

State of Access to Israeli Government Archives Data Sheet, May 2023

Background

The Israeli Archives Law, which stipulates the obligation to store material in government archives and regulates how it is presented to the public, sets the principle that: “any person may consult the archival materials deposited in the Archive.” Nevertheless, current figures received by Akevot Institute with regards to effective access to archival records kept in the major governmental archives – the Israel State Archives (ISA) and the IDF and Defense Establishment Archives (IDEA) – **show the overwhelming majority of these archival records is entirely inaccessible to the public.** A significant portion is not only inaccessible but does not even appear in the publicly available catalogue, such that often, it is not possible to know what records the archive has and, obviously, impossible to ask for the declassification of unlisted records.

This data sheet presents the current state of affairs regarding the scope of access to materials kept in the major governmental archives. The figures, sourced from the Prime Minister’s Office and Ministry of Defense replies to requests submitted under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), show that **only 3% of all files kept in the ISA and the IDEA are currently accessible to the public.** The figures also show that reviews ahead of declassification are extremely slow, especially at the IDEA, the largest governmental archive in Israel, which is a major factor in the low rate of access to historical records in the country. There has been a significant improvement on one key point, however: The number of titles appearing in publicly accessible catalogues, which provide information about the records stored in the archive, has increased substantially compared to previous years.

Akevot Institute monitors access to records kept in governmental archives on a yearly basis. This is the first publication with updated figures since the data sheet published by Akevot in 2017.

State of Access to Archive Files

**OF THE ROUGHLY 17 MILLION FILES KEPT BY THE ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVES
AND THE IDF AND DEFENSE ESTABLISHMENT ARCHIVES¹ –
484,271 FILES (2.84% OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF FILES) ARE ACCESSIBLE
TO THE PUBLIC.²**

Of the 2,989,744 files³ registered in the **Israel State Archives**, 517,366 have been fully or partially declassified (17% of the registered files). However, the scope of files that are accessible to the public is lower: The ISA website provides access to 433,058 scanned files (14.5% of the registered files).

In general, this is a significant improvement compared to previous years: To illustrate, in 2017, the proportion of files accessible to the public was about 5% of all files stored in the ISA.⁴ Still, the rate of publicly accessible files in the ISA remains low.

The **IDF and Defense Establishment Archives** hold 14,079,742 files,⁵ of which 51,213 are fully or partially accessible to the public, making up 0.36% of the total number of files in the archive.⁶

¹ These are the two government archives that provide services to the public. The figure does not include the archives of the Shin Bet, the Mossad, the Israel Atomic Energy Commission and the Israel Institute for Biological Research, most of which are completely closed to the public (following the High Court ruling in the Hazkani case [HCJ 15/19 Dr. Shai Hazkani et al. v. Shin Bet Archives and et al.]. Over the past year, the Shin Bet Archives began providing very limited services to the public via the ISA). The figure also excludes the many archival records kept by various governmental and public bodies that have not been handed over to the ISA. For example, the Ministry of Justice stores 4.5 million archival files that are entirely inaccessible to the public.

² Discounting Individuals' Files (files related to specific individuals) kept in the IDEA, the figure stands at 4.88%. Unless otherwise stated, figures related to the ISA in this document were sourced from the response provided by the PMO to an application made by Akevot Institute under the FOIA, dated January 15, 2023; figures related to the IDEA in this document were sourced from the response provided by the Ministry of Defense to an application made by Akevot Institute under the FOIA, dated February 5, 2023.

³ The ISA storage facilities contain an unknown number of files that have not been registered in the Archive's systems.

⁴ See, [State of Access to Israeli Government Archives](#), Data Sheet, September 2017, Akevot Institute.

⁵ Of which 4,808,961 are subject files (34%), 2,123,665 are case files (15%) and 7,147,116 (51%) are personal files.

⁶ Or 0.74% of all files other than personal files.

Not only is this an extremely low proportion of accessible files, but it has, in fact, dropped slightly compared to previous years. In 2017, the proportion of files accessible for review at the IDEA was about 0.4% of all files.⁷

Files Remaining Sealed Past the Restricted Access Period

The Access Regulations,⁸ first enacted in 1966 and replaced in 2010 with a new version that has since been amended several times, regulate public access to archival records stored in the ISA and its branches. The Access Regulations stipulate periods of time during which access to the records is restricted (restricted access period) and provide for a procedure for removing the restriction (declassification), whether on the archive's own initiative or prompted by a request from the public. The Access Regulations currently allow for restricted access periods ranging from 15 to 90 years, depending on the nature and origin of specific materials.⁹ Once the restricted access period expires, archives are expected to open the records for public access without prompting.

Nevertheless, contrary to common perception, archival records are not fully classified even during the restricted access period. An archive may consider a specific request to access archival records and open the records for consultation if there is no pertinent impediment to doing so, according to the guidelines set forth in Sections 8 and 9 of the Access Regulations.

Despite this, the data show that many files **remain closed for public access past their restricted access period:**

969,979 FILES REGISTERED IN THE ISA ARE STILL SEALED, DESPITE THE EXPIRATION OF THEIR RESTRICTED ACCESS PERIOD. THEY MAKE UP ABOUT A THIRD OF THE FILES IN THE ARCHIVE.

1,091,825 OF THE SUBJECT FILES KEPT IN THE IDEA REMAIN SEALED DESPITE THE EXPIRATION OF THEIR RESTRICTED ACCESS PERIOD. THEY MAKE UP ABOUT A QUARTER OF THE SUBJECT FILES.¹⁰

Files Declassified in 2022

In 2022, **17,749 files** (containing 2,519,001 pages) were fully or partially declassified by the ISA.¹¹

In 2022, **1,011 files** (containing 56,157 pages) were fully or partially declassified by the IDEA.¹²

The total number of files that were fully or partially opened for public access at the ISA and IDEA in 2022 is **18,760 files** – only about 5% of them were declassified by the IDEA. The number of **pages** declassified by the IDEA is just roughly 2.25% of the number declassified by the ISA.

⁷ Or 0.8% of all files other than personal files. See, [State of Access to Israeli Government Archives](#), Data Sheet, September 2017, Akevot Institute.

⁸ *Archives Regulations (access to archival material held in the archive) 2010* (hereinafter: Access Regulations), enacted pursuant to the *Archive Law 1955*.

⁹ The default restricted access period is 15 years from the time the material was produced, unless the origin or content of the archival record in question is restricted under Schedule 1 of the Access Regulations. Several examples of restricted access periods stipulated in Schedule 1 of the Access Regulations: 20 years for transcripts of confidential meetings of Knesset committees; 25 for “foreign relations” material created by government ministries; 30 for archival records produced by the Israel Police, the Israel Prison Service, the Ministry of Public Security, as well as some material produced by the IDF and the Ministry of Defense. Security Cabinet decisions and transcripts are under a 50-year restricted access period, as is “material concerning security matters” produced by the Ministry of Defense, the IDF, and other agencies. Material vaguely described as “private and personal documents” is under a 70-year restricted access period. Raw intelligence material was put under a 90-year restricted access period, as was material produced by security agencies: the Shin Bet, the Mossad, and the Israel Institute for Biological Research. An identical restricted access period was stipulated for archival records produced by the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, and the “research facilities” under its purview, as well as archival records concerning it kept in other institutions. The Minister of Defense was given powers to list by order, which will not be made public, additional security agencies and IDF units whose archival records would be put under a 90-year restricted access period.

¹⁰ The IDEA maintains that case files (Military Police investigation files, Military Court Files) have no restricted access period and are, as a rule, sealed in perpetuity unless a competent authority orders them opened.

¹¹ Source: “The Archives in Figures”, ISA website.

¹² In addition to these, 183 files were reviewed and disqualified for full declassification. These files contain 3,532 pages.

State of Access to Catalogues

Of the roughly 17 million file titles kept by the ISA and the IDEA, no more than **3,674,222 (21.5% files) are listed in the archives' publicly accessible online catalogues.**

A catalogue is an archive's basic search tool: it is the full list of items found in it, at all levels of documentation, files, file series, divisions, collections, etc. A good catalogue informs consulting parties as to what materials can and cannot be found in the archive, what materials are missing, and whether or not materials are restricted, for what reason and for how long. **Publicly accessible catalogues are a necessary condition for proper access to information even when, and perhaps because, such a significant proportion of the materials are classified and inaccessible.**

The ISA allows access to the titles of 1,698,876 files – about 57% of the 3 million files registered in it.

This is a significant and valuable improvement compared to the state of access to the archive catalogue in previous years. According to ISA figures, in 2017, the publicly accessible catalogue contained about 557,000 titles, which made up only 18.6% of all the files stored in the archive at the time.

The IDEA allows access to the titles of 1,975,346 files – about 14% of the roughly 14 million files stored in it.

This too marks a significant improvement compared to previous years: In 2020, the list of titles in the IDEA's search engine contained 7% of all the files in the archive; in 2019 the list of titles included 3.4% of the files, and in 2018 the list of titles allowed for access to only 2.7% of all the files in the archive.

Despite the real improvement, these figures are still abnormally low in relation to the accepted professional standard as well as the commitment the state gave the High Court of Justice.¹³

¹³ Paragraphs 6 and 7 in HCJ 2467/05, Gershom Gorenberg et al. v. IDEA Commissioner et al. (judgment dated January 13, 2010). In 2005, Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) petitioned the High Court of Justice, demanding the declassification of archival materials relevant to Gorenberg's research, and a reform of archive protocols that restricted freedom of information and freedom of research. The petition included a demand to present the full catalogue of the IDEA materials. For more on this subject, see, Akevot Institute, [Point of Access: Barriers for Public Access to Israeli Government Archives](#) (2016), PP. 26–27, 62–63.

Conclusion

The past year's figures point to a significant improvement in the accessibility of archival records stored in the ISA and the scope of titles visible on its website; The IDEA has also shown a significant improvement in the scope of titles visible in the search engines online and in the reading room.

However, **the rate of declassification at the IDEA remains particularly low, and the proportion of publicly accessible materials is infinitesimal.** This means that, in practical terms, Israel's largest archive is inaccessible to researchers and fails to provide adequate services to those interested in using it. **In the ISA as well, despite a significant improvement in the rate of declassification and access, in reality, only 14.5% of the files kept in the archive are available and accessible to the public.** Adding to that, the ongoing closure of the physical reading room and the exclusive reliance on the pace at which files are being scanned result in a situation where many files whose declassification process has been completed and have been cleared for access are effectively inaccessible. Finally, the slow processing of declassification, spanning months and sometimes several years, also prevents researchers from basing their work on materials found in the state archives.

Put together, these make Israel's two largest archives irrelevant to research and preclude the public from relying on knowledge found in governmental archives to advance public, political, artistic and cultural discourse – all of which are essential to a liberal and democratic society.