

Middle East Studies Forum Annual Report



2020 in review

Despite the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 saw a number of accomplishments for the Middle East Studies Forum and our members. We held our Policy Dialogue Series as part of a Deakin University project 'Assessing the impact of external actors in the Syrian and Afghan proxy wars', in partnership with Carnegie Corporation New York, and saw our network grow with new members.

Research Recognition

In 2020 we celebrated outstanding achievements. *The Australian* 2020 Special Research Report named Deakin University as the national leader in Middle East and Islamic Studies, and A/Prof Benjamin Isakhan as Australia's Leading Researcher in that field. This is a great recognition based on years of impressive performance by MESF researchers, evident in our high quality publications and impact. Dr Dara Conduit's book *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (CUP) won the Oceania Book Prize for International Studies - an outstanding achievement.

Other key milestones included MESF Convenor, Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh's invited witness statement to the UK House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee on Iran's role in Afghanistan, and Professor Fethi Mansouri was elected to the [Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia](#) as a new Fellow - a well deserved recognition of Professor Mansouri's work.

Academic Achievements

Our members continued to publish extensively this year. We celebrated two book releases:

- Fraihat, I., (2020) *Iran and Saudi Arabia – Taming a Chaotic Conflict* (Edinburgh University Press)
- Mozaffari, A., Westbrook, N., (2020) *Development, architecture, and the formation of heritage in late twentieth-century Iran - A vital past* (Manchester University Press)

Our scholars contributed to five book chapters and [27 journal articles](#) across a range of esteemed publications. Our top cited and viewed papers published in 2020 include:

- Ibrahim Fraihat (2020): 'Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis.' *Italian Journal of International Affairs*.
- Benjamin Isakhan (2020): 'The Islamic State attacks on Shia holy sites and the "Shrine Protection Narrative": Threats to sacred space as a mobilization frame'. *Terrorism and Political Violence*.
- Fethi Mansouri & Tariq Modood (2020): 'The complementarity of multiculturalism and interculturalism: theory backed by Australian evidence', *Ethnic & Racial Studies*.
- Zahid Shahab Ahmed & Musharaf Zahoor (2020): 'Impacts of the 'War on Terror' on the (De-)Humanization of Christians in Pakistan: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Reporting', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*.

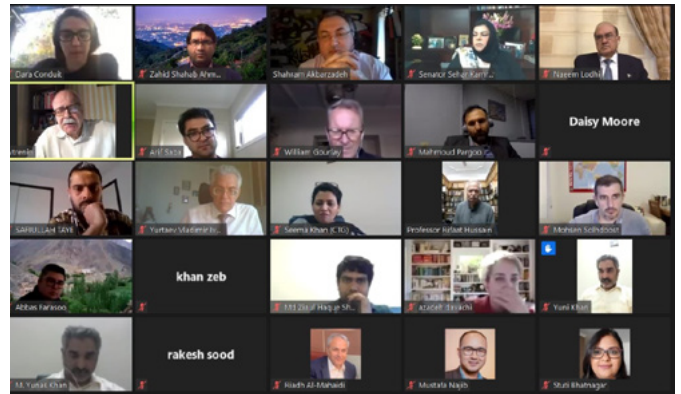


MESF Events

2020 was certainly the year of Zoom webinars! This year we hosted [two face-to-face events](#) and [12 webinars](#), allowing us to reach and accommodate a wider local, national and international audience and panel members.

In partnership with Carnegie Corporation New York, we hosted a Policy Dialogue series that aimed to generate new understandings of proxy conflict and propose important policy recommendations for peace and stability in Afghanistan and Syria. We were extremely lucky to have local and international experts on the panel for each session - Policy dialogue I and II: Proxy dynamics and peace in Afghanistan and Policy dialogue III and IV: Proxy dynamics and peace in Syria.

The 2020 program included ['The Voice of Women is a Revolution: Women in the Middle East's Uprisings'](#) presented in conjunction with WoMENA. ['China between Iran and the Gulf Monarchies'](#) presented by Dr. Jonathan Fulton (Zayed University, UAE), and ['Polarized & Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine'](#) presented by Assistant Professor Dana El Kurd (Doha Institute of Graduate Studies).



Panel members and attendees of 'Policy Dialogue I: Proxy Dynamics and Peace in Afghanistan.'

MESF is proud to provide a platform to share research and initiate important conversations.

Funding Success

MESF enjoyed great success in funding this year - another indicator of the caliber of our members and their dedication to conducting cutting-edge research.

Dr Dara Conduit	Authoritarianism and political organising in exile	Alfred Deakin Postdoctoral Research Fellowship
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Selected Projects in 2020

MESF members engaged in pioneering research. A selection of these projects are listed below, demonstrating the breadth and depth of our expertise and the competitiveness.

Lead	Project Name	Funding Body	Duration
Dr Zahid Ahmed	The Religion of Islam, Terrorism, Terrorism in India and Kashmir & Jammu	Australian Federal Police	2020-2020
Prof Shahram Akbarzadeh with Dr Zahid Ahmed and Dr Dara Conduit	Assessing the impact of external actors in the Syrian and Afghan proxy wars	Carnegie Corporation of New York	2018-2020
A/Prof Benjamin Isakhan	After Islamic State: Local-State-Global Heritage Dynamics in Syria and Iraq	Australian Research Council	2020-2024
Prof Fethi Mansouri	A Transcultural Approach to Belonging and Engagement among Migrant Youth	Australian Research Council	2018-2022
Prof Fethi Mansouri	Mapping Social Services Provisions for Diverse Communities	Australian Research Council	2020-2023

Research Engagement

This year we saw a number of contributions by MESF members to public debates. The recognition of media outlets further positions our members as leaders in Middle East studies and provides a link between the scholarly community and the broader community.

The MESF team engaged in a plethora of interviews and commentary across local and international outlets including *ABC News*, *3CR Radio*, *NewsAsia*, *TRT World*, *BeFM 'Morning Wave in Busan'*, *SBS Greek*, *SBS News*, *The Age*.

In addition, our members contributed to a number of online media outlets with op-ed's articles and briefs including Dr Dara Conduit's brief in the *Middle East Institute* on the [UNSC vote](#), and Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh's contribution to *The Conversation* on the [US assassination of General Soleimani](#).

Podcast appearances included *IAS Talk Pieces* featuring Professor Michele Pace and her thoughts on ['Life in the time of Coronavirus. Gaza: from ghetto to frontier.'](#)

A number of our members participated as panel guests in local and international webinars, including the UCI Centre for Armenian Studies webinar 'Armenian Communities in the Middle East Today – Lebanon' featuring Dr James Barry. Dr Zahid Shahab presented the 'Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative on Regional Stability in South Asia' to students and faculty at the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University.

MESF's engagement with the wider community via social media was extremely strong this year. We saw huge Twitter engagement rates with an average of 401 profile views a month and steady rise in Twitter followers - from December 2019 we saw a 32% increase in followers.

Communication of our webinars consistently generated favourable interaction and high reach. The efforts of 2020 resulted in a substantial increase in traffic to the website - up 68% from 2019.

A Growing MESF Network

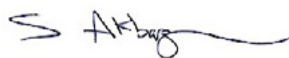
In 2020 we were privileged to welcome highly accomplished researchers to our network.

Non-resident member Dr Vladimir Rauta marked joining MESF by presenting a paper on ['Proxy War Research: Progress, Pitfalls and Promises.'](#) Dr Rauta is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations with the School of Politics, Economics, and International Relations at the University of Reading.

Our Graduate Researcher cohort also grew by four new members. Dr Galib Bashirov's work has been published in *Third World Quarterly*, *Democratization*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. Dr Bashirov researches state-society relations in the post-Soviet region and Turkey. Azadeh Davachi is a researcher, writer and women's rights activist and has published several articles, commentaries and reports about the situation of women in Iran for online and printed journals in Persian and English. Sofya Shahab has over seven years of experience working in fragile and conflict affected contexts across the Middle East and Reem Sweid works on issues of political violence, multiculturalism and citizenship.

Azadeh Davachi and Reem Sweid went through thesis examination successfully in 2020, marking a magnificent achievement.

To view all our members, and see the full list of work and achievements for 2020, please visit our [website](#).



PROFESSOR SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
MESF CONVENOR