

THE  
Clara Marina  
O'Donnell  
FELLOWSHIP



2014-2024

◇ **The Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellowship was established in 2014 in memory of Clara, who was working at CER in London and Brookings in Washington DC when, at the age of 30, she died of cancer.** ◇

The fellowship was an initiative conceived by these two think tanks, and by the two universities where Clara had studied – Cambridge, and King's College London. These institutions have sponsored, supported and conducted the fellowship since then.

Every year, it provides a six-month opportunity for a young researcher in international relations – Clara's area of expertise - to spend time at these institutions, to further their own research, to widen their connections, and to publish.

The first ten fellows have kindly offered their thoughts on what it meant for each of them, professionally and personally, for this compilation.

Fuller details of the Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellowship can be found on the CER website at <https://www.cer.eu>

**Clara's obituary is online at**

*<https://www.cer.eu/personnel/clara-marina-odonnell>*

# The Ten Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellows



2014-2015

**Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy**

2019-2020

**Khrystyna Parandii**

2015-2016

**Sophia Besch**

2020-2021

**Katharine Pye**

2016-2017

**Luigi Scazzieri**

2021-2022

**Megan Ferrando**

2017-2018

**Noah Gordon**

2022-2023

**Helmi Pillai**

2018-2019

**Leonard Schütte**

2023-2024

**Christina Kessler**



## Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy



**Getting the fellowship was a dream come true for me. I had moved to London to pursue a postgraduate degree in European studies, so joining the best think tank in London for a fellowship after the degree was really the icing on the cake.**

**T**he fellowship meant so much to me - it was a rare opportunity to learn from the best. Ian, Charles, and the rest of the team are the crème de la crème when it comes to think tank writing, and I learned so much from their rigour and analytical thinking. It was a tough, intellectually stimulating

experience.

Beyond the research, the think tank was a platform to hear world leaders. In six months, I attended events with Alexander Stubb, Carl Bildt, and Macron (back then I believe he was the finance minister) - it was really like walking on clouds for several months.

The visit to Brookings was mind-blowing - and it happened during the 2015 elections in Israel, so there were lots of relevant events. I also met our dear and now famous Fiona one-on-one (her book is on my bookshelf, catching my eye as I write).

On a personal level, after a year in London, I had still felt like a “foreigner,” with a foreign name and accent. But CER opened the doors for me, paving the way to access the local job market - and this was priceless. Eventually, for personal reasons, we decided to return to Israel after the fellowship ended.

I know it's a cliché, maybe because I was the first fellow, or maybe because I felt some kind of connection (both of us interested in Israeli politics, etc.) - but Clara's presence was very palpable during my fellowship, and I still think about her a lot.

When I returned to Israel, my experience in a think tank like the CER helped me into posts at the British Council, then in highly competitive roles at the Israeli State Comptroller, and later at Google, with the Global Affairs and Public Policy Teams. The skills learnt - how to be concise, avoid passive

voice (I remember Charles saying that “only journalists use passive voice...”) and how to be bold.

So many great memories from my time in London, spending time with bright people, the family of friends who worked with Clara and loved her so much - Charles, Ian, John, Simon, and the great researchers at Brookings.

I am still in touch with Ian, but it is more challenging to keep up with all the fellows, and I don't know all of them. I know people are spread all over the world, but it would be great to set up a virtual meeting to get to know one another and strengthen our network. Even perhaps with Charles, Ian, Fiona... each of us sharing some memories and updates about our lives?



## Christina Kessler



**As I write this, I have just started as the tenth Clara Marina O'Donnell fellowship six weeks ago. I had known about the fellowship for some time, and I had heard from previous fellows how great their experience with it had been (funnily enough, when Megan moved to London in 2021 to commence her fellowship, I moved to Brussels for the first time - taking over her old room).**

**S**o when I received the news that I had been selected as the tenth fellow, I was incredibly excited - but frankly, also quite scared at the thought of leaving my life in Brus-

sels behind. There were not many things that I would have moved from Brussels (rainy and grey, but full of familiar faces) to London (rainy and grey, but with none of my friends) for. But I did.

And now, six weeks later, I am so happy I did. There is the CER team, of course. It is one thing to work with people who are so good in what they do, and so competent in their areas of expertise. I am appreciative of that. But I am even more glad to work alongside people who are kind and are just overall amazing colleagues on a human level - who are welcoming, understanding, and don't make a big deal out of someone, e.g. let's say, accidentally almost setting fire to the microwave within only her second week.

There is London, too. Honestly, I did not expect to like it as much as I do. What a great city (especially when the sun is out)! Every time I walk to the CER office and pass by Westminster, I think it is crazy I get to go to work here. I am trying to take it in as much as I can - the museums, the parks, the filming locations of '90s rom-coms...

Professionally, I am learning so much. I attend events organized by other think tanks and universities, listen to the guests who visit us at CER, and see the work my colleagues are doing. Having the freedom to dive into my topics of choice. And I don't just get to learn, I also get to do things. I am

proud that I got to give opening remarks at a roundtable on security two weeks ago - the first time I did something like this! I am proud that I got to publish a piece about the recent German state elections online! It's not all easy - I was anxious ahead of the roundtable and I am still learning how to formulate such a thing as policy recommendations. But the fellowship is allowing me to do things I am unfamiliar with, to push myself, and to grow.

I never met Clara, but I have learned some things about her in the past weeks. She was incredibly accomplished despite her young age, having achieved quite a big deal. She must have been a sharp thinker, very intelligent. I learnt that she was outspoken, and feminist in her thinking. Clara cared about injustice and wanted to make the world a better place. She was an advocate for the causes she believed in. I am proud to be part of a programme that honours her memory and I hope that there will be many more Clara fellows in the years to come.



## Luigi Scazzieri



**It feels like a long seven years ago when I started my Clara O'Donnell fellowship in October 2016. After my six months were over, I was offered to stay on as a Research Fellow at CER, and have been here ever since. That makes it difficult for me to separate the fellowship itself from the years that followed.**

**D**uring my time as fellow I was very conscious of the fellowship's link to Clara. I myself had read and greatly appreciated many of her pieces in the years before I applied for the fellowship. Some of the people I met had known Clara and were willing to share some thoughts with me about her life and remarkable career. I am very happy that the fellowship has continued to honour her memory for so long.

I can confidently say that the fellowship was - and remains - very unique, and that it had a defining impact on my career. The Fellowship gives a young researcher, often with quite limited experience, the opportunity to enter the world of foreign policy with significant status. This is a rare opportunity, and even more rare because of the freedom that the CER gives its researchers, including the O'Donnell fellows. Having seen many other fellows go through the fellowship, I think it has also benefitted them and enriched their careers, albeit in different ways. I always sought to help them navigate their time at the CER and how to approach relations with Brookings, Cambridge and King's.

Personally, I had worked in think tanks before (CEPS and IISS), but not with the same degree of autonomy and professional profile as during the fellowship. In previous engagements I had been working for someone else rather than writing for myself under my own name. But in the first few weeks of my fellowship I ended up writing an op-ed for The Guardian, which I would never have imagined. I had never been to the US, and was delighted to spend a week in DC as part of the fellowship, digging into

what change Trump would bring to US foreign policy in the Middle East. Being involved in the CER's work was invaluable in allowing me to meet researchers, officials and political figures that I otherwise would never have met.

In retrospect, without the fellowship, I think it would have been difficult for me to enter the world of think tanks. That was always my professional aim, but I can see that the road was full of difficulties and that I was able to avoid many of the early ones due to the fellowship. Without it, I may well have ended up giving up and taking a less rewarding professional path.



# Sophia Besch & Noah Gordon



We expect that we are the only Clara Marina O'Donnell fellows to write this commemoration jointly. There is a reason for that: the Clara fellowship brought us together, not only as scholars and members of the CER family but as spouses and part of our own family.

**W**e both came to the CER London office as Clara fellows, fell in love, and later got married. Our little family has grown by one with the arrival of our first child in November 2023. Without all that Clara achieved, the people she inspired, and the fellowship created to honor her, we never would have met, and that would have been a very sad thing.

Of course, the Clara fellowship did more than help us find love. It also earned us a place as scholars of foreign policy. Sophia used her fellowship to launch the CER podcast and make professional connections, among them meeting the supervisor of her PhD. Working at the CER for over six years, first in London and then in the CER's Berlin office, she still draws every day on all she has learned from her CER colleagues. Noah used his fellowship to build his profile and get an offer to work in the DGAP in Berlin, so that he and Sophia could move to Berlin together and continue working in the fields that they and Clara so enjoyed. Now that both of us are working at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington DC, we have the opportunity to go next door to Brookings for the yearly presentation of the Clara fellow.

It is remarkable to hear how people who knew her, like Constanze Stelzenmueller and Fiona Hill, still speak so reverentially and emotively of Clara.

It is a shame that we didn't get to meet Clara, and we are deeply grateful for her making such an impact in her all-too-short life. We – like our daughter who has now joined this world – are among the many beneficiaries of the legacy of Clara.



Credits : MSC / Kuhlmann

## Leonard Schütte



**I was the Clara Fellow at the CER 2018-2019 during the climax of the Brexit negotiations (protests for and against taking place outside the CER's London offices daily).**

**B**ut Brexit was only one of the seminal political developments unfolding during my fellowship: Donald Trump's escalating rhetoric toward Europeans; exacerbating relations between the US and China; and surging right wing extremism to name but a few. In this context of upheavals, the fellowship introduced me to the opaque world of think tanks that endeavour to make sense of such

developments and devise policies to cope with them.

Entry-level positions in think tanks are extremely rare. Entry-level positions with the kind of support from both from the CER – in particular, in person of Ian Bond and Charles Grant – but also other institutions like Brookings are virtually non-existent outside the Clara fellowship. I was privileged to spend nine months at the CER.

This period was extremely formative, inspiring, and laid the foundation for my career. There is no way that without the fellowship I would be where I currently am (both professionally and intellectually).

During the fellowship, I learned to write concisely and for decision-makers, a skill hardly honed at universities. I was taught to conduct myself in diplomatic settings. And the many trips to Brussels, Washington DC and beyond created an invaluable network of fascinating people around the world, which I am still drawing from today. The fellowship also cemented my intellectual interests in EU foreign and defence policy, the rise of China, and transatlantic relations. And it was the fellowship that created the ambition to pursue a career in the think tank world.

After the fellowship, I embarked upon a PhD project as I felt it a necessity to further my research skills to obtain a permanent position as a think tanker. Once again, the fellowship inspired both my subject choice (the crises of multilateralism as manifest in Brexit, Trump's opposition toward NATO, and Russia's challenge to the OSCE) and opened doors in Brussels and DC to interview key deci-

sionmakers during these momentous times.

Since September 2022, I have been a researcher at the Munich Security Conference, a position I would not have obtained (stated so explicitly) without my previous experience as Clara fellow. Here, I continue trying to pursue the ambition of the Clara fellowship: inform policymaking for the better. I am pleased that I still remain in close contact with many former CER colleagues.

Wherever I have introduced myself as a (former) Clara fellow, I have encountered people who remembered her and expressed their appreciation for her life's work. Looking at the trajectory of the CER fellows, the fellowship has become one of the premier opportunities for young think tankers in Europe. In light of the dangerous geopolitical developments across the globe, there has rarely been a greater need for sober, research-informed policy advice. The Clara fellowship has prepared, and I am certain will do so in the future, a cohort of young people to face this daunting task. I could not imagine a better way to honour Clara's name.



## Khrystyna Parandii



**I had the honour of being a Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellow in 2019-2020, and it has been a formative experience for me and a dream coming true.**

**T**he fellowship provided me with a precious opportunity to deepen my expertise in the topics of my choice, sharpen my analytical and writing skills, and network with the brightest minds on both sides of the Atlantic. The freedom to explore different foreign policy aspects helped me to define the direction of my future career de-

velopment and motivated me to continue my career in international relations and diplomacy.

After my fellowship, during which I focused on the EU's foreign and development policies, I continued my professional journey as Political Officer at the Swedish Embassy in Ukraine and later - as Senior Project Officer for Human-

itarian Disarmament at Dutch peace organisation PAX. At the same time, the rigorous editing process at the CER and inspiring example of my colleagues' excellence, from whom I had the privilege to learn, prepared me very well for the next stages of my research career, including in my capacity as non-residential fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The Clara Marina O'Donnell fellowship moved the boundaries of what I thought was possible for a young foreign policy researcher's journey: from the opportunity to represent and cooperate with the leading transatlantic think-tanks and researchers to the incredible experience of living in London, which has now become my favourite city in the world.

But the more I learned about Clara herself, the more I realised how much this idea of moving the boundaries of the possible was a characteristic of her own life, despite her young age: publishing groundbreaking research, earning a reputation in both Europe and the US, advocating innovative policy developments ahead of the curve, like Clara did with regard to EU defence cooperation. As a

Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellow, I felt tremendous responsibility to live up to the standards of excellence set by Clara in her own work, and this motivated me to keep working and growing in this professional domain.

This January, I am turning 30 - the same age Clara was when she tragically passed away. At this age, there is so much energy and excitement about all the personal and professional breakthroughs that are yet to be achieved. From my many conversations with colleagues from the CER and Brookings, I have a feeling that this is exactly the attitude Clara had in the course of her journey, with her ambitions, brilliant ideas, vibrancy and devotion.

Approaching this age myself, I have an even deeper comprehension of how heartbreaking and unfair it was that Clara's journey ended so early—at the point in life when there is still a sense of the beginning and vast horizons ahead. However, Clara's legacy lives on, through new generations of foreign policy researchers inspired by her example. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to have been one of them.



## Katherine Pye



**The fellowship felt like the first job where my professional opinion was genuinely valued and I was given the space to grow as a researcher. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity.**

**C**lara's fellowship is such a rare and special chance for young professionals in foreign policy to get their first break, to be properly mentored, and to be published on a prestigious platform. I have just returned from Bamako, Mali, where I was researching EU peacebuilding, and people I met

there had read my CER policy brief on the Sahel.

Foreign policy analysis and research is a particularly tough – and often male dominated – career to break into, where strong connections to other researchers and practitioners are very difficult to make for young people starting

out. As a woman, I have sometimes lacked the confidence to speak with authority on the issues I researched.

The fellowship allowed me to forge links with influential institutions in the foreign policy world connections, and it sharpened the skills to produce high-quality research. The CER editorial process taught me to communicate succinctly and with nuance.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from travelling to make connections in person, I met numerous contacts online - and therefore perhaps more people than I could have in short trips to Brussels or Washington DC. Ian Bond helped me make connections to high-profile diplomats involved in the peace process in Mali, and a Nigerian development practitioner in Washington gave me insights that informed my policy brief on Europe's intervention in the Sahel conflict. He even took part in a CER podcast with me to discuss my findings – and has become a great mentor.

After an interval working at the EU Council, I am now following up my masters by pursuing a PhD in international relations at the London

School of Economics, focusing on why EU investments of the EU in the Sahel conflict have not produced their desired results.

I have met researchers and practitioners from a range of backgrounds, and all who knew Clara shared a deep admiration of her work and achievements. During my fellowship, I felt I got a sense of her spirit - her passion, her intellect, her spontaneity and also her sense of humour. Through her own multinational background and her mastery of languages she seemed to have a brilliant ability to connect with people from a range of backgrounds and act as a bridge to explain complex issues from the Euro crisis to Israel-Palestine in a concise and accessible way. As another young woman interested in European foreign policy, Clara has greatly inspired me to have the confidence to speak up for myself and to make the most of every opportunity that comes my way.

The Clara Marina O'Donnell Fellowship was one of the most exciting opportunities I've had in my career. Without it, the confidence I now have to pursue full time research, and the quality of access it provided, would have been impossible. I shall always be grateful.



## Helmi Pillai



**I had the enormous privilege to be the Clara Marina O'Donnell fellow at the Centre for European Reform from October 2022 to April 2023.**

**M**y six months at the CER were some of the most rewarding of my career so far, both professionally and personally. The fellowship opened doors I could have only dreamt of, especially so early on in my career. Before I had even officially finished my postgraduate studies, I was given the opportunity to plan, conduct and publish my own research - a significant milestone for a young researcher like myself.

The fellowship also gave me the opportunity to visit two of the main political capitals in the world: Brussels and Washington DC. I especially cherish my week at the Brookings Institution, where I got to meet so many brilliant people and take part in fascinating events. Furthermore, I had the chance to present my research at such esteemed venues as the University of Cambridge and the FCDO, which I certainly would not have expected to be doing only a few months after my graduation.

However, what I value the most of all was the opportunity to work alongside CER's world-leading experts and learn directly from them. Few aspiring researchers get the opportunity to have the likes of Ian Bond and Charles Grant - as well as all the other incredible researchers at the CER - personally read and guide you through your work.

The fellowship is truly one of a kind. There is quite simply nothing else like it out there. I am profoundly grateful for the invaluable experiences and knowledge it provided me. It has been a pivotal chapter in my career, allowing me to go on to further work in my chosen field of foreign policy analysis

in my current role at the Embassy of Finland.

While I do not know yet where my career will take me in the long term, I know that the lessons I learned and the friendships I made will support me in whatever path I choose to pursue in the future.

Although I sadly never had the chance to meet Clara, I got to meet her colleagues, friends and family during the fellowship. So many people came up to me specifically to tell me how much Clara meant to them and to share stories about just how brilliant and special she was. Needless to say, I feel deeply honoured to be part of something bearing her name.



## Megan Ferrando



**I feel honoured at the opportunity to share my contribution to Clara's memorial at this personal and emotional time. Three words best describe my time as a Clara fellow: growth, excitement, and inspiration.**

**G**rowth, because this was a real professional awakening. Research, in particular on the EU and foreign policy, had long been an ambition, but I knew how rare opportunities were for young

professionals to conduct and publish their own research, and I honestly did not know how to enter this field.

The Clara fellowship offered just this opportunity, with the freedom to dig into my topics of interest - water scarcity and conflict - and to discover that this was what I really wanted to continue working on. It made possible the contact with the think-tank for which I have now been publishing research on climate-water-conflict issues for more than a year, and helped clarify the eternal question 'what type of work do you want to do?'

The excitement was new impressions, new people, new ways of seeing the world. I worked with wonderful colleagues at the CER on topics I was not yet familiar with, was pushed beyond my comfort zone to give a presentation at Oxford, travelled to the US for the first time to meet fascinating Brookings colleagues... As I had once mentioned to Ian, there was not a single Sunday evening when I was not looking forward to going to work the next morning. The feeling of constant learning and growth gave me an energy for which I will always be grateful.

Inspiration came from the realisation, during my week at Brookings, how important Clara was and is for her colleagues in DC - an important and emotional moment. Her for-

mer colleagues came to see me to share their memories about Clara, talk about her achievements, and to say how delighted they were that the fellowship existed.

For her to have left such a mark that her colleagues would speak about her with so much pride and passion was truly inspiring. It gave me a strange feeling of closeness to a person I was never lucky enough to meet. And it made me feel proud to hear her colleagues, both in DC and in London, talk about how passionate, smart and kind she was - and that these were personality traits they were looking for in Clara fellows.

This combination of amazing colleagues, exciting career prospects, and the love and consideration for Clara meant that I felt supported during the fellowship. More than a career opportunity, the fellowship felt personal, rooted in a combination of past, present and future in the CER family. It has helped me grow, learn, and discover - and has let me also make my small contribution to the memory of Clara.

◇ The Centre for European Reform, CER, is an independent, private nonprofit think tank with offices in London, Brussels and Berlin, focused on the European dimension of international affairs. ◇

*[www.cer.eu](http://www.cer.eu)*

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit think tank in Washington DC. Its Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE) offers independent research and recommendations on developments in Europe and global challenges that affect trans-Atlantic relations. ◇

*[www.brookings.edu/centers/center-on-the-united-states-and-europe/](http://www.brookings.edu/centers/center-on-the-united-states-and-europe/)*

◇ The Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at Cambridge University provides teaching and research within politics and international studies. Nearly 600 undergraduates and more than 350 graduate students from over 30 countries are currently enrolled. ◇

*<https://www.polis.cam.ac.uk/about-us>*

The Department of European & International Studies at King's College London focuses on analysis of European integration and governance, especially economic and monetary union and foreign policy, as well as international political economy. ◇

*<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/eis/about>*

# Acknowledgements



*Clara's family wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the role of the people who have made – and continued to make – the Fellowship possible, particularly Charles Grant and Ian Bond of CER,*

*Fiona Hill, Constanze Stelzenmüller, Andy Moffatt,*

*Natalie Britton and Ted Reinert at Brookings,*

*Peter Neumann and Christophe Meyer at King's College London, and Chris Hill, Geoffrey Edwards and Julie Smith at Cambridge.*

*And of course the readiness of the first ten Fellows to contribute their reflections is deeply appreciated.*

*The design of this brochure has been created by Roberto Salvador,  
as his own tribute to his life-long friend Clara.*