Dear friends,

I can’t believe it has already been a year, and what a year it has been! It started dramatically enough with a move to new digs in Taper Hall 256. It still feels new but we’re making the space feel more like home. When you visit, you will see Renee’s evil eye defense system in full display. Other than on a few minor incidents, the authentic amulets have warded off major catastrophes, disasters, and plagues. Those who have visited us have often commented on how “simpatico” the department is, especially because students, staff, and faculty hang out in the common area, eat lunch, charge phones, and just share juicy tidbits about friends and frenemies…

Among the most memorable events last fall, two stand out for launching the department’s new environment and sustainability vision. The first was a very informative, if a little scary, talk by Professor Jeremy Pal of Loyola Marymount University who focuses on heatwaves of the future. Basically, if we stay the course, vast areas of the Middle East will become simply uninhabitable within a few decades, a prediction supported by extensive evidence. The second event was the Undergraduate Student Symposium on environmental history. Everyone was unanimous in praising the quality of the research and the presenters’ command of the material. Kudos to Gina, Philine, and Alana!

Of course, and as usual, we also had a large number of outstanding professors and other experts come share their work with us. Topics varied greatly ranging from the challenges of delivering aid to Syrian refugees, to the diplomatic contests around oil production in Iraq, and the intricacies of modern Persian poetry. One of the year’s highlights was the Annual USC Dornsife Farhang Distinguished Lecture delivered by Professor Richard W. Bulliet (Columbia University) on the biography of two famous Sufi masters from Nishapur. A few weeks later, the department held a very successful conference on water, climate change, and governance. The talks were compelling and everyone present was very attentive, informed, and engaged. Undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and local media interacted with the panelists and generated a daylong conversation on fascinating and important subjects.

At a place like USC where we’re so fortunate to welcome great speakers all the time, it is almost easy to take for granted the wonderful people that make our own university what it is. I consider myself lucky to work with individuals who are so talented and dedicated that they are regularly recognized for their excellence. Naturally, it is a little sad to see three of them go at once. Drs. Afaf Nash and Yasmeen Daifallah are leaving us, and so is Camilia ‘Yuri’ Shofani who will be calling London home next year. We wish everyone good luck and much success.

In balance, I would say it was an exciting transitional year. We had more majors and minors than ever before and, this spring, we had the largest number of our students studying abroad. For me, this has meant a regular stream of updates from overseas with photographs of camels, pyramids, markets, and all sorts of colorful dishes. I would like to think that our students did somehow learn too, but we received no photo evidence of that. But we do have photos of our newly instituted Annual Language Awards Ceremony and this year’s winners who were truly exceptional.

Yes, we achieved a great many things this year and I’m convinced that together we’ll accomplish even greater things in the future. Stay tuned!

Ramzi Rouighi  
Associate Professor of Middle East Studies and History  
Chair, Department of Middle East Studies
VISION

The newly minted Department of Middle East Studies recognized the importance of environmental issues for the region and its peoples and charted a path forward for itself that put them at the heart of its vision for the future. This new vision distinguishes the department from traditional Middle East Studies departments and centers, and is the recipe for making it a hub for a multidisciplinary knowledge aware of its responsibilities, locally and globally.

EXPANSION

As part of the program’s exciting transition to department status at the end of the previous academic year, we have also moved to the second floor of Taper Hall in suite 256. The move has not only afforded more working space but it has also allowed us to host large social gatherings for students, faculty, and staff to mingle.

CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The department has recently began offering three awards and prizes to recognize the excellence and dedication of its students. For students who have demonstrated academic excellence in the studies of Arabic and Persian language, nominations were made by the Arabic and Persian language faculty to the MDES Awards Committee. The Persian Language Award is partly funded by the Gramian–Emrani Foundation (left photo). This year’s awardees included Monica Leung and Nickolas Wrobeski (Arabic Language) and Campbell Mattix and Bardia Soltani (Persian Language). The Mohamed El Beih Paper Prize was also recently established by USC alumnus Mohamed El Beih to recognize the best undergraduate student paper in Middle East Studies. The awardee will be announced at the department’s holiday party at the end of the fall semester on November 28, 2018.
**DAY ZERO: WATER, CLIMATE CHANGE & GOVERNANCE IN MENA**

On April 10th, the Department of Middle East Studies hosted its first USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences-sponsored conference about water and power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Day Zero brought together experts working in different disciplines to examine how various governments, political movements, and communities have been dealing with the set of problems arising from the scarcity and management of water. By focusing on issues of sustainability, governance, and social justice, the conference contributed to the rise of public awareness in the Global North about the importance of these issues and raised questions about the role of Middle East Studies at this critical juncture. Andrew Lakoff, Dornsife Divisional Dean for Social Sciences, kicked off the event with introductory remarks, drawing attention to the importance of environmental and sustainability questions in the current political climate as well as USC’s role in enriching those discussions.

The first panel, moderated by Department of Economics Professor Jeff Nugent, began with Viterbi School of Engineering PhD candidate Ghena Alhanaee’s presentation “Rising Temperatures, Rising Risks: Interdependencies of Nuclear, Oil and Desalination Industries in the Gulf.” The talk gave the audience a sobering picture of the food-energy-water nexus.

The next participant with an engineering background, Professor Amir Aghakouchak of UC Irvine, followed with a presentation on “Anthropogenic Drought and the Notion of Water-Bankruptcy” around Lake Urmia, Iran, demonstrating that although the water crisis is man-made, it is exacerbated by climate change.

"AS A SOCIAL SCIENCES MAJOR IT WAS A VALUABLE EXPERIENCE TO HEAR FROM REPRESENTATIVES OF THE HARD SCIENCES IN ORDER TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE COMPREHENSIVE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEGIN TO IMAGINE HOW COOPERATION BETWEEN THE TWO FIELDS CAN BEST INFORM GOVERNANCE SURROUNDING CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST."

- Paxton Lambright, junior
DAY ZERO: WATER, CLIMATE CHANGE & GOVERNANCE IN MENA

Steven Gorelick, Professor of Earth System Science at Stanford University, was the last panelist in the morning session. He presented his paper "From Transboundary Competition to Climate Change" which described the uncertainty of regional water security in Jordan, one of the world's most water-stressed countries. The morning panel was concluded by a spirited Q&A session.

Laurie Brand, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Studies, led the afternoon panel of social scientists. University of British Columbia Professor Leila Harris presented "Water Conflict and (In)securities in Southeastern Turkey: Navigating Difference, Inequality, and Statecraft." Professor Harris focused on Southeastern Anatolia to show the intersection of environmental issues, social conflicts, and inequality/gender disparity. Professor Steven Caton of the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University, was the last to discuss his research, mainly on the politics of water sustainability in the different ecosystems of the Arabian peninsula and how they relate to geographic conditions and state regimes.

His lecture was titled "Water Sustainability in the Arabian Peninsula: A Comparison of Yemen and the UAE." The afternoon panel was also concluded by a lively Q&A discussion that highlighted the importance of collaboration among the different disciplines.

Professor Ramzi Rouighi, department chair, gave concluding remarks that acknowledged the dire and urgent situation not only in the MENA region but globally. He ended on a hopeful note by saying that even though future climate change impact scenarios look bleak, we can try to build a safer and resilient future through innovative ways of knowing and public engagement.

THANKS FOR ORGANIZING THE CONFERENCE! I PARTICULARLY LIKED GHENA’S PRESENTATION. I APPRECIATED THAT SHE WAS A PHD CANDIDATE AT USC, AND HER PRESENTATION HELPED ME CONNECT MOVING PIECES OF THE GULF THAT I HAD PREVIOUSLY NOT CONSIDERED.

- Philine Qian, senior
As part of the new department vision, MDES hosted events that focused on environmental degradations, among other related topics, in the MENA region. In October 2017, MDES invited Jeremy Pal, Graduate Program Director and Professor of Civil Engineering and Environmental Science at Loyola Marymount University, to discuss his findings in a study he co-authored with Elfath A. B. Eltahir, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The talk, entitled “Deadly Heat: Climate Change and the Gulf,” attracted a diverse audience of students and faculty from various disciplines. The department also hosted its first student symposium that showcased undergraduate student research on environmental topics in the MENA region. In November 2017, the three student presenters discussed historical and environmental issues in North Africa. Senior Philine Qian presented “Deconstructing Desertification: Persistence of the French Colonial Narrative” while former students Gina Hakim and Alana Osterling examined “Botany in Italian Libya: Creating the Mediterranean” and “Cultivating a Settler Colony: The Imposition of Agricultural Expertise in French Algeria,” respectively. In January 2018, the department invited Dr. Christopher Dietrich of Fordham University to speak at USC. His talk, “Iraq and International Oil Politics, 1938 to 1974,” provided an analysis of the local and international origins of debates about the multinational oil concessions by the member nations of OPEC in the 1960s.

Among the diverse events offered by MDES is the “Spotlight Series,” a series of panel discussions or lectures, each of which focuses on a key regional issue highlighted in current events. In November 2017, MDES hosted a roundtable discussion on recent developments in Iran’s nuclear negotiations under the Trump administration with Professors Najmedin Meshkati (USC Viterbi School of Engineering) and Andrew Coe (SIR). In April 2018, Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies Yasmine Daifallah presented “The Ruse of Democracy: Egypt’s Presidential Elections in Focus.”

**LECTURE, SYMPOSIUM & THE SPOTLIGHT SERIES**

**ENVIRONMENT AND HISTORY:**

**STUDENT RESEARCH ON ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA.**
ANNUAL DORNSIFE-FARHANG FOUNDATION DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

The Annual Dornsife-Farhang Foundation Distinguished Lecture Series in Iranian Studies is part of an effort by USC Dornsife-MDES and the Farhang Foundation to bring eminent scholars of Iranian Studies to USC to deliver public lectures and engage with students and faculty over several days. In February 2018, MDES hosted Richard Bulliet, Professor of History at Columbia University. Over the course of two days, Professor Bulliet delivered a public lecture as well as an informal lunch seminar for students, faculty, Farhang Foundation affiliates, and interested members of the community. The public lecture, “Nishapur: A Tale of Two Sufis” was followed by the lunch seminar the following day entitled “Energy Profiles in World History.”

WELCOME

Dr. Sara Hughes will join the MDES faculty as its first postdoc in Fall 2018. Dr. Hughes received her PhD in Geography at UCLA and is currently Visiting Lecturer in Human Geography at Mount Holyoke College. She is a political and cultural geographer by training and studies territorial conflict and land — both societies’ connections to land and various means of control over it — primarily in Israel/Palestine.

AWARDS

Dr. Hani Khaifipour was recently awarded the USC Advancing Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences (ASiSS) Research and Creative Project Grant, 2018–2019 for his upcoming book manuscript on politics and religion in early modern Iran.

PROMOTIONS

Drs. Peyman Nojoumian and Hani Khaifipour have been promoted to Associate Professor (Teaching) and Assistant Professor (Teaching), respectively. These promotions are the result of hard work and dedication to our program and a recognition by the university of their excellence.

BOOKSHELF

In April 2017, with generous support from the Farhang Foundation, the first two volumes of Professor Nojoumian’s Persian language textbooks were published by the UC Irvine Jordan Center for Persian Studies. The third volume was published shortly thereafter in August 2017. Entitled Persian Learner, the books are multimedia-based and designed to develop basic to intermediate Persian proficiency through using authentic materials to develop integrated language skills and thematic contents enriched with culture.
A YEAR WITH
PROFESSOR
LAURIE BRAND

Laurie Brand, Robert Grandford Wright Professor of International Relations and Middle East Studies, was asked to join the Academic Advisory Board of The Arab Center, Washington. This is an independent Arab think tank in D.C. specializing in US-Arab Relations as well as human rights and democracy in the MENA region. She also co-edited with Tamirace Fakhoury a special issue of the journal Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies. “Migration and Transnational Governance.” Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2018). Her article in that special issue was entitled “Expatriates and Home State Political Development.” She also joined the editorial board of the aforementioned journal in fall 2017.

Professor Brand was a prominent contributor to several conferences and roundtables. She gave the keynote address at the July 2017 meeting of the British Middle East Studies Association (BRIMES), held in Edinburgh, Scotland, entitled “Migrants and Refugees: Making and Unmaking the Middle Eastern State.” She also gave a paper entitled “Education and Human Security: MENA Realities and Prognoses” in a February 2018 conference at UCLA entitled “Understanding the New Middle East.”

At yet another event, she gave a talk entitled “Protecting Vulnerable Communities: Researching Refugees and Forced Migrants in the Middle East,” in a Research Roundtable at the Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, Doha, Qatar entitled “Supporting Social Science Research in the Turbulent Middle East.”

The department is excited to see what’s in store from Professor Laurie Brand for the upcoming academic year!

A WONDERFUL SCHOLAR, TEACHER, AND MENTOR

Azade-Ayşе Rorlich, Professor of History, Middle East Studies, and Slavic Languages and Literatures has announced her retirement this year. Professor Rorlich has taught at the university since 1977, specializing in Russian and Eurasian social and cultural history, including the history of the Muslims of the Russian Empire, Soviet, and post-Soviet era. She filled large seminars year after year with her popular course “The Worlds of the Silk Road.” Among her many publications, she also provided an annotated translation and introduction to Ismail Gaspirali’s French and African Letters (2008). Asked to reflect on Professor Rorlich’s retirement, Professor Rouighi said:

“Unlike many academic pioneers who laid the foundations for entire new fields of research, Ayşе has also been tremendously impactful as a teacher. I have been one of her luckiest students. Over the years, I learned what it takes to become truly familiar with a world one claims to study. I am still in awe that a historian like her is at home in so many. As a true (life) mentor, she has been a model of integrity and a reliable source of humor.”
IDA ABHARI, CLASS OF ’17, IRANIAN STUDIES MINOR

It’s not an exaggeration to say that my year as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Azerbaijan has been full of new adventures. Whether it’s figuring out how to pay my gas bill so I can turn my heating back on, or navigating an English classroom as the solo teacher when the students speak very little English and I very little Azerbaijani, my experiences so far have been incredibly difficult and gratifying. My main Fulbright placement in Baku is at a local public high school, where I lead English conversational classes for students at the high school and surrounding neighborhoods, but I’ve also been excited by the opportunities I’ve had on the side to engage more with the local community. Twice a week, I also teach English classes with another Fulbright Fellow to (mainly) Afghan refugees at the UNHCR Center, where I am better able to utilize my Persian language skills. With skills I learned as an undergraduate, I’ve also co-taught a seminar on law to local university students with a Foreign Service Officer at the American Embassy here who is also a former lawyer.

Besides teaching, I’ve also been taking Azerbaijani language lessons and am able to have basic conversations in Azerbaijani. I’ve also thoroughly enjoyed exploring Azerbaijan in my free time. Though it’s a small country, it has so much to offer in terms of varied landscape ranging from the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus Mountains. I’m so grateful that I learned so much at USC, whether about trial advocacy or Persian language, that has helped me immensely in my time here.

MORGAN MAMON, CLASS OF ’17, MIDDLE EAST STUDIES MAJOR

After graduating in 2017, I took part in the Teaching Assistant Program in France (TAPIF), an exchange coordinated by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States. For the past seven months, I have been living, teaching English, and eating copious amounts of Moroccan food in Lille, France. While on vacation in February, I was able to visit Beirut, Lebanon and I plan to return to Beirut this summer to continue developing my Arabic skills.

JASON TSE, CLASS OF ’17, IRANIAN STUDIES MINOR

After graduating, I enrolled at USC Gould School of Law to pursue my J.D. I hope to eventually gain a specialty that could utilize my international experience and allow me to deal with clients around the globe. MDES and the education I got as an undergrad and as a student abroad has allowed me to bring an international perspective to what I study and interact with people from every corner of the world. I will be interning this summer as a Law Clerk for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in Anaheim.
ANNA MERZI, CLASS OF ’18, MIDDLE EAST STUDIES MINOR

Anna is graduating this semester with a major in Political Science and double minors in Middle East Studies and Business Law. Anna is the founder and CEO of Algo, a freelancing platform that connects top refugee talent to tech and creative companies for remote work. With its proprietary payment system, Algo is one of the only universally legal and accessible employment options for refugees worldwide.

GEORGE SANAD, CLASS OF ’18, MIDDLE EAST STUDIES MAJOR

After graduating this semester with double majors in Middle East Studies and Business Administration (Real Estate Finance), I’ll be working with the USC Fundraising Institute for about 6 weeks in the summer on their Annual Giving team. After that, I will do some traveling (TBD where). Then, I’ll be joining Deloitte’s Marketing and Communications team in September.

RAISING THE BAR

Renee Almassizadeh, MDES Program Specialist, was awarded the Dean’s Outstanding Staff Achievement Award at the USC Dornsife Faculty & Staff Recognition Ceremony in November 2017. Since joining the MDES staff in August 2015, Renee has been a central and critical force in setting the department on an exciting new trajectory.

MORE STAFF

Junior Sima Fayad joined the MDES staff in August 2017 and has since become a vital member of our team. Aside from general administrative support, Sima is responsible for the aesthetically pleasing promotional material the department churns out for every new event. Sima is majoring in international relations (with a minor in Middle East Studies) and will head to Rabat, Morocco for study abroad in Spring 2019.

NEW PROSPECTS

Camillia Shofani, Special Events Program Coordinator, will be ending her tenure at USC MDES and entering the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London this fall as an MSc candidate in Environment, Politics, and Development. Camillia joined the MDES staff in January 2015 and has played a key role in the department’s unique and diverse offering of programs and events.
SOCIAL HOUR

COFFEE & COOKIES

During the first week of school, MDES hosted the first of many social hours in its new suite with a “Welcome Back” coffee and cookie social.

ARABIC MIXER

MDES organized the first conversation exchange mixer with native Arabic speakers from the USC International Academy, American Language Institute, and other USC programs in the hopes of finding a conversation exchange partner. Students excitedly spoke in colloquial and conversational Modern Standard Arabic over traditional refreshments in THH 256.

HOLIDAY PARTY

The new space has also been host to the annual MDES Holiday Party where students, staff, and faculty relaxed after a busy finals season over desserts, coffee, and tea.
UPCOMING EVENTS

STAY TUNED

VISIONS & VOICES

EL SEED COMES TO USC

The department is delighted to announce that its proposal, coauthored by Renee Almassizadeh and Sherin Guirguis, Vice Dean of Faculty at the Roski School of Art & Design, to bring Tunisian “calligraffiti” artist eL Seed was accepted by the USC Visions and Voices Arts & Humanities Initiative. The proposal, entitled “eL Seed’s Role in Shifting Perceptions of and Within the Middle East,” will bring eL Seed to USC in October 2018 to discuss his work in terms of the political, social, and cultural landscapes that we all face today.

THE POLITICS OF IMAGE, NATIONALISM, AND FASHION: INTRODUCING THE WORK OF HUSHIDAR MORTEZAIE

The department will partner with Roski and the USC LGBT Resource Center once again to host US-based Iranian artist and designer Hushidar Mortezaie in the fall of 2018. He will give a presentation introducing his body of work that deals with themes of nationalism, imperialism, identity, gender representation, and religion.
INVEST IN EXCELLENCE

The department relies on institutional and external support to fund academic growth and development. Please consider donating to MDES at this link: https://bit.ly/2rnFduO

WRITE TO US

The alumni newsletter is published by the Department of Middle East Studies. We encourage alumni to contribute news regarding their educational and career progress, published articles, books and op-ed pieces for future editions. Please send your updates to almassiz@usc.edu.

STAY CONNECTED

Please call, write, fax or email:

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