

Middle East Studies Forum Annual Report



2025 in review

Research Recognition

Deakin University is named Australia's Lead Institute for Middle East and Islamic Studies for five years in a row. This recognition reflects the amazing work of MESF researchers who are advancing scholarship in their field of expertise: Zouhir Gabsi (Middle East & Islamic Studies), Fethi Mansouri (Migration), Ihsan Yilmaz (Religion).

We extend our warmest congratulations to Professor Benjamin Isakhan for securing two major international research grants in 2025, an exceptional recognition of his leadership and scholarship in the field.

Professor Isakhan was awarded a prestigious Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (FT250100023) for his project *Heritage and Displacement: Intersections of Exile, Culture and Conflict*. As the lead and sole Chief Investigator, he will oversee this four-year, fully funded fellowship valued at A\$1.3 million, running from 2026 to 2030.

In addition, he was named Partner Investigator on a United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) project titled *Reconfiguring Heritage: Present Engagements with Communities' Pasts for Resilient Futures*, led by Dr. Sofya Shahab at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. This four-year collaboration (2025–2029) is supported by A\$2.2 million in funding.

These achievements mark a significant milestone for MESF and reflect the growing global impact of our members.

Throughout 2025, MESF members continued to raise the profile of our work—delivering keynote addresses, engaging in high-level policy discussions, and contributing to media interviews across Australia and around the world.

Academic Publications

This year, our members made outstanding contributions to knowledge by publishing books and articles in esteemed journals. We celebrated the release of two books:

- Saba, A., Farasoo, A., Akbari, F., & Ibrahim, N. (Eds.) (2025). *Mapping Futures for Afghanistan*. Routledge.
- Yilmaz, I., & Akbarzadeh, S. (Eds.) (2025). *Authoritarian Actors and Strategic Digital Information Operations: The New Age of Manipulation*. Routledge.

The following book chapters were also released:

- Hashim, A. S. (2025). *The Persian Empire's Wars, 1501–1925*. In B. Heuser & R. Johnson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook on the History of War*. Oxford University Press.
- Hashim, A. S. (2025). *Colonial and Post-Colonial Legacies in the Armies of North Africa: Egypt and Sudan*. In G. Myles & C. Johnson (Eds.), *Colonial Legacies in African Militaries*. Ohio State University Press.
- Rouhshahbaz, S. (2025). *From Margins to Movements: The Gendered Implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in Iran*. In K. Leclerc, E. I. B. Yague, & H. Berents (Eds.), *Youth Leading Change: Emerging Sites of Knowledge in Peace and Conflict* (pp. 31–44). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leclerc, K., & Rouhshahbaz, S. (2025). *Young Peacebuilders as Architects of Knowledge: Challenging Traditional Paradigms*. In *Overcoming Violence in Transdisciplinary Perspective: A Praxis Anthology of Peace* (pp. 149–172). Frontpage Publications.

MESF members published numerous [journal articles](#) in top-ranking academic journals in 2025. A sample of these publications includes::

- Ahmed, Z. S., Yilmaz, I., Akbarzadeh, S., & Bashirov, G. (2025). *Contestations of internet governance and digital authoritarianism in Pakistan*. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*.
- Akbarzadeh, S., Naeni, A., Bashirov, G., & Yilmaz, I. (2025). *The web of Big Lies: state-sponsored disinformation in Iran*. *Contemporary Politics*.
- Childs, E., & Isakhan, B. (2025). *Gender and cultural violence: feminist perspectives on Islamic State's heritage destruction*. *International Affairs*.
- Eslami, M., & Akbarzadeh, S. (2025). *Israel's 12-day war on Iran and the Russian fighter jet exports: A geopolitical analysis*. *Mediterranean Politics*.
- Fraihat, I. (2025). *Colonial Scripts: How Western political discourse facilitates the erasure of Palestinian humanity*. *Third World Quarterly*.
- Gabsi, Z., & Sarihan, A. (2025). *Social contract and rising populism in Tunisia: Is there a risk of sliding into autocracy?* *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.
- Gabsi, Z. (2025). *Digital mediascapes and cultural transformation: youth identity formation in Tunisia's post-revolutionary digital sphere*. Continuum.

- Isakhan, B., & Meskell, L. (2025). *Modelling norm cluster expansion: the case of UNESCO's heritage mandate*. *European Journal of International Relations*.
- Meskell, L., & Isakhan, B. (2025). *Reconstruction, repair and rehabilitation: a view from Mosul*. *Change Over Time*.
- Saba, A., & Akbarzadeh, S. (2025). *Promoting Authoritarianism? Continuity and Change in China's Policy Towards Myanmar (1990–2023)*. *Journal of Contemporary China*.
- Yilmaz, I., Abbasov, N., Akbarzadeh, S., & Bashirov, G. (2025). *The double-edged sword: Political engagement on social media and its impact on democracy support in authoritarian regimes*. *Political Research Quarterly*.

MESF Events

2025 featured another strong lineup of MESF-hosted and co-sponsored events, showcasing timely scholarship, regional expertise, and thought leadership on Middle Eastern politics, religion, and conflict.

The year began with the MESF Seminar *Church-State Relations in Syria through the Prism of the 'Neo-Millet'*, held on March 4, 2025, at the Burwood Corporate Centre. In this seminar, Professor Fiona McCallum Guiney (University of St Andrews) presented a detailed analysis of the church-state dynamic in Syria, applying the “neo-millet” framework to understand how religious minorities have been politically managed by the state. Drawing on original field research and participant interviews from Syria between 2008–2010, Professor McCallum examined how Christian church hierarchies navigated their relationship with the Baathist regime during Bashar al-Assad’s first decade in power and into the turbulence of the 2011 uprising and the regime’s collapse in late 2024. The presentation sparked rich discussion around authoritarian resilience, sectarian governance, and the politics of religious recognition in the Middle East.

On July 30, 2025, MESF hosted the official book launch of Dr. Abbas Farasoo’s *Proxy War in Afghanistan: The Politics of State-Wrecking*. The event explored the concept of “state-wrecking” and the destructive consequences of external support for insurgent actors, focusing on the Afghanistan conflict. Dr. Farasoo’s talk highlighted the structural



implications of proxy warfare—including territorial fragmentation, institutional collapse, and political delegitimisation. Based on extensive fieldwork, case studies, and archival research, the book sheds light on the Pakistan-Taliban nexus, the limitations of US-led interventions, and the evolving nature of proxy conflict in modern warfare. A compelling and timely discussion, the event drew academics, diplomats, and policy specialists interested in conflict dynamics and international security.

MESF was proud to co-sponsor the *2025 Afghanistan Conference*, held on 15 August 2025 at the Monash University Law Chambers in Melbourne. The event, titled *Four Years of Taliban Rule: Confronting Impunity and Systematic Human Rights Violations*, opened with a Plenary Session chaired by Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, examining the Taliban regime’s impact on human rights and the global response to escalating repression in Afghanistan.

These events reflect MESF’s ongoing commitment to advancing nuanced, evidence-based discussions on Middle Eastern affairs. Thank you to all who attended, presented, and supported our programming in 2025. Recordings and highlights from these events can be found via the MESF website and [Youtube channel](#).

Selected Projects in 2025

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

Lead	Project Name	Funding Body	Duration
Prof Shahram Akbarzadeh	Indonesia in the global geography of Islamic knowledge	Australian Research Council	2026-2028
Prof Benjamin Isakhan	Reconfiguring Heritage: Present Engagements with Communities' Pasts for Resilient Futures	United Kingdom Research and Innovation	2025-2029
Prof Benjamin Isakhan	Heritage and Displacement: Intersections of Exile, Culture and Conflict	Australian Research Council Future Fellowship	2026-2030
Prof Ihsan Yilmaz	Civilisationist Mobilisation, Digital Technologies and Social Cohesion	Australian Research Council	2023-2026

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MESF DIRECTOR