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On Documents in the Basement and Historical Research: A Personal Perspective*

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Throughout the forty-two years since my MA studies at the Hebrew University, my academic life has entailed writing about issues relating to the history of international relations in the twentieth century. This writing has to a large extent been based on archival research in Israel and elsewhere. In this context I took advantage of the fact that since the mid-1970s hundreds of thousands of files have become accessible to historians, allowing us to uncover and analyze affairs of state previously shrouded in darkness. In my case, the academic fruit of this labor amounted to five books and more than thirty journal articles.

Such a range of studies is, by its nature, difficult to summarize substantively. It began with an analysis of Israel's decision of May 1948 to declare political independence, went on to address core problems in Britain's foreign policy during the interwar period, and concluded with an examination of hitherto unknown aspects of Israeli foreign policy in its early days. Yet there was a common denominator among these subjects, namely, the challenge of writing a history on the basis of archival work. The process by which I overcame some of the technical, methodological, and conceptual problems I faced during the course of my research might, I believe, be of interest to readers of *H-Diplo*, and I therefore allow myself to expound on it here. I will focus primarily on questions of *what is and what is not to be found* in archival documents.

My various studies have focused on international relations, primarily from the perspective of one actor. Thus, even though I did have to take into account both sides of an issue, at the substantive level I was able to concentrate the scope of my sources on a single state. As such I could, presumably, have limited myself to archival research solely in Israel, and indeed most of the insights I drew stemmed naturally from documents in Israeli public and private archives. The reality I encountered in these archives, however, posed a multitude of difficulties that essentially left me with numerous lingering questions. I was able to resolve some of these uncertainties by turning to foreign, and seemingly unrelated, sources.

The need to track down additional sources, beyond Israeli documentation, stemmed from the limitations that Israeli officials' reporting "culture" and the state authorities' very selective disclosure of documents to researchers. Israel's functionaries in the days of early statehood were not particularly adept at orderly and detailed reporting because, on the one hand, they basically had to create a previously nonexistent practice, and on the other hand, the tradition of strict secrecy that had characterized Jewish political culture in Palestine¹ had an undeniable impact that lasted years after Israel achieved

* An earlier version of this article was published in Hebrew: Uri Bialer, "On Documents in the Basement and Historical Research: A Personal Perspective," in Gadi Heimann (ed.), *New Perspectives on the History of International Relations* (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute, 2013) [Hebrew]. The essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Donald Watt of the London School of Economics who long ago opened before me the gates to the world of archives.

¹ Gershon Rivlin and Aliza Rivlin, *The Stranger Cannot Understand* (Tel Aviv: Ma'archot, 1998) [Hebrew]. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Israel's diplomatic culture during those early years of statehood was also characterized by openness and

statehood. Moreover, Israel's sensitivity to matters of security and a multitude of domestic political issues (relations with the left-wing Mapam Party and the right-wing Herut party, and the presence of a large Arab minority within the borders of June 1949, following the War of Independence), as well as foreign affairs related to the political conflict with the Arab world, circumscribed strict parameters for disclosure, leaving significant historical events beyond the reach of the researcher delving through documents in Jerusalem. Some of the resulting questions dissipate when one expands the investigation to foreign archives that describe local events "from the outside," although, by its nature, this is a complex, time-consuming process necessitating financial resources.²

For example, my study on Israel's relations with the Christian world during the state's early years revealed a central dimension of diplomatic activity that the scholarship to date had overlooked: Israeli efforts to resolve problems of church property, most of which the Israel Defense Forces had seized during Israel's war of independence and which the state refused to return to its owners. The lion's share of this property belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. Complicated and convoluted negotiations resulted in a series of agreements under which the Church leased a significant portion of its properties to Israel.³ The relatively detailed documentation on the subject in the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem did not, however (for reasons that became clear to me later), shed light on the main means used by the state's foreign policy architects, sometimes brutal, to achieve their aim, as explained below. This became evident only after I examined archival material in the British Public Record Office in London, which detailed intensive contacts between leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church, both in Israel and elsewhere, and British Foreign Office officials in which the former vented their bitterness over Israel's financial extortion (an ultimatum to pay various taxes) – a demand that eventually broke their resistance. The excellent Foreign Office analysis and reporting provided me with a thorough and convincing account of the complicated situation and allowed me to present a suitable explanation.

Another example of the importance of examining foreign documents in order to understand Israel is the following. One of the more complicated problems Israel had to address during its early years was the need to give legal expression to its relations with foreign oil companies that had operated in the land during the British Mandate era.⁴ The declassified Israeli documents on the subject are primarily lengthy and tedious minutes of meetings between the parties. These left me with many "trees" but no "forest": it was very hard for me to understand the dynamics and, in particular, the ultimate outcome of their talks – a tacit agreement by both sides not to sign a new documents. I was unable to locate any clear summary of the issues and therefore could not resolve this riddle until I found reports by the American consul in Jerusalem, located in the U.S. National Archives in Washington, in which he explained the complexities of this issue to his superiors using internal

participation in the process of policymaking, even on the part of relatively low-ranking officials. In contrast to the norm among long-standing foreign ministries with the tradition of reporting to superiors and instructing subordinates, even the lower ranks of Israel's officialdom allowed themselves to offer advice, recommendations, and sometimes even criticism during those years. Moshe Yegar, Yosef Govrin, and Arye Oded, eds., *The Foreign Ministry: The First Fifty Years* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002) [Hebrew].

² In some fields one can now draw on foreign documents regarding Israel. See, among other examples, *Foreign Relations of the United States (Series); Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941–1953* Edited by The Israel Foreign Ministry; The Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation; The Israel State Archives; The Russian Federal Archives; The Cummings Center for Russian Studies, Tel Aviv University; the Oriental Institute, the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2 vols. (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Marcos Silber and Szymon Rudnicki, eds., *Polish Israeli Diplomatic Relations, a Selection of Documents (1945–1967)* (Warsaw: Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych, 2009) [Polish]; Jerusalem: Government Printer, 2009 [Hebrew]; *Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, Directia Arhivelor Diplomatice, Romania-Israel 50 De Ani Relatii Diplomatice, vol. 1, 1948–1969* (Bucharest: Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, 2000) [Romanian]; *Cekoslovensko a Izrael v letech 1945–1956—Dokumenty* (Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR ve spolupráci s Historickým ústavem České armády a se Státním ústředním archivem, Praha, 1993) [Czech].

³ Uri Bialer, "Horse Trading: Israel and the Greek-Orthodox Ecclesiastical Property, 1948-52," *The Journal of Israeli History* 24:2 (2005): 203-214 and correspondence in PRO FO 371/82/189.

⁴ Bialer, *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1948-1963* (London: Macmillan / St. Antony's Oxford Series, 1999).

Israeli information he had attained.[Please add a note - SDR (State Department Records) 884A2553/2] His analysis provided me with a clear outline of the “forest” that I had previously been unable to discern.

These reports also helped me identify the internal Israeli political perspective in relation to negotiations (which had been underway since Israel’s founding) on the future of Russian Church property in Jerusalem. Israeli diplomatic documents described and explained the foreign political dimension quite well but, perhaps naturally, make no reference to Israel’s internal political perspective, which in fact played an important part in accelerating the negotiations and, in 1964, reaching an agreement. As it turns out, and as reported by the American consul to his superiors in Washington, political considerations on the part of Israeli leaders seeking to form a coalition between the Mapai and Ahdut HaAvodah parties had shaped the state’s diplomacy in this area.⁵

Let us now shift from a technical perspective to a substantive question related to archival research. My five books aim to explain how states struggle with economic, ideological or religious security, and psychological challenges and needs. The first, *The Shadow of the Bomber*, addresses the sources and repercussions of British fears surrounding airstrikes before World War II.⁶ The second, *Between East and West*, presents the origins and manifestations of the policy Israel adopted during its early years, known at the time as “non-identification” – a political strategy of “knocking on all doors” and refraining from measures that could lead to their closure, all within the context of a rigidly bipolar world.⁷ My third book, *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, examines how Israel coped with the cutoff of energy supplies in the Middle East and identifies the paths it chose to pursue to ensure sustainability in this critical area.⁸ The fourth book, *Cross on the Star of David*, presents the techniques by which Israel sought to minimize the harm of the Christian world’s hostility and to reinforce what it saw as positive trends and, in this context, explains the relative position of Christianity as a consideration in the formation of Israel’s foreign policy apparatus at the time.⁹ The fifth book provides a synthesis of the field as a whole.¹⁰ These are very complex issues, and in order to explore them I needed more material than what the official files had to offer, despite subject headings that seemingly exhausted the issue. The documentation on which I drew is therefore quite wide-ranging, making it difficult to identify a unifying “story” and logic that allow for the presentation of an orderly, persuasive thesis. In short, I faced the problem of having to systematize, organize, and to a large extent conceptually “invent” the subject matter in light of archival material that proved frustrating because of what was lacking, on the one hand, and the disorderly abundance of what it contained, on the other. How did I overcome this?

The topic of *The Shadow of the Bomber* (which is based on my doctoral dissertation at the University of London) was completely foreign to me when my advisor Professor Donald C Watt proposed it during our first meeting. I pursued it by obsessively collecting every security-related and political document that seemed as though it might have even the slightest connection to the issue, and then, for the data analysis phase, I let the documents “speak” to me. This technique of separating the collection of data from its analysis, which also served me well in other studies, was ultimately supposed to

⁵ SDR 661.842/6-1360

⁶ Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber; The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London: The Royal Historical Society, 1980).

⁷ Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel’s Foreign Policy Orientation, 1948-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; 2nd ed. (paperback), 2009).

⁸ Bialer, *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*.

⁹ Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel’s Foreign Policy 1948-1967* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

present me with “wine” (the raw information I extracted from the documents) and “bottles” (the narrative/analytical template that structures the information and gives it meaning). Yet from the very outset I remained unconvinced of the essential importance of this particular historical thesis. That became evident to me like a flash of lightning only when – in the context of my directionless “archival meanderings” – I came across deliberations of the British Cabinet from 1932 on the issue of aerial disarmament.¹¹ On that occasion, Stanley Baldwin, then a senior official and future prime minister of Britain, suggested presenting the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva with a proposal to set international limits on civil aviation subsidies. His reasoning, which the other ministers found acceptable, was that such an initiative would delay progress in aeronautical technology and thereby minimize the harm of aerial bombardment and the catastrophic effects ascribed to it at the time.¹² This was the only document (not an unusual pattern, I later discovered) that conveyed the fascinating conception of aerial weapons as the “genie in the bottle” capable of wiping out entire societies and states in wartime, and it provided me with the justification I needed to devote several years of work to completing a doctorate on the topic. It still did not resolve a very difficult problem that exists in any book-length historical study – namely, the need to “beef up” the text, to add volume to the main argument by means of chapters. I needed a good deal of creative imagination to “invent” a structure and fill it with substance – imagination that in essence amounted to conceptualizing the reality I had to explain. This initial study demonstrated for me something I had first heard explicitly articulated by a music teacher I knew. Apparently musical genius manifests through two elements of a composition. The first is the principal motif, and the second is the ability to “beef it up” through variations. I realized that writing a historical book is essentially no different. It requires an original main thesis and structured secondary arguments that relate to and reinforce that core idea from different angles.

I faced a similar problem in writing *Between East and West*. Here too I was uncertain about the book’s justifiability until I ran across a single but very detailed document, a memorandum to the architects of Israeli foreign policy written in the early 1950s summarizing American concerns that the state was becoming too “pink” – if not “red” – in relation to the Cold War. The analysis contained statements and examples of Israeli political conduct that U.S. State Department officials had interpreted in such a manner. In this instance, too, I then had to overcome the gap between the importance of the issue, which historians had recognized,¹³ even without access to the Israeli documentation on the issue that I later uncovered and the duty to “fill out” chapters that would validate and “beef up” the thesis. As in the British case, the issue did not receive coverage among documents filed under a suitable heading, and I had to greatly extend the scope of my reading in order to learn the subject matter on the one hand, and to arrange it by chapters on the other.

Archival searches have always made me think of fishing. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the activity, fishermen have control over the size of fish caught in their nets and some influence over the cumulative volume of their bounty. They do so by determining the size of the holes in their nets: the smaller the holes, the greater the bounty, but at the cost of catching small and unwanted fish, and vice versa. So too with the historian: accumulating mass quantities of documentation comes at a cost but also has an advantage. To apply this analogy: for the purpose of writing my book *Cross on the Star of David*, I received a generous grant from the Israel Science Foundation, which help me overcome a long-standing reluctance to employ a teaching assistant for my archival research. Because I find it very difficult to trust others for research purposes, I gave my assistant very simple instructions: photocopy every single document on the issue without any concerns about the cost. The result was that at the end of the process my office on Mount Scopus was filled to the brim with tens of thousands of documents that required sifting, vast quantities of which I did not need. In tandem, I had to sort them and extract supporting theses from them, which also naturally derived from their “beefiness” – that is, the very existence of massive

¹¹ PRO Cab. 23/71

¹² Bialer, “The Danger of Bombardment from the Air and the Making of British Disarmament Policy 1932-1934,” in Brian Bond and Ian Roy, eds., *War and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1975): 202-216.

¹³ See for example Michael Brecher, *Israel, The Korean War, and China*, (Piscataway: Transaction Press, 1974) and *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1974).

quantities of documents dealing with a particular issue presumably justifies building a chapter to address the topic. Ultimately the project bore fruit.

Producing a historical study depends in no small part on the ability to locate a sufficient mass of documents to confirm its thesis. Throughout my years researching various archives, I developed senses that allowed me to uncover fascinating issues through an initial prism that involved examining the nominal “beefiness” of archival coverage. To fill the time spent waiting for requested files to reach the desk counter at the British National Archives while conducting research, I examined several catalogs of the Foreign Office Library Department in London. My eyes were drawn to a particular heading that appeared on no fewer than fifteen files: “Documents on German Foreign Policy.”¹⁴ My intuition justified itself, and a meticulous review of this material led to my authorship of a foundational article that appeared in a prominent historical journal. It demonstrated that preliminary talks in London regarding the release of German diplomatic papers proving Berlin’s culpability for World War II actually led to a different decision – the release of British diplomatic papers regarding the interwar period – which in turn paved the way to numerous other states adopting a similar practice.¹⁵

The following story, too, illustrates the “fishing” element inherent in archival research. The historian seeks to extract as much information as possible from documents, whereas the authorities seek to balance recognition of the importance of disclosure as a matter of principle with the need to minimize any consequent harm through appropriate selectivity. The form this struggle takes in Israel usually, but not always, grants preference to the party calling for minimal harm. In the course of writing *Between East and West*, as always, I examined numerous files that bore no relation to the subject. My eyes were drawn to three such files labeled “Iranian Recognition of Israel.” Their content initially seemed boring and, in particular, incomprehensible, until I came across one document that discussed granting bribes to the “king.”¹⁶{Add a note –} Apparently the Foreign Ministry functionary working in the State Archives in Jerusalem in the early 1980s had overlooked this and authorized the declassification of a document that certainly would not have found its way to the file had he been paying close attention. The outcome was an article I published exposing a fascinating aspect of relations between the two countries and Israel’s no less interesting course of action.¹⁷

Another technique for obtaining diplomatic intelligence that *raison d’état* would justify concealing came to my attention thanks, again, to oversights by officials tasked with reviewing archival information for declassification. In the course of examining files on the economic relations between Israel and Hungary during the former’s early statehood, I was amazed to discover a lengthy message from the Hungarian economic attaché in Tel Aviv to his superiors in Budapest meticulously detailing their bilateral negotiations.¹⁸ This indicated that Jerusalem evidently had a good source within the Hungarian Embassy in Tel Aviv. In the course of writing *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* I once again came across intelligence material and an instance of oversight. Israel’s ability to stand its ground during difficult negotiations with international oil companies stemmed in no small part from the fact that the latter used the regular postal service to report to their superiors abroad. The documents I uncovered made it abundantly clear that the Israel Post censorship had full control over this channel...

Sometimes what is missing in the official archives indicates what is being concealed. As part of my research for *Cross on the Star of David* I examined the question of Russian Church property in Israel, which had been an extremely complex

¹⁴ PRO FO371 22987, FO 371 26579.

¹⁵ Bialer, “Telling the Truth to the People: Britain’s Decision to Publish the Diplomatic Papers of the Inter-War Period,” *Historical Journal* 2 (1983): 349-367 (reprinted in Keith Wilson (ed.), *Forging the Collective Memory* (London: Berghahn Books, 1996).

¹⁶ ISA 2563/12.

¹⁷ Bialer, “The Iranian Connection in Israel’s Foreign Policy 1948-1951,” *Middle East Journal* 39:II (1985): 292-315.

¹⁸ ISA 2512/3.

international and religious point of dispute since the late Mandate era. The Israeli documents provided many insights, but there was one issue regarding which I unearthed only partial information – no more than a few hints. The matter had to do with Israeli suspicions that Britain and the Russian “White Church” had, prior to May 1948, hatched a plot to deny Israel control over property in Jerusalem (and to transfer it later to the “Red Church”) through a fictitious transfer of ownership to the British before the official founding of the state. By searching the Foreign Office archives in London I discovered that a file evidently dealing with this very issue was never declassified and, in 1991, was labeled as “Under Review by the Department” – more than twenty-five years after the event....¹⁹ To my mind it was not very difficult to read between the lines.

My archival wanderings taught me that there is an interesting connection between the quality of a historical document and the qualities of the research outcome. It was my good fortune that my first research project was based on British Foreign Office documents. Its officials were almost without exception outstanding graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, where they had honed their writing skills and powers of expression, and perhaps no less so, certain literary skills. Some of them customarily used Greek or Latin for internal correspondence, often quoting phrases from those languages. Many could undoubtedly have served as lecturers at those prestigious universities, and some even did so. I had the privilege, for example, of reading many memoranda by E. H. Carr, who was in charge of the Northern Department during the 1930s, at a time when it included the Soviet Union. Ultimately the structure I created for my doctorate contained no small amount of bricks chiseled by master craftsmen of analysis, expression, and writing, which I arranged using cement that was entirely of my own making.

Historians have long recognized the need to tell a story, and to do so in a way that sparks interest. Having such a story appear in documents that relate the words of historical figures greatly simplifies the history writer’s task of exercising creative imagination. The following excerpt from a 1957 memorandum by the Israeli envoy to Tehran responsible for oil affairs, Zvi Doriel, to his superior, suggesting how the latter might spend a vacation in Paris, provided a vibrant and colorful backdrop to the plot I developed for two lengthy articles:

Forget about all the vendors and credits and repairs and enjoy your life, and confiscate a car from the people of Avenue de Wagram and drive to Chartres, and you will understand why Europe is not enthusiastic about ideological conservatives and theories from America and Russia, and you will see the rose of the Île-de-France, now in bloom. And when you return, roam around the alleys near Notre Dame and cross the river at the Henri IV bridge, and gaze by moonlight at Place de Furstenberg and Place des Vosges, which I loved, and pass the time at the shops selling antiques and pictures. And if you yearn for pictures of the Diaspora and to reinforce your Zionist outlook, go to Rue des Rosiers, the Mea She’arim of Paris, where a single vendor can provide you with a *mezuzah* and *tfillin* and the Vilna edition of the Talmud, and stuffed fish, and the address of a hooker, a *shiksa* of course, so as not to violate the Torah prohibition, with the age and the size and the technical details suited to your needs, and if you make an impression as a decent man they will offer you “greens” at a black [market] rate, the cheapest, with immediate payment in Tel Aviv, much to the indignation of any censorship, and they will invite you to the Minhah [afternoon] prayer service. And when you feel the nausea building up, hurry across the river to the first bistro and rinse your mouth and your soul with cheap wine, which is poison to irregular bowels but which goes with Paris like raisin wine with Grandfather’s Sabbath blessing, and have faith in the greatness of our enterprise.²⁰

Not all texts are as juicy and picturesque, and there were some whose narratives I found extremely difficult to follow. For example, in writing *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* I needed thousands of documents, nearly all of which had been written by professionals in the field of oil, for whom the historical narrative was unimportant: tables were more important. Beyond the difficulty of learning about the international oil trade, I therefore had to invest more than a year in futile attempts to

¹⁹ PRO CO 733/490/3.

²⁰ ISA 2953/7168/4, Bialer, “Oil from Iran: Zvi Doriel’s Mission in Tehran, 1956-1963,” parts 1 and 2, *Iyunim BiTkumat Israel* 8 (1998): 150-180 and 9 (1999): 128-166 [Hebrew].

develop the underlying story. Ultimately I needed far more than a year to examine the material simply in order to discern the outline of a plot and uncover a narrative logic that would serve me in writing the book.

My efforts to present a historical analysis and tell a story based on archival documents did not always bear fruit. In one instance I had to rely on material that I always hesitate to use – oral testimony. In my research on Iran’s recognition of Israel it became evident that an American citizen stationed in Tehran in the late 1940s had played a key part in a drama that culminated with what at the time was a massive bribe, paid by the government of Israel to Prime Minister Sa’ed of Iran. The documents did not mention his name, noting only his codename – Adam – which I used in my 1985 article. After that I spent months, if not more, in failed attempts to locate this man, whose name I eventually learned – Gideon Hadary – and who was still alive and residing in the United States, according to a number of prominent figures in HaMossad LeAliyah Bet (a branch of the Jewish paramilitary Haganah that facilitated clandestine immigration) who had known him at the time. At a conference in Washington some years later, during a boring evening in my hotel room, it occurred to me to look for Hadary in the phone book provided by the hotel. To make a long story short, after a telephone conversation of several hours and two lengthy meetings with this man when he visited Israel, a fascinating personal story unfolded before my eyes. Yet he refused to provide me with supportive documentation, although he did promise that when he died I would receive such material from his family. I have since located archival material in Israel and the United States that partially supports Hadary’s account, but I was still reluctant to write about it. Then one day in the spring of 2011, I received an email message from his grandson informing me of his death and of a memoir he had completed towards the end of his life. I took the message as the fulfillment of a promise, and requested and received the material from his grandson as well as the permission to use it. The fascinating story was published couple of years ago.²¹

Many of my historian colleagues would not dispute the comparison that Prof. Robin Wink drew some years ago between the historian and the detective.²² I prefer to use the analogy of an intelligence officer: the historian is similarly entrusted with providing an explanation and description of the past, but unlike the intelligence officer is not expected to produce a forward-looking assessment. The difficulties facing the two are not dissimilar, and the dynamics of completing a historical puzzle and creating a reality some of which must be imagined are common to both. My decades-long engagement in both professions has taught me that such is indeed the case.

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²¹ Bialer, “Between Rehovot and Tehran: Gideon Hadary’s Secret Diplomacy,” *Israel Studies* 17:1 (2012): 1-23.

²² Robin W. Winks, *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978). On the *problématique* of archives as a historical source, see the following examples involving the history of sports: Douglas Booth, “Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive,” *Sport in History* 26:1 (2006): 91-109; Martin Johnes, “Archives, Truths and the Historian at Work: A Reply to Douglas Booth’s ‘Refiguring the Archive,’” *Sport in History* 27:1 (2007): 127-135.