

**Middle East Studies Beyond the Middle East Archive –
Promises, Predicaments and Practices of MENA research in
Western Governmental Archives**

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Abstract

Building on my work on Iranian political exiles in France and on my experience conducting research in various French archival funds, I aim to offer here a practical introduction to French governmental archives for international researchers, and in particular scholars of Middle East studies. However, researching the Middle East in ‘Western’ governmental archives (WGAs) – i.e., within the (re)productive heart of past states’ hegemonic and adverse narratives on the Middle East – warrants theoretical and methodological discussion. In this article, I first establish that despite the issue of WGAs’ Western and governmental bias, these

funds still constitute a unique resource for MENA research, especially on topics such as Middle Eastern diasporas, foreign relations, or history. I also contend that continuing to engage with the Middle East through sources external to the region will help reaffirm the deep relationality of the Middle Eastern construct and, crucially, stave off the risks of a ‘silozation’ of MENA studies. Heeding still the postcolonial critique of the narratives embedded in such sources, I then examine the biases likely to shape the content of WGAs, covering in turn the biases related to WGAs’ archival dimension, their governmental character, and their Western situatedness. In the third section, building on these observations, I emphasise the role of critical analysis, cross-referencing, and rigorous transparency as ways to compose with the inescapable biases embedded in WGAs. I conclude the article by proposing a practical introduction to three of France’s governmental archival institutions, emphasising the difficulties of access international researchers and MENA scholars may face, and offering practical recommendations for making the most of these archives, in a timely fashion.

Keywords: France, Iran, Middle East, MENA studies, Diaspora, Silos, Compartmentalisation, Bias, Orientalism, Diplomatic archives, Police archives

Introduction

In the frame of my research in International Relations (IR) on dissent-hosting and its effects on bilateral relations between ‘host’ and ‘home’ states, I have been studying multiple cases of Iranian opposition groups exiled in France, between the 1950s and the 1990s. As that study aims to elucidate the connections between host-state ‘management’ of the exiles and the effective impact of their asylum on France-Iran bilateral relations, French governmental archives (e.g., archives of the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, etc.) have constituted a unique source of primary data towards the description and analysis of these cases.

Building on the logistical issues (access, timeline) and the more methodological problems (source bias) encountered while researching Iranian exiles in the French archives, this article seeks to offer a practical introduction to French governmental archives, aimed in particular at international researchers focusing like me on Middle East-related topics. Using Western governmental archives (WGAs) towards research on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area may however strike as a debatable choice considering how such archives arguably epitomise the West’s hegemonic and extractivist gaze on the Middle East, which critical studies have long strived to denaturalise and dismantle. In this article, I thus discuss whether WGAs can contribute (if at all) to Middle East studies and engage in a necessary examination of the critical issues stemming from their use in MENA research.

In the first section, I show that WGAs constitute an important and arguably unavoidable resource for the MENA research focused, for instance, on the region's international history, its foreign relations, its diasporas, etc. I emphasise that these topics, though located in the margins (not only geographical) of MENA research, remain essentially constitutive of the Middle East object. The idea of WGAs' enduring importance for MENA research is then reinforced by a second and related argument: I further contend that though critical sensibilities would suggest dismissing WGAs as too adversely biased for MENA research, avoiding such sources would only disconnect Middle East studies from the field's margins, thus favouring a silo effect. Further down the line, this 'siloization' of MENA studies would reinforce epistemological imbalance that has separated regions like the Middle East – essentialised and perceived as inescapably bound to its own context – and the 'West' – long perceived by Western academia as contextually neutral. By claiming that 'the Middle East is everywhere', I aim to reaffirm and anchor the sometimes-obscured notion that the Middle East, both as a research object and as a geographical construct, remains fundamentally relational.

If WGAs remain a key source for MENA research, how then can researchers use such sources without reproducing the biases and narratives – hegemonic, colonialist, adverse, or otherwise – held in these archives? In the second section of this article, I elaborate on the biases and narratives likely to impair MENA research that WGAs may be infused with. The third section then proposes a few good practices towards identifying biased narratives and working around them. I notably delineate ways for researchers to (1) keep a critical eye out for visibly biased narratives, (2) compare archival data with that of alternative

sources, and (3) I encourage transparency on archival interpretation, bias identification or the difficulties involved at the different steps of document analysis.

The fourth and final section of the article offers a practical introduction to three types of French governmental archives – the Diplomatic Archives, the National Archives, and the Departmental archives – delineating the sources that may be of interest for MENA research, and identifying the difficulties of access that international researchers may face with these different archival funds. I conclude by offering practical recommendations towards navigating the French governmental archives and anticipating the difficulties of access delineated earlier.

The Promises of Western Governmental Archives: What They Can Contribute to Middle East Studies.

Why research Middle East-related topics in Western governmental archives (WGAs)? It is essential to acknowledge upfront that the reasons and occasions to do so are limited. Middle East archives, be they personal, community-based, institutional, or governmental, are plentiful, and there is most of the time no reason to (and many reasons not to) go search into Western repositories for stories Middle Eastern communities can tell themselves. The reasons to dismiss WGAs as data sources for Middle East research are discussed in the course of this paper. There are however two crucial reasons for Middle East studies to keep engaging with WGAs. First, those archives can contribute uniquely instructive material for research on MENA history, its foreign relations, and its diasporas. For topics such as these, WGAs remain a unique resource, the educated use of which would gain from being

normalised, despite their intrinsic biases. Second, enduring engagement with non-MENA sources should help reaffirm the essentially relational nature of the Middle East as a region and as an object of study, and contribute to staving off the risk of ‘siloesation’ and essentialisation common to all area studies. This section addresses these two arguments in that order.

A Unique Source on Middle Eastern History, Foreign Relations and Diasporas

For researchers studying the MENA region – in particular historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars – , WGAs offer unique data on topics such as (1) the region’s (international) history – notably the role its relations with the ‘West’ have played in its history – and (2) its foreign and diplomatic relations with Western states. By providing foreign angles to the study of MENA history, such archives evidence the international and transnational nature of the processes, connections and influences that have contributed to shaping the region throughout its history. WGAs can also elucidate the content of MENA-Western political dialogues, European narratives about the region, or the underpinnings of Western decision-making processes that may have had significant impacts in the region. Finally, WGAs remain a workaround to study bilateral relations when the archives of one state of the studied dyad are not accessible. In the case of French-Iranian bilateral relations, most foreign researchers cannot currently count on accessing Iranian governmental archives (Byrne 2020). In such a context, looking into French archives would constitute an alternative route

(however imperfect) to get a sense of the content of French-Iranian diplomatic interactions.

WGAs also constitute a key resource for the study of Middle Eastern diasporas. First, while diasporic archives would offer data on diasporic practices and discourses, WGAs can provide relatively credible descriptive data on diasporic populations and their political activities. In the course of my study on Iranian exiled opposition groups, intelligence reports from the French police and the Ministry of the Interior, have thus provided unique compendia of information on diasporic political activities, the individuals involved, and the associations within which they organised. Such data could not have been recovered from historical works and would have otherwise been particularly difficult to reconstitute from alternative primary sources. Second, WGAs provide unique and detailed insights into the diaspora-related discourses and decision-making processes at the level of the host governments. The way host governments engage with Middle Eastern diasporas, while instructive in itself regarding these populations' history and ties to their host countries, can also be relevant to the politics and history of Middle Eastern states themselves. For instance, the study of France's hosting of Iranian political exiles, as it engages with the triangular relation between (Western) host state, (Middle Eastern) exiles and (Middle Eastern) home states, shows how the presence of politicised segments of the Iranian diaspora in France has impacted not only French-Iranian relations, but also both Iranian and French domestic politics, and both Iranian and French regional pursuits.

Combatting the Perils of Area Compartmentalisation, Exceptionality and Essentialisation

Beyond the unique types of data WGAs can provide to MENA research, studying the Middle East in non-Middle Eastern governmental archives also significantly affects the production of Middle East studies as a research field.

In International Relations, as in probably all social sciences, the post- and de-colonial turns spurred by works like Said's 'Orientalism' (2014) have fostered crucial endeavours – still ongoing to this day – to reclaim agency, subjectivity, and centrality for the subjects marginalised by the traditional ethnocentrism of Western scholarship. While establishing the value of non-Western intellectual traditions within Western research (Moss and Thomas 2018:6), postcolonial theory has fostered a reevaluation of local sources, critical to understanding the region's realities beyond West-centric narratives. In doing so, this critical movement has contributed to entrenching a salvatory reflex of scepticism vis-à-vis Western sources on the Middle East and to reaffirming the crucial value of Middle Eastern archival sources. On the reverse of the coin, however, this necessary re-centring of MENA research on Middle Eastern sources seems to have also fostered epistemic hierarchies in which the use of purely MENA-based or MENA-produced sources has become the token of a more noble and desirable form of research¹, to the comparative expense of non-local sources. Left rather unquestioned, this trend, though justified

¹ I base this argument on my own observations and perceptions as a Middle East-focused researcher. I am not aware of existing studies on the phenomenon, which I believe would be precious to postcolonial and decolonial literature and practice.

in many ways, tends in turn to foster understandings of MENA studies as essentially geographically bound.

The idea that the regional foci of area studies “[can] no longer [be] viewed as fixed physical, cartographic or cultural entities, but as dynamic, purposeful and socially constructed spaces” (Acharya 2012:23-24, in Moss and Thomas 2018:4) is nothing new. Yet, the use of geography-based areas as “a practical means to organise scholarly research” (Moss and Thomas 2018:5) has also persisted. As a result of these trends, the geographical entrenchment of MENA studies remains constant, and the need to challenge it, permanent.

I thus argue in contrast that MENA research can and should be done *everywhere*, since the Middle East has been and remains (re)produced and (co-)constituted through international exchanges and influences (diasporic, political, economic, cultural, etc.) far exceeding the boundaries of its geographical base. Losing sight of this notion and giving in to an exclusively inward focus² entail a risk, not unknown to other area studies: that of ‘silozation’³; and further down the line, that of a regime of exceptionality, which would itself result in an assumption of non-generalisability of MENA-related knowledge, and in turn, in the essentialisation of the region and its populations.

² The risk of silozation associated with inward disciplinary focus is recognised across disciplines. In Dimitrova’s words: “a continued inward focus may create epistemic bubbles and disciplinary silos” (Dimitrova et al. 2024:357).

³ In this article, I use the coined term of ‘silozation’ as a preferred synonym of ‘compartmentalisation’. While ‘compartmentalisation’ remains rather neutral in value (it describes a process that may be desirable for instance as a task management strategy), the term of ‘silozation’ appears critical in nature, since the figurative use of the term ‘silo’ usually conveys a criticism of undesirable hermeticity between sections of a whole.

While exceptionalist thought is a feature shared across area studies (e.g. Chong 2022:230), it has been particularly persistent within Middle East studies over the past decades, and notably detrimental in political sciences and international relations research. Though they vary in tone from openly orientalist criticism to cultural relativism, exceptionalist discourses on the Middle East have for instance popularised the ideas that the region is culturally “immune to democratic movements, values, and institutions”, notably due to “the public role of Islam [which is thought to] inevitably resul[t] in autocracy” (Mojtaba 2023:2-3), coercive authoritarianism (Bellin 2004:152), and resistance to secularisation (Mojtaba 2023:8). Though many works have since convincingly debunked the myth of MENA exceptionalism (e.g., Bayat and Herrera 2021, Harik 2006, Hariri 2015, Mojtaba 2023), the idea persists in public discourse and representations today, as do the many associated risks – from deep misunderstandings of the political phenomena at play in the region, to grave moral consequences.⁴

The problem here is not so much whether or not the findings drawn from MENA cases can be reasonably transferred to other contexts: there is no solving the epistemological debate opposing the search for general and portable laws (e.g., King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994) and the postmodern scepticism emphasising knowledge’s context-boundedness. It is, rather, that the siloization of MENA research has often reinforced a regime of double

⁴ For instance, the consequences described by T. Todorov in ‘On Human Diversity’ (1993), which Hartley summarises as follows: “If left unchecked, cultural relativism will also lead to the assumption that not all humans are equal: if one argues that democracy is a Western value, one both condones totalitarianism in the rest of the world and assumes that not all humans are deserving of the same freedoms” (Hartley 2023:10).

standards where research findings from MENA cases have been denied generalisability while those drawn from Western contexts have been traditionally regarded as context-neutral and thus transferable.

By re-emphasising how Middle East studies can benefit from archival resources beyond MENA's geographical boundaries, we are reminded of the profoundly relational nature of the Middle Eastern construct. Neglecting the region's margins, its porosity and its ubiquity would not only cause the loss of elements constitutive to the Middle East (e.g., diasporas) but also favour the production of Middle East studies as a silo of knowledge, a 'world apart', essentialised and othered. In the face of this peril, it is essential to recognise that the Middle East gains to be studied from everywhere, even from the administrative heart of former colonial powers.

Western Governmental Archives and the Predicament of Western Biases

While I delineated several reasons for MENA researchers to keep engaging with Western governmental archives, the postcolonial critique of Western sources and of the detrimental narratives they often carry vis-à-vis the Middle East establishes the crucial need to reckon with the biases such sources may carry.

Archives, like any other sources, are inescapably biased: the positionality of their producers and, later on, of their guardians and curators (Trouillot 2015:26; Shiffrinson, 2022:592), creates the bias in the material these sources hold or do not hold, in the discourses

and “tacit narratives” (Ketelaar 2001:131) they produce and reproduce, and so forth⁵.

However, the use of Western governmental archives towards MENA studies poses a specific problem, first related to the power imbalance long embedded in West/‘Orient’ relations, but also compounded by the governmental origins of those archives: embalmed relics of governments past, WGAs hold the traces of past state power in action. They consequently embody *par excellence* the adverse, hegemonic, exploitative and/or colonialist Western gazes that critical theory has been endeavouring to shake off. It may thus seem strange to anyone even remotely acquainted with the postcolonial critique to study the Middle East through sources that would *a priori* constitute nothing short of ‘ground 0’ of an adverse Western gaze on the MENA region. As a result, the question of *how* one can claim to research the Middle East in such archives is an essential one, which must be addressed by first identifying the characteristic biases one is likely to encounter while conducting such research.

WGAs, as *governmental* archives, hold states’ narratives but also their silences. The material they still hold today results from what (and who) institutions and civil servants deemed worth recording and discussing (Moss & Thomas 2021:5), and further down the line, the records they decided to preserve. Marginalised populations have systematically borne the brunt of this selective process of production (e.g., Arondekar 2009, Hartman 2008). And the more

⁵ Reflecting on the creation of ‘silences’ in historical production, Trouillot identifies “the moment of fact creation (the making of sources) [i.e. the original production of documents] and the moment of fact of fact assembly (the making of archives)” as two of four essential moments of historical silence-production (Trouillot, 2015:26).

abundant and systematic a state's records, the more occulted its silences.

Just like their governmental aspect, the *Western* quality of WGAs is bound to shape – perhaps more spectacularly – the type of narratives and discursive biases held in the archives relating to Western engagement with the ‘Middle East’. Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ most famously formalised the notion that modern Western international thought has been pervasively based on ontological and epistemological hierarchies of domination between the ‘Occident’ (the ‘West’) and a proteiform, othered and subaltern ‘Orient’ (which includes the Middle East) (Said 2014:26-27). Such narratives, always essentialising, but alternatively demeaning or romanticising, have been co-constitutive of Western interactions with – and policies towards – the MENA. As these narratives, often tacit, are thus bound to inform the content of WGAs’ engagement with MENA-related affairs, the risk becomes for researchers studying the Middle East from such sources to reproduce the biases, damaging narratives, silences, and power hierarchies embedded therein. Yet, as per the point made in the previous section, steering clear of WGA is not a desirable option. How then does one work with the limitations of such sources?

Working With and Around Bias: A Few Propositions

While silences cannot be mended and underlying narratives cannot be ‘exorcised’ from the archives, a few good practices can be followed to study MENA-related topics in WGAs, which I number here for the reader’s convenience.

1. Keeping a critical eye out for identifiable narratives

It is possible to keep an eye out for explicit and implicit narratives underpinning their contents. There are a few complementary ways to do so.

a. Using General Critical Knowledge

First, critical theory has become mainstream enough for most researchers (even those not directly engaged with such theories) to have a working understanding of power hierarchies in narratives about race, gender, class, etc., and thus to be able to usually identify such dynamics when they appear in the sources. E.g., when a French ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs writes in his memoirs that “excesses of all sorts have always existed in [Iran]” (Dumas 2013:128), it is difficult not to think about the tropes of ‘oriental’ excess and decadence extensively described by critics of Orientalism (Said 2014:185, 302, 338, Macfie 2014:65, 88, 162, 173). Though using one’s general critical knowledge in the archives pertains to an automatic process rather than an applicable tool, it is worth emphasising that researchers wary of bias in the archives can trust their baseline critical knowledge in the first instance.

b. Using Value judgments

Second, even when typical narratives are not to be found, value judgements usually constitute telltale indicators of the norms, morals or narratives underpinning the consulted documents – though the extent to which those judgements are idiosyncratic or stem from commonly shared narratives remains for the researcher to determine. E.g., when the French Ambassador in post in Tehran in 1978 comments on the “usual [political] clumsiness” of the Iranian monarchy (French Embassy in Tehran and Delaye 1978),

whether the formula pertains to wider narratives about, for instance, bad Iranian governance, or maybe about an incomplete acculturation of the Iranian elites to the Western norms of genteel diplomatic exchange, etc., is unclear. However, the comment's personal dimension is certain: the archives attest to the man's propensity for scathing comments about Iranian figures. This value judgement is indicative here of the Ambassador's negative opinion vis-à-vis his Iranian counterparts and interlocutors, which is in turn likely to colour his analyses of Iranian affairs and his advice to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs: e.g., if the Iranian government is deemed 'politically clumsy', the conclusion for the French may be that Iran should be treated as a subaltern state, distrusted in its decision-making, maybe advised by foreigners, etc.

c. Using Preliminary research

Third, conducting preliminary research on the narratives likely to intervene in the consulted archives should give researchers further leverage to avoid reproducing them in their own work. For instance, while one of the examples above pointed out a staple of 'orientalist' discourse, research on the topic has shown that the concrete expressions of orientalism are far from monolithic, and vary significantly through time and space. Not only should French orientalism be distinguished from British orientalism (Lowe 2018), but French narratives on Persia have also significantly differed from those on the Ottoman empire (Mokhberi 2019:4), and French representations of Persia/Iran themselves have markedly evolved through time (Mokhberi 2019:4, Hartley 2023, Nanquette 2017). In a study of 17th century French representations of Persia, Mokhberi thus shows how Persia, regarded as an 'alter ego', was simultaneously praised as a place of culture, refinement and *savoir-vivre* – in which the French saw their own reflection – and

criticised for its excesses of luxury and its despotism – also regarded as great faults in the French monarchy – (Mokhberi 2019:5). By the 19th century, French representations of Persia retained an ambivalent comparative dimension (sometimes positive, sometimes negative), but had changed and diversified, as shown by Hartley (2023), who delineates five distinct representational trends: Persians as (1) Europe’s ancient adversaries or (2) as noble Aryan ancestors to the Europeans⁶, (3) as spiritual and refined in their relation to an all loving God (Hartley 2023:5), (4) as an intriguing subject for ethnographic and geopolitical study (ibid.), or (5) as a superior version of the Islamic ‘Orient’. Similarly, research on French representations of Iran since 1979 shows how essentialising and distorting narratives about Iran still have purchase today (Nanquette 2017:5). The leading narratives Nanquette delineates depict an ambivalent Iran, both “heavily compromised by religious fanaticism” and the heir of a “glorious and sophisticated civilisation” (Nanquette 2017:168). Against this background, the archival material evoking “beyond the clichés [...] about the Islamic regime, the profound culture [...] and the reality of a true and ancient country, of noble race to boot” (Colin de Verdière and French Embassy in Tehran 1993), visibly plays into several layers of inherited narratives that could be shown to affect diplomatic analyses or even France’s effective political dispositions vis-à-vis Iran down the line⁷.

⁶ As summarised by Hartley: “France had traditionally defined its cultural heritage as GrecoRoman, which made the Persians historical enemies. Indeed, Edward Said goes so far as to identify Eschylus’s play *The Persians* as the earliest example of what he calls ‘Orientalism’. But following the Oriental Renaissance of the nineteenth century, the ancient Persians became viewed as a great civilization in their own right, and even as the ancestors of modern Europeans” (Hartley 2023:3).

⁷ I am not aware of any work engaging with the effective impact of such narratives on French Foreign policymaking vis-à-vis Iran.

Interestingly however, such narratives remain generally difficult to trace in governmental archives, where they usually appear much less clearly and frequently than one could expect, ranging from scarce in the diplomatic archives, to wholly absent in other institutional archives (e.g., Police, Interior, etc.). This lack of blatant positional indicators is consistent with the primary purpose of governmental document production, which is to provide relatively ‘neutral’ and ‘factual’ material for decision-makers to ponder and act upon. Critical awareness remains useful even when the underpinning narratives remain invisible, and it is not impossible to make tacit narratives emerge from the material. It is however a difficult endeavour, for which complementary approaches can be usefully leveraged.

2. Cross-referencing

a. With secondary sources

Cross-referencing can be used to evidence both inconspicuous narrative biases and archival silences. The content of WGAs can thus be compared to that of secondary sources. The work of historians can, for instance, be used as a way to contextualise and offer a wider perspective on the researched archival material, or constitute a useful narrative counterpoint. However, whether such work is effectively available is another issue, and one might have to scavenge bits of indications in wider historical endeavours, the accuracy of which is, due to these indications’ tangential nature, not always certain.

b. With ‘rebel’ archives

Scholars have also emphasised the benefits of using alternative primary sources such as community-based or ‘rebel’ archives

(Carpio 2020) – i.e., material⁸ collected outside of mainstream (or governmental) archival projects and standards – and their online version (leaked material, social media, digital photographs) that De Kosnik (2016) theorises as ‘rogue archives’⁹. Such archives offer an opportunity to circumvent the silences resulting from governmental control on archival access – e.g., through secrecy and non-communicability – (Moss and Thomas 2021:229), and access different or divergent narratives. Returning to the example of my own research on the hosting of Iranian political exiles in France, relevant community-based archives could be found in diasporic sources (physical archives, interviews, online community archives¹⁰), which can be juxtaposed with governmental sources as a way to fact-check, or for contrasting narratives to emerge.

c. With other governmental sources

It is worth noting, however, that cross-referencing work can still be conducted, to some extent, within the realm of governmental sources. As emphasised earlier, a key issue with governmental archives is the extent to which the standards of dispassionate and tentatively objective analysis tend to erase the usual markers of authors’ positionality and biases. It is possible, however, to access less policed and censored material in three ways. First, by engaging with later material, as opposed to the material contemporary with

⁸ Carpio evokes material such as “family photo albums, school records, popular media, oral histories, and ‘counter-mapping’” (2020:57).

⁹ “De Kosnik defines rogue archives as having a number of essential characteristics. They are available online and allow users to view or download texts in their entirety. They are not constrained by copyright laws and are dedicated to the persistent publication and preservation of contents. They are usually found outside traditional memory institutions and are normally staffed by volunteers who are not trained in archives or librarianship.” (Moss and Thomas 2021:233, on De Kosnik 2016).

¹⁰ E.g.: the ‘Archive of Iranian Opposition Documents’, started in 2007, is accessible at: <https://iran-archive.com/fā>.

a given case, in which references to that case may be made in a freer and more opinionated fashion, without the filters imposed by topicality or sensitivity. Second and correlatively, memoirs of politicians and civil servants, in addition to the time-buffer effect just described, constitute much freer formats in which tacit narratives become much more apparent. Ex-French Minister of Foreign Affairs Roland Dumas thus provided ample background in his memoirs on the orientalist narratives that underpinned his decision-making as a Minister in the 1980s, notably regarding France's management of Iranian political exiles (Dumas 2013:128). Finally, other states' archives may yield more explicit material as well: states usually keep tabs on their counterparts' affairs, and diplomatic issues are sometimes discussed with 'allies'. In the case of Khomeini's arrival in France in 1978, the French talked to the British about the case's diplomatic stakes, and the British worried about the man's potential projects to come to the UK (British Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1978). While French diplomats' reporting on the issue was focused on problem-exposing and problem solving, the British archives on the matter focused on analysing the elements at play in French decision-making and thus provided an 'external' analysis, unembarrassed with delivery standards and interested in intervening undercurrents.

3. Remaining Transparent

Regardless of the results yielded by the approaches above, it is my argument that difficulties in evidencing biases within governmental archival data are a constant and cannot constitute an indictment of an archival research work as long as the principle of transparency is upheld. Utter transparency around one's approach to archival data is indeed paramount. By staying rigorously upfront about the

possible limitations of an archival source, the analysis of biases and narratives, the difficulties encountered therein, and the interpretative process, scholars will not only protect the perceived soundness of their work but also ensure its replicability.

Overall, whether archival bias analysis turns out particularly successful or not, archival researchers must come to terms with working with data that will stay, regardless, partial and imperfect – just like any other type of sources (e.g., Lindemann 2011:302). The approaches proposed above may thus feel disappointing: rather simple in principle, they are not guaranteed to ‘work’, and of course, do not ‘neutralise’ the biases shaping the data since there is no objective truth to be uncovered in the first place. I still see these methods as liberating: in seeking to limit bias reproduction in their archival analysis, there is little more a researcher can do other than (1) trying to conjure up plausible and informed propositions as to how data could be biased, and (2) remaining fully transparent about the analytical and interpretative process and the decisions made along the way. While engaging with archives that have surely rarely seen the light of day remains an empirical contribution in itself, doing one’s best at questioning its contents, in all transparency, is all that could reasonably be expected.

Practical Introduction to the French Governmental Archives

Having established the benefits of WGAs for MENA research, explored the difficulties of using such sources and proposed some baseline practices towards the management of their shortcomings, let us dive into the French governmental archives. The reputation of France’s archival institutions, generally seen today – both inside and outside the country – as particularly difficult to map and to

access, owes a lot to the different institutions' online interfaces, which range from 'rather good' to 'entirely inexistent', and remain on average rather limited. Though such shortcomings may not stand out so starkly among archival institutions in other Western states, the language barrier – which may bewilder even correct speakers – and the undisputable persistence of a somewhat aggravating French administrative habitus are no service to the perceived international accessibility (or absence thereof) of France's governmental archives.

There is also precious little in the scholarship discussing the content of France's governmental archives. Two book chapters (Confer 1959, Milligan 2005) constitute the bulk of retrievable English-language contributions on the matter. Though vastly outdated, the former, focused on the *Archives Diplomatiques*, presents a section on the types of diplomatic correspondence that would still prove somewhat profitable to current readers. The latter, focused on the history of the *Archives Nationales*, discusses these archives' symbolic relation to the French state and nation, and their intertwining with the political fate of post-Revolutionary France. In French-language literature, the apparent absence of scholarly engagement with these institutions tends to emphasise, rather than an absence of interest, the use of other media by archival researchers to access practical or other information about the French government's many archival institutions (blogs, official websites, etc.). In this scholarly landscape, the brief practical introduction to French governmental archives planned for this third section should fill an informational gap.

In an attempt to make these archives more accessible to foreign researchers, I offer here a general overview of three key types of French archival institutions (though there are many more),

highlighting their possible use for Middle East-related research and particular difficulties of access. I then offer practical suggestions for best navigating these archival funds.

Three French Governmental Archives

As a result of the different rationales underpinning their creation (e.g., *ibid.*), and to policies of territorial decentralisation, France's various governmental archives are all independent from one another, vary greatly in size and resources, are scattered across the territory, and are not integrated – despite the attempt made with the creation of the aggregator website *France Archives*¹¹. The different archives are thus very uneven in terms of cataloguing and accessibility.

Diplomatic archives may be the WGAs most naturally likely to interest MENA researchers. In France, the *Archives Diplomatiques*¹² are divided between two institutions. The *Centre des Archives Diplomatiques* of La Courneuve, a suburban area North of Paris, holds the archives of the central administration of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (or *Quai d'Orsay*). The *Centre des Archives Diplomatiques* of Nantes (a two-hour train ride from Paris) holds the archives repatriated from France's network abroad (embassies, consulates, etc.). These funds hold diplomatic and ministerial material organised geographically, which makes identifying relevant boxes rather easy. Though both institutions have a

¹¹ The website *France Archives* (accessible at: <https://francearchives.gouv.fr/fr/>), is meant to host a super-catalogue compiling the catalogues of the country's many archival institutions. In practice, it is mostly inoperational, but remains useful as a repository of links towards France's archival institutions.

¹² For the website of the Diplomatic archives, see: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/archives-diplomatiques/>.

catalogue in principle accessible online¹³, those catalogues are partly incomplete (some funds do not appear), and the “*instruments de recherche*” – i.e., the PDF files detailing a fund’s boxes and boxes’ contents – are often not accessible online and can only be consulted in an offline catalogue on site.

The *Archives Nationales*¹⁴, located in the northern Parisian suburb of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine¹⁵, are the biggest and possibly best endowed of the French state’s archival institutions. The site hosts all Ministerial archives since 1789 – except for the Foreign Affairs and the Defence Ministries, which have their own separate archives – and the archives of the President’s and the Prime Minister’s cabinets. For MENA research, the national archives can yield a variety of data, for instance on presidential or ministerial treatment of (or discourses on) bilateral and multilateral affairs, but also on the management of diasporic populations in the host territory. For my work on Iranian political exiles in France, the archives of the *Ministère de l’Intérieur* (i.e., homeland security) held key material on the surveillance of political exiles, their protection by the police, the administrative aspects of their entry or exit from the territory, etc. In particular, as priorly mentioned, the intelligence reports found in those archives constituted a useful resource on the activities and population of Iranian exiles in France, which could not have been recovered as easily from historical works or diasporic archives. The *Archives Nationales* boast a handy, very

¹³ For the online catalogues of the French diplomatic archives, see: <https://archivesdiplomatiques.diplomatie.gouv.fr>.

¹⁴ For the National Archives’s website, see: <https://www.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr>.

¹⁵ The site of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine/Saint-Denis holds the post-1789 archives. Another site, that of Caran (Paris, 3rd arrondissement), holds the material relevant to pre-1789 France.

complete online catalogue¹⁶, allowing deep preliminary search for relevant material – though its website is often down, and some of its functions regularly fail.

Police archives may also be of some interest to researchers interested in Middle Eastern diasporas, as these archives hold documents produced in the frame of the registration and surveillance of individual foreign citizens involved in any form of activism, and of the associations related to them. Such documents can provide some insight into both diasporic activism and host states' management of diasporic activism. In France, police archives are stored in the different *Archives Départementales*¹⁷. Thus, while the police's intelligence reports on Iranian dissident Abolhassan Bani Sadr were held in the archives of the Police Prefecture of Paris¹⁸ (Le Pré-Saint-Gervais), the material pertaining to Khomeini's exile in Neauphle-le-Château was held in the *Archives Départementales des Yvelines*¹⁹ (Montigny-le-Bretonneux). The accessibility of catalogues varies greatly across Departments: the catalogue of the Paris Police Prefecture's archives is only accessible on site through an internal network; the archives of the Yvelines department have a fund inventory available online, which is, however, organised thematically and thus impractical to research, etc.

¹⁶ For the *Archives Nationales*' online catalogue (available in English), see: <https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/cms/content/display.action?uuiid=Accueil1RootUuiid&onglet=1>.

¹⁷ *Départements* are territorial administrative units below the regional (*Régions*) unit.

¹⁸ Website of the Paris Police Prefecture's archives: <https://www.prefecturedepolice.interieur.gouv.fr/archives>.

¹⁹ Website of the Archives Départementales des Yvelines: <https://archives.yvelines.fr>.

Good Practices in the French Archives, For the Use of Foreign Researchers and Middle East Research

Despite a few exceptional cases of good online accessibility, it is safe to say that French governmental archives are, on average, rather difficult to map and navigate. The difficulty is compounded for foreign researchers, for whom field trips are particularly resource-costly, who may face some form of 'language barrier' on-site or online (most sites are not particularly user-friendly), and may even feel aggravated by French 'archival culture' – which certainly surprised me, a French citizen rather used to the peculiarities of French administrative practices. I offer here two key recommendations that should be useful to foreign researchers as a whole, and in particular for those researching the Middle East.

a. Archivists are every researcher's lifeline.

First, in the face of a dearth of readily accessible information, archivists are every researcher's lifeline. Research in the archives is, in fact, much more of a social endeavour than it is reputed to be. Resident archivists, whatever their specialisation, will first and foremost be able to see you through catalogue navigation, help you map the collections, and locate the material relevant to your research. Even in the presence of functional catalogues, cross-checking for relevant funds with an archivist is advisable. As organisational charts are usually not made public, archivists can also help researchers identify the archivists responsible for the relevant geographic or thematic funds. In turn, researchers have all the reasons to seek and build a rapport with their archivist colleagues, and in particular with the specialists on the relevant funds: partly trained as researchers, archivists are often genuinely

interested in visiting scholars' research. Not only may they be able to connect you with other scholars researching similar funds or topics, but they also have usually been responsible throughout their career for a great variety of funds across archival institutions, of which they sometimes keep valuable memories²⁰. Fund specialists may be willing to provide advice on the subtleties of derogation requests. Of course, individual archivists' willingness to help markedly depends on their own understanding of the profession: either as public-facing or as document-facing; despite the crucial role fulfilled by archivists in orienting visiting public and researchers, some may thus prove somewhat unfriendly to the visitor, which I attribute to what I propose to call the 'French administrative habitus' – which would deserve its own sociological research. In some lucky cases, establishing a rapport with the right archivists may yield a boon of administrative shortcuts and insider information, which will come particularly handy considering the length of French administrative treatment times.

b. Start earlier than planned.

Second and correlatively, it is advisable to assume the worst, from the outset, of accessibility delays and source management time. Though inconspicuous, the step of catalogue-scanning and box-referencing is, for any proper catalogue, extremely time-consuming. In the absence of proper catalogues, researchers will have to email the various archives to request information about collections' contents and documents' communicability, or in the worst case, will have to wait for pilot fieldwork to gauge the available material and measure the number of derogations necessary. For all French archives less than 100 years old, funds

²⁰ Amusingly, archivists thus constitute in France the closest thing to archival integration.

can still be classified and non-communicable. In such cases, derogations can be requested, which will open an inquiry for the early declassification of the desired boxes. Between the instruction of the derogation request by the local archivists and the examination of the request by the original 'producers' of the desired files, responses to derogations can take between 4 months and more than a year. In that context, starting to identify the relevant material and sending derogation requests at least 6 months ahead of the planned fieldwork seems advisable. The issue of archives' communicability is particularly salient for researchers studying Middle Eastern contexts. As provided by the French legislation on declassification, the classification of an archival file can be prolonged (or even reinstated after declassification) when, in the occurrence of international tensions, the file's consultation may endanger "national security" (e.g., Protection du secret de la défense nationale 2021:126). Considering the recurring periods of political upheavals in the MENA, the regular involvement (direct or indirect) of Western states, and the enduring sensitivity of some topics (e.g. Algeria war), heavily anticipating consultation and derogation requests is particularly advisable for MENA-related research.

Conclusions

In this article, several key arguments were made. First, that despite the significant biases likely embedded in both Western and governmental archival sources like France's governmental archives, such sources provide irreplaceable material for a set of Middle East-relevant research topics. I contended, correlatively, that the continued use of non-MENA resources towards MENA studies could help stave off risks of 'siloization' and essentialisation

shared by other area studies subfields. Paying heed to the important warnings made by the postcolonial critique of Western sources on the MENA, I examined the types of biases likely to be encountered in WGAs, using illustrations from my own research in the French governmental archives on Iranian political exiles. I proposed in passing a condensed review of French orientalist representations of Iran since the 17th century, which may be of particular use to scholars interested in France-Iran relations. I proposed in turn several ‘good practices’ towards identifying narrative bias in such sources, acknowledging, however, that for an essential part, such narratives usually remain tacit, making the identification of their impact on archival content particularly difficult. Transparency, I contend, remains crucial to the practice of archival research, especially in such cases. The last section of this article offers both a practical introduction to a few of France’s governmental archival institutions and elements of good practices in accessing these archives.

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