Arab Culture and Communities

a 15-week syllabus

Course Objectives

- To articulate an understanding of how Islam, historical dynasties and colonialism continue to influence the shape of the Middle East and Arab national identity(ies) today.
- To explore the arts and cultural heritage of Arabic-speaking communities and their diversity.
- To draw connections between some of the recent upheavals in Arab countries and their historical roots and antecedents.

Primary Text

Frangieh, B. K. *An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture*; San Diego Cognella Academic Publishing, 2019.

Additional Reading

"Introduction" from Armstrong, K. *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*; Phoenix: London, 2001.

Asi, Y. The Colonial Legacy in the Arab World: Health, Education, and Politics, Arab Center Washington DC, 2022

Eyadat, Zaid, 'Minorities in the Arab World: Faults, Fault-lines, and Coexistence', in Will Kymlicka, and Eva Pföstl (eds), *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World* (Oxford, 2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Apr. 2014)

Ghnaim, W. Reclaiming Palestinian Beauty, One Wall Label at a Time, November 3, 2024. *Hyperallergic:* New York, New York.

Ghnaim, W. Tatreez in Time: The memory, meaning, and makers of Palestinian embroidery, July 26, 2024. The Metropolitan Museum of Art *Perspectives:* New York, New York.

Mundy, Jacob, 'Bringing the Tribe Back In? The Western Sahara Dispute, Ethno-history, and the Imagineering of Minority Conflicts in the Arab World', in Will Kymlicka, and Eva Pföstl (eds), *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World* (Oxford, 2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Apr. 2014)

"Introduction" from Said, E. W. *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed.; Vintage Books: New York, 1979.

"Introduction" from Simon, A. *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*; Stanford studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies and cultures; Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2022.

Sluglett, P. (2016). From Millet to Minority: Another Look at the Non-Muslim Communities in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. In L. Robson (Ed.), *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives* (pp. 19–38). Syracuse University Press.

Suleiman, Y. *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*; Georgetown University Press: Washington, D.C, 2003.

Veracini, L., Settler Colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa: A Protracted History, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Vol. 302 (Spring 2022).

Grading

Participation	10%
Sirah of the Self	10%
Historical Connections paper	15%
Student Presentation	15%
Reaction Synthesis	15%
Final Paper	35%

Assignments

Sirah of the Self – In a creative assignment, students will illustrate one aspect of their connection to Arab countries, communities or culture. Students will choose an image (historical photograph, family snapshot, painting or other visual art or craft) and write 300-500 words about why it speaks to them. This may take the form of a poem, autobiographical vignette, or short essay.

The image and explanation will be posted to a common online forum; students must comment on what speaks to them on at least a third of their colleagues' submissions.

Historical Connections – In a 4-page paper, students will connect readings from 2 of Weeks 2-5 to their current interests, such as research in other classes, current events, or their family history. At least 3 additional sources should also be referenced. This analysis should describe a question the student wondered about before this class that was addressed by the readings and how, and a new question they would be interested in investigating further and why.

Student Presentations – Choosing one of the themes in Week 6-12, students will prepare a 15-minute presentation. Students will find two artifacts (e.g. an image, poem, song, video clip or object) and explain how they are related to the theme. The presentation should reference the week's reading(s), 2 prior weeks' readings, and at least 2 outside sources.

Reaction Synthesis – In a 6-page paper, students will draw connections between artifacts and themes in their classmates' presentations from four of Weeks 6-12. At least 3 course readings and 3 outside sources should also be referenced. What theme(s) are similar between presentations, and how do these theme(s) vary between presentations? How are they connected to historical themes of the first five weeks?

Final Paper – Is there a "crisis of Arab culture?" In a 10-page paper, summarize the arguments for a crisis of Arab culture, connect these arguments to historical precedents and Arab cultural heritage, and take a position for or against the idea of a crisis of Arab culture. At least 6 course readings and 5 outside sources should be referenced. Students *may* also choose to incorporate their thoughts one (or more) of the following:

- What are the unspoken assumptions underlying Frangieh's claim to a crisis of Arab culture? Are these fair assumptions? Do you agree with them?
- Is there one Arab culture? If not, how does this effect the answer to the question?

- Is this even a fair question? Would we ask this question about other cultures, and if we did, would the implications of the question be different?
- If there is a crisis of Arab culture, is it unique to the Arab world, or connected to what's happening in other parts of the world?

Schedule

Topic	Readings	Assignment
Week 1 **Introductions**		
Week 2 **Arab Identity, Values & Language**	Frangieh Ch 1 & 3 Suleiman	Sirah of the Self
– Who are the Arabs? Is there one Arab identity? – What are the defining characteristics of Arabs?		
Week 3 **Islam, Muhammad & Qur'an**	Frangieh Ch 5 Armstrong *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*	
– What are the pillars of belief and practice in Islam, and the sources of religious authority? – How do these elements interact with daily life and culture in the Arab world?		
Week 4 **Islam Through the Ages**	Frangieh Ch 6	
– What are the major dynasties and capitals of the Arab/Islamic world? – How did they interact with the larger world?		
Week 5 **Colonialism and Orientalism**	Said Veracini Asi	
– How have Europeans shaped the Arab world? Has this been a net positive for the Arabs? – What should the relationship between Arabs and the West look like in future?		
Week 6 **Minorities Amongst the Arabs**	Eyadat Mundy Sluglett	Student Presentations Historical Connections
– Who are the religious, ethnic and cultural minorities in the Arab countries? – How has the position of minorities in Arab countries changed in the last 100 years?		
Week 7 **The Arab Family**	Frangieh Ch 2	Student Presentations
– How does the Arab family compare to families in your national, ethnic or religious community, current or historically?		
Week 8 **Classical Arabic Poetry**	Frangieh Ch 4	Student Presentations

Topic	Readings	Assignment
– What are the conventions and common themes of classical Arabic poetry? – How do these conventions and themes compare to the poetry you studied in high school?		
Week 9 **Modern Arabic Poetry**	Frangieh Ch 8	Student Presentations
– What are the conventions and common themes of modern Arabic poetry? – How do they compare to classical Arabic poetry? other poetry you've studied?		
Week 10 **Music in the Arab World**	Frangieh Ch 7 Simon	Student Presentations
– What makes Arab music distinctive and different from other music you listen to? – What role can or has music played in Arab culture and politics?		
Week 11 **Traditional Arts & Crafts**	Ghnaim (2 articles)	Student Presentations
– What value is there in preserving a culture's traditional arts and crafts? – How and why can the practice of traditional arts and crafts be political?		
Week 12 **Modern Arab Thought**	Frangieh Ch 10	Student Presentations Reaction Synthesis
– What are the characteristics of Arab modernism, and how did they develop? – How are Arab expressions of modernism shaped by Arab history and Islam?		
Week 13 **The Arab Spring**	Frangieh Ch 11	
– What is the "Arab Spring" and what precipitated its emergence? – How and why did the Arab Spring succeed or fail, and why does it matter?		
Week 14 **Refugee Issues**	Frangieh Ch 12 Guest Lecturer	
– Define and compare: migrants, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, the diaspora – What are the causes of the refugee crises in the Arab world? – How are the present refugee crises related to the history of empires and colonialism?		
Week 15 **Crisis of Arab Culture?**	Frangieh Ch 13	Final Paper
– Is there a crisis of Arab culture? How would it be described? – What are the historical and cultural roots of this crisis?		