

ROUND TABLE

**TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY
SURVEY COURSE****The Middle East Survey Course: Challenges and
Opportunities**

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The production and dissemination of knowledge on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has always had a particularly complex relationship vis-à-vis research funding, faculty hiring priorities, course scheduling schemas, and course enrollment numbers. In this essay, I hope to share some observations—that I have experienced firsthand and discussed with a number of colleagues—on teaching an introductory survey course on the history of the modern MENA region. Such reflections are rooted in my own experience of teaching at a public university with no current major research or teaching commitments to the MENA region. While these observations are not unique to the context within which I teach, they might be otherwise inflected in different contexts.

Pedagogical Challenges

Some of the key pedagogical challenges facing those of us who teach the MENA survey are well known. First, there is the question of focus. In asking what we want students to get out of the course, we are constantly pulled between the two poles of processes and events. Many of us wrestle with the balance between the two in both organizing our syllabi as well as constructing our lectures and assigning our readings. How we navigate this challenge has serious repercussions for what students take away from the course both in the short and long term. Key in this regard is also how we evaluate the students. While details are important for providing the empirical substance that characterizes the period, students are often in need of understanding the broader historical consequences and present legacies of the sum total of such events.

Another challenge is the reality that knowledge produced on the MENA region is uneven, as is the availability of survey-level reading assignments.

While the last decade has featured a concerted effort at studying regions such as North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, much of the historical metanarratives and scholarly syntheses continue to privilege imperial centers and provincial capitals. As course instructors we are thus presented with a particular challenge of integrating new scholarship into our lectures (at both the empirical and analytic levels), while challenging our students with more specialized readings on regions less studied and thus less incorporated into textbooks.

A third pedagogical challenge has to do with the timeframe covered by the course. Historians elect to start their survey course at different junctures, often in relation to how they address the first challenge of processes vs. events, and which processes and events they find most important or useful to cover. Yet irrespective of this starting point, we are also faced with the question of how far into the contemporary moment to take the course. While the end of the Cold War serves some historians well, other historians find it more productive to include the inauguration of the so-called war on terror in general and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in particular. Yet the Arab uprisings (to say nothing of the Green Revolution and the Gezi protests) and their varied trajectories have produced a set of realities in the region that make it very difficult to end a survey course without addressing these more contemporary transformations.

It is here that our unique challenge as historians comes to the fore. This is a perennial problem that all modern history survey courses must address. Instead of finding the perfect endpoint, however, perhaps it is more useful to end the course with key examples of how history can help shed light on contemporary developments. The challenge here is not so much to provide a comprehensive narrative up to the present, but to layout the ways in which the history covered is necessary (even if not sufficient) to making sense of the present.

Administrative Challenges

In addition to pedagogical challenges, those of us who teach MENA history courses are faced with several administrative challenges. Some of these have to do with declining enrollments across the humanities and many of the social sciences. Yet perhaps more important are new modes of university governance. Such modes marginalize the research and pedagogical insights of frontline faculty and de-emphasize area studies concentrations. They also create a zero-sum game between departments in the competition for what some administrators openly call “butts in seats.” How are MENA historians

to navigate these dynamics, particularly in institutions where there is only one MENA scholar in the department if not the whole institution?

The most immediate way to address such a challenge is in the requirements for the history major and/or minor. Some MENA historians find themselves teaching at institutions in which they are the first to occupy such a position in the department. Others find themselves filling a position that has been vacant for many years. As such, many history departments have major and minor requirements that do not adequately take advantage of their (new) MENA course offerings. In some cases this can be resolved through the mere inclusion of such courses as elective options for the major. Other more structural measures are also possible. There is a case to be made that the MENA region should be elevated to an equal status with that of other fields. Yet most departments continue to privilege US and European history at the expense of “World History” or “Non-Western” fields, despite the rhetoric of being committed to international and/or global history. This of course is not unique to the MENA, as our colleagues who work on Africa, South Asia, and Latin America know all too well. While there can be several institutional (and many times collegial) obstacles to addressing this chasm between rhetoric and practice, there is significant room for maneuver on the part of MENA historians.

For many, the majority of students enrolling in our survey courses are not history majors or minors. Rather, they are students seeking to fulfill general education requirements or those of a different major. Basic research into the structure and requirements of other majors in the humanities and social sciences can provide important insights into potential additional enrollments. Many non-history majors have specific area-studies requirements. Among these are education, journalism, and political science majors. Yet these departments are often unaware of the presence of a MENA scholar in their institutions, mostly due to the lack of communication between departments. In such cases, one might be surprised at the merits of meeting with various chairs or directors of undergraduate studies. As other majors struggle to attract students, many of them are quite open to creating a MENA category for their non-departmental requirements or electives. This is particularly so for majors that market themselves on job prospects and contemporary relevance associated with the degree.

None of this is meant to valorize the overemphasis many universities and departments place on “butts in seats.” There is much to be said about the efficacy of such an approach, especially as it affects faculty–student ratios, the feasibility of in-class discussions, and the time allotted for grading

and office hours. Nevertheless, we need to be active participants in both critiquing the status quo and better positioning our course offerings.

Concluding Thoughts: On Opportunities

Despite the above-listed challenges, those of us teaching MENA history survey courses are presented with a number of opportunities. First and foremost among them is the reality that there is a genuine curiosity for knowledge on the Middle East and North Africa region. We can certainly take issue with some of the more nefarious sources of this curiosity. Yet we should not dismiss the fact that such curiosity presents a significant opportunity to challenge popular misconceptions and translate scholarly knowledge into common sense understandings about the region. It is for this reason that it is worth identifying the various student groups that might be interested in survey course content and ask that their leadership announce course offerings to their members. We are well aware of how much more productive post-lecture questions or in-class discussions can be when there is a critical mass of enrolled students who have broader political, religious, or professional commitments within which the course lies. In this sense, we should not simply assume that such students are aware of our presence on campus or of our particular course offerings.

For those of us who live in or study the Middle East and North Africa, these are especially pressing times. This difficulty is underscored by the realities of socioeconomic de-development, emboldened authoritarianism, civil war, military intervention, and settler-colonial occupation. At the same time, we are living in a period in which the field of MENA studies has never been more diverse in terms of case studies, more eclectic in terms of theoretical approaches, and more voluminous in terms of publications. This is to say nothing of new platforms that we are yet to take full advantage of in our classrooms, be they social media accounts of local activists, journalists, and intellectuals, region-specific e-zines such as *Jadaliyya*, audio journals such as *Status*, or various video feeds. For these reasons, we are well equipped to instantiate a long-term curiosity and critical understanding of the region in our students. Will that make the world a better place? No, it will not. However, it is why many of us entered academia and perhaps the only tool many of us have in contributing to a better world, barring other measures.