

Institution: University of St Andrews



Unit of Assessment: 21 – Politics and International Studies

Title of case study: The Institute of Middle East, Central Asian and Caucasus Studies (MECACS): Influencing this unstable region's triadic nexus of Policy Community, Civil Society and the Individual

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

The Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus (the MECAC region) houses some of the most intractable conflicts in the world that demand fresh ideas and proposals about building stable societies and economies. The Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies (MECACS) has co-ordinated underpinning research to grapple with these challenges, and its impact includes (a) the local and Western policy-making community reassessing their policies and behaviour in key areas of foreign policy-making and conflict resolution; b) reports, cultural artefacts and exhibitions that have been used by civil society activists and cultural entrepreneurs to strengthen inter-communal dialogue and reflection; and c) a radical improvement in the career opportunities of individuals and the sustainability of institutions of higher education. The research has encouraged diverse benefits to Western policy-makers and to a broad set of regional actors. Involving both the political and regional elites representing sectors of society, culture and education, the influence of the research has been penetrating, comprehensive and self-sustaining.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The underpinning research on the MECAC region addresses three principal interconnected themes: conflict management; foreign policy and intervention; and nation, states and identity. In each case the research combines theoretical paradigms with extensive fieldwork employing complex data sets, a mastery of local languages and intensive regional immersion. Findings therefore carry academic significance at the levels of both region and theory, and representative projects are summarised as follows.

Conflict Management and Peace-Building

Conflict is a tragic everyday reality for many parts of the MECAC region and the research undertaken under the umbrella of MECACS (formed in 2003) has sought to better understand its sources and resolution. Dr Rick Fawn (RF, Senior Lecturer, in post since 1995) has focused on secessionist conflicts in the South Caucasus, Professor Sally Nikoline Cummings (SNC, in post since 2003) on the establishment of order after revolution in Central Asia's Kyrgyz Republic and Professor Ray Hinnebusch (RH, in post since 1996) on the Syrian crisis. Key questions are the conditions in which Western intervention counters or reinforces local instability, and the local conditions that can build a sustainable peace. The key findings that underpinned the impact were: a) explanations of why electoral observation missions to countries attempting to democratize can have the paradoxical impact of strengthening local authoritarianism (R2, R3); b) establishing how Western governments can influence human rights and conflict resolution simultaneously (R4); and c) how international organizations are best structured and managed to influence the democratization agenda (R6).

Foreign Policy

In globalized and highly penetrated regional systems, and with substantial oil and mineral wealth, the states of the MECAC region negotiate their place as sovereign polities and economies. SNC (R7) demonstrated that factors of identity provided the limits of legitimate foreign behaviour and how within these limits output has been primarily driven by pragmatism not ideology. In 2013 RF formulated the concept of 'internal conditionality' for interactions between post-communist states and their inter-relations with pan-European international organisations. RH's Syrian economic and foreign policy nexus (R2) highlighted that significant economic reforms had been initiated but had not been consolidated due to absent political pluralisation, rule of law and excessive rent-seeking (R2). RH (in 2009) further studied the effects of generational change in Syria to lead to a better

understanding of the links between generation and foreign policy, enabling a deeper understanding of policy drivers particularly with the succession of Bashar al-Asad (2001-03). R1 explored the conditions (in a hurting stalemate) for effective political intervention in the 2011 Syrian Uprising and concluded that neither side was yet ready to compromise and, without this, intervention would require extensive long-term commitment of resources.

Nations, States and Identity

At the core of these research clusters of conflict and state-building exists the underlying challenge of constructing and managing identity. SNC (in 2006) looked into both the self-legitimation of elites and the ways in which collective memories of the past are negotiated by societies and leaders. She argues that early memories of state-building create path-dependency in the reform process. R1 on Turkey-Syria relations showed that trans-state interdependencies from shared water, trade and identity groups bridging the border moved from being seen as vulnerabilities to opportunities for mutual gain as the construction of identity changed from depicting the other as “enemy” to “friend.” The intersections of sub-state conflict, state interests and the efforts of IOs to mediate in post-Soviet conflicts involve nuanced understanding of assertions of rights and responsibilities (R3 and R4). In all cases, collective identities are produced and contested.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The following publications resulted from research projects funded by research or policy bodies and published in peer-reviewed journals or books by reputable international publishers.

(R1) R Hinnebusch, “Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy Between Regional Conflict and European partnership,” in *The Review of International Affairs*, v 3, n 1, winter 2003. DOI: [10.1080/1475355032000240676](https://doi.org/10.1080/1475355032000240676)

(R2) R Hinnebusch “Syria: From Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution?,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs) vol 88, no 1 (January, 2012), 95-113. DOI: [10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x)

(R3) R Fawn (ed.), *Georgia: Revolution and War*, published in *European Security* special issue (2012) and expanded as book (Routledge, 2013).

(R4) R. Fawn ‘The Kosovo – and Montenegro – Effect’, *International Affairs*, (Royal Institute of International Affairs) Vol. 84, No. 2 (March 2008), pp. 269-94. DOI: [10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00703.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00703.x)

(R5) S. N. Cummings, *Silent Witnesses* (30 minute documentary film) (as producer, director Mikhail Dudnikov) (2008), offshoot of: ‘Soviet Rule, Nation and Film: The Kyrgyz “Wonder Years”’ *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 15, No.4, October 2009, pp. 636–57. DOI: [10.1111/j.1469-8129.2009.00412.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2009.00412.x)

(R6) S. N. Cummings, *Domestic and International Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Tulip Revolution’* (Routledge, 2009) as editor, author of one, co-author of second chapter.

(R7) S. N. Cummings, ‘Eurasian Bridge or Murky Waters between East and West? Ideas, Identity and Output in Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (Vol. 19, No. 3, 2003), pp. 139-55. DOI: [10.1080/13523270300660021](https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270300660021)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of underpinning MECACS research has reached across the social and cultural elites of the Middle East and Central Asia and the Western policymaking leaders, and its significance is exemplified by three key beneficiaries: (i) Governments in the region who are formulating new foreign and security policies; (ii) the social and cultural elites who are playing a role in representing violence and conflict with a view to fostering greater dialogue about past, present and future political transformation; and (iii) individuals and institutions in higher education in the Caucasus and Central Asia that have faced momentous reform from a previous Soviet communist system. The research has encouraged diverse benefits to Western policy-makers and to the region’s own societies, cultures and individuals.

a) Benefits to the policy making community both in the West and the MECAC region itself by stimulating policy debate verbally or in written form

MECACS underpinning research has provided a particular brand of research increasingly used by the policy-making community. Unusually, therefore, MECACS research holds significance for

Western policy-makers and for those involved in policy in the region itself. Western think-tanks, government and intermediary organizations have deliberately sought out MECACS expertise to self-criticize, better inform and contextualize one-size-fits-all perspectives that often do not speak to the recipients of aid or intervention.

- RH has been regularly consulted by governments (Intelligence Council 2012) and Japan Cabinet Office on the peace process and engagement with Syria. His paper, *What Does Syria Want* (2006), was disseminated to US policy makers, stimulating a 2008 visit to St Andrews by intelligence analysts (R1, C1, C6).
- The Centre for Syrian Studies assembled an international conference of young scholars to discuss the Syrian Uprising (R1), with representatives of the UK and German foreign offices participating and thereafter influencing policy-makers (C2). According to the former UK acting head of mission in Damascus, the conference showed how “*the academic and policy worlds benefit from two-way conversation.*” In a 2008 Damascus Conference of over 50 participants the Centre brought together Syrian officials and researchers, publishing the results in *St Andrews Papers* (2012). According to the foreign affairs spokesman of the Syrian National Council, “*the Centre’s work is instrumental in informing the Syria debate.*” (C2)
- RF was invited, on the basis of ongoing research on South Caucasus conflicts since the 1990s (exemplified by R1 and R2), to write in 2012 the synthesis of meetings of all the parties run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Georgian MFA which was then distributed to conflict parties and to numerous European and North American governments and became of crucial importance for the next step of British engagement in a country that has seen the most intractable post-Soviet conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) (C5)
- RF made invited presentations and briefings at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the House of Commons, and served as the rapporteur for a high-level Georgian Foreign Ministry & FCO/Wilton Park-hosted international conference on the Caucasus conflicts in March 2012 and December 2013 (C5).
- Based on previous work (e.g. R3 and R4), Fawn was engaged as the international expert for a UK Conflict Pool-funded study of security and social conditions in Abkhazia since the Russian-Georgian war (2012). The completed report was presented to the international community in Georgia and to the authorities in Abkhazia and is serving as the basis for reconsideration of international aid and development programmes. (C5)
- SNC’s 2005 research on elites and state building has led to her being regularly consulted by the policy making and practitioner community on policy toward Central Asia, e.g. for the EU Commission (2008), US State Department (2009), large corporate actors (2010), Bertelsmann Stiftung (from 2008 annually) and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Development Office (from 2008 intermittently). The Royal Institute of International Affairs in November 2012 invited forty-five policy-makers, IO representatives, leading scholars, embassy representatives, international business representatives to discuss the findings of SNC’s book, *Understanding Central Asia*, partly to discuss how findings of such a book can best be translated into workable documents for policy-makers on the region, with a follow-up meeting in September 2013 (C4).

b) Benefits to constituents that observe or are party to conflicts or intercommunal violence with impacts on creativity, culture and society

MECACS underpinning research has benefitted those making policy and those striving to bring greater understanding between different factions involved in violence. RF’s UK Conflict Pool-funded analysis of living conditions in Abkhazia after the 2008 war is a critical example: it identified gaps in provisions by intergovernmental and INGO assistance and societal needs and provided the definitive basis for changing actual practice at the communal level. As a different mechanism, RF, with SNC, assembled in St Andrews MECACS seminars high-ranking representatives from countries across the Caucasus lacking diplomatic relations that were publically recorded (such as on embassy websites), for dialogue especially on another intractable conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh (C5). In 2009 SNC was invited to become a Director of the *Kyrgyz-British Society* (KBS), a not-for-profit organization where she regularly participates in cultural events that gather academics, policy-makers, NGOs and interested parties also raising money to benefit charitable organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic: in January 2012 the KBS raised £1,500 for an orphanage in Bishkek. SNC’s

research on identity and politics (R5) has led to the production of cultural artefacts (a 2008 documentary film, *Silent Witnesses*, produced by SNC) plus the enhancement of cultural presentation (an exhibition of visual art). It has proven useful also to cultural entrepreneurs and civil society organizations who are working to overcome inter-communal violence and poverty. Stakeholders involved in formulating cultural policy in the Kyrgyz Republic – Ministry of Culture, artists and local communities – invited SNC in 2008 and 2009 to hold several showings of *Silent Witnesses* and provide a neutral platform for discussion of sensitive political issues. The May 2013 London exhibition, *Ketsin! Art and Revolution in the Kyrgyz Republic*, that SNC curated and which ran over 4 days, benefits the artistic community whose output can be used both to increase in the West the overall profile and understanding of a small resource-poor state, the Kyrgyz Republic, and to serve the broader audience consumers who as a result more openly discuss pivotal political events, particularly after Kyrgyzstan 2010 inter-communal violence which left hundreds dead and hundreds of thousands displaced.

c) Benefits to individuals and institutions in the region's higher education sector

Finally, the underpinning MECACS research described in section 2 has influenced and abetted institution- and capacity-building in the MECAC region. SNC and RF participate multiple times a year in two of the Open Society Foundation's flagship programmes, Central Asia Research and Training Initiative (CARTI) and the Academic Fellowship programme (AFP), an involvement which began about 10 years ago. CARTI creates exceptional and transformational opportunities for individual researchers from the region; AFP engages in sustainable reform of academic departments across the region. In 2008 SNC produced an edited book (R6) as part of the AFP programme that for the first time exposed scholars in the Kyrgyz Republic's leading University (AUCA) to a rigorous peer-review process. A new research sabbatical scheme was adopted, and CARTI and AFP have overhauled entire curricula and introduced good academic practice among leading institutions of the country, navigating a difficult path from communism to post-communism. For example, SNC was asked to present to the AUCA's Academic Management Board a peer review teaching system, subsequently adopted. The Open Society's regional director (C3) writes (2011): *'Dr Cummings' input has been central in building up our flagship research development program in the social sciences and the humanities for the region of Central Asia and South Caucasus...she brings sincere interest, deep commitment and profound human connection to the colleagues in the region and their daily life and work experiences.'* The above measures constitute sustained and ongoing change to the fates of individuals and institutions.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

C1. Letter from Acting Head of mission, Damascus Syria, 11 Feb 2012, on the role played by the Syrian Studies Centre in assembling and conveying expertise on Syria that was found useful by the FCO.

C2. Letter from Foreign Affairs Spokesman, Syrian National Council, on the important role of the Centre in sponsoring dialogue and scholarship on Syria, 8 February 2012.

C3. Letter from Senior Program Manager, Higher Education Support Program, Open Society, Budapest, on how Cummings' research impacts on reform of the higher education sector in Eastern Europe.

C4. Letter from Director of Public Relations, International Visegrad Fund, on how Fawn's research influenced the 4-government Central European Visegrad capacity to influence EU practices towards Caucasus countries.

C5. Letter from Senior Adviser on Europe and Central Asia, Saferworld, and previously, 12 years in the Foreign Office as Head of Eastern Research Group, responsible for post-Soviet countries, on how Fawn's research is used by policy-makers to formulate policy regarding engagement with conflicts in the Caucasus.

C6. Hinnebusch's published piece that was widely circulated among US policy communities: <http://www.cna.org/research/2008/what-does-syria-want>, pdf.