Arab Activist Life-Writing

Twice-weekly 75-minute classes for 15 weeks

The facts of history often leave us wondering about what motivated people to choose one path over another. We'll read personal histories by (or occasionally about) academics, reluctant revolutionaries, ordinary people, and their families. We'll start with Palestinians of the Nakba and the diaspora, marginalized Jewish voices of Israel, Egyptian voices of the diaspora and the 2011 Revolution, Syrian voices from a decade of civil war, and finally the voices of Gazan youth. Our conversations will focus on what we found most emotionally resonant about each life story, and what challenged our preconceptions about the region and its history.

Class Culture: On the first day of the class, we will develop together our specific, concrete expectations for how we will demonstrate respect and inclusion for all of our classmates, and how we will hold each other accountable when we fall short of our own expectations. All participants will be expected to respect those shared norms.

Schedule

Week	Tuesday	Thursday	Assignment(s)
1	Norm-setting, Introductions	Arab American performance poetry: Suheir Hammad and Omar Offendum	
	Palestine		
2	*Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024) by Isabella Hammad	*Out of Place: A Memoir* (2000) by Edward Said	Mini-memoir
3	*Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (2008) by Raja Shehadeh	Raja Shehadeh interview on the Makdisi Street podcast	Final project proposal; Mini-memoir responses
4	excerpts from *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) by Ghada Karmi	excerpts from *They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom* (2022) by Ahed Tamimi and Dena Takruri	Reflection on Palestine
	Israel/Palestine		
5	*Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew* (2024) by Avi Shlaim	Avi Shlaim interview on the Makdisi Street podcast	Project Proposal responses
6	*Tracing Homelands: Israel, Palestine, and the Claims of Belonging* (2023) by Linda Dittmar	Checking in and catching up	Reflection on Jewish Palestine
	Lebanon		
7	*Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi* (2013) by Anbara Salam Khalidi and Tarif Khalidi		Final Project Outline & Annotated Bibliography

8	*Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (2026) by Jean Said Makdisi and Angela Flournoy	Jean Said Makdisi interview on the Makdisi Street podcast	Reflection on Lebanon
	Egypt		
9	*Finding Home: From Cairo to New York: A Memoir* (2024) by Djenane Nakhle	Guest presentation from Andrew Simon about the life of Sheikh Imam	
10	*The Buried: An Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution* (2019) by Peter Hessler	Guest presentation from Emily Drumsta on the Tahrir Docs project	Reflection on Egypt
	Syrian Civil War		
11	*Days of Love and Rage: A Story of Ordinary People Forging a Revolution* (2026) by Anand Gopal	Guest appearance by NPR correspondent Jane Arraf	Final Project Draft
12	*Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (2014) edited by Nawara Mahfoud, et al.	Checking in and catching up	Reflection on Syria
	Gazan Voices		
13	*Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine* (2014) by Refaat Alareer	Pulitzer-winning essays by Mosab Abu Toha	
14	excerpts from *We Are Not Numbers: The Voices of Gaza's Youth* (2025) edited by Ahmed Alnaouq, Pam Bailey	excerpts from *Every Moment Is a Life: Gaza in the Time of Genocide* (2026) edited by susan abulhawa, Huzama Habayeb	Reflection on Gaza
15	Final Project Presentations, with departmental guests		Final Project

Grading

Mini-Memoir & responses	15%	Weeks 2 & 3
Reflections	40% (10% each)	Weeks 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 & 14
Final Project	45%	Weeks 3, 5, 7, 11 and 15

Assignments: (due Sundays at midnight)

- **Readings**: Approximately 100 pages will be assigned each week, which you are expected to read before the appropriate class. You are encouraged to read more, as your schedule allows.
- **Mini-Memoir** (500-750 words of prose, or 2-3 pages of poetry, or 5-7 min video)
  Share a slice of your life illustrating some aspect of your motivation to take this class, such as: a vignette from your personal history, a summary of your family background, an original

poem or song, or a video reflection. Be creative! Mini-memoirs will be shared in a private online forum such as Padlet.
    - You will also leave a positive comment on half your colleagues' mini-memoirs about what resonates with you.
- **Reflections** (500-750 words) on four of the six regions we study (you may choose which two regions you would like to skip). Your reflection should focus on:
    - what you found most emotionally resonant about the life stories from this region, &
    - what challenged your preconceptions about the region and its history, &
    - if relevant, how this region relates to or influences your final project
- **Final Project** (multimodal, 1500 words or 15 min video)
  Profile an Arab who lived at least part of their life in an Arab country. Describe their background, the historical events that shaped their life and choices, their important contributions to their community(ies), and why they're important to you. Your project should address an **audience** beyond our class, i.e. be something that you would share with others, such as at a family reunion, in a gallery at a community center, as a khutbah or sermon, as a colloquium in your department or at a conference in your field, etc. If you have Arab family or friends, you are strongly encouraged to profile someone with whom you have a **personal connection**. The project must also include **cited research**, and be **multi-modal**, meaning that it will incorporate visual and/or auditory elements, e.g. pictures, interview excerpts, music, video, poetry. Arabic-language sources are acceptable, but translation or subtitles must be provided.
    - *Proposal* (250-300 words, 10% of project grade)
      identifying **whom** you will be profiling, **why** you chose them, and **what** you hope to learn about the time in which they lived, as well as proposing the **audience** with which you would share this profile. Project Proposals will be shared in a private online forum such as Padlet.
    - *Project Proposal responses* (5% of project grade)
      Leave an encouraging comment on half your colleagues' proposals that includes a) something you're **excited** to see/hear in their final project or project presentation, and b) a **question** you hope their project will answer.
    - *Outline and Annotated Bibliography* (15% of project grade)
      Demonstrate the broad strokes of the major sections, topics and themes of your profile, and how the project will be assembled/presented. Provide at least 5 **academic AND primary sources** you will utilize, describing what you think each source will contribute to the project. Primary sources include interviews, photo albums, or things your profile subject wrote about their own life and/or times.
    - *Draft* (10% of project grade)
      Your project should be at least 70% finished; you will receive instructor feedback about how well you're meeting the expectations of the assignment, and what could be improved or expanded in the final project.

- *Project Presentation* (10-15 minutes, 30% of project grade)
  Invitations will be extended to students and faculty in the MENAS department, and community members of the class's choice. In your presentation, you may choose to:
  - Share the completed project (especially if your medium is primarily video),
  - Share part of your project, and/or
  - Describe the process of how you developed your project and what you will or might do with it in the future
- *Final Project*: (30% of project grade) Graded for
  - content of the project and relevance to the class (50%)
  - integration of appropriately cited research (20%)
  - multi-modality (20%)
  - appropriateness to the identified audience (10%)