

Report on Participation in the MELA/MELCom International Joint Annual Conference 2026

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I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to MELCom International and MELA for supporting my participation in the Joint Annual Conference held at the American University in Cairo from 25 to 27 January 2026. Receiving the grant made it possible for me to attend, present my work, and engage with a community of librarians, archivists, scholars, and cultural heritage professionals whose work is directly connected to the preservation, description, and accessibility of Middle Eastern collections.

The conference was an important professional and intellectual experience. It brought together participants from a wide range of institutions and geographic contexts, including university libraries, national libraries, research centers, archives, museums, and independent cultural initiatives. What made the conference especially valuable was that it did not approach Middle East librarianship as a narrow technical field, but as a living professional practice shaped by history, politics, language, technology, preservation needs, and community memory. Across the three days, the sessions demonstrated how librarianship in and about the Middle East is deeply connected to questions of access, representation, collaboration, and survival.

One of the strongest aspects of the programme was the attention given to collaboration across institutions and borders. The opening sessions showed how collections often exceed the capacity of a single institution and require shared expertise, shared infrastructure, and long-term cooperation. Presentations on the history of MELCom networks, the Women and Memory Forum, the Nizami Ganjavi manuscript project, the Maktabat al-Khanji Collection, and the digitization of visual legacies from Afghanistan all showed that collaboration is not only administrative; it is also intellectual and ethical. These examples were especially useful for thinking about how dispersed collections can be reconnected, described, and made accessible without removing them from their historical and cultural contexts.

The conference also gave considerable attention to rare materials, manuscripts, preservation, and digitization. Sessions on Central Asian Islamic manuscripts, Ottoman and Turkish collections, Coptic-Arabic lectionaries, the Comité de Conservation des Monuments archive, and Lebanese maps highlighted the urgency of safeguarding fragile materials while also making them discoverable for future research. For colleagues who have not previously attended MELA or MELCom, this is one of the most valuable aspects of the conference: it allows participants to learn not only from completed projects, but also from

projects still in progress, including their challenges, limitations, and methodological decisions.

Another important dimension of the conference was its engagement with the political conditions that shape collecting and access. Several papers addressed how conflict, censorship, displacement, and institutional precarity affect libraries and archives. The presentations on Palestine solidarity and DEI frameworks in an academic library, Lebanese maps in Japanese collections, dispersed Kurdish archives, and archival access in Egypt demonstrated that collection development is never neutral. These sessions were particularly relevant to my own work, because they showed how librarians and archivists must often negotiate between professional standards, local realities, political pressures, and the ethical responsibility to preserve endangered histories.

I was especially interested in the sessions on cataloging, metadata, multilingual collections, and emerging technologies. Presentations on Arabic metadata, AI-assisted cataloging, multilingual discovery, authority control, and digital humanities were highly relevant to current debates in the field. They showed both the promise and the limitations of new technologies. AI and digital tools can support access, metadata generation, and discovery, but they also require careful human review, cultural knowledge, and ethical frameworks, especially when dealing with Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, Kurdish, Coptic, and other Middle Eastern languages and scripts. These discussions were useful because they treated technology not as a replacement for librarianship, but as a tool that must remain accountable to professional expertise and community knowledge.

My own presentation, “The Upside-Down Archives World: Between Preservation and Destruction in Middle East Librarianship,” was part of the panel on archival practices and the preservation of community memory. In it, I reflected on the contradiction between the global celebration of archives, digital humanities, and preservation initiatives on the one hand, and the destruction, silencing, and targeting of archives, libraries, and cultural heritage in Palestine and Lebanon on the other. Presenting this work in the context of MELA/MELCom was particularly meaningful because the audience understood both the technical and political stakes of the subject. The discussion around community memory, ecological archiving, university archives, and endangered collections created a strong space for thinking about preservation not only as a professional activity, but also as an act of responsibility.

Beyond the formal sessions, the conference was also valuable for the professional connections it enabled. It provided an opportunity to exchange experiences with colleagues working on Middle East collections, archives, manuscripts, metadata, digital humanities, and preservation across different institutional contexts. These conversations were

important because they allowed me to learn from the expertise of others, share the challenges we face in Lebanon and Palestine, and identify possible areas for future collaboration. For grant recipients and early-career professionals in particular, this kind of networking is one of the most meaningful outcomes of attending MELA/MELCom, as it helps transform individual participation into longer-term professional exchange.

For colleagues attending for the first time, I would say that MELA/MELCom is more than a conference of formal presentations. It is a professional network where participants can meet colleagues working on similar problems across different institutional and national contexts. The conference is particularly useful for early-career librarians, archivists, and researchers because it offers exposure to practical case studies, current debates, and potential collaborations. I would encourage first-time participants to read the programme carefully in advance, attend sessions outside their immediate specialization, and use breaks and receptions to speak with presenters. Some of the most valuable exchanges happen informally, especially around shared challenges such as metadata standards, digitization priorities, language access, funding, and preservation under difficult conditions.

The organization of the conference was very strong overall. The American University in Cairo provided a welcoming setting, and the programme was rich, diverse, and intellectually coherent. The combination of formal panels, vendor presentations, receptions, lunches, and the gala dinner created opportunities for both academic exchange and professional networking. I also appreciated the multilingual dimension of the conference, including Arabic-language presentations alongside English and French contributions, as this reflected the linguistic diversity of the field.

Overall, attending the MELA/MELCom International Joint Annual Conference was a highly valuable experience. It strengthened my understanding of current work in Middle East librarianship, introduced me to new colleagues and projects, and allowed me to situate my own work within a wider regional and international conversation. I am grateful for the support that enabled my participation and hope to remain involved in future MELA and MELCom activities.