



THE MIDDLE EAST AT A CROSSROADS

THE MIDDLE EAST CENTER FOR
REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

Annual Report, 2018

2018 HIGHLIGHTS

2018 A YEAR OF CHANGE IN THE REGION

It has been an exciting year in the Middle East with major tectonic changes under way in the region. The US withdrawal from Syria, announced on December 19, has thrown into question four years of US policy in regards to the Coalition against Islamic State. Major changes on the ground in Syria regarding Idlib, the re-taking of the south by the regime and agreements between Turkey and Russia presage the country's dynamics after the Syrian civil war winds down.

The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis was founded to help bridge the gap that exists between field reporters, analysts, major media and academics. This year we concentrated on creating a unique organization and developing our skills in this realm, through publishing accounts of events in the region and providing unparalleled analysis of them.

Founded in February of 2018, MECRA has already established a name for itself online and in print. On our website Mideastcenter.org we **published 105 articles** covering events from Afghanistan to Tunisia. We also published **twenty-eight longer form interviews and analysis pieces** examining issues from the Kurdistan region of Iraq to an interview with former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford. MECRA also obtained exclusive video and photos from throughout the Middle East, documenting the war on ISIS in Syria, the conflict in Yemen and human rights abuses in Iran.

BREAKTHROUGHS

This year MECRA worked with our own seven Research Fellows as well as writers and sources from around the region. Kareem Botane in Iraq shed light on the emerging ISIS insurgency. Writers from Iran and among the Syrian opposition factions provided unique insights into developments in Idlib province and the attack in Iran's Ahwaz province. Jonathan Spyer and Zach Huff both journeyed to northern Iraq and entered Iran. Spyer also went to eastern Syria, including to Raqqa and Manbij cities, to shed light on developments in both key areas. Mahmoud Sheikh Ibrahim went to the front line in Hajin and sent MECRA exclusive videos and photos from the battlefield.

MECRA had several important breakthroughs this year. We were the first non-Iranian website to report on the September 22, 2018 attack at Ahwaz and among the first to get exclusive photos from the scene of the Iranian ballistic missile strike in Koya, and the Turkish air strike in Makhmour in northern Iraq in December. We sent writers into the field and brought back early reports in June 2018 on the growing ISIS resurgence north of Baghdad and the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' use of "cyber Hezbollah," an army of civil activists who are increasingly cracking down on Iranians online. MECRA also reported from Tunisia, Yemen, Afghanistan and the Gaza Strip, key areas of the region that are undergoing profound changes that affect their own society and neighboring countries.

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SOCIAL MEDIA MILESTONES

Our main success this year has been exposure on social media where MECRA's Facebook page (@MidEastReporting) has received more than **8,000 likes and followers** and its content **reached more than 5,180,000 in the second half of 2018**. In the first half of 2018 our posts reached 600,000 people via social media and received 15,000 link clicks. This shows tremendous growth in our social media presence which has increased every month.

Our Twitter page (@MidEast_Center) has 1,600 followers. In November and December of 2018 MECRA **reached 1.8 million people on social media with 396,000 engagements and 42,000 link clicks**. We had 272,000 social media page visits in the same period with posts reaching 70,000 people a week on average. Our videos, in the last quarter of 2018, we watched for 2,149 hours, reaching **up to 200,000 people a day**. We found that the comments and visitors to MECRA's Facebook page were frequently in regional languages, often in Arabic, meaning we are reaching a Middle Eastern audience that is particularly interested in learning about what is happening in region. This gives us a unique window into the region and also ability to reach these viewers. MECRA also found success on Twitter and on its own homepage, where it continues to build up a following.



A destroyed building in Raqqa, Syria (Jonathan Spyer)

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BRIDGING THE GAP

The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis is a project intended to combine on the ground reporting in the most crucial areas of the Middle East, with timely and cogent analysis of the information obtained. The project was created by journalist-analysts Seth Frantzman and Jonathan Spyer, as an attempt to fill the gap in timely and detailed regional reporting which has taken place in the last decade as a result of declining media revenues. Many major news organizations no longer maintain reporters permanently stationed on the ground in key Middle East countries. As a result, western publics and policymakers often do not receive the key information and analysis required to make informed decisions. Information and real-time analysis are a vital resource at a time when the Middle East constitutes one of the most turbulent and significant regions for US and western strategy. Frantzman and Spyer reported extensively on the ground during the wars in Syria and Iraq. In the course of this period, they built up an extensive network of local contacts and developed relationships with many local reporters and correspondents. MECRA is an attempt to systematize and utilize this network in order to provide original and vital coverage of key Middle Eastern countries.



Aftermath of the September 8, 2018 Iranian ballistic missile strike in Koya, Iraq (Zach Huff)

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Zach Huff photographs IRGC positions from a location in the Iraq-Iran border area in the summer of 2018

FIELD REPORTING SUCCESSES

Mapping armed resistance against the Iranian regime

One of MECRA's fellows, a US citizen named Zach Huff, was able to enter Iran embedded with fighters of the PDKI (Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran), in August, 2018 and to interview the leadership of this party, which is currently engaged in insurgency against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The PDKI's base in eastern Iraq, where MECRA conducted interviews with the party's leadership, was targeted on September 7 by Iranian ballistic missiles. The PDKI is one of a number of organizations engaged in armed struggle against the Iranian regime. Huff's subsequent reports, including at *The National Interest*, provided important insight into this emerging and important element of the broader western campaign to contain roll back Iran.

MECRA was able to get to an important regional story ahead of other media and research organizations by mapping and tracking the Kurdish struggle against the Iranian regime throughout the year. This resulted in

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several reports we published on our website, at *The Jerusalem Post* and on social media. Our video from Iran received 164,000 views and reached 369,536 people on Facebook, garnering comments and shares. It was the combination of regional knowledge (understanding how to discern important emerging stories, and therefore to focus on the PDKI prior to its becoming a major focus of media attention) and the presence of staff members on the ground in relevant places with specific knowledge and language skills, which enabled MECRA to reach the relevant information, and to understand and analyse its significance. The project of mapping opposition to the regime is continuing to bear fruit after August 31 with new reports on the attack on the IRGC in Ahwaz.



Syrians flee one of the last ISIS-held pockets near Baghuz in Syria in January 2019 (Mahmoud Sheikh Ibrahim)

Reporting in Syria

MECRA Executive Director Jonathan Spyer and MECRA Fellow Sirwan Kajjo, a Syrian citizen, entered northern Syria and reported from there in April, 2018. Spyer interviewed top officials and military commanders of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the western-aligned authority in north east Syria, including Ilham Ahmed, co-chair of Syrian Democratic Council, who led the SDC's delegation to its first negotiations in Damascus a few days after our interview. As a result of this series of interviews, Spyer wrote an article in the prestigious *Janes' Intelligence Review* magazine on the situation in northern Syria. Spyer also wrote in *The Australian* based on this trip. Spyer's privileged access to SDC officials, a result of his many

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trips to cover the war in this area since 2012, enabled him to gain unique insights. The articles published built on Spyer's two other Syria-focused articles this year in *Foreign Policy*. A video from northern Syria's Manbij we obtained and published exclusively received 201,000 views.

Sirwan Kajjo, a native of Amuda in northern Syria, investigated the issue of oil extraction in northern Syria, and the political implications of the location of much of Syria's oil and gas resources in the SDC controlled region. Kajjo revealed for the first time on our website the existence of an ad hoc pipeline used to transport oil from northern Syria to the Kurdish Regional Government area in northern Iraq. Based on his trip he published in *The Defense Post* and shares of his article on social media reached an addition 100,462 people on Facebook.

In both these instances, MECRA's methods of field reporting, regional knowledge and close analysis were able to bring us to privileged information, which we were then able to reveal to the world. It is probably unnecessary to note that access to Syria is difficult and involves some element of considered risk. Very few journalists and researchers now enter. Yet Syria remains a geo-political space of paramount importance on the world stage today. We are thus pleased to continue our work in this area.



Kurdish Peshmerga from the 14th brigade on Qarachouk mountain. (Jonathan Spyer)

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Mapping the new ISIS insurgency

Beginning in May we learned through sources in Iraq that ISIS attacks were increasing in Iraq despite Baghdad's claims of victory over the group. On July 8 we mapped these attacks and sent a local contributor named Kareem Botane to interview the large Sunni Shammar tribe that was fighting ISIS. We published his piece and a subsequent piece he did with Iraqi security forces reached 110,740 and 46,824 people on Facebook. Paul iddon, a journalist in Erbil revealed that the Iraq government was preventing coordination with Kurdish Peshmerga against ISIS. Our unique access to sources on the ground in Iraq enabled MECRA to be among the first places to publish details of the new ISIS insurgency, and also to bring out videos of the mass protests that have swept Iraq. Jonathan Spyer also visited the Qara Chouk mountain area south west of Erbil in November 2018. This is, a remote location where ISIS is seeking to rebuild its strength. Spyer interviewed Peshmerga commanders stationed close to the ISIS area, and published an article in the *Wall Street Journal* and in *Jane's Intelligence Review* on this subject.



Smoke rises from below Qarachouk mountain, an area where ISIS continues to operate. (Jonathan Spyer)

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Heavy weapons are withdrawn from Idlib after the September Turkey-Russia agreement

Building a regional, Arabic audience

Starting from scratch in March of 2018 we have reached an Arabic speaking audience in the region as evidenced by hundreds of comments in Arabic on our posts. This illustrates that our targeting of demographic groups in the Middle East and elsewhere has been successful, even though our posts are in English. Our exclusive videos and photos that we published from Syria, Iraq and Iran have made an impact online through our social media. Many viewers are going beyond just “likes” and debating the region’s issues. This provides our MECRA platform the ability to reach, influence and tap into this audience. It also gives us a potential window into emerging trends in the region among younger audiences who use social media. Sensing that this audience is unique we have begun translating our articles into Arabic on our website. We envision having articles in Farsi in the future as well.

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This is significant because other similar organizations are not attracting these types of comments or reach. We have found that there is a real desire in the region for knowledge about Iraq, Syria, Iran and other developments and conflicts, especially outside of the traditional news sites.

ARTICLE AND RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

NAME	AUTHOR	DATE	TYPE
The Sochi conference	Tamimi	February	
Visit to Jazeera Canton	Tamimi	February	Field work
The arrest of Saleh Muslim	Spyer	February	
The battle of Deir ez-Zor	Grinberg	February	
Saudi princess promotes sport	Kelly	March	
Can HTS be defeated in Idlib	Ruzgar	March	
The KRG after the referendum	Frantzman	March	Interview
Turkey repopulates Afrin	Kajjo	March	
From Syria to Skripal	Grinberg	March	
Future Syria Party	Kajjo	April	
Mosul photo essay	Baroodi	April	Photo essay
Russia and US Syria strikes	Frantzman	April	
Syria's sovereignty	Kajjo	April	
Elections and Kirkuk	Zangna	April	
Lebanese elections	McAvoy	May	
A visit to Saudi Arabia	MECRA Gulf	May	
Reconciliation in Beit Jann	Tamimi	May	
Internal structure of ISIS Hisba	Tamimi	June	
Iraq's Sinjar	Frantzman	June	
Iran protests, Rouhani and Hormuz	Grinberg	July	
The Shammar tribe confronts ISIS	Botane	July	Field research
Iraq's "Martyr's Revenge" operation	Botane	July	Field research
Providing medical aid to Syria's IDPs	Frantzman	July	Interview
The Free Burma Rangers and Raqqa	Frantzman	July	Interview
Iraq's Sinjar region remains combustible	Iddon	July	
Historic Church damaged in Mosul	Baroodi	July	
The Palestinian Authority crackdown	Salim	July	
Basra protests	Frantzman	July	
Exclusive photos from Raqqa	Spyer	July	Field research
What's next in Syria with Amb. Robert Ford	Frantzman	August	
Conflicting statements by the PMU	Frantzmann	August	

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NAME	AUTHOR	DATE	TYPE
Oil politics in Syria	Kajjo	August	Field research
Hubs of peace in Afghanistan	Frantzman	August	Interview
The forgotten war in Yemen	Frantzman	August	Interview
The defeat of ISIS near the Golan	Frantzman	August	
With the KDPI on the Iranian border	Huff	September	Field research
Coptic Christians in the face of terror	Kelly	September	
Can Turkey stop humanitarian crises in Idlib	Ruzgar	September	
The Fateh 110's abilities and Koya	Huff	September	Field research
Idlib after the agreement	Ruzgar	September	Field research
Interview with Zkri Musa and the KDP	Frantzman	September	
The attack on Ahwaz	MECRA Iran	September	
Idlib interviews after the agreement	Ruzgar	October	Field research
The sandstorm attack in Hajin	Frantzman	October	
Weapons withdrawn from Idlib	Ruzgar	October	Photo essay
Poverty drives Iranians to sell kidneys	MECRA Iran	October	
A report from inside Gaza	Kelly	October	Field research
Basra's pollution	Frantzman	October	Photo essay
Iran arrests a journalist	MECRA Iran		
How Iran hides its oil tankers	Frantzman	October	Interview
Still Springtime in Tunisia	Ivri	October	Field research
The road to Minya terror attack	McAvoy	November	
Cyber Hezbollah	MECRA Iran	November	
The new face of Al-Hurra	Frantzman	November	Interview
Hezbollah recruitment in Deraa?	Tamimi	November	
Music in Mosul	Baroodi	November	Photo essay
First images of British special forces	Mecra Syria	November	Photo essay
Photos on the Hajin frontline	Ibrahim	November	Photo essay
Video: Peshmerga describe ISIS threat	Spyer	November	Field video
Chabahar attacks in Iran	MECRA Iran	December	
Rise of cyber revolutionaries	Patrikarakos	December	
1.8 million Iraqis still displaced	Frantzman	December	Interview
Photos of Turkish airstrike in Makhmour	MECRA Iraq	December	Field research
From 1.6 to 39 Coalition airstrikes a day	Frantzman	December	
Who are the Rojava Peshmerga	Frantzman	December	
SDC discuss Syria withdrawal	MECRA Syria	December	Interview
Women activists detained in Iran	MECRA Iran	December	

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A musical in Mosul (Ali Baroodi)

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OUR TEAM

- **SETH J. FRANTZMAN** **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**
Expert on the war on ISIS, covering Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and the Palestinian territories
- **JONATHAN SPYER** **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**
Journalist/Analyst covering Syria and Iraq, author of *Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars* (Routledge, 2017).
- **DAVE MCAVOY** **SENIOR FELLOW**
Expert on Arabic language media based in London
- **Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi** **SENIOR FELLOW**
Researcher on Iraq and Syria with a focus on armed groups
- **ALEX GRINBERG** **SENIOR FELLOW**
Iran and Russia policy researcher fluent in Russian, Farsi, Arabic, French, English and Hebrew
- **LAURA KELLY** **FELLOW**
Washington D.C.-based journalist who has reported from the Middle East
- **SIRWAN KAJJO** **FELLOW**
Kurdish affairs analyst and journalist based on Washington D.C

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BENJAMIN WEINTHAL	EUROPEAN CORRESPONDENT OF <i>THE JERUSALEM POST</i>
PROF. J.I. ABBOT	PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND PHILOSOPHY

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