MEI recently held its 2013 annual conference at the Four Seasons Hotel in Singapore from May 29-31. Titled “Converging Regions: Global Perspectives on Asia and the Middle East,” the conference brought together an international line-up of speakers for an intellectually stimulating three-day journey about the crossroads and intersections between the Middle East and other regions in Asia, especially Southeast Asia and China.

MEI was honoured to have as keynote speaker, His Royal Highness Prince Turki al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. His Royal Highness compellingly made the case for Asia-Middle East links to move beyond a purely trade and investment relationship to a more holistic approach which includes strategic interests, regional security, political coordination, as well as networking opportunities for corporations and individuals. Strategic dialogues between the GCC and its Asian partners should continue till national, bilateral, and regional strategic objectives are met. These relationships should be paved toward the ultimate goal of contributing to world peace and prosperity.

The Guest of Honour Lee Yi Shyan, Singapore’s Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and National Development, also delivered a speech after the welcome address given by MEI Director Professor Michael Hudson. Lee noted that the Asia-Middle East trade relations are becoming highly interdependent, as Asian economies need energy to sustain their growth while Middle Eastern economies look eastwards to diversify. However, viewing Asia-Middle East ties solely through an economic lens would be doing their rich historical interconnectedness a great disservice. Singapore’s very own Arab Street area serves as a reminder of the long-standing links with the Middle East. For example, Arab traders, primarily the Hadhramauts of Yemen, had historically travelled to Singapore via the East-West shipping route for many decades.

Finally, MEI is grateful for the support of SABIC, our exclusive sponsor for MEI’s annual flagship conference. SABIC is one of the world’s leading manufacturers of chemicals, fertilizers, plastics, and metals. It is ranked 88th on Forbes magazine’s annual “Global 2000” list, which ranks the top 2,000 public companies in the world.
MEI was honored to host nine world-renowned Middle East studies scholars in a two-part international colloquium on March 7 at the Hilton Singapore. After the welcome address by MEI Director Michael Hudson, the first session discussed the current state of Middle East studies, with special reference to Asia; whereas the second session discussed “The Middle East in 2013: On the Brink?”. The panel of experts included Professor Abdelkhaleq Abdulla of Emirates University; Dr. Wu Bingbing of Peking University; Professor Ahmad Dallal, Provost of the American University of Beirut; Professor Prasenjit Duara, Director of the Asia Research Institute, NUS; Professor Eng Seng Ho of Duke University; Professor Suad Joseph, Director of the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program at the University of California, Davis; Professor Akira Usuki of Japan Women’s University; Professor Zhu Weili, Honorary Director of the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University and Director of the Center for China-Arab States Cooperation Forum Studies; as well as Professor Sami Zubaida, Emeritus Professor of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck College, University of London.

Announcing Our 2014 Annual Conference, “After the ‘Arab Spring’: Development Challenges and Solutions”


MEI Director Michael Hudson piloted the MEI Research Seminars with a presentation on his current research project, “The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Prospects for Democratic Transitions.” The MEI Research Seminars are casual bi-weekly work-in-progress presentations by MEI’s in-house researchers. MEI also welcomes researchers from other institutes and departments within NUS to present and participate.

The question of political participation in the Arab world has long been a topic of concern for Hudson, as the subject is related to his 1977 book, Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy. Legitimacy is linked to participation, and until recently there was not much to discuss in terms of political participation in the Arab states. Certainly, the Arab world has seen and experienced Weber’s three types of legitimate rule: personal, bureaucratic, and ideological. Yet, these categories do not sufficiently explain many issues regarding the Arab uprisings of the past two years.

Hudson is also looking at the failure of the bulk of the academic community to predict the “Arab Spring”. He asks: Was scholarly attention too focused on the “durable/persistent authoritarianism” of the Arab regimes and kingdoms that it failed to notice brewing unrest amongst the people? Journalists and pundits seemed to be more prescient with regard to the uprisings than academics.

In addition, Hudson explores current research that assesses the long-term implications of the ongoing “Arab Spring”. Political scientists have oscillated between liberal and conservative forecasts – from “persistent authoritarianism” to “transitiology.” While the former forecast did not prepare scholars for the uprisings, the latter offers a limited approach to the diverse post-uprising environment of the Arab world.

In conclusion, the “Arab Spring”, ongoing as it is and relatively unforeseen, has much to offer political scientists in terms of rethinking their long-held propositions about authoritarianism and democracy.
MEI warmly congratulates its distinguished new colleague, Visiting Research Professor Ali Allawi, for being named among the world’s top public intellectuals in a recent poll published by Prospect magazine. Allawi came in fourth out of 65 figures in the magazine’s “World Thinkers 2013” list, beating the likes of Slavoj Žižek, Amartya Sen, and Mohamed ElBaradei. As a former Minister of Trade and the first civilian Minister of Defence in post-Saddam Iraq, Allawi is much admired for his continuous work on the Iraqi economy. His books, The Occupation of Iraq (Yale, 2007) and The Crisis of Islamic Civilization (Yale, 2009), have both been well-received by critics and the public. The Occupation of Iraq was voted one of the Washington Post’s top 10 nonfiction books for 2007, and The Crisis of Islamic Civilization received excellent reviews from such newspapers and magazines as the Economist, the Guardian, the Observer, Literary Review, and the Asia Times. His most recent book, Faisal I of Iraq, a comprehensive political biography of the monarch, will be available early next year by Yale University Press. Congratulations!

Our New Publications

MEI is pleased to announce the publication of its fourth volume of ‘Singapore Middle East Papers’ series. In the single-author volume, former MEI Research Associate, Camille Germanos, does an extensive assessment of the political alliances between Hizbullah and the Free Patriotic Movement. The fifth volume of our ‘Singapore Middle East Papers’ series is about the social and economic bases of Ennedha power in Tunisia by Robert R. Bianchi. In addition, in the first of our Middle East Reflections series – where academic treatises are featured through a unique epistolary approach – MEI’s Ali Allawi writes a profound and insightful letter on the Arab revolutions to Professor Syed Farid Alatas of the National University of Singapore.

Please look out for our upcoming publications as well, including the latest compilation of MEI Insights and the proceedings from our May 2013 Conference, “Converging Regions: Global Perspectives on Asia and the Middle East.” MEI Insights are 1,000-2,000-word online essays on a variety of topics pertaining to MEI’s research clusters of politics and regional security, economics and business, and society and culture. Every quarter, the Institute publishes the latest 10 articles in a booklet. All MEI publications may be downloaded free of charge from our website: http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg.
The Middle East Institute is pleased to welcome Editor and Research Fellow Dr. Nele Lenze, Research Fellow Dr. Jeremy Kingsley, Visiting Research Fellows Dr. Meron Zeleke Eresso and Joshua Rickard, and Research Assistants Retna Devi and Milan Antal Karner.

Dr. Nele Lenze’s research focuses on the cultural online sphere in the Gulf. Her main research interests include literature published in social media, through microblogging tools, on blogs, and in e-publishing houses. She holds a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies and Media Studies from the University of Oslo where she lectured on the Arab online sphere. She obtained her Master’s degree in Arabic Literature from Freie University Berlin.

Dr. Meron Zeleke Eresso holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS, Germany). Her areas of research interest are religious conflicts, customary and faith-based institutions of conflict resolution, and gender. Upon completion of her studies, Meron moved back to her home country, Ethiopia, where she is working as a lecturer and researcher. She has been the representative of the Eastern African Chapter of the African Good Governance Network, since July 2012. Her recent awards and grants include the International Peace Research Association Foundation Small Peace research grant, the German Academic Exchange Programme publication grant, the International Peace Research Association Dorothy Marcus Senesh fellowship for African female PhD students, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University research grant, and the latest grant as a visiting researcher at the National University of Singapore.

Dr. Jeremy Kingsley’s career as a legal anthropologist brings a wide range of perspectives and skills to the research program at the Middle East Institute. His research focuses primarily upon religious and political authority in Indonesia and how this affects local governance. Jeremy has recently completed a two-year Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He has undertaken extensive field research primarily on the eastern Indonesian island of Lombok. His work has been published in academic and public affairs journals, including Indonesia; Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia; Inside Indonesia and the Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law. Jeremy has a joint appointment with the Tembusu College, NUS. He is undertaking a research project entitled: “Networks and Interconnection: Contemporary Educational Encounters between Southeast Asian Muslims and the Middle East.” He obtained his LLM and PhD degrees in Law at the University of Melbourne and his BA and LLB from Deakin University.

Dr. Joshua Rickard’s research has explored the social implications of the division of Palestinian communities through long-term imposed isolation, as well as community sustainability and resilience. He carried out research on social cohesion in communities in the Nablus region of West Bank, Palestine, in the University of Kent at Canterbury, where he earned a PhD in Social Anthropology. During his stint in MEI, he will critically examine the roles of foreign aid and international NGOs in Palestinian communities, and their relationships to external as well as local actors.

Retna Devi holds a BA in History from National University of Singapore. Her research interests include gender relations and the cultural history of the Middle East.

Milan Antal Karner’s primary research interests lie in the environment-security nexus and the impact of climate change on conflict and cooperation in the Middle East. He holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Vienna and an MPhil in Peace and Conflict Studies from Trinity College Dublin. Following his assignment at MEI, he will be pursuing a PhD at King’s College London.
MEI Participates in ACS (Independent)’s Inaugural Middle East Summit and MFA Diplomatic Academy Course on the Middle East

MEI is pleased to announce its involvement in the Middle East Summit (MES) 2013, a new initiative by the Anglo-Chinese School to provide students aged 17-18 years old with a deeper understanding of Middle Eastern issues. MES is a simulation of a summit featuring only Middle Eastern diplomats with similar protocols to a Model UN conference. The event that took place from June 12-13 had over 80 delegates from 35 different secondary schools in Singapore. MEI’s Deputy Director Dr. Charlotte Schriwer delivered the keynote address with the Middle East was included to set the context for the overview of Singapore’s strategic interests and engagement with the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University in London (September). Allawi was also featured in The Takeaway, a WNYC/WGBH/New York Times radio co-production show (April).

Research Staff Accomplishments

From December 2012 onwards
Researcher Updates (From December 2012 onwards)

Ali Kadri, Senior Research Fellow, published “Revisiting Arab Socialism” in World Economic Review Vol 1, No 1 (September); “Proletarianisation in the Arab World under Neoliberalism” in International Development Economic Associates, WP No. 5 (November), and “The Political Economy of the Syrian Crisis” in Technology Governance and Economic Dynamics WP, No. 46 (December). He wrote two short papers titled, “What is to become of the state?” and “Arab World VS East Asia: Economic Development” for London School of Economics, Middle East Centre (October). Kadri also contributed a chapter “A Pre Arab Spring Depressive Business Cycle” to The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World, ed. Fawaz Gerges, Cambridge University Press, 2013. He presented the following papers: “Comparative Economic Development with the Arab World” at the conference The Middle East and East Asia, American University of Beirut, Beirut from 10-11 May; “The Possibility of Welfare State in the Arab World” at the Association for Middle Eastern Public Policy and Administration’s Inaugural Conference, First Global Conference on Public Policy and Administration in the Middle East in Ifrane, Morocco from 8-9 November 2012; “Declining Productivity in the Arab World” at the symposium on Food, Farmers and Revolution that took place in American University of Beirut, Beirut on 22 June 2013; and “From Disintegration to Integration in the Arab World” at the conference Instability in the Middle East at Tokyo University from 11-12 February.

Ali Allawi, Visiting Research Professor gave a lecture on “The GCC Countries” at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (April); and a talk on “Transcendental Unity of Religions” at Singapore Interfaith Council (April). He finalized the editing of Faisal I of Iraq. He also conducted field interviews in Malaysia, UAE, Jordan, Kuwait for his forthcoming books, A Long Cycle Economic and Social history of the Middle East and The Journeys of Ibn Arabi and Modern Times. He participated in the conference “Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A Life and Legacy” organized by The British Institute for the Study of Iraq and the British Academy in collaboration with the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University in London (September). Allawi was also featured in The Takeaway, a WNYC/WGBH/New York Times radio co-production show (April).

Nazry Bahrawi, Research Fellow, published “Let’s Make Literature Compulsory” and “The Downside of National Culture” in Today (March & April), as well as “Textual Desires” in Critical Muslim (July). He was featured in BeritaHarian, the local Malay daily, for his doctoral dissertation in June and SG+, a Channel NewsAsia current affairs programme, in August. Bahrawi also participated in the “Singapore International Translation Symposium” held from February 1/2 at The Arts House; the “Andalusi Secular” seminar at the University of Warwick on May 22; “Reclaiming Al-Andalus” seminar at The City Circle, United Kingdom on May 31; and International Forum on the Plight of Muslims in Burma in the 21st Century at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, Malaysia on June 19.

Navid Fooz, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, published The Iranian Diaspora in Malaysia: Emergent Pluralism: a contribution to the Middle East Institute at Washington D.C. for the Middle East Asia Project (July). He also presented the paper, "Emergent Pluralism in a Fragmented and Polarized Diaspora: Politics of Iranian Diasporic Identity Formation in Malaysia" at the Sixth Biennial Convention of the Associations for the Study of Persianate Societies, Sarajevo (September).

Fanar Haddad, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, contributed to the "Iraq’s Protests: Can a ‘Sunnist Spring’ Turn into an ‘Iraqi Spring’?" in Foreign Policy (January); "Iraq’s Sectarian Inheritance" in Foreign Policy (March); "The Politics of Sectarianism in Iraq" in Chatham House’s Iraq Ten Years On (May); "Federalism Would Mean the Death of Iraq Nationalism – But So What?" in Gulf News (May); "How Mass Atrocities End: Iraq" in World Peace Foundation’s Reinvigorating Peace (August); "The Language of anti-Shiism in Foreign Policy (August); "Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq: Contextualizing the Civil War of 2006-2007" in British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (August), and "Identity Politics in Iraq: How Much of it is about Identity?" in Near East Quarterly (September). He also presented the paper "The Politics of Sectarian Identity in Iraq" at the Iraq Ten Years On conference at Chatham House in March; and "We’re All Brothers: Fact or Fiction? The Future of Sunni-Shia Relations in the Middle East" at Sectarianism in the Contemporary Islamic World, Centre for Academic Shi’a Studies, Khoei Islamic Centre, London (April). Haddad also participated in the conference "How Mass Atrocities End: Violence Against Civilians in Iraq" at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University in May at the Memory and Dialogue workshop hosted by Pax Christi in Istanbul, Turkey in February. He was interviewed by The Independent (March), BBC Radio (May), NPR (July) (Iranwire (July), Loopcast (August), Daily Star (August); and appeared on "The Stream" "Ali Jazeerain January; "Bil Harf al Wahid" Al Rasheed TV (Iraq) in March; as well as "The Changing Face of Sectarianism in Iraq: Musings on Iraq in June.

Michael C. Hudson, Professor & Director, provided the luncheon keynote on "U.S. Geopolitical Interest and Policies in the Indian Ocean Basin" at the 3rd Biennial Critchfield conference: Navigating the 21st-Century Marine Silk Road, held at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia in April; and gave a talk on "Middle East Turmoil and American Decline: Views from Singapore and Asia" at the Middle East Institute, Washington D.C.in the same month. He presented a revised version of this lecture at a seminar at the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut on May 14 which was subsequently published along with commentaries in the Arabic journal Al-Mustaqbil al-'Arabi. A revised version of this paper was also published in Contemporary Arab Affairs (August 2013). He continues to give extensive media interviews on recent developments in the Middle East including Channel NewsAsia Singapore (January 23 & 28, February 4, March 20, May 16, June 7, August 3, August 13, and August 30), CNBC (February 27 and September 2), MediaCorp Radio (May 16 & 28, June 5), Channel 8 Singapore (June 18), BBC Radio (June 25), Anatolian News Agency (August 4), BBC World Service (June 30, July 13 and August 18), Al Jazeera (August 15, July 30, August 31, and Bloomberg (July 4 and August 28).

Lilia Labidi, Visiting Research Professor, published "The Political Dimensions of Women’s Actions: New Challenges for Justice and for the Social Sciences in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring in the MENA Region" in Challenges to Women’s Security in the MENA Region: Women’s Voices from Around the World – Celebrating International Women’s Day 2013 (Washington D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2013) and "Turkish Filmmaker TalibLouchich and His Film Mayoun Layla" in Afritvatives in January. She presented the following papers: "The Construction of Identity and Public Morality" at the seminar on Rapports de genres au Maghreb et au Maghreb, Centre de Sociologie des Pratiques et des Représentations Politiques, Université Paris VII on 18 February 2013; "Préemances et constitutionnalisation des droits des femmes" at the conference Lascité, lacités, reconfigurations et nouveaux défis.Afrique, Amériques, Europe, Japan et Pays Arabes that took place in CNRS, Paris, France from 11-12 April 2013; as well as "Women’s Rights and Empowerment: The Experience of Tunisia following the 14 January 2011 Revolution" at the MENA Regional Consultation of the Women Deliver conference held from May 25-29, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and "Égalité des sexes dans la constitution tunisienne" at the conference Droits des femmes méditerranéennes après les révolutions arabes", in Fez, Morocco from June 21-23.

Peter Sluglett, Visiting Research Professor, wrote the "Foreword" in Living to Some Purpose: Memoirs of a Secularist Iraq and Arab Statesman (London, Arabian Publishing, 2013); "Saddam Hussein" and "Iraq in Oxford Companion to Politics of the World (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), as well as "The Middle East in the Cold War", in The International Relations of the Middle East (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013). He also presented the paper "The British, the Ottomans and the Russians in North Iran and the Caucasus, 1917-21" at the 4th Turkish Studies Conference, held from June 10-13, in Tbilisi, Georgia; "Islam and Muslims in the Middle East and Southeast Asia in the 19th and early 20th Centuries: Some Preliminary Thoughts" at the Rising Asia Meets a Turbulent Middle East conference, held on May 9, at the American University of Beirut; and "From Millet to Minority: Another Look at the Non-Muslim Communities in the Last Decades of the Ottoman Empire" at The Crisis of Stability in the Middle East conference, held from February 11-12, at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.