

# A Glance at the Historical Development of the Documentation System in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Saudi Arabia “A Descriptive Study”

Maha Mohammad Saud Alrasheed<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of History-College of Arts, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Maha Mohammad Saud Alrasheed, Department of History-College of Arts, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. Tel: 00966-505-225-038. E-mail: prof.mahaalrasheed@gmail.com

Received: September 20, 2015    Accepted: October 1, 2015    Online Published: November 2, 2015

doi:10.5539/ach.v8n1p83

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ach.v8n1p83>

## Abstract

This study aims at presenting a description of the historical development of the documentation system of the official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia. These documents are characterized as reflecting the fundamentals of the foreign policy of the Kingdom and its point of view as a key body in the state in local, Arab, Islamic and world events. This description is divided through two eras; Before and After the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs MFA. At the end of this study, the researcher recommends it was recommended the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ask assistance from experts in Document processing, classification and tabulation to facilitate access to information by the Ministry staff and researchers in order to shorten time and organize work.

**Keywords:** historical, descriptive, documents, ministry, foreign affairs, Saudi Arabia

## 1. Introduction and Background

Documents are the most important written means of communication. They are among the vessels in which information is recorded in the aim of solving problems, making decisions, planning, supervising and regulating. The document itself is an important source for researchers in the modern and contemporary history as it records the history and development of the state and society. Documents may lead to clarify questionable facts as they reveal secrets and uncover many issues of history and its mysterious enigmas (Abboud & AlSossaa, 2007). The researcher of the current study tried to shed light on the historical development of the documentation system of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia. These documents are characterized as reflecting the fundamentals of the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and its point of view as a key body in the state in local, Arab, Islamic and world events.

The importance of these documents manifests **in two ways:**

**First**, the documents issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs MFA - as any Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the world- are considered as a very important source of documenting the history of relations with foreign countries. The MFA is the body entrusted with assisting in the formulation, coordination, and implementation of the foreign policy of the state with other foreign states, as its documents are a historical source in research and studies (Samari, 1999) such as agreements, treaties, protocols, official papers related to alliances, official correspondence related to the MFA and its institutions, official reports, minutes of meetings of official conferences, and minutes of discussions of border issues between neighboring countries.

Accordingly, it is concluded that everything that is written in the official records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and which has a political, economic, social and educational nature, is deemed as one of the most important sources for writing the political and cultural history of the kingdom. Because all previous activities used to resort to external expertise, they used to be carried out through the channel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Nofal, 1996).

**Second**, its documents are considered as a historiography for the founding of the state administrations as this ministry is one of the oldest ministries that were established in the state in 1344 A.H. (1925-1926). Therefore, it chronicles the founding of government devices and monitors their functional and administrative evolution. It is the real and actual memory of the government staffs (Samari, 1999). The organization of documents is associated with the way of administrative work in every staff. Every codified, technical and advanced organization of documents

reflects the existence of an advanced and sound administrative organization of the staff itself, as well as the increase in documents indicates the continuity of functional mobility in the state (As-Said, 1987).

### *1.1 Objectives of the Study*

This study aims at presenting a description of the historical development of the documentation system of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official documents in Saudi Arabia. This description will be divided into eras; Before and After the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia.

### *1.2 Importance of the Study*

Due to the great importance of the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as national documents that preserve cultural and historical heritage of the state, the current study tried to provide information about the historical stages of improving the documentation system in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this study tried to shed light on the most important collections of documents in MFA; how they are classified, and the limits of confidentiality before and after the establishment of MFA era. Accordingly, this paper may help the future researchers to have an easier access to some confidential and important information related to original resources from MFA to implement their studies in this field.

## **2. Documentation before the Establishment of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

The documentation system of the official documents of Saudi Arabia started after the unification of the kingdom. King Abdul Aziz—God bless his soul—inaugurated the first steps before the founding of the ministry during the establishment phase as he had external relations with the Ottoman Empire, Britain and the Arabian Gulf Emirates. He also had contacts and correspondences with prominent leaders, scholars and writers in many countries (Samari, 1999). King Abdul Aziz was overseeing foreign affairs and directing the preparation of correspondences and treaties. Moreover, he carried out visits outside the borders of the state to assert his foreign relations and political situations (As-Salloum, 1964-1971). In the early stages of the state establishment, King Abdul Aziz did not have diplomatic representatives in foreign countries. He used to have political agents (such as: Fawzan Al-Sabiq "in Egypt", Abdul Latif El-Mandil "in Kuwait", Abdullah El-Nafisi "in Basra", Abdullah El-Fawzan "in Bombay", Abdul Rahman Al-Gosaibi "in Bahrain"). All these agents carried out their duties in terms of sending letters to take orders and so on. He also attracted national and experienced Arab figures in foreign affairs like Ahmad Thunayyan, Yusuf Yassin, Fouad Hamza, Hafiz Wahba, Abdul Aziz Al Ateeq, Abdullah Damluji and others. There may be signs of the nature of their work and the correspondences it includes in their personal papers.

The documents of this period are worthwhile but most of them have not spread so far, and they include:

- Letters of third parties, which have been dealt with.
- Treaties such as Darih Treaty done on 18 February 1334 A.H. (December 26, 1915) in the aim of determining the relationship with Britain and the Arabian Gulf Emirates as well as determining borders (Samari, 1999).
- Minutes of meetings of King Abdul Aziz with the representatives of Britain and some of the princes of the Arabian Gulf.

Some of these treaties have been published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example: the set of treaties of 1341-1393/ 1922-1973 in two parts without a hint of year of printing or an introduction containing an explanation of the source of these documents (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1922-1951)); (The Saudi Foreign Affairs Ministry (1963-1973) The Saudi Green Book). However, regarding the events taking place prior to 1922, the researcher could not find any related hints in some references where minutes were not written for meetings attended by King Abdul-Aziz. Perhaps, the British side recorded the ones in which Britain took part.

What has just been presented above, shows the beginnings of the diplomatic action which was not under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those agents were in fact ambassadors, the naming was absent at that time as the state was still in the establishment phase.

## **3. Documents of the Directorate of Foreign Affairs' Era**

After the annexation of Asir in (1338-1342 A.H./1920-1923), and Hejaz in (1344 A.H./1925-1926) by King Abdul Aziz, and the completion of the political construction's process of the state (Uthaymeen, 1997), there was a necessity to deal with European countries other than Britain, and to deal with the Muslim and Arab world. The importance of The Hejaz was stemmed from being the sponsor of the two holy mosques and the holy places. It fully assumed the responsibility and sponsorship of pilgrimage "al- Hajj", especially that most of Muslim states were under the control of western colonizing countries. Western countries and others showed increasing interest in the new state, and this new entity was internationally recognized. The Soviet Union was the first foreign country to recognize the new situation on (03/08/1344 A.H.)/(16/02/1926) and it was followed by Britain on (15/08/1344

A.H.)/(01/03/1926), the recognition of The United States was delayed until 1350 A.H. (1931) (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1922-1951)) That Hejaz had relations with external parties and had a number of diplomatic missions, as a result a Directorate of Foreign Affairs was established in Mecca, and an office was opened in Jeddah in February 1345 A.H/ 1926 (As-Snaidi,2000) The Directorate consisted of four specialized sections: Political, Administrative, Human rights and Consular sections (Sadiq,1965). King Abdul Aziz transactions started to include the problems of borders' demarcation with his neighbors in the north and the south. The Directorate began exercising diplomatic action and concluded a number of international agreements and treaties, including, for example, the Jeddah Agreement to determine the border with Trans-Jordan on (15/04/1344 A.H.)/(02/11/1925) and the Mecca Agreement with France on trade relations on (09/15/1344 A.H.)/(19/03/1926), and a treaty in Jeddah and Khartoum with Sudan's government and the British government regarding the ownership of the "electricity" wire between Jeddah and Port Sudan in 1345 A.H. (December 28, 1926). In 1349 (April 26, 1929) the State signed a treaty with Cairo and German governments for the establishment of political and commercial relations. In 1349 A.H. (August 3, 1929), Mecca treaty was concluded with the Turkish government for the establishment of friendly relations (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs(1922-1951)) The Directorate of Foreign Affairs did not establish representations outside the Kingdom except for two commissions (Cairo 1345/1349) and (London 1930/1927) (Sadiq,1965)

The significance of the documents of this particular period stems from the fact that they reflect maintaining security throughout the country. King Abdul Aziz started reconsidering some of the agreements held with foreign countries, particularly the Treaty of Darih in 1915 as it lacked compatibility with the new accompli. Therefore, the Treaty of Jeddah was concluded on (18/11/1345A.H) - (05/20/1927). In this treaty, the Saudi-British relations were put for the first time in a more positive frame (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1922-1951)) Many of these treaties have been published in books (such as: a book on the relations between the Kingdom and Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din, and Marine Documents of the Kingdom) which consist a presentation for the arbitration to settle the dispute between Muscat, Abu Dhabi and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was printed in two parts in 1955) with other books that contain a set of documents. However, some other documents haven't been published until now (Nofal, 1996).

#### **4. The Documentation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

Four years after the establishment of the Directorate of Foreign Affairs, a royal decree was issued to convert it into a Ministry on (26/07/1349 A.H.)/(19/12/1930). Prince Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, deputy of the King in Hejaz at that time, was appointed as a minister, in addition to general deputyship. Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became the first ministry established in the Kingdom, and was headquartered in Mecca with an office in Jeddah. Then, it was moved to Jeddah in 1366 A.H. (1947) (Sadiq, 1965).

Thus, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs became the body assisting the King in managing his state's relations with the other countries and international community. MFA, as well, assisted in caring for the interests of the citizens of the state abroad. Moreover, it assisted in preparing and participating in concluding agreements and treaties with the representatives of foreign governments, international bodies, and organizations. It also assumes the collection of information and data on matters of international relations and supervision of the affairs of diplomatic representation of other states in the country. His Highness the Minister of Foreign Affairs is a member of the Council of Ministers and, by virtue of this quality, he contributes to the internal and external general policy of the state, and implements its policy with regard to foreign affairs.

MFA kept developing and expanding gradually since 1345 A.H. (1927) as needed and according to international politics' requirements. Some amendments were carried out on its administrative structure and the formations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were reconsidered. The Consular diplomatic representation between the Kingdom and the outside world began to function in an organized way. Consulates and commissions were opened, some of them were developed into embassies later on (Samari, 1999).

In 1400 A.H. (1980) The Diplomatic Institute was established. The aims behind creating an academic institution were to supply the MFA with the necessary political studies and research, organize conferences and seminars, cooperate with other parties, and prepare a program for the diplomatic studies diploma (As-Snaidi, 2000). In general, the number of MFA staff was increased. As many of the ministry's documents representing the administrative activities carried out by its various organs since its establishment, the following procedures have been taken:

- Creating an archive for each department to maintain its transactions.
- Registering incoming and outgoing transactions in records and storing them in files.

- Preparing lists of the files contents.
- Gathering important documents that tackle a particular theme and printing them in a book.
- Most of the ministry departments began to save incoming and outgoing transactions in the computer by scanning them (The National Center for Documentation and Archives, 2014). In 1412 A.H. (1991), as the MFA moved to its permanent headquarters in Riyadh, a ministerial decision was issued to form a committee for documentation. Its mission is to collect, classify and save documents. This committee has begun its work and agreed that documents organization should be done on stages, starting by choosing a place to save them and ending with the process of configuration and utilization. The committee started working and faced problems in sorting them. These problems resulted from duplicated copies, undocumented documents, as well as some of them were insignificant. Moreover, some documents were too old, and very difficult to deal with in terms of their obsolete papers and difficult reading.

In 1422 A.H. (2001), the Documentation Administration was formed by a ministerial decision according to what was required by the National Center for Documentation and Archives at the Office of the Presidency Council of Ministers on 10/23/1409 A.H. This administration has become concerned with old documents in the ministry in terms of sorting, cataloging, classifying, organizing, evaluating, relocating and destructing the drafts and duplicated carbon copies resulting from administrative routine work inside the ministry. This administration is also concerned with providing information and documents, applying and implementing the rules and regulations issued by the MFA and the National Center for Documentation and Archives which have the royal approval.

In the past, due to the small number of staff, the administrative work was carried out by teams consisting of management staff and sometimes joined by representatives from other departments. For example, a work team was formed to sort and categorize the old files which were received from Jeddah and some departments and embassies; a second team to transmit the old documents to the National Center for Documentation and Archives; a third team to gather the documents related to borders with Yemen; and another team to supply the administration and other government departments with the required documents and work teams. At present, there are many departments in the administration to undertake the actions referred to duties above (The National Center for Documentation and Archives, 2014).

#### **These departments are:**

- **The Department of Sorting, Cataloging and Classifying:** the task of this department consists of sorting and classifying received documents according to measures determined by the administration. Due to the limited number of administration personnel at the present time, any of the staff could be assigned to sort, catalog and classify the very necessary files.
- **The Department of Relocation:** The employees in this department receive the files relocated from departments and embassies to the administration. They must ensure filling in forms of relocation before receiving any file. They also compile files that can be carried over to the National Center of Documentation and Archives and then fill in the forms of relocation in preparation for the relocation process.
- **The Department of Destruction:** The employees in this department receive requests for file destruction to be studied, reviewed and reconsidered in accordance with the instructions.
- **The Department of Information Services:** all requests and inquiries sent to the administration for documents and information are referred to this department, whose task is to prepare and look for what is required using the programs available in this or other administrations in order to be provided to the requesting party.
- **The Department of Evaluation:** this department shall know all the regulations issued by the National Center for Documentation and Archives, especially the regulating list for evaluating the ministry documents.
- **Administration Secretariat:** it receives and sends all correspondences, type all the administration transactions, file and store data.
- **A work team responsible for scanning and storing data:** This team is made up of Arab Systems Company and some administrative employees who scan the documents and store the relevant data (The National Center for Documentation and Archives, 2014). There is also a documentation department in the two ministry branches in Eastern Region and Mecca. As for the issue of access to the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this could only be done in accordance with the rules of access to documents and archives issued by the National Center for Documentation and Archives at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers' office. According to Article VI, each government entity provides the National Center for Documentation and

Archives with the type names of its secret documents that belong to different degrees of confidentiality and suggests the type of confidentiality of each document -permanent or non-permanent. And if it was non-permanent, the entity should suggest the duration after which the documents could be available to access and circulation in accordance with the regulations contained in Article (V) of this rule. These data are supplied by filling in a form of secret documents number (1). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs – documentation department- should determine the practical value of the document. And the National Center for Documentation and Archives should be responsible for evaluating the historical value of the document and can be assisted by experts (The National Center for Documentation and Archives, 2014). There are some of the MFA documents in other places such as:

- King Abdul-Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives.
- The Documentation Centre of the Institute of Public Administration.
- King Fahd National Library (The researcher consulted a number of documents of the MFA in these areas)
- King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.

There are also some documents outside the Kingdom, **such as:**

- Egypt's National Archive (Abdeen documentation) - Cairo.
- Historical Documents Center-Bahrain
- Ottoman archives, the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Istanbul ((Hariciye Archive)), some of these documents have been printed by Harvard University (Abu-Alih, 2001) such as: Turkey Treaties with Saudi Arabia.
- British archives in London (Public Records), Foreign Office archives. A number of documents have been printed in the form of documentary collections, for example, Archive Editions group.
- British archives in London, India Office Records.
- National Archives Of the United States of America, Washington DC; Library of Congress has printed some documents such as: United States Treaties and other International Acts (The researcher consulted a number of documents of the MFA in these areas)
- Archive of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris and the city of Nantes (Minister des Affaires Etrangeres, Archives Diplomatiques Quai D Orsay, Paris, de Nantes).
- German Archives and Libraries.
- The National Library of Russia
- Central Archives of the State Italy
- National Archives of the Netherlands (ABU-ALIAH)

## 5. Summary

This study tried to present a description of the historical development of the documentation system of the official documents in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia. These official documents reflect the fundamentals of the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and its point of view as a key body in the state in local, Arab, Islamic and world events. The description was split into two parts; one described the documentation system before the establishment of MFA, and the other part was dedicated to describe the documentation system after the MFA establishment.

The documents of MFA are important since they are issued by this ministry of which is considered as a very important source of documenting the history of relations with foreign countries. They include everything that is written in the official records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and which has a political, economic, social and educational nature. In addition; these documents are considered as a historiography for the founding of the state administrations as this ministry is one of the oldest ministries that were established in the state in 1344 A.H. (1925-1926). To sum up, the documentation administration is the real and actual memory of the Saudi Kingdom.

## 6. Recommendations

According to the importance of the documents that the researcher read and used in the current study, it is strongly recommended to facilitate the process of accessing the MFA documents by researchers to provide information more easily. This shows the importance of developing a precise and practical time-bound strategy as follows:

- Asking assistance from experts in Document processing, classification and tabulation to facilitate access to information by the Ministry staff and researchers in order to shorten time and organize work. In addition, asking assistance helps benefit from the famous international experiences in keeping and dealing with documents.
- Giving priority to the Documentation Administration by providing it with technical technology and the potential to introduce modern equipment, and provide employees with training on the latest technologies and equipment. Creating appropriate and adequate place for the administration and its future expansion as well as establishing a special section for women researchers.
- Announcing the limits of confidentiality of documents in terms of time and national security.
- Creating a website by the Documentation Administration within the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which it states the most important collections of documents it has; how they are classified; the limits of confidentiality; the way by which researchers can have access to documents; and how they could communicate with persons in charge.

### Acknowledgements

This is a research project that was supported by a grant from the Research Center for the Humanities, Deanship of Scientific Research at King Saud University.

### References

- ABboud, R., & AlSossaa, A. (2007). *Documentation Centers* (Marakiz Alma'lomaat Watawtheeq). Amman: Dar Zahran for publication and distribution.
- Abu-Alih, A. (2001). *The most important modern historical resources of The Arab Island, Sources of the history of Saudi Arabia*. Riyadh: El Merikh publishers.
- As-Said, M. (1987). *Documents' Organization*. Cairo: House of Culture for Publishing and Distribution.
- As-Salloum, L. (1964-1971). *The Political and Modern Developments of Saudi State*. Riyadh: Obeikan library.
- As-Snaidi, A. (2000). *Detectors by regulation and administrative and public institutions in Saudi Arabia in terms of origination and organization and Achievements*. Riyadh: Obeikan library.
- Documentation Administration, Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2014). Original documents describing the work of administration obtained by the researcher from the administration.
- Nofal, A. (1996). Work Sheets of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia. *Research of historical documents Symposium in Saudi Arabia*. Riyadh: Versions of King Abdul Aziz.
- Sadiq, M. (1965). *Administration's Development in Saudi Arabia*, Riyadh: Prints of Institute of Public Administration.
- Samari, F. (1999). *King Abdul Aziz Historical Encyclopedia*. Riyadh: King Abdul Aziz public Library.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (1922-1951). *Debates' Group*. Jeddah: El-Banawi Press.
- The National Center for Documentation and Archives, the Office of the Presidency Council of Ministers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2014). The General policy for documents, obtained by the researcher from the administration.
- The Saudi Foreign Affairs Ministry. (1963-1973). *The Saudi Green Book*. Mecca: Umm Al-Qura Press.
- Uthaymeen, A. (1997). *The history of Saudi Arabia Kingdom*. Riyadh: Obeikan Bookstore.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).