

# NESA CENTER UPDATE

MAY 2025

## NESA REGION TRENDS: CYBERSECURITY

- **Surge in Infostealer Malware:** The UAE experienced a notable increase in infostealer malware, with [RedLine Stealer accounting for 69.9% of infections](#). This trend threatens personal and organizational data security, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced cyber defenses.
- **Rise in Cyberattacks Targeting Critical Infrastructure:** State-sponsored groups, particularly from Iran, intensified cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, including Israel's railroad network, using sophisticated phishing campaigns to compromise electrical systems. These incidents reveal the growing vulnerability of critical systems and the rising stakes of cyber conflict in the region.
- **Increased Cybersecurity Investments:** Israel was the number two target in the world for hackers and malicious actors in 2024 with 1,550 cyberattacks, mostly from pro-Palestinian groups opposing Israel's policies in the Middle East. Israeli [cybersecurity firms raised \\$4 billion in 2024](#), more than double the previous year, driven by heightened demand for cloud and AI security solutions. This surge in investment highlights how geopolitical tensions are directly accelerating the development and adoption of advanced cybersecurity technologies in the region.
- **Middle East Cybersecurity Landscape:** As the Middle East (ME) expands its digital infrastructure, it faces growing cyber threats driven by economic modernization, technological growth, and geopolitical tensions. State-sponsored attacks, cybercrime, and hacktivism are rising, making robust cyber defense essential for re-



NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA  
**NESA**  
CENTER FOR  
STRATEGIC STUDIES

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# NESA REGION TRENDS

gional and global stability. Three key cybersecurity trends threatening U.S. and ME partner nation security include increased state-sponsored cyberattacks, the rise of cybercrime and ransomware, and the exploitation of critical infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia conduct cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure and economies while also being targeted themselves. These attacks aim to disrupt regional stability and normalization efforts. Ransomware attacks are escalating across government, public, and private sectors, with critical infrastructure like energy grids and financial systems becoming prime targets for disruption and ransom demands. As ME digital infrastructure expands, sectors like energy, defense, and finance face growing cyber risks—particularly the oil and gas industry, which is vital to economies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE and remains vulnerable to espionage and sabotage.

Three promising cybersecurity initiatives to enhance U.S.–partner nation ME regional security (2025–2030) may include strengthening cyber defense alliances, investing in advanced cybersecurity technologies, and developing regional cybersecurity talent. The U.S. should consider enhancing collaboration with ME nations through intelligence sharing, joint cyber exercises, and standardized protocols to bolster collective resilience. Technologies such as AI-driven threat detection and cloud security will be key to real-time defense and deterring evolving threats. Collaborative education initiatives and training programs with international institutions can support long-term workforce development. Overall, these efforts could represent a strategic shift from reactive defense toward a more proactive, alliance-based cybersecurity planning.

# NESA PROGRAMS & EVENTS

## **The Post-Assad Era in Syria with Brigadier General Antoine Abisamra**

On 23 January 2025, Dr. Michael Sharnoff and Professor Anne Moisan hosted a virtual roundtable with a MENA program Alumnus, Brigadier General Antoine Abisamra. The event included 10 participants from Albania, Algeria, Canada, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Türkiye, and the United States, and provided a follow-up conversation on relevant topics with partners who participated in the “Security Opportunities in the MENA Region” seminar from 19–23 August 2024 and the “Conflict Resolution, Cooperation and Challenges in the MENA Region” seminar from 9–13 December 2024.



## **Senior Executive Seminar: “Countering Extremist Organizations and Narratives”**

From 27–31 January 2025, the NESA Center conducted a Senior Executive Seminar (SES) held in Washington, D.C., on Countering Extremist Organizations and Narratives. The seminar brought together 38 participants from 23 countries. Led by Dr. Hassan Abbas, with Dr. Michael Sharnoff and Dr. Wayne Clark serving as co-directors, the program explored a range of critical topics. These included the dynamics of extremist networks, counter-narratives and peacebuilding approaches, case studies, countering extremism, technology and law enforcement, de-radicalization efforts, and pathways forward.



## **The NESA Center Celebrates its 25th Anniversary with a Special Washington Seminar**

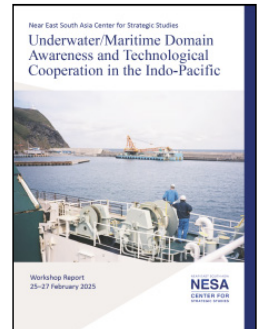
On 12 February 2025, the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies celebrated its 25th anniversary with a special Washington Seminar that featured Lieutenant General Michael T. Plehn (USAF-Retired), 17th President of the National Defense University, as its keynote speaker. The seminar was marked by a gathering of distinguished guests, including past NESA Center Directors, esteemed faculty, dedicated staff, and members of the Washington diplomatic community and the U.S. Government.



# NESA PROGRAMS & EVENTS

## Underwater/Maritime Domain Awareness and Technological Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Workshop

From 25–27 February 2025, the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies gathered over 40 participants from more than 15 partner and allied nations in San Francisco, CA, for a forum focused on technical and technological enhancements for maritime domain awareness and underwater domain awareness. The conversations ranged from discussions of protecting critical underwater infrastructure to more rapid maritime security information sharing.



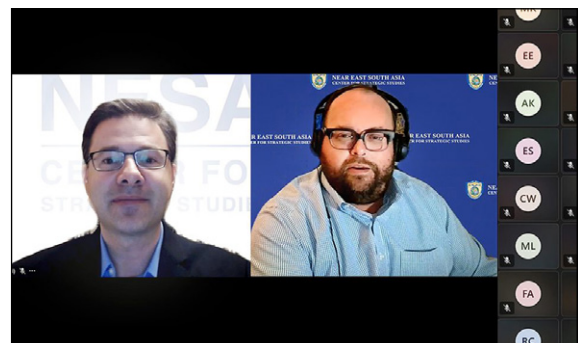
## Webinar on the 'India-U.S. Strategic Maritime Partnership'

The Maritime Research Center (MRC), India, in collaboration with the NESA Center, successfully hosted a webinar on 19 March 2025, titled “India- U.S. Strategic Maritime Partnership – Approaches Both Partners Bring to the Maritime Domain,” about maritime technology cooperation between India and the United States. The program engaged 31 participants. This was the second iteration of cooperation between the NESA Center and the MRC. [Read the report and watch recordings of the presentations.](#)



## Israel Indo-Pacific Virtual Workshop

From 24–25 March 2025, the NESA Center for Strategic Studies held a virtual workshop that provided a venue for participants from Israel and across the Indo-Pacific region to discuss shared interests, identify new areas for cooperation, and strengthen their partnerships. The workshop was a continuation of an inaugural workshop launched in March 2024. Dr. Michael Sharnoff and Prof. Jeffrey Payne led the workshop, which included 21 scholars and practitioners from Israel and the Indo-Pacific region. The two-day virtual workshop included four panel sessions to address mutual strategic interests and emerging challenges and to create conditions for regional consultations and security.





# NESA FACULTY & STAFF ENGAGEMENT

## Dr. Hassan Abbas



**January 2025** – Dr. Hassan Abbas published a book chapter on internal Taliban politics and divisions in “Navigating Uncertainty: Perspectives on Post-Taliban Afghanistan and Geopolitical Footsteps,” sponsored by German think tank Hans Seidel Foundation. Dr. Abbas also virtually joined the book launch event through the [Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad](#).

**11 January 2025** – Dr. Abbas delivered a lecture during “Muslim Heritage Month” celebrated by New Jersey State at the Princeton Library in NJ. About 50–60 people were in attendance with [local news coverage](#).



**21 January 2025** – At the College of International Security Affairs at NDU, a panel discussion on developments in Syria and Afghanistan featured Dr. Abbas as one of the panelists. The audience included about 100 NDU students and faculty.



**10 February 2025** – Dr. Abbas participated as a speaker at a conference in Iraq focused on geopolitical developments in the Middle East and Iraq’s role in the region. He is pictured with Sayyid Ammar Al-Hakim, leader of the Hikma political party, which is part of the ruling coalition government in Baghdad.

**27 March 2025** – In an interview with the Associated Press, Dr. Abbas commented on Taliban leader Akhundzada’s duplicitous Eid message, which was widely cited in media coverage, including the [Associated Press](#), [Newsday](#), and [WTOP News](#).

## Dr. Gawdat Bahgat



**26 March 2025** – Academic Dean Dr. Roger Kangas and Dr. Gawdat Bahgat participated in a roundtable discussion with the Turkish FM Hakan Fidan. The meeting was organized by SETA, a major Turkish think tank in Washington, D.C. About 40 think tank representatives participated in the roundtable. Mr. Fidan started with a brief overview of Turkish foreign policy in different regions. Most questions and answers focused on the growing role Ankara is playing in Syria, rivalry between Türkiye and Israel in Syria, the war in Gaza, Türkiye’s growing presence in Iraq, the recent developments with the Kurds, bilateral relations with the United States, Türkiye’s role in ending the war in Ukraine, and Ankara’s role in the Horn of Africa.

## David Des Roches



**3 March 2025** – Prof. Des Roches gave a long interview to [The New Arab](#) on Iraq-Syria relations. His aim was to provide factual information based on his research as well as dispel the Iranian narrative that the U.S. has fomented trouble in Syria to destabilize Iran and attack the Shi’a strain of Iran.

**10 March 2025** – Prof. Des Roches explained the significance and interests of the U.S. in the Iran/China/Russia joint naval

# NESA FACULTY & STAFF ENGAGEMENT

maneuvers on [Al Hurra](#), the Arabic language VOA television channel. He discussed both military and political aspects of the maneuvers and made the point that the Iranians remain wary of Russian attempts to establish bases on Iranian soil.



**20 March 2025** – Prof. David Des Roches discussed on [TRT World](#) (the English language global Turkish-funded network) the damage to the U.S. military-chartered tanker Stena Immaculate and the vulnerabilities in the U.S. defense enterprise, particularly to hybrid attacks on our communications and logistic systems.



**24 March 2025** – Prof. Des Roches explained the relative positions of Russia and Ukraine in the Riyadh peacetalks and the role of the United States for India's [WION television](#), a network with tens of millions of viewers.

**25 March 2025** – At the request of the acting Omani ambassador, Prof. Des Roches met with her to address growing anti-Oman sentiment in the Washington think tank community. He assured her that Oman was considered a valued partner and intermediary, that the U.S. appreciates Oman's long-standing hosting of U.S. forces, and Oman's role as an intermediary. They also discussed the various aspects of Omani policy which Washington objects to and the possibility of modifying these aspects to comport with the Administration's security goals.



**25 March 2025** – Prof. David Des Roches (center, in hat) led the German Armed Forces Staff College on a historical staff ride around the White House and through central Washington, D.C., covering topics such as foreign support in the American Revolution, the Washington campaign in the War of 1812, the role of the President in foreign and security policy and restraints on the President, populism in the presidency of Andrew Jackson and beyond, the role of the U.S. Treasury in the global financial system and the use of economic sanctions as a tool of statecraft, the evolution of the Freedmen's Bureau as a post-conflict reconstruction case study, the practice of lobbying and how it has evolved through history, the evolution of the physical protection of the President, and finally the genius of General William T. Sherman in developing the doctrine of total warfare.

The NESA Center has provided instruction to the German Armed Forces Staff College visit to Washington, D.C., for

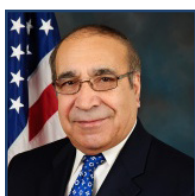


# NESA FACULTY & STAFF ENGAGEMENT

over a decade and remains active with other partner nations, including those from the NESA region as well as other partners interested in the NESA region.

**27 March 2025** – [The Wall Street Journal](#) interviewed Prof. Des Roches on the topic of U.S. military deployments to Diego Garcia and the capabilities there which could be used in the event of a strike on Iran.

## Ali Ahmad Jalali



**14 January 2025** – In an interview with the BBC, Prof. Ali Jalali discussed President Biden's legacy and analyzed the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan before the Taliban fulfilled the conditions of the Doha Agreement.

**21 January 2025** – As a guest on the *Didgah* program of Afghanistan International TV, Prof. Jalali shared insights on the potential direction of Afghanistan policy under the Trump administration.

**6 February 2025** – Prof. Jalali provided commentary to Voice of America (VOA) on the military situation in the ongoing war in Gaza and the broader developments in the Middle East.

**24 February 2025** – Prof. Jalali was a guest of Afghanistan International's Sparano program on the fate of American weapons left in Afghanistan.

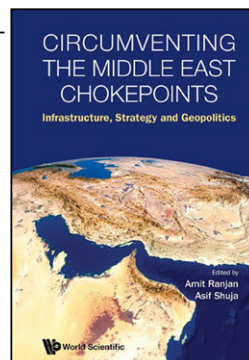
**13 March 2025** – In an interview with Amu International TV, Prof. Jalali examined internal fractures within the Taliban regime.

**30 March 2025** – Prof. Jalali joined Afghanistan International's *50 Minutes* to discuss power dynamics under four years of Taliban rule.

## Dr. Roger Kangas



**February 2025** – Dr. Roger Kangas co-authored a chapter with Nigel Li titled "Russia and the Persian Gulf," published in the book [Circumventing the Middle East Chokepoints: Infrastructure, Strategy and Geopolitics](#), by World Scientific Publishing Company.

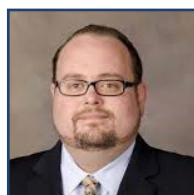


## Charles Marks



**22 January 2025** – Associate Dean Charles Marks, Ambassador Ali Jalali, and Dr. Michael Sharnoff engaged with Security Cooperation Organization (SCO) personnel from AFRICOM, CENTCOM, EUCOM, and INDOPACOM at Fort Lesley J. McNair in Washington, D.C. The NESA Center delivered an engaging overview of regional center functions, the NESA Center mission and lines of effort, NESA Center programming, and concluded by answering questions through an interactive Q&A. Another SCO briefing was held with Associate Dean Charles Marks, Prof. Brianne Todd and Prof. Michael Sharnoff on 1 April 2025.

## Jeffrey Payne



**27–31 January 2025** – Professor Jeffrey Payne took part in a workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka, that was led by the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka and the Australian National University. Prof. Payne moderated a session and spoke in a session devoted to digital solutions for MDA capabilities. The workshop featured participation by over 75 delegates representing 14 countries. Read the [affiliated research paper](#) tied to the workshop.

# NESA FACULTY & STAFF ENGAGEMENT

**10 February 2025** – Prof. Payne hosted a delegation from S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), led by Dr. Sinderpal Singh, at National Defense University (NDU) for conversations on U.S. relations to ASEAN, ASEAN regional affairs, and Indo-Pacific issues. NDU was represented by the NESA Center, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), College of International Security Affairs (CISA), and National War College (NWC). There were 11 participants.

**10 February 2025** – A small delegation of eight participants from Japan, led by the Japanese Embassy, met at the NESA Center for discussions on the current state of affairs in the wider Middle East. The meeting was hosted by Professor Payne, with Academic Dean Dr. Roger Kangas serving as the Center's lead representative.

**21 February 2025** – Professor Payne and NESA Center Distinguished Advisor Nancy Jackson discussed military cooperation through technology with the Indian Defence Attaché to the United States of America.

**14 March 2025** – Prof. Payne and NESA Center Distinguished Advisor Nancy Jackson met with the Sri Lanka Defence Attaché to the United States for a conversation on intensifying cooperation between the NESA Center and Sri Lanka.

## Dr. Michael Sharnoff



**3 February 2025** – Dr. Michael Sharnoff served as an invited lecturer for the Reserve Component National Security Course (RCNSC) at National Defense University, where he delivered a presentation on “U.S. Diplomacy in the Middle East.”

The RCNSC is a two-week course offered in January, April, and July to Reserve military officers' grades O-5/O-6/E-9, interagency and international fellows. The RCNSC is designed to lay a foundation for students moving on to joint command management and staff responsibilities in a multinational, intergovernmental, or joint national security setting. This event had 109 students.



**21 February 2025** – Dr. Sharnoff published an op-ed in *The Jewish Chronicle* titled “Arab Leaders Are Slowly Realizing That Hamas Has to Go.”

**27 March 2025** – Dr. Sharnoff published a paper titled “A New Marshall Plan for Gaza” in *Foreign Policy*.



# ALUMNI PUBLICATIONS & NEWS

## Alumni Publications & News

01 January 2025 – **Asanga Abeyagoonasekera (Sri Lanka)** published an Op-Ed in the *South Asia Journal*: "[Modi's Fragile Balancing Act: India's Democratic Erosion and Its Geopolitical Dilemma](#)."

13 January 2025 – **Asanga Abeyagoonasekera (Sri Lanka)** wrote an article for the *Colombo Telegraph*: "[Clean Sri Lanka: A Higher Call For A Fresh Start With Global Lessons](#)."

21 January 2025 – **Mohamed Eljarh (Libya)** published an article for *Al Monitor*: "[Russia eyes Libya as military substitute for Syria? Not so fast, say Libyans](#)."

25 January 2025 – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** published an Op-Ed for *Modern Diplomacy*: "[Why is it hard to conquer disinformation?](#)"

28 January – **Shanthie D'Souza (India)** published an Op-Ed for *The Diplomat*: "[Trump 2.0 and the Taliban's Afghanistan](#)."

03 February 2025 – **Nimra Javed (Pakistan)** wrote an article for the *NESA Alumni Blog*: "[AI-Driven Strategies to Counter Terrorism and Extremism](#)."

07 February 2025 – **Nasser bin Nasser (Jordan)** published an Op-Ed for *UNIDIR*: "[The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Regional Security, Threat Perceptions and the Middle East WMD-Free Zone](#)."

08 February 2025 – **Rupakjyoti Borah (India)** published a book "[Beyond the BRI: Can India, Japan and the US Provide an Alternative Model of Connectivity?](#)"

11 February 2025 – **Mahfoud Bahbouhi (Morocco)** wrote an Op-Ed for *Morocco World News*: "[The New World Order in an Era of Two Growing Dichotomous Nationalisms](#)."

22 February 2025 – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** wrote an Op-Ed for *Ceylon Today*: "[Prospects and Challenges of Cryptocurrencies in Sri Lanka](#)."

26 February 2025 – **Shanthie D'Souza (India)** published an Op-Ed for *The Diplomat*: "[The Fraying of the Taliban's Counternarcotics Efforts](#)."

04 March 2025 – **Shanthie D'Souza (India)** co-authored an analysis for *Mantraya*: "[Transnational Cocaine Smuggling into India from South America: Disrupting the Networks](#)."

06 March – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** wrote an Op-Ed for *Ceylon Today*: "[From Crisis to Reform: Strengthening Sri Lanka's Rice Sector](#)."

14 March 2025 – **Shanthie D'Souza (India)** published an Op-Ed for *The Diplomat*: "[India's Nascent Blue Economy: Structural Constraints and Climate Change Challenges](#)."

25 March 2025 – **Shanthie D'Souza (India)** co-authored an analysis for *Mantraya*: "[ETIM: A Strategy of Multi-Alignment with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State](#)."

27 March 2025 – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** wrote an Op-Ed for *Modern Diplomacy*: "[Power in Flux: Community, Leaders, and the Dynamics of Change](#)."

# CALENDAR

## April–June 2025 NESACenter Events

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- **SCO NESACenter Orientation & Regional Briefing** | 1 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **Lebanese Armed Forces Seminar** | 7–11 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **United States and the Middle East Seminar** | 8–9 April 2025 | Doha, Qatar
- **Joaan Bin Jassim Academy for Defence Studies Education & Research Seminar** | 6–14 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **Tunisian National Defense Institute Security Seminar** | 9–16 April 2025 | Amman, Jordan
- **Mastering Negotiation Skills for Security Partners** | 14–18 April 2025 | Boston, MA
- **OPM SANG Staff College Program** | 14–18 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **Combating Transnational Threats Senior Executive Seminar 02-25** | 21–25 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **KSA National Defense University Strategic Analysis Seminar** | 23–25 April 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **Study the Economy of War on the Sultanate of Oman** | 28–29 April 2025 | Muscat, Oman
- **Pakistan NDU Program** | 11–14 May 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **New Face of Security, Conflict, & War** | 12–16 May 2025 | Casablanca, Morocco
- **NESA SSN Africom-IEMED** | 12–16 May 2025 | Casablanca, Morocco
- **Women & Security Challenges Roundtable** | 12–16 May 2025 | Casablanca, Morocco
- **Silk Road Future Leaders Seminar** | 12–16 May 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **SCO NESACenter Orientation & Regional Briefing** | 10 June 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **The Revolution in Modern Air Attack and Air Defense: Drones, Missiles, Missile Defense and Electronic Warfare** 9–13 June 2025 | Virtual
- **NDU Faculty Extension Program** | 16–27 June 2025 | Washington, D.C.
- **Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Forum San Diego Process** | 17–19 June 2025 | Palo Alto, CA
- **Transnational Threats and the Growing International Illicit Crime** | 23–27 June 2025 | Casablanca, Morocco
- **Central and South Asia Executive Security Seminar: Global Dialogue on Preventing and Countering Extremism** 23–27 June 2025 | Tashkent, Uzbekistan

# CELEBRATING 25 YEARS!

The NESAC Center debuted a [new video](#) that highlights its rich history, meaningful impact, and vision for the future—while celebrating the many contributions of its past and present leaders. With deep appreciation, the NESAC Center thanks its entire community for 25 years of support and dedication to the shared mission of fostering understanding, building capacity, and advancing a more secure and stable world.







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## Building Relationships & Enhancing Security

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