be voluntarily made subject to the considerations of the Military Censor and other factors, is a threat to open public discourse and education.**

**This must, and indeed can, be amended.**

To the best of our knowledge, central archives in resource-rich countries, some of which are deliberating with regards to digitization projects, **did not** take comparable actions, and choose **not** to limit access to materials exclusively to a digital internet-based platform. This is the case of the German Federal Archives and the archives of the various German states, as well as the British National Archives. The same is true for other countries in the Middle East where national archives have been digitized: In both Egypt and Turkey, for example, digitization has not resulted in the denial of access to physical records. Only the Iranian National Archive has begun preventing access to physical records in parallel to digitization.

**The Israeli public as a whole, including researchers as members of the public who see bringing the archives closer to the public as part of their objectives and roles, is entitled to have access to its history.** It is for this purpose that the limitations and declassification procedures of archival materials were introduced in the Archives' Law and in the access regulations; it is for this reason that the ISA's primary goal was defined as allowing public access to government documentation, and that the default for viewing archival materials is determined in the Archives' Law.

We ask to ensure the continuation of the digitization process itself, while minimizing the damages characteristic of such processes, such as the loss of information and the loss of access to information, as has already taken place.

To this end, we demand **that the ISA's decision to close the reading room and prevent access to physical records be revoked immediately. We** further demand **the continued operation of the reading room and access to physical records alongside the launching of the ISA's new website. Finally, we ask to open a public and professional discussion on the matter.**

In the coming days, we will present these demands to the State Archivist and to public discussion, as well as through other channels. Your urgent support is required now as these changes are taking place. We hope to start a constructive discussion and guarantee the success of the digitization process of ISA materials while improving the possibilities for research work and the general accessibility of archival materials.