

Archives in Developing Countries: Iran as a Case Study

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IRAN, BETTER KNOWN to earlier generations as Persia, in 1971 proudly celebrated its 2,500th anniversary. At its height the Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great, extended from Egypt and Asia Minor to the Indus River. In addition to its military prowess and its contributions to art and literature, Persia played an important, but lesser known, part in the development and spread of recordmaking and recordkeeping in the ancient world. Through the courtesy of author Ernst Posner, who kindly made the galley proofs available, a few of these practices will be summarized from *Archives in the Ancient World*, published by the Harvard University Press in May.

Persian archival contributions before 500 B.C. included a change in recordmaking from cuneiform characters on clay tablets to documents written first in Aramaic and later in Persian on leather and papyrus. Another development was the royal chancery, whose secretaries controlled the administration of the empire. They drew up proclamations and edicts, handled diplomatic correspondence, and kept a daily register of all acts of the king. Despite fragility, a few Persian documents on leather and papyrus still exist from this early period, thanks to their preservation in the sands of Egypt. Although no remnants of the archives of the early Persian kings have been found, Biblical scholars will recall the books of Ezra, chapters 5 and 6, and Esther, chapters 6 and 7.

Ezra describes the search for a 538 B.C. decree of Cyrus. It was unsuccessfully sought 18 years later in the archives of Darius in Babylon, but through archival ingenuity it was discovered, recorded in the register roll in another royal depository at Ecbatana, Media. Esther tells of Xerxes who, troubled with insomnia, called for the

The author, a Fellow and founding member of the Society and its president in 1966-67, retired in 1972 as Deputy Archivist of the United States after 40 years in Government service. His paper, describing his and other efforts to establish a national archives for Iran, was read Oct. 15, 1971, in San Francisco at the 35th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists.

book of records of the chronicles to be read to him. There he learned of Mordecai, a cousin of Esther, who had reported a plot against the king but had not been rewarded. The king promptly rewarded Mordecai richly, incidentally saving him from the hanging that had been planned by his enemies.

Following the Greek conquest of Persia, Persian archival practices and institutions were adopted and further developed under Alexander the Great. Alexander expanded the use of daily journals, for example, and when his records were destroyed by fire during a campaign, he was able to have them reconstructed from copies in the hands of officials and military commanders. The Persian system continued to spread, not only through the Greek world but also through the domains of the Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, who followed the Greeks into Persia. It helped to improve recordkeeping in Egypt, whence it was carried into Sicily. There the Normans adopted it and bequeathed it to the Hohenstaufen kingdom, the first modern state of Western Europe.

By the end of the 18th century, however, archival procedures in Persia itself had been far surpassed by those developed in Western Europe. This was still the situation when Iran moved into the modern period, with the coming of representative government under a constitution adopted in 1906.

Few archival advances were made in Persia in the next half century, and they can be summarized briefly. A Franco-Belgian mission assisted in the revision and operation of the Iranian customs system between 1901 and 1937. In the process the mission developed a customs records system that included a file manual, a register summarizing the contents of and action taken on documents (*indicateur*), an index book, and disposal authorizations for some customs records. In 1925, at the suggestion of the Ministry of Finance, a conference of Iranian officials met and agreed to recommend uniform recordkeeping practices, essentially those of the Franco-Belgian customs records system, but these were not universally installed. Five years later, in 1930, Iranian records antedating 1909 were removed for safekeeping from agencies to a strongroom in the Gulistan Palace, there to form the nucleus of a national archives. And finally in 1950, the Ministry of Finance, usually progressive in records matters, proposed a general records disposal law. Supplemented by regulations to be approved by the Council of Ministers and administered by a committee of senior officials in each ministry and province, this law would have authorized the destruction, with certain exceptions, of all records more than 30 years old and of some 15 years old. Excepted from destruction would have been agreements with foreign countries and

companies, records having educational and historical value, court records within the statute of limitations, and personnel records of pensioners and of civil servants who had made outstanding contributions to the country. The proposed law was not enacted.

In late 1952 or early 1953, Ali Akbar Siassi, Chancellor of the University of Tehran, began his attempt to bring to Iran as a professor in the university for a minimum of 2 years, an expert to teach and advise on archives and records management. When a tour of this duration could not be arranged, Dr. Siassi agreed to my assignment for a 3-month period.

Under the Department of State Educational Exchange Program, I arrived in Tehran early in October 1954 to offer the University's first course in archives and records management. Scheduled for 26 sessions concluding at the end of December, the course was open to university students who already held their licentiate or would receive it that academic year and to persons actively engaged in records work in the ministries and agencies of the Iranian Government. To keep this second group sufficiently small, only the heads or assistant heads of records units who had completed their secondary schooling were accepted. The course was completed by 25 seniors and graduate students, 10 librarians, and 91 from the ministries and agencies.

Because of my unfamiliarity with Iranian recordkeeping practices and the absence of any literature on the subject in any language, visits to ministries and other Government agencies were arranged throughout the stay to enable me to study their operations at first-hand. At the request of Dr. Siassi and with the encouragement of Hossein Ala, Minister of Court, and Abdollah Entezam, Minister of Foreign Affairs, I also agreed to prepare a brief report with recommendations based on observations in the mail- and file-rooms of 13 ministries and other Iranian Government agencies in Tehran, on discussions with ministers and other principal officials of those agencies, and on conversations with university class members who were Government agency records officials.

It should be noted that my lectures were written in English and were translated into Persian and reproduced in advance. The same interpreter then alternated with me in presenting the lectures orally in English and Persian and in conducting the question and answer sessions that followed. The interpreter also accompanied me on visits to Government agencies. Throughout the tour, I worked closely with officials of the Public Administration Division of the United States Operations Mission in Iran and with University of Southern California faculty members on loan to establish an Institute for Administrative Affairs in the University of Tehran. When de-

parting, I left a small reference collection on archives and records management and copies of my lectures in English and Persian with these officials.

A final word should be said about the report's recommendations on the management of archives and records in Iranian Government agencies. Six in number, these recommendations, backed by supporting data, urged the Government to (1) enact a public records law, (2) establish a national archives, (3) inventory the archives and records of the Government, (4) develop comprehensive plans for the retirement of Government records, (5) improve current records management practices, and (6) train archivists and records managers for Government service.

Nothing of significance happened with respect to Iranian archives and records for six months after I left Tehran. Then in May 1955 the Minister of Finance called a meeting of representatives of the ministries to discuss possible revival of the records disposal bill that had been proposed in 1950. Again no action was taken.

Shortly thereafter, during the summer of 1955, there began the first of several records management assistance projects supported by the United States over the next 11 years. This first project was initiated by Ray Jolly, a University of Southern California graduate student and faculty member, who had come to Iran as a staff member of the Institute for Administrative Affairs. Using my lectures and reference materials as a basis, Mr. Jolly taught a 6-week course in records management for half a dozen students at the University of Tehran.

A few weeks later, in mid-September, the Minister of Foreign Affairs called another meeting of representatives of ministries, this time under the chairmanship of the Minister of Labor, to discuss the possibility of establishing a national archives for Iran. This committee recommended that it should be established only after the filing systems of the Ministries and Government offices had been organized according to the latest and most modern recordkeeping techniques. It was believed that these measures and the issuance of an instruction manual for records personnel would facilitate the transfer of records from ministries to the national archives. Meanwhile, orders would be given to keep valuable Government records in proper order for eventual transfer. The committee did not discuss records disposal. Again, apparently, no action was taken.

By November 1955 Mr. Jolly was able, in addition to his other duties, to undertake a second project, this one an attempt through a seminar to build administrative support within the ministries for attention to the problems in records management. The 13 officials in the seminar were mostly heads of secretariats or records super-

visors in the ministries, though some other administrative officials were included. During the seminar, which consisted of 10 weekly meetings, the members listened to lectures by Mr. Jolly, participated in discussions, and visited agency records operations in Tehran and one provincial city. From this seminar came the conclusions that legislation was needed to establish a national archives and to authorize the disposal of unneeded records and that a legislative study should be made to determine the proper content of these laws.

Three seminar members, with the assistance of Mr. Jolly, two of his Iranian colleagues, and occasionally Edward N. Johnson and Donald L. Goodwin of the Public Administration Division of the United States Operations Mission (USOM), thereupon undertook a third project. Extending from February to November 1956, on a part-time basis for all concerned, the project produced three bills drafted by the seminar members and a supporting analysis prepared by Mr. Jolly. In their work the drafters drew heavily on United States and British archives and records management laws and on the model archives law prepared by the Society of American Archivists.

First to be finished was an archives bill, completed after five drafts, in September. This defined records; established a General Archives of the country; prescribed its organization and functions; and made provisions for transferring records to the Archives, restricting the use of records transferred, reproducing and authenticating copies of documents, issuing internal regulations, and preparing maintenance and preservation standards for agency guidance. The Archives organization would consist of the Chief Archivist; a High Council of the General Archives, composed of the Prime Minister and other officials, to review and approve records transfer standards and regulations for the use of records and to advise and guide the Chief Archivist on his internal and external responsibilities; and an Advisory Board of the General Archives, with representatives from the academic community, the judiciary, the Archeology Department, the National Library, and the press, to make recommendations on the accession, arrangement, use, and publication of records.

The draft of a records disposal bill followed in October. It defined record and nonrecord material and prescribed procedures to obtain disposal authority for records without further value, to be accomplished through agency requests that had to pass successive review and approval by the Chief Archivist, the High Council of General Archives, and a Parliamentary Joint Committee on Records Disposal. A final draft bill on records management was completed in November 1956. It defined records management and gave the Chief Archivist responsibility for administering a Government-wide records management program. He was charged with the responsi-

bility of giving technical advice on records management, operating records centers, providing records reproduction services, inspecting agency records practices, and reporting unlawful records practices. Ministries were made responsible for creating and maintaining appropriate records, operating a suitable records management program, and reporting on their records activities, all in accordance with regulations of the Chief Archivist.

Mr. Jolly was helped immeasurably by Robert W. Herder, Chief of the USOM Public Administration Division, who, in building up an excellent staff of management analysts for work with Iranian agencies, included three men with strong archives and records management backgrounds. Edward N. Johnson and Donald L. Goodwin, previously mentioned, and Thomas M. Foley all contributed their expertise to the seminars and used it to good advantage in their day-to-day work in the agencies, work that continued after Mr. Jolly's return to California at the end of 1956. The account just given of Mr. Jolly's activities is based on his unpublished 1958 doctoral dissertation entitled "A Study of Requirements for a Public Records Law in Iran."

Meanwhile, in late September 1956, the Ministry of Justice prepared its own version of a records disposal bill which did not include either a National Archives or a records management program. The bill was introduced in the Senate, where it failed of enactment after some questioned its objectives and others urged the establishment of a National Archives as a prerequisite to records disposal. Except for this effort, no action was taken in 1956, or for many years thereafter, on any of these bills or their substance.

Aside from publication in 1957 of a manual on correspondence and filing by Hossein Ijla Gamsari of the Ministry of Finance, the next significant event occurred in early 1963, when the High Council on Government Administration, with the technical advice of Donald Hooker, another specialist on the staff of the USOM Public Administration Division and a former staff member of the National Archives in Washington, prepared a draft law for the establishment of what was called a Central Dead Files Organization and a National Archives.

This initial movement gathered impetus in early 1964 when the High Council, in consultation with Russell Farmer, a United Nations expert and former head of the British Public Record Office annex in Ashridge, introduced a new project and draft legislation for the establishment of a Records Retirement Center. The project contemplated records management training programs that would supply every ministry with at least one well-trained records officer. A draft decree approved by the Presiding Board of the High Council in

October 1964 was followed by a Cabinet Resolution approved by the Council of Ministers in December 1964. Thus the project advanced another step.

Mr. Farmer, who was in Iran from late 1963 until August 1970, moved forward in other ways. He promoted a 2-month fellowship at the Public Record Office in London that was followed by a 6-month grant from the Agency for International Development for study at the National Archives and elsewhere in the United States for Cyrus Parham, Archivist Designate of Iran. When Mr. Parham was given responsibility for the National Records Project of the Iranian Government, he had previously earned degrees at the University of Tehran, Columbia University, and the University of California, had spent 4 years in the United States, and had served as editor of the English-language *Tehran Journal* from 1955 to 1963. Similarly, Mr. Farmer arranged for Meldi Vazirnia, designated to be head of the Records Center whenever it was established, to receive a 6-month United Nations fellowship to study records management in Government agencies and the management of records centers in the United States. These men carried out their assignments between July 1965 and March 1966.

Upon Mr. Parham's return from the United States, a government-wide survey of noncurrent records was launched to collect all possible information on the contents of the existing "dead files" repositories in the ministries and agencies. Six records management analysts, carrying out the survey under the direction of Mr. Parham, prepared brief inventories for most of the ministries. These inventories included such data as volume or linear measure, type of filing equipment, existence and types of indexes, frequency of use, and subjects or titles of main series. The analysts also identified the series and approximate volume of disposable records.

Another significant step was taken in July 1966, when the Prime Minister issued a circular requiring each ministry and agency to appoint, with the approval of the State Organization for Administration and Employment Affairs (SOAE), one of its high-ranking officials as ministry or agency records liaison officer. The primary purpose in appointing these officers was to facilitate the transfer of noncurrent government records to the projected records center. The appointed officers, 40 in all, participated in several orientation sessions and seminars held at the SOAE, the central administrative agency of the government, where they were familiarized with their responsibilities in managing the noncurrent records of their respective ministries or agencies and were requested to begin projects for inventorying, arranging, and packing their noncurrent records.

In still another approach, between 1966 and 1969 the SOAE de-

veloped about 50 improvement projects for records offices of the ministries and agencies. About one-third of these projects were successfully implemented by the respective organizations.

Concurrently, plans were being developed for the construction of the Records Center building. An area of land (about 25,000 square meters) was set aside for the Center by the Ministry of Housing and Development, which also prepared detailed plans and working blueprints as directed by Mr. Farmer and other experts in the SOAE. Repeated efforts between 1965 and 1969 to obtain money for the construction of the Center were unsuccessful, so it was decided to concentrate on obtaining enactment of suitable basic legislation. Failure to obtain the necessary appropriations for the construction of the projected Records Center naturally had the effect of delaying or halting records projects in progress in many of the ministries and agencies.

Progress was also slow and difficult in obtaining the needed legislation. The draft of a long and detailed bill, drawing heavily on earlier drafts, particularly that of 1963, and itself the result of numerous other drafts by the High Council on Government Administration, was sent to the Prime Minister's office in November 1966. Eighteen months and three more drafts later, after several rounds of review, comment, and revision by the Prime Minister's office, various ministries, and the Council of Ministers, approval was given to a somewhat shorter document.

Beginning in May 1968, this revised document began to run the parliamentary gauntlet of review and approval by the majority party central committee and caucus, by a dozen committees of the two houses of Parliament, and then by the two houses themselves. Final approval came in May 1970, when the Iran National Archives Organization was established as an agency attached to the State Organization for Administration and Employment Affairs. In addition to establishing the agency, the law defines "National Records," provides for a director of the agency, and creates an archives council. The Director, who is appointed with the approval of the Council of Ministers, must be selected from among high-ranking Government officials with university education who have research experience and specialized knowledge in both public administration and archives and records management. He is responsible for executing the Archives Council's decisions and for administering the Archives.

The Archives Council is composed of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, the Attorney General, the Secretary General of the State Organization for Administration and Employment Affairs, the Attorney of the Accounts Tribunal, and two persons well versed in the history and culture of Iran ap-

pointed by the Council of Ministers for 3-year terms. The Director serves as Secretary to the Archives Council. Council functions include approving disposal lists and schedules developed jointly by the ministries and the Archives; approving regulations for selecting and accessioning noncurrent records and archives, for managing and preserving archives, and for making records available to the public, including the use of confidential archives; and setting fees for documentary reproductions. In accordance with procedures and timetables prescribed by the Council of Ministers, the Archives Council also approves regulations, criteria, and standards for the arrangement, filing, and preservation of agency records and archives. As a further precaution, regulations on records disposal must be approved by relevant committees of both Houses of Parliament.

Agencies are required to manage their filing units in compliance with the Archives Council regulations; to transfer noncurrent records to the Archives for temporary custody, or for permanent custody if the records are 40 years old; and, together with the Archives, to keep confidential for prescribed periods those records whose disclosure would prove detrimental to the rights of individuals or the interests of the Government. The Ministry of War is excepted from the provisions of the archives law, but its own archives are governed by a Ministry-appointed board whose activities are made known to the National Archives.

A year and a half after passage of the archives law, Archivist Parham reports in recent letters, the Iranian Archives is engaged in identifying, evaluating, weeding, and disposing of a 50-year accumulation of records—amounting in Tehran alone, to a million cubic feet. Early Parliamentary approval of the disposal regulations is expected, after which disposal scheduling will begin. Appraisal and accessioning regulations will come next, but actual records transfers cannot be made until a records center with a capacity of 220,000 cubic feet is constructed in the next 2 years. A separate Archives building near the University of Tehran will follow. In the meantime, training seminars are planned for agency records managers, and, by means of fellowships, selected Archives personnel will be sent abroad, preferably to the United States, for specialized training.

In summary, after 17 years of assistance from abroad and after diligent work by Iranian officials themselves, the Iranian Archives is on its way. Although this is a considerable improvement in time over the 125 years required to launch the National Archives in the United States, the moral of this case study is that progress still comes slowly.