Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel

Louise Fischer

Our series, "Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel" is issued by the Israel State Archives on the basis of a Cabinet decision. The ISA, which is part of the Prime Minister's Office, was appointed by the Foreign Ministry to carry out the decision. The Foreign Ministry also issues another series, "Yearbook of Official Documents", including current official documents and items of interest.

Our series (DFPI) began to appear in 1975, beginning with May 1948, and the last volume covers 1960. The documents are published in their original language but we also issue a companion volume in English with an introduction, abstracts of the Hebrew documents and the editorial notes, a list of documents and indexes. We have some gaps in the series (between 1955 and 1957). The next volume to be published will be for 1956 (up to the Sinai Campaign) and will include maps and (for the first time) photographs. Volumes covering 1961-1967, are in preparation. We are well behind the official date of release which is 30 years after production of the documents.

We include mainly material from the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Ministers' Office, increasingly supplemented by material from other government departments, the cabinet minutes etc.. The arrangement of material is chronological, but we are planning to adopt a thematic approach. In fact the plan is to start a new series of volumes from 1961 on, with each volume covering a particular subject or geographical area over several years.

Our department also publishes a parallel series of commemorative volumes of documents by Prime Ministers and Presidents of Israel, and is planning volumes on bi-lateral relations in co-operation with other governments. So far one volume on Russian-Israel relationships between 1945 and 1953 has been published. The other projects do lead to a problem of conflicting priorities and of shortage of manpower. Although we have five full-time editors, they have to work on all of the projects. However we also find that the different kinds of material complement one another.

Over the years we have reduced the size of our editions due to marketing problems and we now print 400-500 copies, which are sold gradually in Israel and abroad.

Digitization

Up till now a million documents from the archives have been scanned, most of them diplomatic. We are hoping to make them available on-line in a joint project with New York University.

From the new series on we are also planning to issue our publication in digital form. We hope that access will be free. However as yet we do not have a suitable platform for on-line publishing.

Declassification

Our declassification policy is still based on the original Archives Law of 1955, modified by a series of regulations and updates. A new Archives Law has been prepared but has not yet passed the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament).

The regulations fix different periods for declassification according to the type of material and date of production. In principle all material is to be released after 30 years subject to the usual limitations (damage to state security or foreign relations, individual privacy). The State Archivist can close material for a longer period with the approval of a Cabinet committee. The body which produces the material is also responsible for de-classification.

With regard to most government ministries, including the Foreign Ministry, the Archives have reached the target of release after 30 years. However with regard to the Cabinet minutes (released after 40 years) we have only reached 1960. The reason for the gap is that the decision to release them was delayed.

Material relating to individuals is released after 70 years, and security matters – after 50, with permission of the body which produced it.

Proposals are under consideration to shorten the period of closure for non-sensitive material to 15-20 years. The Archives are exempt from the Freedom of Information Law, but as a result of the law pressure to adopt a more liberal approach has increased.