

MIDDLE EAST FORUM

IMPACT: The Middle East Forum is a right-wing anti-Islam think tank that spreads misinformation, creates “watchlists” targeting academics, and advocates hawkish foreign policy. MEF provides funding to numerous anti-Muslim organizations and has provided legal services to a number of anti-Muslim activists including Geert Wilders and Tommy Robinson.

- The Middle East Forum (MEF) is a **non-profit organization led by Daniel Pipes, that “promotes American interests in the Middle East and protects Western values from Middle Eastern threats.”** It views the Middle East as an amalgam of “dictatorships, radical ideologies, existential conflicts...” and focuses on ways to defeat “radical Islam” abroad and “lawful Islamism” domestically. It pursues these goals through policy recommendations, public lectures, television appearances, and distributing about \$2 million annually in grants. The **Center for American Progress describes the MEF as a “controversial far-right think-tank that is known for its anti-Islam views and hawkish foreign policy recommendations.”**
- According to **2018 tax filings, the total functional expenses for the MEF were \$5,195,431.** The organization has provided hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to a number of anti-Muslim groups. **In 2012 and 2013, MEF gave nearly \$2.5 million to the Gatestone Institute. In 2015, MEF provided \$100,000 to Center for Security Policy (CSP) and \$10,000 to the David Horowitz Freedom Center (DHFC).** MEF has also provided grants to the Investigative Project on Terrorism and the American-Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD).
- In 2016 and 2018, MEF gave \$40,000 and \$25,000 respectively to the Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET), a “think tank and policy center with an unabashedly pro-America and pro-Israel stance” that provides briefings to Congress. Pipes, along with Frank Gaffney of CSP, are members of the organization’s advisory board. In the same year, MEF gave another \$36,000 to Defending America for Knowledge and Action (DAFKA), an organization headed by Lee Kaplan, an investigative journalist and contributor to Front Page Magazine, a project of the DHFC.
- The **MEF has received millions of dollars from Donors Capital Fund (\$6,768,000), William Rosenwald Family Fund, Middle Road Foundation, and Abstraction Fund (\$4,248,729).** These groups have also funded Investigative Project on Terrorism, Clarion Project, the DHFC, CSP, Jihad Watch and the AIFD.
- The **MEF and Pipes were cited numerous times in Anders Breivik’s manifesto detailing the far-right mass murderer’s motivations for his July 2011 attack that resulted in the death of more than 70 Norwegians.** Other individuals cited in the manifesto were Frank Gaffney, Steven Emerson, Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer.
- The MEF has a number of projects including Islamist Watch, Campus Watch, The Legal Project, Shillman/Ginsburg Writing Fellowship Program, Jihad Intel, Campus Speakers Bureau and Washington Project.
- Islamist Watch was created to stop “Islamists” in the West “quietly, lawfully, [and] peacefully ... [imposing] aspects of Islamic law, win[ning] special privileges for themselves, shut[ting] down criticism of Islam, creat[ing] Muslim-only zones, and depriv[ing] women and non-Muslims of their full civil rights.” It seeks to “widen the ‘war on terror’ from violent extremists to non-violent extremists” and pursues its goals through a number of avenues including “think tank research, textbooks, campus activities, the media, philanthropy, political lobbying, lawsuits, [and] feature movies.” An October 2019 piece by Dr. Andreas Krieg stated that “arguments about ‘Islamism’ have always been rooted in a racism and

MIDDLE EAST FORUM

irrational fear that conceives of the Muslim world as a flat surface to be treated as a threat—this hasn't changed." The article also argued that many western right-wing groups "make a living out of Islamist fear mongering," and specifically noted that **MEF has received money from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to host politically-motivated events.**

- *Islamist Watch* **contains a compilation of "extensive profiles of organizations, activists and clerics belonging [to] various Islamist networks."** Among the organizations listed are the **Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the largest Muslim civil liberties organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Council,** and the Muslims Student Association. CAIR has disputed such claims, but Islamist Watch continues to accuse it and other organizations of trying to infiltrate the U.S. and impose Islamic law, perpetuating the anti-Muslim trope that Islam is a political ideology that seeks to dominate the West through "stealth jihad," rather than a religion.
- *Campus Watch* "reviews and critiques Middle East studies in North America, with an aim to [improve] them" by critiquing the "teaching and scholarship of academic specialists." The project has been criticized by the Middle East Studies Association for its "defamatory attacks on educators and researchers in the field."
- In November 2002, ***Campus Watch* was involved in a controversy over its "blacklisting project" whereby it "posted 'dossiers' on eight scholars who ... criticize US foreign policy and the Israeli occupation.** In response, approximately 100 professors asked to have their names added to the list in opposition to the project. The "dossiers" were subsequently dropped from the page. However, *Campus Watch* continues to keep a list of recommended "Professors to Avoid" and a list of the professors who stood against the dossiers in 2002 under the title "Solidarity with Apologists"
- The goal of *Jihad Intel* is to educate "law enforcement and the general public with intelligence on radical Islam and Islamic terrorist groups" and to provide "local and state police with tools to connect the dots before major terrorist incidents."
- The *Legal Project* seeks to "protect researchers and analysts who work on the topics of terrorism, terrorist funding, and radical Islam from lawsuits designed to silence their exercise of free speech." In 2006, The *Legal Project* defended Steven Emerson in a lawsuit mounted against them by The Islamic Society of Boston, which alleged he and 16 others "waged a media war against the project." The lawsuit was later withdrawn, however. In June 2011, **Dutch anti-Islam politician, Geert Wilders was acquitted of inciting hatred against Muslims. Wilders thanked the Legal Project for their "help, advice and [assistance]," and the Legal Project acknowledged that it "worked on Wilders' behalf and has raised substantial funds for his defense."**
- In 2018, MEF stated it provided the funding for British anti-Muslim activist's, Tommy Robinson, legal defense through its Legal Project. Additionally, MEF organized two "Free Tommy" rallies, one of which turned violent. The think-tank also covered the travel costs of Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) who spoke at one of the rallies in London.
- *Washington Project* attempts to influence "U.S. policy ... through intensive in-person contacts in the capital." Its 2017 agenda included narrowing the definition of "Palestinian Refugee," increasing extreme vetting of Muslim immigrants, "defeating radical Islam," teaching law enforcement about Jihad, and improving Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs.

MIDDLE EAST FORUM

- In recent years, MEF has expanded its focus when it comes to international campaigns. In **September 2020, MEF announced that it had played a “key role” in influencing the Department of Justice’s decision to designate AJ+, a US-based subsidiary of Al Jazeera media network, to register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).** In response, *Al Jazeera* condemned the decision stating it “appears the designation was a precondition of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to “normalise” diplomatic ties with Israel.” **MEF stated that the designation was a result of a “multi-year effort by the Middle East Forum to counter Qatar’s toxic influence campaign in the U.S. through its media arm,”** and described the gulf kingdom as a “a malign Islamist influence across the globe.”
- MEF has continued to lead campaigns to restrict academic freedoms. In a September 2020 email sent to MEF’s listserv, **Gregg Roman, the director of MEF, stated the organization had “spurred federal investigations of Middle East Studies programs, working with the White House, Department of Education, and Congress** to hold to account: (i) the Duke/University of North Carolina consortium for Middle East Studies; (ii) Georgetown University; (iii) the University of Arizona; (iv) the University of California at Berkeley; and (v) Yale University.” A September 2019 piece in the *New York Times* focusing on the government’s inquiry into the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies described the investigation as “part of a far-reaching investigation into the program by the department, which under Betsy DeVos, the education secretary, has become increasingly aggressive in going after perceived anti-Israel bias in higher education.” A September 2019 piece in *Inside Higher Ed* stated that **the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) joined with 17 other scholarly associations and wrote a letter expressing “considerable concern and surprise” regarding the department’s intervention at UNC/Duke.** The letter stated, “Your letter, in tone and content, suggests an intention not only to significantly narrow the scope of Title VI activities, but also to micromanage them.”
- MEF’s research has been used to pursue politically-motivated campaigns targeting Muslim humanitarian organizations and organizations that entered into partnerships with them. In **May 2020, Sam Westrop, Director of MEF’s *Islamist Watch*, claimed that InterAction, the largest alliance of international NGOs and partners in the United States whose members include the American Red Cross, Islamic Relief USA, Oxfam America, and Save the Children, “works to lobby Congress on behalf of dangerous, bigoted Islamist charities tied to extremism and terror.”** In 2017, InterAction launched the Together Project, to “confront discrimination or targeted prejudicial regulations in the U.S. due to their operating principles or religious faith.” Westrop alleged that the project was really “a coalition of extremist-linked Islamist charities that work together under an InterAction banner,” with the “implicit goal...to stifle criticism of Islamist charitable fronts and undermine terrorism-finance laws.”
- MEF has **led numerous campaigns targeting Islamic Relief Worldwide, an international aid agency that provides humanitarian relief and development programmes in over 40 countries, repeatedly accusing the humanitarian relief agency of being tied to and/or supporting terrorism.** The Charity & Security Network has noted that **Islamic Relief has “been audited more than 500 times, none of which found any evidence to support these allegations” made by MEF** as well as a number of other anti-Muslim organizations. A 2018 article in *Civil Society News* involved an interview with then-chief executive of IRW, Naser Haghamed, who stated the audits took place in the last 10 years. In regards to the accusations of ties to terrorism, Haghamed stated, “we abhor terrorism and categorically deny any links with any terrorist organisation or individuals. We have lost staff to acts of terror and violence in many parts of the world – this has made us more determined to ensure that aid reaches its intended recipients and doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

MIDDLE EAST FORUM

- In recent years, **MEF has also produced commentary and been actively involved in the growing anti-Muslim movement in India.** In the September 2020 [email](#) from MEF to its supporters, Roman stated **the organization had provided research for a case in India's Supreme Court.** The case in question regards a t.v. show by *Sudarshan News* titled "UPSC Jihad," a t.v. program [claiming](#) to reveal how Muslims are "infiltrating government service." A September 2020 piece in *NewsLaundry*, [noted](#) that many of the claims in the show "have been borrowed from an [article](#) that appeared in *Firstpost* in late August," authored by Sam Westrop of MEF. In the August 2020 article, Westrop [claims](#) "radical Islamism makes use of international networks of support, and relies on infrastructure closely intertwined with civil society," and that today "western Islamist charities, funded by western governments and linked to international Islamist movements...operate throughout India."
- In **February 2021, the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC) issued a statement responding to the "ludicrous attacks" from MEF and its "Hindu American nationalist allies."** The statement [said](#) "Hindu nationalist front organizations in the US have entered into a collaboration with MEF, in order to blunt the impact of IAMC and other organizations advocating for the defense of human rights and religious freedom in India." The **statement was in response to an article published in the *Sunday Guardian Live* by Benjamin Baird, who works for MEF's *Islamist Watch* project, in which he claimed that IAMC had "forged allegiances with Islamists, including extremists with ties to murderous terrorist groups."** An earlier piece in December 2020 by Westrop [published](#) in *Newsweek* also accused IAMC of being an "Islamist group" with ties to "terrorist organization in India."
- In a **December 2017 [email](#) to the organization's listserv, Pipes discussed "Extreme Vetting of Muslim Immigrants," and announced that the MEF had "produced a detailed plan to identify and weed out Islamist immigrants, differentiating them from moderate Muslims."** Additionally, he stated that MEF had [met with](#) "eight senior Trump administration officials and the House and Senate committees on Homeland Security to discuss implementation of the plan," and that "a congressional bill is in the works." A June 2017 piece in the *Guardian* [noted](#) that legal experts warned that "extreme vetting" measures were giving rise to "discriminatory conduct by government officials, unlawful searches at border checkpoints and other constitutional violations."
- MEF employees have been involved in a number of legal proceedings as a result of their claims and conduct. In **2014, Westrop served as director of an organization called *Stand for Peace*, which published a piece on October 27, 2014 [falsely accusing](#) Mohamed Ali Harrath, the founder and CEO of the *Islam Channel*, of terrorism.** In **2017, a British court [ordered](#) Westrop to pay £140,000 in libel damages.** The Judge in the case [observed](#) that: "there was simply no evidence to support the allegation of terrorism" and stated that "the sum awarded should be such as to leave interested onlookers in no doubt as to the baselessness of the Defendants' charge against him." A 2017 [piece](#) in *Middle East Eye* noted that over the last few years *Stand for Peace* had "launched a stream of scathing attacks against Muslims...many of them well-known Islamic charities and other prominent figures."
- In **October 2019, Patricia McNulty, the former acting director of development/program director at the MEF [filed](#) a complaint against the MEF, Pipes, Roman, and Matthew Bennett, citing "discrimination, harassment, retaliation, and the hostile work environment" which ultimately led to her "unlawful termination."** A November 2019 [piece](#) in the *Pennsylvania Record* notes that McNulty "claims she was paid more than \$34,000 less per year than her male counterpart with the same job in addition to being subjected to sexual assault and harassment by her male supervisor." The **lawsuit [stated](#) that Roman sexually assaulted McNulty,** and that throughout her employment McNulty

MIDDLE EAST FORUM

would have to contend with Roman’s “inappropriate sexually suggestive conduct and comments.”

There have been a number of other lawsuits alleging employment discrimination against the MEF, Pipes, Roman, and Bennett, including one filed by Lisa Barbounis, who was listed as a witness in McNulty’s lawsuit. The lawsuit stated that Barbounis, who held the title of Executive Liaison at MEF, was subjected to a “campaign of sexual harassment and abuse” by Roman. It also stated that “because of the severe discrimination and harassment” to which he subjected Barbounis to, Roman “was forced to discontinue visiting MEF headquarters” in Philadelphia.

Bridge Initiative Factsheet