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ROUND TABLE

TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY SURVEY COURSE

The Middle East Survey Course: Some Problems and Some Solutions

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In this short piece, I will begin by raising two points about the future geography of the Middle East survey course and then lay out two salient points that were raised in the course of the panel discussion at MESA.

Where is the Middle East?

The geography of the Middle East survey needs to shift away from the Arabic speaking-'core' of the Middle East to include more material on Turkey, Tunisia, and the Maghreb, as well as Iran. Many surveys of the modern Middle East begin with the gunpowder empires of the early modern period. In particular, a special place is given to the Ottoman Empire as the "soup" from which the modern Middle East emerges, yet after the Empire's fall, the Turkish republic usually receives little attention. Turkey has always been an important part of the Middle East, but shifts in Turkish foreign policy over the last few years mean Turkey is becoming an increasingly important regional player. For instance, Turkey's influence in Syria and Iraq continues to grow, and after years of orienting toward the West, the Turkish government began focusing its attention on its neighbors soon after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings of 2010–11.

Tunisia, the place where those uprisings began over six years ago, is another place that warrants a greater degree of attention in the survey course. Even though some might argue that Tunisia is exceptional, I would argue it is precisely Tunisia's "exceptionalism" that makes it an interesting place from which to ask questions or think about the rest of the Middle East. It is also one of the few places in the Arabic-speaking Middle East where there are some signs of a better future taking shape for the country's denizens.

The third geographic area to which the Middle East survey should reorient is Iran. In my experience, many surveys deal somewhat with the Safavid

Empire as a gunpowder empire and the Qajar Empire as the direct antecedent to modern Iran. Reza Shah's reign and the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 usually get some attention, but by and large Iran after the revolution is not dealt with at all. In the wake of the Iranian nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions, the United States is going to have to deal with Iran as both a collaborator and a competitor. Students in American universities need to be better equipped to understand Iran as a complex country in its own right. Therefore, the geography of Middle East survey courses in the future will need to look beyond the "classic" or "traditional" focus of Egypt, the Levant, and Palestine/Israel.

Of course, all of this begs the question of whether or not we should even continue to use the nation-state as the primary unit for organizing the survey course, or whether the survey should be organized differently. Alternative ways of organizing the survey course could include basing it around a series of thematic questions, telling the history of the region from the vantage point of its many diasporas, or through critical methodological questions raised by existing scholarship.

There is another way to think about the geography of the Middle East survey course: It needs to provide a full account of the centrality of the region for post-World War II American history. The Cold War–era area studies framework of the Middle East survey continues to render the Middle East as something over there. As immigration from the Middle East to the United States continues to increase, after over a decade and a half of direct American engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the continued importance of Palestine/Israel to domestic politics, and the centrality of oil production to the US economy, it is imperative to help students understand how the history of the United States and the Middle East are entangled. Yet this poses a challenge: On the one hand, one doesn't want to reduce the history of the modern Middle East to simply a story of its entanglements with the United States, which would reinforce American-centrism. Yet on the other hand, it is important to convey to American students that it is impossible to understand their country's own history after World War II without situating the United States in the context of the history of the modern Middle East. The larger imperative is to help students in the United States understand the complexity of the multi-polar, non-American-centric world, so they can critically and constructively engage in that world.

Engaging Students

In the discussion that followed our panel at MESA, many participants lamented their students today are not willing to read as much or engage

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with primary sources in the same way they remember themselves doing as undergraduates or that their students did a decade ago. While this may be true it doesn't mean that our students aren't willing to work hard or engage with us. Perhaps a more constructive way to think about this issue is that students today are entering the classroom with different kinds of literacy in terms of how they use and understand media and technology than they did a decade ago. The important question for us as educators is how do we engage students in critical/meaningful ways as technology continues to develop? Moreover, what are some of the different ways we can use media to help develop students' own sense of intellectual curiosity about the region and move beyond the steadfast notion that the only primary sources worth considering are written texts?

Several years ago, I was involved in planning a conference on the future of history graduate education as a part of UCLA's participation in the American Historical Association/ Mellon Career Diversity Initiative. One of the central discussions around the project was about the connection between graduate training and the quality of undergraduate education. People need to be trained to be good teachers, just like they need to be trained in languages and research methodology. Reading recent *New York Times* stories about how Google and Apple are partnering to provide basic virtual reality technology to elementary and middle school social studies classes has made me think about what kinds of expectations and cultural imaginary the students I'll work with in the first decade of my career will have. It used to be that if you wanted to give students a "taste" of the Middle East, you took the class out to eat at a Middle Eastern restaurant, took them to an exhibit of Islamic art at a local museum, or screened a film. Yet new forms of technology make it possible for students to follow Middle Eastern bloggers on Twitter in real time and the same kinds of virtual reality that are being tested in elementary and middle school social studies classes could soon become a part of university lectures.

This raises two large questions: First, how do we meaningfully incorporate multimedia material and even forms of virtual reality into teaching the survey course? Second, how do we equip students with the critical apparatus necessary to engage the increasingly varied forms of representation of the Middle East they will encounter beyond the confines of our classrooms?

These questions lead me to a final and related point about the place of skills vs. facts in the context of the Middle East survey course. Some panelists and participants suggested the purpose of a survey course on the Middle East is first and foremost to present facts to correct the misinformation about the region with which our students enter the classroom. In contrast, others emphasized the importance of the history survey more broadly as a place

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where students acquire basic analytical skills in reading and writing that they will use throughout their college careers and beyond in the world of work. The question of what students should take away from the survey courses we teach on the Middle East is directly related to declining history enrollments. How do we make what we teach relevant to our students without entirely subordinating what we do to the market logic of measureable qualifications and employability?

In order for students to enroll in our courses they need to feel like they are getting something out of what we teach. The idea that the survey simply presents facts in order to correct the misinformation about the Middle East with which our students enter our classrooms isn't going to take our students or us very far. Nor will such an approach do much for sparking the kind of intellectual curiosity that will make students interested in learning more about the region on their own. Therefore, the two most important tasks of the survey are sparking students' intellectual curiosity about the Middle East and equipping them with the analytical skills necessary for them to critically engage with material about or from the region on their own.

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