

## **45<sup>th</sup> MELCom International Conference – Aga Khan Library report**

MELCom International, the European Association of Middle East Librarians, aims to foster international cooperation among individuals and institutions involved in all aspects of Middle East librarianship, book collecting, the book trade, and publishing. To support its aims, it celebrates an Annual Conference that draws librarians, academics, and entrepreneurs engaged with Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African collections.

Reflecting its cosmopolitan reach, a library supporting research and teaching on relevant fields for MELCom hosts the Conference each year. In previous years, the Conference has been held in Antalya (Türkiye), Constantine (Algeria), Kazan (Russia) and several European cities.

The last time MELCom International took place in London was in 1997 when SOAS held the Annual Conference. In 2023, as proof of its efforts and relevance to the European library community, the Aga Khan Library was invited to host the 45th MELCom International Conference the following year. After a twenty-seven-year absence from London and seven since the last time a British institution hosted it, MELCom International returned to the United Kingdom.

The 45th Annual MELCom International Conference has been a memorable event, highlighting the significant impact and appeal of the Aga Khan Library. As a hybrid conference, it drew over 110 attendees from 23 countries, with 87 colleagues travelling to London and 38 attending MELCom International for the first time. These numbers underscore the library's role in fostering international collaboration and knowledge exchange. In addition to our librarian and academic colleagues, we were joined by 11 international publishing houses and content providers who sponsored the event.

The mark of a successful conference, however, is not only the number of attendees but also the quality and quantity of presentations delivered. The 45th MELCom International Conference exceeded all expectations in this regard. The program featured 37 presentations, and for the first time in MELCom International's history, the Aga Khan Library organized parallel sessions to accommodate them all. These engaging presentations covered a wide range of topics, from the conservation and preservation of manuscripts and artefacts to digital humanities projects applied to library collections, the history and development of specialized libraries, and the trafficking of looted texts. Additionally, the Aga Khan Library introduced an innovative panel discussion to examine the role of new technologies, particularly AI, in libraries and the evolution of librarianship.

As is customary for MELCom International, the hosting institution arranges social events during the Conference. After the afternoon sessions, the Aga Khan Library provided a comprehensive overview of its collections and guided tours of the Aga Khan Centre and Gallery, featuring a presentation by its curator on the current Quran exhibition. On May 17th, the Aga Khan Library organized an excursion to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, which included an hour-long tour, lunch, and free time to explore the park. The day concluded with a cruise along the Thames, ending at Westminster Pier.

As part of its welcoming environment, the Aga Khan Library arranged lunch for the participants, offering them a glimpse of the culinary variety available in London. The lunches on the first two days featured an assortment of Levantine specialities, and the third provided a Pakistan-style delicious biryani. The Aga Khan Library hosted a canapé reception on the first night, providing a perfect opportunity for new and old colleagues to network and socialize. On the evening of May

15th, the attendees were treated to an extraordinary Yemeni culinary experience at Queen of Sheba, a much-beloved restaurant.

As always, the Conference concluded with a business meeting. The President of MELCom introduced the new treasurer and revealed that the 46th MELCom International Annual Conference will happen in Paris, hosted by Sorbonne Nouvelle Université—Paris 3.

The Aga Khan Library is quite proud of the success of this Conference, but an event like this could only happen with many people's help. We are indebted to the MELCom International executive committee for their support. We are also grateful to all the researchers who submitted their abstracts at the call for papers and the MELCom International scientific committee for selecting many engaging presentations.

Most significantly, we are grateful for all the presenters, moderators, and participants, without whom the Conference would not be possible. Lastly, gratitude is due for the support of our institutions and colleagues: the Institute of Ismaili Studies, Aga Khan University, Aga Khan Centre's events team, the IT team, all the student and TKN volunteers and guides, and, of course, the unwavering Aga Khan Library team.