



NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

NESA Update

January–February 2024

REGIONAL TRENDS – CYBER

U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Cyber as a Non-traditional Threat:

- The cybersecurity landscape in the Middle East, Levant, and Central Asian States is marked by complexity and geopolitical tensions, where both state and non-state actors leverage cyberspace to pursue political, economic, and military objectives. As governments grapple with the dual role of being both victims and aggressors in cyber warfare, there is an increasing recognition of the need to fortify national defenses against cyber threats. Despite being ranked as a third-tier cyber power, Iran stands out as a significant regional disrupter, posing threats to the networks and data of U.S. allies and partner nations. In response, major powers like the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia are intensifying efforts to safeguard critical sectors through substantial investments and advancements in cybersecurity infrastructure.
- The significance of cybersecurity cannot be overstated, particularly in the face of state-sponsored threats that challenge national sovereignty and security. Military preparedness in the digital age requires sustained capabilities and sophisticated technologies to counter internal and external adversaries effectively. Artificial Intelligence emerges as a crucial tool in bolstering cybersecurity, enabling advanced threat detection, prevention, and response through machine learning algorithms. Automation further enhances operational efficiency by streamlining security workflows and enabling split-second decision-making for integrated measures.
- Addressing cybersecurity challenges demands collaborative efforts across multiple domains and borders, including government, industry, and civil society. It is critical to tailor initiatives aimed at promoting awareness, capacity building, and resiliency to specific regional needs and priorities. Establishing norms and regulations governing cyber warfare, enhancing cybersecurity capabilities, promoting digital literacy, and diversifying economies away from oil dependence are key areas of focus.

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Engagement • Education • Outreach

NESA Region Trends

- To effectively mitigate evolving cyber threats, three recommendations are institutional capacity building, education, and engagement to build a like-minded integrated force to protect global stability. First, investing in AI-driven cyber defense systems is a strategic imperative to ensure advanced capability for threat detection, decision-making, incident response, and resiliency against future cyberattacks. Secondly, education and training programs are essential to equip military and civilian personnel with the necessary skills to understand, develop, and defend against cyber threats. Lastly, strengthening international partnerships for cybersecurity cooperation is paramount, given the transnational nature of cyber threats.
- These proactive measures represent just the beginning of efforts to safeguard against cyber threats. Failure to act promptly could empower radicalized individuals with the means to perpetrate cyber violence, underscoring the urgency of collective action to protect the cybersecurity landscape in the Middle East, Levant, and Central Asia.

Cyber Threats:

- Countries in the region are very aware of cyber threats but generally lack the ability to detect or counter cyber threats on their own. For the most part, cyber efforts are focused on identification and the imposition of cyber hygiene as a preventative measure.
- Countries in the region are dependent upon commercial vendors for most of their cyber products. They generally have a diverse range of cyber products from different vendors in different countries. This means that they have a variety of vulnerabilities and, in general, do not have the indigenous capability to respond to cyber threats across multiple platforms.
- The cyber defense effort in the region tends to focus on “retail level” software, such as communications and financial transaction systems. There is less capacity in control and remote sensing software, again because of the reliance on multiple offshore vendors rather than home-grown software developers.
- NESA Center program participants have expressed the view that other countries, most notably the U.S., would police the cyber realm as it generally does in the maritime realm. Participants seemed unconcerned about the possibility of Huawei hardware having back doors that would introduce a cyber threat. They seem to think that their generally non-confrontational relations with China provide insurance against any possible Chinese cyber disruption, although they seemed less confident about possible information exfiltration.

North Africa & the Sahel:

- North African and Sahelian officials often simply tie cybersecurity to their experiences with terrorist use of the Internet and the web for recruiting and communication, as well as leverage new technology to that end. They understand all too well that as governments and private providers (Facebook, X, etc.) crack-down on extremists on these social media platforms — terrorists, radicals, and criminals are increasingly turning to more secure platforms, such as the “dark web.” Governments are most challenged on the “dark web” which ensures anonymity and avoids government monitoring. Their goal/ask/answer as far as cybersecurity is concerned is often simply “how do we completely shut down the internet.”

NESA Region Trends

- The expanding use of cyber also challenges their more traditional security approaches in that it can change rapidly and outpace governments' ability to stay abreast of cyber-use implications. It should be of no surprise that AI will almost certainly end up being adopted into terrorists' and criminals' new strategy as another effective tool. It was acknowledged by security experts in the region that their governments lack the ability to counter terrorists' and criminals' use of this new technology nor effectively add it to their own toolbox. While it was accepted that technology would play an enormous role in future conflicts and while it was not necessarily being embraced by governments, most did see this as an opportunity to establish closer partnerships between public and private, as well as with skilled youth.
- Cybersecurity discussions often tied to concepts of future conflicts. Even as far back as 2019, some predicted that there would be an increasing prevalence of proxy wars; cyber-attacks; coercion; weaponization of food and water and violence against women; economic pressures/sanctions; coordinated international criminal attacks; and a wider range and forms of terrorism. How well countries are prepared to deal with these new trends in state warfare is questionable as governments, even today, struggle to meet even the basic services and personal security for their people. On the other hand, there was no doubt that non-state actors not only will set these new standards but stand ready to fill the governance voids and, in the very eyes of its citizens, put in question the very legitimacy of the state.
- There is a need and a strong argument for allies to better tailor security assistance programs to prepare partners for realities and challenges that lay ahead – cybersecurity being only one of those key areas.

Regional Economy & Market:

- Globally, 40% of jobs are exposed to cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. Countries that lack the infrastructure and a skilled workforce to invest could fall behind. Regional economies such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have significantly increased investment in cyber and AI as part of strategies to diversify their economies.
- According to a new analysis by [MarketsandMarkets™](#), the size of the Middle East cybersecurity market is expected to increase from USD 14.8 billion in 2023 to USD 23.4 billion by 2028 at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 9.6%. The rise in digital transformation projects is fueling the Middle East Cybersecurity Market development and pushing cloud technology adoption. This rise is further supported by regulatory initiatives aimed at countering the dynamic threat landscape, which highlights the crucial role of cybersecurity. In particular, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 influences cybersecurity market growth, and increasing cyber threats against Israel has accelerated the country's demand.
- The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has established a [National Cyber Security Authority](#) (*many other states have similar structures*) with a mission to “Enhance cybersecurity in the Kingdom” to reduce risks, boost confidence, and enable growth. They are looking for global and local investors and promoting research and development, entrepreneurship and startups, local content, and leadership of national companies.

NESA Programs & Events

Tunisian National Defense Institute Security Seminar (Phase I of II)

On 9 January 2024, in partnership with U.S. Africa Command, the NESA Center conducted Phase I/II of the Tunisian National Defense Institute (NDI) Security Seminar in Tunis, Tunisia. Professor Anne Moisan covered a Strategic Policy Approach for developing this year's Class Strategic White Paper for the Minister of Defense and the Tunisian President. Dr. Kheira Tarif deep-dived into the class's assigned MOD theme with a presentation on "The Impact of Climate Change on Security, the Economy and Society." The NDI 2023–2024 program is now in its 41st year and consists of approximately 50 Tunisians from as many as 16 ministries and representatives from the President's Office. [Continue reading.](#)



NESA-Africom-IEMed "Human Security Approach for the 2030 Workshop"

From 10–11 January 2024, the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies/Strategic Studies Network (SSN), in partnership with U.S. Africa Command and the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), conducted the 10th annual workshop entitled "NESA (SSN)-AFRICOM-IEMed Human Security Approach for the 2030 Workshop," in Tunis, Tunisia. The event was attended by 20 NESA/SSN and IEMed Alumni and senior leaders from think tanks, research centers, and academia from nine countries in the region. [Continue reading.](#)



Combating Transnational Threats Senior Executive Seminar

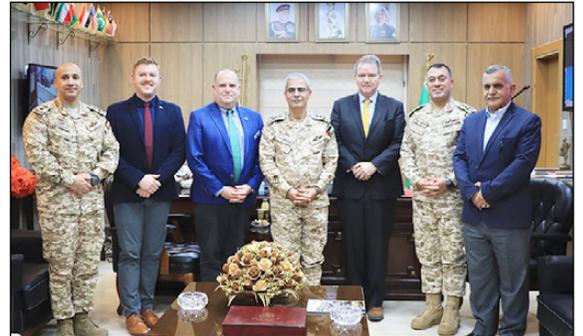
From 22–26 January 2024, the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies hosted a Combating Transnational Threats Senior Executive Seminar (CTSES) titled "Technological Innovation & Security Challenges in the NESA Region," held at National Defense University in Washington, D.C. The five-day CTSES engaged 33 participants from 24 countries, including Armenia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Djibouti, Ecuador, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Kosovo, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Zambia. Twenty-four percent of participants who completed the course were female, exceeding NESA's DoD goal of 20%. [Continue reading.](#)



NESA Programs & Events

Subject Matter Expert Lecture Series at the Royal Jordanian National Defense College

From 21–23 January 2024, the NESA Center Professional Military Education Team enabled the delivery of three subject matter expert lectures to students and faculty at the Royal Jordanian National Defense College outside Amman, Jordan. Student participation included Jordanian officers and civilians and international students from Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America. [Continue reading.](#)



Roundtable Discussion with Indian Institute of Public Administration

On 6 February 2024, five NESA Center faculty members held a seminar discussion at NESA Center offices in Washington, D.C., with two faculty members and twelve students from the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) regarding current and emergent policy issues in South Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. Discussions included a NESA Center overview, followed by focused presentations on developments in Afghanistan, political futures in Pakistan, and challenges in cybersecurity policy for regional governments. [Continue reading.](#)



Countering Violent Extremism & the Role of Community Policing: Best Practices Program

From 28 January–1 February 2024, the NESA Center hosted a program in Kathmandu, Nepal, designed to help participants evaluate and analyze the nature and dynamics of significant community policing challenges, especially in the realm of violent extremism, and deliberate on building counter-narratives to extremism. Twenty-six participants attended, and 36% of the class were women. Participants were from the following ten countries: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the United States. [Continue reading.](#)



NESA Programs & Events

SANDU Military Strategy Course

From 28 January–2 February 2024, the NESA Center delivered a one-week Saudi War Course Strategy Module to support the Saudi Armed Forces Command and Staff College in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. A mix of sixty War College faculty and students received the course which consisted of theoretical modules and case studies on military strategy, assisting the participants to conceptualize and apply theoretical concepts of strategy to real-world problems. The content centered on Fundamentals of Strategy, Strategic Principles, Developments of Strategy, Grand Strategy, and the Strategic Concepts of the USA, Iran, and Israel applied to the current global security situation. [Continue reading.](#)



KSA PME

NESA Faculty & Staff Engagement

Dr. Hassan Abbas



1 February 2024 – Spoke at the [Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement \(NIICE\) dialogue series](#) in Kathmandu, Nepal. Presented on the topic of the “Taliban and their Impact on Radicalization Trends in South Asia” along with Dr. Shalini Chawla, who spoke on the “Dynamics of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia.” There were about 30 in attendance, including policy analysts and university students.

NIICE Dialogue Series VIII

Taliban and their Impact on Radicalization Trends in South Asia
Prof. Hassan Abbas
NESA Center, National Defense University, US

Dynamics of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia
Dr. Shalini Chawla
Centre for Air Power Studies, India

28 January 2024, Sunday
11:00-12:30 hrs
NIICE Seminar Hall, Hattiban, Lalitpur

NIICE
NEPAL INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ENGAGEMENT

2 February 2024 – Interviewed by Chatham House regarding Pakistan elections and was quoted in an analysis titled [“Pakistan: Imran Khan’s party faces ‘huge election losses.’”](#)

3 February 2023 – Quoted in Dawn about U.S.-Pakistan relations and national elections in Pakistan in the article, [“Pakistan Elections Garner no Significant Attention in US.”](#)

Dr. Gawdat Bahgat



January 2024 – Wrote the paper [“The United States and the War in Gaza,”](#) published in Araa Magazine’s January 2024 issue. The paper examines the United States’ short and long-term goals and efforts to end the war and build a consensus on a two-state solution.

7 January 2024 – Discussed, on [Al Jazeera News](#), the purpose of the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s fifth visit to the Middle East since Israel began its war on Gaza.

Andrea Brewington



4–8 February – Attended the [World Defense Show](#) in Riyadh. The NESA team that attended included Acting Director David Lamm, Program Manager Matt Holbert, and Academic Advisors Andrea Brewington and Thomas Wagstaff. The show hosted many companies from the defense industry and officers and soldiers from many countries. The team explored the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s progress towards Vision 2030. This was particularly prevalent in the transition to the Saudi Arabian National Defense University (SANDU) display, where Deputy Director Lamm met with some recently promoted partners from SANDU. This progress is an effort with which NESA personnel are familiar, having been instrumental in both the design of the new PME institution and in preparing the faculty for this exciting change.



The team enjoyed Maj Gen Al-Ruwaili’s participation in the Future Defense Forum, where he spoke about the future of PME and the establishment of the SANDU. Another noticeable area of progress in the Kingdom was with Women in Peace in Security. The International Women in Defense Program was held on 7 February, headlined by Princess Reema Bint Bandar Bin Sultan, who is Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the United States. The World Defense Show was a great event and a chance to meet up

NESA Faculty & Staff Engagement

with colleagues and partners in the Kingdom. The KSA team looks forward to the World Defense Show 2026.

David Des Roches



12 January 2024 – Discussed the U.S. response to the Houthi attacks on shipping vessels in the Red Sea on [Al Jazeera News](#).



18 January 2024 – Gave a presentation on Red Sea Security as part of a Gulf International Forum panel titled [“Navigating Troubled Waters: The Implication of Escalation in the Red Sea.”](#)



19 January 2024 – Discussed Russia’s rebranding of the Wagner group in Africa as the “African Legion” on [Voice of America’s Africa News Tonight](#) radio show.

Ali Ahmad Jalali



19 January 2024 – Was interviewed by VOA Pashto for comments on terrorist attacks in Iran and Pakistan and how this situation affects the regional cooperation in fighting terrorism. Also, how the presence of several terrorist groups in Afghanistan, with potential threats to the neighbors, and what this means for bilateral and multi-lateral relationships in the region. In the wake of cross-border anti-terrorist attacks by Iran and Pakistan, tension in relations between the two neighbors has escalated. Iran and Pakistan launched missile and drone strikes on each other’s territory. On 17 January, Iran hit what it called a terrorist group (Jaish-e Adl) based in the Pakistan Baluchistan province. A day later, Pakistan launched strikes targeting an anti-Pakistani group headquartered in Iran. Although the two countries deescalated the tension, the sudden exchange of violence may have a lasting impact on bilateral ties.



Prof. Ali Jalali during an Afghanistan International TV feature on China-Taliban relations.

Elevated diplomatic relations between China and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: In a sudden diplomatic development, China exchanged ambassadorial diplomatic relations with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Although no country, including China, has extended official recognition of the Taliban regime, the exchange of ambassadors between Kabul and Beijing created many questions about the legal status of the Taliban. The U.S. State Department spokesperson called on China to clarify its position on

NESA Faculty & Staff Engagement

whether accepting the credentials of the Taliban ambassador meant official recognition. China has not given a clear answer — only emphasizing friendly ties with the Taliban. But Beijing did call on Kabul to broaden its base and inclusiveness and bring reforms.

- **2 February 2024** – Was interviewed by RFERL Pashto and Dari on the significance of China receiving the credentials of the Taliban ambassador.
- **5 February 2024** – Was a guest of an Afghanistan International TV feature on China-Taliban relations.

7 February 2024 – Was interviewed by RFERL on the significance of the conference on Afghanistan and why the Taliban are hesitant to participate in the meeting. The United Nations Secretary-General convened a two-day conference on Afghanistan in Qatar on 18 February to discuss the proposals of a UN Security Council special evaluator for Afghanistan. The report proposes a roadmap on how to “normalize” relations with the Taliban government. A recent UNSC resolution 2721 calls on the UN Secretary-General to appoint a special envoy to set up diplomacy with the Taliban government. The resolution emphasizes the creation of a roadmap for Afghanistan’s full integration into the international community and a monitoring mechanism to follow its recommendation. Senior representatives of regional countries and major powers, a representative of Afghanistan women, and the Taliban government were invited.



Dr. Roger Kangas

24 January 2024 – Spoke on a panel on defense security at the [Black Sea Security Conference](#) hosted by the Caspian Policy



Center and the Caucasus and Central Asia Club. The conference brings in high-level experts and policymakers to discuss critical security challenges in the Black Sea region.

Charles Marks



25 January 2024 – Gave a presentation on U.S. policy in the Middle East and hosted a discussion on the Israel-Gaza conflict with the Civic Leadership Hampton Roads and Old Dominion University. The engagement was positive, with approximately 140 people in attendance and lots of interaction during the Q&A.

25 January 2024 – Gave a presentation on U.S. policy in the Middle East centered on Gaza and the conflict in Israel. The engagement was at an Episcopal Camp and Conference Center annual retreat to provide further understanding of U.S. policy in a complicated environment shaped by polarization both in the U.S. and the region.

Jeffrey Payne



16–17 January 2024 – Took part in the Conference “[Operationalizing Integration in the Indo-Pacific: 2024](#),” and discussions focused on not only how to mature various technological capabilities among U.S. partners and allies but also on how to enhance and improve the scale of the defense industrial base. This inaugural event was held in Honolulu, Hawaii, and hosted by the Pacific Forum in an effort that will continue in future years. NESA Center alumnus Dr. John Hemmings led the event. Over 300 participants were from the U.S. interagency, the private sector, academia, and foreign nation-states.

22–25 January 2024 – Spoke and moderated at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) “[Maritime Safety and Security: Shared Challenges and Responses in the Indian Ocean](#)” Academic Program. Prof. Payne spoke on the technological applications of open-sourced MDA tools in a panel featuring the U.S. Sixth Fleet.

NESA Faculty & Staff Engagement

Richard Wiersema



26 January 2024 – Delivered a lecture and fielded questions on American strategy and policy in the Middle East to over forty students and faculty from the National Defense University Reserve Component National Security Course at

the Lincoln Hall auditorium at Fort McNair. At the request of the Reserve Component National Security Course faculty, the NESA Center routinely supports the course requirement by lecturing and leading discussions on American national security policy and interests in the Middle East. The lecture was part of a two-week national security survey course that NDU conducts in support of reserve component joint professional military education. Prof. Wiersema was privileged to deliver this lecture for NESA.

Alumni Publications & News

Alumni Publications & News

January Issue – **Kevin Duffy (USA)** wrote an article for the U.S. Naval Institute: [“Counterpiracy Lessons for the Current Crisis in Yemen.”](#)

01 January – **Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (India)** co-authored an article for The Diplomat: [“2024: Our Annual Primer on What to Expect in the Asia-Pacific.”](#)

13 January – **Asanga Abeyagoonasekera (Sri Lanka)** was featured in an interview on Global Express: [“China’s Stranglehold on Sri Lanka: What Does it Mean for India?”](#)

15 January – **Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (India)** wrote an Op-Ed for The Diplomat: [“The Plight of Deported Afghans.”](#)

16 January – **Eman Ragab (Egypt)** wrote an Op-Ed for Al-Ahram Online: [“Dangers of Disinformation.”](#)

19 January – **Thokozani Chazema (Malawi)** wrote an Op-Ed for the NESAC Center Website: [“Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the New World Ode: A Book Critique.”](#)

20 January – **Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (India)** wrote an Op-Ed for The Diplomat: [“Impasse at Torkham: Pakistan’s Border Closure a Pressure Tactic on the Taliban.”](#)

22 January – **Antonia Dimou (Greece)** contributed to a report for Agora Strategy: [“From Ballots and Bullets to Bytes: 7 Global Risks to Watch in 2024.”](#)

24 January – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** wrote an article for the Institute for National Security Studies Defence Review (2023 Volume VI): [“Defending National Security: Uniting Against Corruption and Bribery with Whistleblower Empowerment.”](#)

27 January – **Charani Patabendige (Sri Lanka)** wrote an Op-Ed for Modern Diplomacy: [“Challenges Faced by UN Peacekeepers.”](#)

06 February – **Asanga Abeyagoonasekera (Sri Lanka)** wrote an Op-Ed for the Institute for Security & Development Policy: [“Online Safety Bill & Operation Justice: Sri Lankan Democracy Under Attack.”](#)

NESA Center Alumni Numbers

Total Center NESAC Alumni: 13,659

Total Countries: 140

Visit the NESAC Center Alumni Interactive Map:

<https://nesa-center.org/alumni-map/>



Calendar

Upcoming NESACenter Events

- **Washington Seminar** | 14 February 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **UCLA Track II CMED** | 22–24 February 2024 | Prague, CZ
- **Middle East Security** | 25–26 February 2024 | Istanbul, Türkiye
- **SWC Lecture Defense Management** | 5–6 March 2024 | Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- **Omani Academy of Defense & Strategic Studies Engagement** | 4 March 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **USCENTCOM The Changing Security Dynamic on the Middle East** | 5–6 March 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Armenia National Defense Research University Program of Instruction** | 18–22 March 2024 | Armenia
- **Israel Indo-Pacific Roundtable Workshop** | 27–28 March 2024 | Virtual
- **Nepal MOD Engagement** | 8–12 April 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Lebanese Fouad Shehab Command and Staff College Seminar** | 15–19 April 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Tunisian National Defense Institute National Security Seminar** | 17–23 April 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Quad Minilateral Series: Technical-Technology Cooperation** | 23–25 April 2024 | Jakarta, Indonesia
- **Saudi Arabia National Guard CGSC Student Program** | 21–25 April 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Saudi Arabia Staff & Student Engagement** | 21 April–3 May 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **SSN Alumni Program: Environmental Security** | 22–24 April 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **UAE War Course Engagement** | 29 April–3 May 2024 | Washington, D.C.
- **Senior Executive Seminar 02-24 (CT-2)** | 29 April–3 May 2024 | Washington, D.C.

**Near East South Asia (NESA)
Center for Strategic Studies**

Fort Lesley J. McNair
National Defense University
Abraham Lincoln Hall
300 5th Ave SW
Washington, D.C. 20319-5066

Phone: (202) 685-4131
Fax: (202) 685-4999

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