

**MELA Statement on Collection
Development, Access, and
Equity in the Time of COVID-19**
In response to the SALALM Resolution:
MELA Statement on Collection
Development, Access, and Equity
in the Time of COVID-19

This statement has been endorsed by the Board of Directors for the Middle East Studies Association (MESA).

<https://mesana.org/advocacy/letters-from-the-board/2020/06/23/statement-on-collection-development-access-and-equity-in-the-time-of-covid-19>

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced significant operational and financial challenges for libraries and other institutions committed to preservation and access for documentary heritage.

As library specialists engaged in the work of collection development and collection access in support of the study and appreciation of the communities, cultures, and languages of the Middle East (Southwest Asia), North Africa, and their diasporas, we in the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA) share the concerns around equity, representation, and access raised by our colleagues in the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM) in their Task Force Resolution issued 10 June 2020.

SALALM Resolution: Collection Development in the Time of COVID-19

<https://salalm.org/salalm-resolution-collection-development-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

Keywords: Access, collection development, COVID-19, equity, funding, libraries, Middle East

As is the case in Latin America and the Caribbean and elsewhere across the Global South, the majority of publications from the Middle East (Southwest Asia), North Africa and the diasporas are print-only, and are not available in electronic formats. Therefore, collecting policies which prefer electronic acquisitions at the expense of print risk excluding from their growing collections a significant portion of the cultural and scholarly production of these regions. Such policies threaten the diversity of representation in library collections by further marginalizing already marginalized voices.

Furthermore, such policies jeopardize the work of regional vendors. The strength and excellence of our collections rely on the expertise of vendors who have been working in the region for decades. Many of these vendors are small businesses. Failing to continue acquiring from these vendors puts them at risk of folding. Losing these vendors will considerably weaken our libraries' ability to meet the needs of our users.

Therefore, MELA urges libraries to preserve funding allocations for acquiring material from the region (particularly directly from regional vendors) and for expertly processing this material for better access and discovery.

We endorse the SALALM Resolution and offer the following addenda for consideration:

Whereas funding for expert library specialists responsible for selecting and processing collections might be under threat;

Whereas libraries have significant print collections which are not easily accessible to off-campus and international users;

Whereas the impending budget cuts are expected to reduce travel funding;

- We urge libraries to protect funding to maintain the expert staffing necessary to conduct rich collection development and the processing required to ensure that collections are accessible;
- We urge libraries to expand collaborative efforts toward digital and enhanced physical access to collection materials through partnerships and consortia focused on cooperative collection development, cooperative cataloguing, and digitization. To this end, we applaud CRL's proposed initiative of focused community conversations about collections, budgets, and collaboration. Furthermore, we urge libraries to maintain their commitment to existing collaborative initiatives such as CRL's Middle East Materials Project (MEMP), Arabic Collections Online (ACO) and the Library of Congress's Cooperative Acquisitions Program, to name a few. Doing so will ensure diversity and access to collections from a region often underserved and misunderstood.

- Further, while travel in the midst of a pandemic presents a serious risk, we urge libraries to preserve funding for international trips intended for collection development and networking. Such trips are necessary for acquiring books, journals, videos, sound recordings and ephemeral materials, and for the development of strategic partnerships furthering collection access through potential digitization projects.

We also encourage collaboration and further discussion with other organizations working with international collections at a national and international level. MELA is calling on the Middle Eastern Studies Association, the American Oriental Society, Middle East Medievalists, and other scholarly associations and organizations whose members are working in and on the Middle East, North Africa, and the diasporas to advocate for the need for strong national collections of materials from the region.

In these uncertain times, strong national area studies collections allow researchers to continue their scholarly and creative work. Moreover, strong national collections in terms of coverage and number of available copies enable better access to materials from the Middle East (Southwest Asia), North Africa, and the diasporas. This access can contribute to increasing equity in the field of Middle Eastern studies and well beyond. We are particularly concerned that research materials and resources will be concentrated in a handful of wealthy, often private, institutions. Commitment to area studies in general and to Middle East studies librarianship in particular is also instrumental for maintaining diverse and inclusive collections that reflect and support the wide ranging scholarly and creative interests of our users.