

MELCom–MELA Joint Conference Report

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The joint MELCom International and MELA Annual Conference took place from 25 to 27 January 2026 at the American University in Cairo. Held under the theme “*Reflecting on Our Past, Charting Our Future: Middle East Librarianship in Transition*,” the conference brought together librarians, archivists, and scholars working with Middle Eastern and Islamic collections from institutions across Europe, North America, and the Middle East.

The conference programme addressed a wide range of topics relevant to contemporary Middle East librarianship. Presentations explored historical perspectives on the development of Middle Eastern library collections, evolving practices in collection development, and current challenges related to cataloguing and metadata for multilingual materials. Particular attention was given to the preservation of rare materials and manuscripts, as well as to the increasing role of digital humanities projects and emerging technologies in supporting research and improving access to collections.

Among the sessions that were especially relevant for professional practice were discussions on the use of artificial intelligence and digital tools in cataloguing non-Latin script materials, as well as presentations addressing new approaches to digitisation and the management of specialised collections. These sessions demonstrated how technological developments are increasingly shaping the work of libraries dealing with Middle Eastern materials and how collaborative initiatives between institutions can help address shared challenges such as metadata standardisation, digitisation, and long-term preservation.

Beyond the formal programme, the conference provided an excellent opportunity for professional networking. Librarians and specialists from different institutional and regional contexts exchanged experiences regarding the management of specialised collections, access to rare materials, and the development of digital infrastructures supporting Middle Eastern studies. Informal discussions during breaks and social events created a particularly collegial atmosphere that encouraged the exchange of ideas and the establishment of new professional connections.

The location of the conference at the American University in Cairo offered an inspiring setting for these discussions. The conference coincided with the Cairo International Book Fair, one of the most significant publishing events in the Arabic-speaking world, which offered participants an additional opportunity to engage with the contemporary landscape of Arabic publishing and book production.

For colleagues who have not previously attended MELCom or MELA conferences, I would strongly recommend participation. These meetings offer a uniquely collaborative environment where librarians and scholars working with Middle Eastern collections can exchange knowledge, discuss shared challenges, and learn about new initiatives and tools that support research in the field.

Overall, the Cairo conference was both professionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating. It strengthened existing professional networks and created new connections among specialists working in Middle Eastern librarianship. I am very grateful for the support that made my participation possible and look forward to contributing to future MELCom and MELA activities.