



The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis

Semi-annual report

Unique Middle East reports - Social media impact -
Exclusive video

Iraq protests - Iran's role in the region - Saudi Arabia's
Vision 2030 - Eastern Syria - the new ISIS insurgency



Kurds flee
fighting in Afrin
in March, 2018

THE CHALLENGE

The media industry is currently in a state of crisis. The rise of social media has wiped out the profitability of traditional publishing models. The result has been the drastic contraction of many media operations. All this has taken place at a time of great instability in world affairs, when the public need for accurate, professionally presented information and analysis has never been greater. Nowhere is the absence of stable models for media more apparent, and the results more concerning than in the Middle East. The region is in the midst of a historic upheaval which is far from over.

Global publics and policymakers are faced with debates, issues and decisions of vital importance. At the same time, the crisis in media produces a situation in which the mechanisms both for collecting information and for cogently analyzing it in the public sphere are deficient.

The traditional media's teams of foreign correspondents, adequately staffed, given ample time and budgets, and with sufficient knowledge and experience to professionally seek out and process information, are hardly to be found anymore. Observation of media coverage of, for example, the Syrian civil war indicates that the main stories of the war were nevertheless 'broken' by traditional news organizations – such as the regime use of chemical weapons (*Le Monde*, *the Times*) and the internal security structures of ISIS (*Der Spiegel*) etc. Many other stories were likely missed because of the lack of resources at the disposal of journalists. Policymakers and analysts

were left in the dark regarding trends and developments on the ground in the region.

Since traditional models of coverage cannot be revived, there is a need for new structures ensuring that individuals engaging in systematic reporting of the region, based on language and area knowledge and long term commitment, are able to combine with analysts possessing relevant skills to produce cogent and coherent regional coverage.

The vacuum left by the decline in legacy media has been filled by state-sponsored media operations in the Middle East. From Qatar to Turkey and Iran, resources are being devoted to spreading the agendas of various regimes and groups whose goals are generally at odds with those of policymakers and pose a threat to regional stability.

THE RESPONSE

The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis (MECRA) is an attempt to address this issue. It is our intention to bring together the most committed and intrepid reporters operating in key sites in the Middle East at the present time, with some of the most skilled and deeply knowledgeable analysts, and in particular to showcase the work of writers whose skill set combines both elements, enabling them both to observe the unfolding realities from close up, to know where to look within the huge canopy of unfolding stories in the region today, and to correctly interpret what they have seen. To combine action and the insightful contemplation of action. Our unique focus will be on recruiting and disseminating the views of people who are in the field and possess language skills from the region, who have access to influencers and local power structures and who provide original views on the dynamics that are changing on the ground so as to identify trends that will affect the region and the global interconnected world. This will help provide the public and policymakers with information to help confront threats and understand trends and developments.

The purpose of this is to present a picture of key regional stories both accessibly, but with unrivaled detail and rigor. We will provide the space for both reported stories, long-form writing, interviews and the presentation of analysis that will leverage the information to increase its impact in media and policy circles. We will also identify and develop new local writers and analysts who are doing work that is of importance but who have been unable to make an impact outside their

local circle. It is our intention that our product will be of use to policymakers, journalists and lay people alike, as well as to NGOs and businesses operating in the Middle East space, and will enrich and deepen the discussion of these vital issues. We are also available for specific tailored projects.

The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis is a 501(c) 3 non-profit registered in the United States.



A new playground in Raqqa, Syria

January – July key developments

The first six months of 2018 have been a momentous period in the Middle East. The US-led Coalition has continued its war on Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Turkey launched an operation to take Afrin in northern Syria from the People's Protection Units in January. In February Iran sought to send a drone into Israeli airspace and regime-backed militias attacked the Syrian Democratic Forces near Deir ez-Zor.

Protests have rocked Iran since January and in Iraq continuing instability threatens to undue the work of fighting ISIS. Elections in May did not reduce the instability, but increased it with the uncertainty caused by Muqtada al-Sadr's party coming in first and Iranian-backed parties dominating.

Elections in Turkey saw a major triumph and continued rule for Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In Syria the regime continued to consolidate its gains, taking eastern Ghouta in Damascus, rebel-held areas near Homs and also launching a major offensive to recover Dara'a. In Yemen the Saudi Arabian-backed Yemenite forces and their UAE allies launched an offensive on Hodeidah.

The United States under President Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Russia held a summit in Helsinki and both countries continued to discuss what would come next in Syria. Our Fellows and writers covered these key developments on the ground and provided exclusive video and photographs. They also wrote unique analysis of the situation.

Social media milestones

MECRA's primary method of reaching readers, policymakers and journalists has been via online content. Through posting articles and providing a platform for our team of writers and analysts. Our model is to go beyond the traditional types of articles that appear online and combine photographs, video and flexibility in length and type of article published.

We have invested resources in promoting our content via social media.

Our Facebook page has 1,500 likes and followers, through promoting our videos and links we have reached 350,305 people in June, according to Facebook analytics and we have reached more than 600,000 since January, including 15,000 clicks on our article links. Our Facebook page generated a response in the region with frequent discussions, often in Arabic, between people across the Middle East.

Video views in June: 108,974

New page follows in June: 743

<https://www.facebook.com/MidEastReporting/>

Our Twitter account has 400 followers

https://twitter.com/MidEast_Center

Our website is receiving an average of 1,000 views a week and its posts receive between 50-200 clicks each week.

<https://www.mideastcenter.org/>

Our unique videos from Iraq and Syria have gathered 108,974 views in June, 2018

Our team

Founders and Executive Directors

Dr. Jonathan Spyer and

Dr. Seth J. Frantzman

Fellows

Dave McAvoy

- *Expert on Arabic language media in London*

Laura Kelly

- *Washington D.C based journalist*

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi

- *Expert on Syria and Iraq*

Alex Grinberg

- *Iran expert fluent in Arabic, Farsi, French, Russian*

Sirwan Kajjo

- *Kurdish affairs analyst*

A window into a region in turmoil.

In the first six months of 2018 MECRA published 26 articles and 57 research blog posts



Syria: Our team covered the continuing Syrian conflict with articles on the reconciliation process, the clash between US and Russian mercenaries in February, the battle for Afrin, several articles on Rojava in eastern Syria and the refugee crises as the regime's offensive unfolded in the south. **Jonathan Spyer and Sirwan Kajjo travelled to eastern Syria to report on recent developments, including Manbij and Raqqa reconstruction.**



Iraq: In Iraq our articles looked at the struggle for Kirkuk, the elections, developments in Sinjar, **the protests in southern Iraq and the Shammar tribe's warning about a new ISIS insurgency.** We mapped the new ISIS insurgency.



Turkey: Our team covered the Turkish offensive in Afrin as well as the **Turkish elections in June.** We also analyzed US opposition to the F-35 sale, the SADAT consultancy, Turkish-Israel relations and US Senator Lindsay Graham's visit to Ankara.



The Gulf and the region: We reported on **Saudi Arabia's reforms** and examined the crackdown on protests in the Palestinian Authority.



Iran: **We interviewed PDKI Iranian dissident leader Mustafa Hijri** and profiled the continuing protests against the administration of Hassan Rouhani. We also examined the expanding role of Iran's influence in Iraq and its militia network in Iraq and Syria.

On the ground - Understanding - Analysis

In our first six months our platform highlighted the work of numerous individuals in the region. This included a spotlight on Kirkuk with journalist **Adam Lucente** and **Dana Zangna**, a local photographer. **Paul Iddon** covered the continuing crises in Sinjar, and **Kareem Botane** spent time with the Shammar tribe and their anti-ISIS campaign as well as the Iraqi SWAT teams hunting ISIS near Mosul. Photographer **Ali Baroodi** in Mosul sent us a photo essay about churches. **Mohammed Ruzgar**, a Syrian writer, profiled new developments in Idlib. **Ali Salim** provided insight into new protests in Ramallah. While **Nemam Ghafouri** described her trip to help IDPs from Afrin. **Dalton Thomas** of FAI Relief and **Paul Curtis Bradley** of the Free Burma Rangers discussed their aid work in southern Syria and Raqqa respectively. In July **Jonathan Spyer** and **Sirwan Kajjo** journeyed to eastern Syria to provide exclusive coverage of developments among the Syrian Democratic Forces and impacts on the region

In the next six months our team will provide new reports and insights into the development of eastern Syria, specifically looking at the Syrian Democratic Forces and the US role. As the Trump administration faces a crossroads in Syria the need for up-to-date information is more important than ever. In Iraq we will continue to monitor the increasing instability caused by a new ISIS insurgency and the challenges Baghdad faces as a new government is formed. Our reports will focus on the influence of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias and also the importance of the Kurdistan region and stabilization programs in Kirkuk and Nineveh.

In Turkey we will examine the Turkish role in northern Syria and map out the civil society structures and Turkish investment in northern Syria. On Iran we will seek to provide unique coverage of the continuing protests as well as minority groups such as the Kurds who have begun a new round of assaults on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Through targeted promotion on social media we hope our social media presence will continue to become a place that locals from the region can both learn about developments and discuss them. Often in the region various regimes seek to cut off social media or suppress information, our platform seeks to provide a place that locals can send video, testimonies and photos.

The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis

112 Dukes Country Avenue
Oak Bluffs, MA, 02557

Mideastcenter.org