



## October 2019 Monthly Report

### NESA Region Trends

NESA's October participants discussed a rich range of topics—from the world's biggest stories, like Iran and Syria—to sharing thought-provoking insights on the role of think tanks in the Arab world.

- “America First”... And America alone?** While U.S. still enjoys a respectable reservoir of goodwill around the world, participants caution that it should not be taken for granted--and that a perceived turn towards American isolationism should be seriously reconsidered. It has been a recurring topic of consternation for NESA's Arab participants that they perceive the U.S. as increasingly uninterested in the Middle East, and they were joined in their concern this October by Europeans, who similarly expressed that the U.S. is increasingly less committed to NATO and its Western allies. European participants also expressed a belief that the U.S. is a declining power.
- U.S. Syria policy unclear and unrealistic, participants say:** Both Middle Eastern and European participants expressed moral and strategic outrage at U.S. withdrawal of forces from Syria, raising concerns about U.S. reliability. European participants in particular were also harshly critical of President Erdogan's Syria policy, and of Turkish foreign policy under his leadership more generally.
- As the U.S. and Iran face off, U.S. partners nervously navigate the middle:** Participants expressed a range of perspectives in regards to Iran and its increasingly aggressive activities in the NESA region. In the wake of Iran's suspected complicity in the September 14 drone strikes on Saudi oil fields, MENA region participants expressed anxiety that Iran may become more of an
- irrational actor as the U.S. “Maximum Pressure” policy begins to devastate the Iranian economy.
- Representatives from countries reliant on Gulf oil fear that Iran may act to disrupt the trade of oil passing through the Strait of Hormuz. These participants are acutely concerned that the Islamic Republic or its proxies may attempt to harm the United States and/or U.S. partners and allies through further attacks on key infrastructure or perhaps military installations. Maritime navigation could additionally be severely impacted as Iran may seek to prove its repeated claim that it holds not only exclusive rights to the Strait--but also the ability to close it entirely.
- Generally, European participants balk at the U.S.' punishing “Maximum Pressure” campaign and remain united in attempts to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, seeing Tehran's recent non-compliance with the deal as insignificant.
- Think tanks can unlock ideas and action in the Arab world:** October participants--mainly from the Arab world--devoted notable discussion to how think tanks can catalyze positive socio-political change. Participants are hopeful about the role think tanks can play in informing policymakers and civil society in solving some of the region's most challenging issues. However, participants were also clear-eyed about the obstacles that menace think tanks face in the Arab world, including restrictive political environments that could chill independent thinking; a shortage of local academic expertise; and entrenched political norms that would likely come into conflict with think tanks' influence in policymaking.



## NESA Executive Seminar 01-20

21 October—1 November

From 21 October through 1 November, NESAC hosted an Executive Seminar on great powers, strategic rivalries, and proxy wars, attended by nearly 50 participants from U.S. partner states and NESAC region countries.

Throughout the two-week seminar, participants discussed their relationships with the U.S. and other great powers and also how they could build upon these relationships through diplomacy and security cooperation. Participants dialogued on a range of issues currently impacting their host nations and the wider NESAC region, including cyber- security, the threat of an ISIS resurgence, the role of National Security Strategies in setting defense doctrines, and improving U.S. relations with the NESAC region. Towards the seminar's conclusion, participants were divided into smaller working groups and gave their own presentations on how best to address the region's most pressing extant security threats, utilizing lessons learned over the course of the two week seminar.

Guest lecturers included subject matter experts like Ambassador (Ret.) Marc Grossman, who spoke to participants on the workings of the U.S. Department of State, and even detailees to the U.S. National Security Council like Mr. Robert Greenway (MENA affairs) and Mr. Christopher Miller, who spoke on Iran and transnational criminal networks, respectively. NESAC faculty members, including Professor Daniel Curfiss (who also acted as the seminar's course director), Professor Richard Russell, and NESAC Director LTG (Ret.) Terry Wolff also spoke to participants on regional touchpoints including the interagency U.S. policymaking process and the Islamic State.



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## Washington Seminar Luncheon, “U.S. Defense Priorities in an Era of Great Power Competition”

10 October

**T** NESA Center hosted a Washington Seminar Luncheon Discussion, “U.S. Defense Priorities in an Era of Great Power Competition”, at the Army Navy Club in Washington, D.C. on 10 October, 2019. The luncheon featured a guest lecture, followed by a question-and-answer session, with Dr. Michael J. Mazarr, a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation, who previously served as Assistant Dean of Academics at the U.S. National War College and as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The luncheon was attended by select officials from NESA partner country embassies and regionally adjacent countries. In his talk, Dr. Mazarr challenged the notion that a ‘Great Power Competition’ truly exists at present, though he did express that the United States will never again enjoy the unipolar position it held immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Participants were keenly interested in the United States’ role on the global stage vis-à-vis the political and military ascent of China and Russia. Additionally, participants were interested in the Trump Administration’s foreign policy approach and expressed a general perception that it lacks foresight and respect for traditional security alliances.

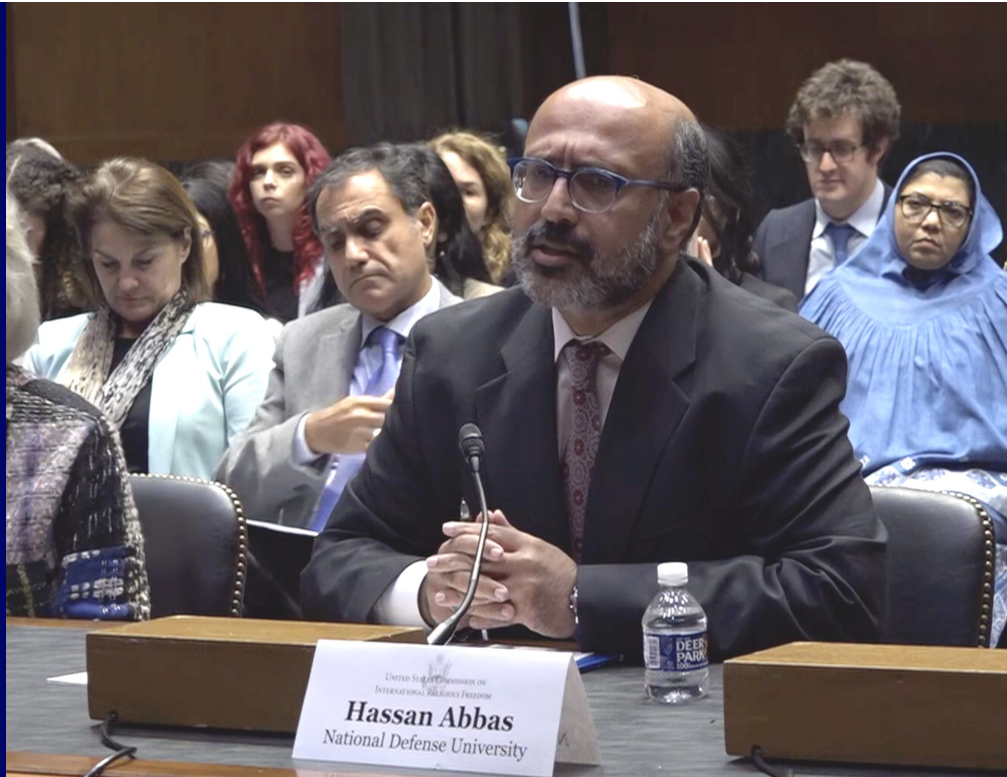
The Washington Seminar luncheon discussion series is a flagship NESA Center program designed to provide senior diplomatic officials from the NESA region and U.S. partner countries with a forum for candid and substantive discussion on issues of critical importance to national and regional security. The not-for-attribution discussion was moderated by NESA Professor Brianne Todd.



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## Advancing Socio-Political Impact



**“A house of worship is a sanctuary for reflection, spirituality and peace. It is a sacred space. A global pattern of attacks targeting these revered spaces is a highly condemnable and worrisome development...”**

A house of worship is built to be a sanctuary, but too often it is a soft target for violent extremists. To address this, **Professor Hassan Abbas** spoke before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) hearing, “Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites” October 23. Dr. Abbas spoke specifically on how the international community can better work together to stem the distressing rising trend of the violent targeting of houses of worship. Dr. Abbas highlighted prospective solutions including compassionate national-level leadership, engagements fostering greater inter- and intra-faith religious dialogue, and targeted anti-extremism messaging.

He was joined by other experts including The Honorable Sam Brownback, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, as well as H.E. Miguel Moratinos, High Representative, U.N. Alliance of Civilizations. [Read](#) the full transcript of Dr. Abbas’ testimony.

## MORE OCTOBER EVENTS



**Professor David Des Roches** moderated a key [forum](#), "Changing Dynamics of Security and Defense in the Gulf", at the Second Annual Gulf International Conference, held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. October 16. Panelists were noted Middle East experts Dr. Jeffery Macris USN, Ret.: Professor of History, United States Naval Academy Elana DeLozier: Research Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy Ambassador Gerald Feierstein: Senior Vice President, Middle East Institute Becca Wasser: Policy Analyst, RAND Corporation Dr. Abbas Kadhim: Senior Resident Fellow and Director of Iraq Initiative, Atlantic Council



**Professor Gawdat Bahgat** [reviewed](#) *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* by Nader Uskowi (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) for NDU magazine PRISM, Vol. 8, No. 2.

**Professor Michael Sharnoff's** comments on U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria were [featured](#) in the Foreign Policy article "U.S. Plan to Guard Syrian Oil Sows Confusion". Professor Sharnoff also provided [comments](#) to Lebanese newspaper Annahar on U.S.-Syria policy.



On 8 October, **Dr. Mike Bell** gave a presentation at the White House to the interagency Middle East Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) about enhancing collective security in the Middle East through U.S. relations with professional military institutions in the region. At the request of the National Security Council staff and in preparation for the PCC, NESA had developed a concept paper for interagency review and consideration.

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# Building Relationships Enhancing Security

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**Dr. Gawdat Bahgat participated in the State Department Speaker Program** October 12-26, 2019 (photo, above left). The program included visits to Finland, Sweden, and Italy, where Dr. Bahgat spoke at leading universities and think-tanks and conducted meetings and media interviews. Highlights of Dr. Bahgat's participation in the Speaker Program included a lecture at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs moderated by former U.S. Ambassador Deborah McCarthy and attended by members of the Finnish Parliament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and EU and European Commission representatives. Dr. Bahgat additionally visited the Finnish Parliament to address the Parliament's USA Friendship Group. He was personally welcomed by the U.S. Ambassador to Finland, Robert F. Pence, who highlighted some of the main opportunities and challenges facing the U.S.-Finnish relationship.

In Sweden, Dr. Bahgat addressed the International Council of Swedish Industry, participated in a roundtable discussion with the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, and lectured at Stockholm University to graduate students and faculty, among other activities.

In Rome, Dr. Bahgat participated in the "Festival of Diplomacy" (festa della diplomazia), a major Italian conference, held at Roma Tre University, with discussion focusing on nuclear proliferation, great-power competition, and NATO. Dr. Bahgat's other activities in Italy included lectures to graduate students at John Cabot University, a meeting with researchers at the Institute for International Affairs, and a lecture on cybersecurity to the Accademia Aeronautica, or the Italian Air Force Academy.

**Professor Hassan Abbas spoke at the University of Kufa (Iraq)** on Islamic history and its relevance for modern Iraq and how it can achieve sectarian harmony. Dr. Abbas's remarks were attended by University President & Dean, pictured above with Dr. Abbas. Learn more at the University of Kufa website (link: ARABIC): <http://bit.ly/2VUeQdQ>

**From 23-24 October, Professor David Des Roches participated in National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR)'s 28th Annual Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference** "Treading a Tightrope: How Best to Balance and Advance the Multifaceted Arab-U.S. Relationship?" Professor Des Roches spoke on a 24 October panel "U.S.-Arab Defense Cooperation Dynamics", joined by experts including Ambassador (Ret.) Lincoln Bloomfield, Former U.S. Department of State Assistant Secretary for Political Military Affairs, and Ms. Kirsten Fontenrose, Director of Regional Security, Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council (and previously the Chief of External Communications at the NESACenter, in fact). The NCUSAR conference featured speakers including VIPs in diplomacy and foreign and defense policy, like CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie (pictured with Professor Des Roches) and keynote speaker General (Ret.) David Petraeus. [Watch or listen to](#) Professor Des Roches' panel.

additional information and images at:  
[www.nesa-center.org](http://www.nesa-center.org)



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