

Course Outline for “Introducing the Middle East: A Multidisciplinary Exploration” Co-Written by Melanie Magidow and Christine Baker

Note for Instructors:

This month, I wanted to start a discussion about the organization and pacing of an introductory course covering the peoples, history, religion, and geography of the Middle East, beginning with the ancient Near East and ending with World War II.

Many institutions ask faculty to teach some form of this course. It can vary in its length and chronology. For example, you might be asked to teach a one-semester course covering from the origins of Islam in the seventh century through to the present or a two-semester sequence on the ancient Near East through to the present.

Since it’s possible that you could be asked to teach anything from Mesopotamia to the present when offering survey courses on the Middle East, I wanted to use my expertise to offer suggestions on how instructors can integrate the literature of the region into a broader survey.

Rather than a sample syllabus, I am suggesting a basic framework for a 30-week (year-long) survey course from ancient Mesopotamia through World War II, with recommendations for introductory historical readings as well as specific suggestions of primary sources in literature and religion. While I would never expect any course to use *all* of these readings, this outline offers you suggestions for various textbooks and primary readings that you could offer to students in one of the versions of this course that you may be asked to teach.

Required Texts:

Cleveland, William and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2016.

Held, Colbert C. and John Thomas Cummings. *Middle East Patterns: Places, People, and Politics*. 5th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010.

Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. New York: Faber, 2013.

Hull, Denison B., Trans. *Digenis Akritas: the two-blood border lord*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1972.

Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

McCall, Henrietta. *Mesopotamian Myths*. London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1990.

Mason, Herbert. *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*. Boston: Mariner, 2003.

Magidow, Melanie. *The Tale of Princess Fatima, Warrior Woman*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2021.

Pickthall, Muhammad M. *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran: Text and Explanatory Translation*. Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2002. (OR any other edition)

Pritchard, James B. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Vol. I. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.

Suggs, Jack M, et al. *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible, with the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. (OR any other edition)

Week 1:

Topic: **Course Overview: What is the Middle East? (or Southwest Asia?)**
Before we can begin talking about the history of the Middle East, we must first establish its geographical and ethnic boundaries. This week will lay out the definition of the Middle East within which we will work.

Readings: “Tricontinental Junction: An Introduction,” “Patterns of Time: Historical-Geographical Foundations,” and “Patterns of Peoples and Cultures” in Held

Week 2

Topic: **The Ancient World**
This week will focus on the various civilizations of the Ancient Near East, notably Sumeria, Babylon, and Egypt.

Readings: Selections from *World Religions* by Oxtoby and *The Ancient Near East* by Kuhrt
+include oud music

Week 3

Topic: **Literature of the Ancient Near East I**
These next two weeks will be an introduction to the literature of the Ancient Near East, affording us an insight into the socio-cultural structures of the age.

Readings: Selections from McCall and Pritchard

Week 4

Topic: **Literature of the Ancient Near East II**

Readings: The Epic of Gilgamesh, “Literature of the Ancient Near East” in the *Oxford Study Bible*

Week 5

Topic: **Religions of the Ancient Near East I: Egypt and Persia**
This week will survey some of the early religions of the Ancient Near East, illuminating some of the religious concepts common to contemporary religions of the region.

Readings: Selections from Pritchard, Oxtoby, “Contexts of the Biblical Communities” and “The Social World of the Old Testament” in the *Oxford Study Bible*

Week 6

Topic: **Religions of the Ancient Near East II: The Formation of Judaism and Monotheism**
The Ancient Near East is well-known as the source of the largest monotheistic faiths. This week we will observe the formation and foundations of Judaism as a religious, social, and political movement.

Readings: Selection from Oxtoby, Chapter 1 in Scheindlin's *A Short History of the Jewish People*, selections from the *Oxford Study Bible* including "Introduction to the Old Testament"

Week 7

Topic: **Religions of the Ancient Near East III: The Development of Christianity**
Growing out of Judaism, Christianity had a dominant influence on the next 2,000 years of history. In this week we will examine its roots and its early doctrinal formation.

Readings: Selections from the *Oxford Study Bible* including essay called "Introduction to the New Testament," comparative handouts of contents in Hebrew Bible, Catholic Bible, Orthodox Bible, and Protestant Bible without Apocrypha

Week 8

Topic: **The Byzantines, Persians, and Arabs of Late Antiquity**
This week will be devoted to social interaction between three important cultures prior to the coming of Islam.

Readings: Magidow's *The Tale of Princess Fatima* and Hull's translation of *Digenis Akritas*

Week 9

Topic: **Pre-Islamic Arabia and Early Islam**
Focusing more specifically on Arab society in the years before Islam, this week we will discuss the transition of Arabia from a diffuse tribal region into the center of an empire that soon spanned from Spain to India.

Readings: Hourani, Mu'allaqat for Millennials – read about and download from:
<https://arablit.org/2020/12/19/introducing-the-muallaqat-for-millennials/>
+ Sacred Women album: "Women as composers and performers of medieval chant: Christian, Arab and Byzantine Chant" by Sarband

Week 10

Topic: **The First Muslim Community and the Life of Muhammad**
Going more in-depth into the early years of Islam, this week's focal point will be the social structure of the two earliest cities of Islam—Mecca and Medina. We will also discuss the influential life of the Prophet Muhammad.

Readings: Handouts from Karen Armstrong, Lesley Hazleton, Stillman's *The Jews of Arab Lands*, and the Introduction of Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*
+ PBS film showing of early Muslim community
<https://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/profilesmuhammed.html>
Optional: Mohja Kahf's "Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era"

Week 11

Topic:

The Qur'ān

The Qur'an, the word of Allah as conveyed through the Prophet Muhammad, is the scripture of Islam. This week we will read selections translated from the Qur'an and discuss them in the historical context of the Middle East prior to Islam.

Readings:

The Quran (Qur'ān), handout from Michael Cook's *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* + play recording of Quranic recitation

Week 12

Topic:

The Expansion of Islam

This week will focus on the years of the *Rashidun* and the Umayyad Empire. These early years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad are the years in which Islam expanded out of the Arabian Peninsula into North Africa, Spain, Persia, and Central Asia. We must ask: what made Islam so dynamic?

Readings:

Hourani, Lapidus, handout from Dunn's *The Spread of Islam*,
+ show photos of Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque, Alhambra, and Cordoba Mosque
+ show excerpt of *Islam: Empire of Faith*

Week 13

Topic:

The Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates

The first two Islamic dynasties moved the center of Islam out of the Arabian Peninsula to Damascus and then Baghdad. We will inquire into the social, cultural, and religious nature of both dynasties.

Readings:

Selections from Hourani and Lapidus

Week 14

Topic:

The Abbasids and the Fracturing of the Islamic World

The Abbasids were the last dynasty to encompass the entire Islamic World. The central focus of this week will be the causes of change within the Abbasid Caliphate and a brief look at some of the empires that broke away.

Readings:

Selections from Hourani, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen; *Impostures* by Al-Hariri (trans. Michael Cooperson)

Week 15

Topic:

Islamic Spain

Muslims ruled most of Spain for nearly 800 years. In this week, we will explore the highlights of Islamic civilization in Spain, focusing on the era of the second 'Umayyad Caliphate and the states that arose in the aftermath of its fall.

Readings:

Selections from Lapidus and handout from Menocal

Week 16

Topic: **The Crusades**

The Crusades have long been recognized as an important event in European history. We will examine their significance in the context of the Middle East and Islamic World.

Readings: Hourani, handouts from Maalouf's *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, handout from Oliver of Urban II's speech at Council of Clermont in 1095 by Fulcher of Chartres: *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium*

Week 17

Topic: **The Mongol Invasion**

Less well-known than the Crusades, the Mongol invasion in 1258 BCE toppled the Abbasid Caliphate. This week will study the Mongol invasion and compare its significance to the Crusades in the historical context of the Islamic World.

Readings: Selections from Hourani, David Morgan's *The Mongols*

Week 18

Topic: **Intellectual Collaboration of the Middle Ages I: Art & Architecture**

These next two weeks we will focus on key intellectual aspects of medieval Islamic civilization. We will discover cross-cultural collaboration through art, architecture, math, and science of the intellectual crossroads that was the medieval Islamic World.

Readings: Handouts from Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom's *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, Hattstein's *Islam: Art and Architecture*, and Mack's *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*
+ slide show

Week 19

Topic: **Intellectual Collaboration of the Middle Ages II: Math & Science**

Readings: Hourani, Handouts from Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom's *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* and Rubenstein's *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages*
+ film clip of *Islam: Empire of Faith*

Week 20

Topic: **The Ottoman Empire**

The Ottoman Empire restructured the Middle East in the wake of the Crusades, Mongol invasion, and Bubonic Plague. Formally taking control of Anatolia in 1517, but with roots approximately 100 years old, the Ottomans ruled parts of Europe as well as North Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula until the

First World War. We will explore key features of the Ottoman Empire and its impact on the rest of the Middle East.

Readings: Hourani, Handout of “Turkey: Bridgeland in Anatolia” in Held, Excerpts from Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red*
+ bring Turkish Delight for students

Week 21

Topic: **The Safavids and Qajars**
The rise of the Safavids was a crucial phase in the development in Shi’i Islam and its rise to prominence in Persia. We will study this development and learn about the Qajars, tracing their development into the modern period.

Readings: Hourani, Handouts from Nikki Keddie’s *Women in the Middle East* and Fisher’s *Cambridge History of Iran*

Week 22

Topic: **Colonialism and the Impact of World War I on the Middle East**
Colonialism had perhaps the greatest influence on the development of modern events in the Middle East. We will survey the history of colonialism and the intellectual and political power it exerted on the Middle East.

Readings: Hourani, Handouts from al-Jabarti and Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*

Week 23

Topic: **Fighting for Independence: Nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Islamist Movements**
As the world embraced various forms of nationalism and ethnic identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these new ideas also spread in the Middle East. We will explore the various types of movements that sought to grapple with the fall of the end of the Ottoman Empire in new and unique ways.

Readings: Cleveland, ch. 7. Literary option: *Savushun: A Novel about Modern Iran* by Simin Daneshvar

Week 24

Topic: **Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan: the British in the Middle East**
In the aftermath of World War I, the British made Egypt a protectorate and created the modern states of Iraq and Jordan. We will explore their policies in these regions as well as local responses.

Readings: Cleveland, ch. 11. Literary option: book and/or film of *The Open Door* by Latifa Zayyat

Week 25

Topic: **Syria and the creation of Lebanon: The French in the Middle East**
After World War I, the French took a very different approach to their control over Syria and Lebanon. We will examine how the French fostered intercommunal rivalries between Christians, Muslims, and Druze as a method of reducing opposition to French rule.

Readings: Cleveland, first half of ch. 12. Literary option: “Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon” by Etel Adnan in *Opening the Gates*, ed. Miriam Cooke

Week 26

Topic: **Arabia: An independent kingdom, the Wahhabi movement, and the creation of Saudi Arabia**
While the French and British commanded control over much of the region, Arabia remained independent. We will examine the origins of the Wahhabi movement, the rise of the Al-Sa’ud family, and the creation of the modern state of Saudi Arabia.

Readings: Cleveland, second half of ch. 12. Literary option: *Cities of Salt* by Abdul Rahman Munif

Week 27

Topic: **Modernization and Reform: Ataturk and the creation of Turkey and Reza Shah and the creation of Iran**
Both Turkey and Iran managed very different paths to independence in the early 20th century. We will explore how both states embraced aspects of authoritarianism, Turkey transitioned to a multiparty system while Iran established a new form of royal rule based in pre-Islamic Persian identity.

Readings: Cleveland, ch. 14. Literary option: Kazan’s *Halide’s Gift*

Week 28

Topic: **Zionism**
Zionism, the movement started by Theodore Herzl in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eventually led to the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine. This week will be devoted to understanding its key intellectual and political developments.

Readings: Handouts from Stillman’s *The Jews of Arab Lands*, Segev’s *1949: The First Israelis* and Laqueur’s *A History of Zionism*.

Week 29

- Topic: **Palestine and Israel: The British Mandate and Arab Resistance**
We will cover the period between the British Mandate and the formation of Israel with respect to the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine and the beginnings of Arab resistance. **Students will turn in completed drafts of their research papers.**
- Readings: “Israel and Occupied Territories: ‘Palestine’ or ‘Eretz Israel’?” in Held, handout of excerpt from Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun*
Film: *The Lemon Tree*

Week 30

- Topic: **Modern Literature in the Middle East**
This final week will give a brief introduction to modern literature in the region and the key issues that its writers confronted.
- Readings: Excerpts from *Palace Walk* by N. Mahfouz, “Shrivelled Petals” by R. Shapurian in F. Lewis, and “Facing the Forests” in Yehoshua

Reading List

- Ahmed, Leila. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman’s Journey*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- _____. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- Blair, Sheila S. and Jonathan M. Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Bloom, Jonathan and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*. New York: TV Books, 2000.
- _____. *Islamic Arts*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997.
- Cook, Michael. *Muhammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- _____. *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Creswell, K.A.C. *A Short History of Early Muslim Architecture*. Ed. James W. Allan. Aldershot: Scolar, 1994.

- Dunn, Ross E. *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Esposito, John L. *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Ettinghausen, Richard and Oleg Grabar. *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650-1250*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Fisher, William Bayne. *The Cambridge History of Iran; vol, 6: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*. Cambridge: University Press, 1968-1991.
- Gettleman, Marvin and Stewart Schaar, eds. *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*. New York: Grove Press, 2003.
- Goldschmidt, Arthur. *A Concise History of the Middle East*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991.
- Hattstein, Markus and Peter Delius, eds. *Islam: Art and Architecture*. Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000.
- Held, Colbert C. *Middle East Patterns: Places, People and Politics*. 3rd ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.
- Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. New York: Warner Books, 1991.
- Hull, Denison B., Trans. *Digenis Akritas: the two-blood border lord*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1972.
- al-Jabarti, Abd al-Rahman. *Napoleon in Egypt: Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the First Seven Months of the French Occupation, 1798*. Trans. Samuel Moreh. Princeton: M. Weiner, 1993.
- Johnson-Davies, Denys, trans. *Modern Arabic Short Stories*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1967.
- Keddie, Nikkie. *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796-1925*. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1999.
- Kuhrt, Amelie. *The Ancient Near East circa 3000-330 BC*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Lewis, Frank, ed. and trans. *In a Voice of Their Own: A Collection of Stories Written by Iranian Women Since the Revolution of 1979*. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1996.
- Maalouf, Amin. *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*. New York: Al Saqi Books, 1984.

- Mack, Rosamond E. *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Madelung, Wilfred and Paul E. Walker. *The Advent of the Fatimids*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.
- Mahfouz, Naguib. *Palace Walk*. Trans. William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- Mansfield, Peter. *A History of the Middle East*. London: Penguin Putnam, 2003.
- Mason, Herbert. *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Menocal, Maria Rosa. *The Ornament of the World*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2002.
- McCall, Henrietta. *Mesopotamian Myths*. London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1990.
- Morgan, David. *The Mongols*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1986.
- Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, eds., *A Source Book for Medieval History*. New York: Scribners, 1905.
- Oxtoby, Willard, ed. *World Religions: Western Traditions*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Pickthall, Muhammad M. *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran: Text and Explanatory Translation*. Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2002.
- Pritchard, James B. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Vol. I. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.
- Rippin, A. and J. Knappert, eds. *Islam: Textual Sources for the Study of Islam*. Totwa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1986.
- Robinson, Neal. *Islam: A Concise Introduction*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999.
- Rubenstein, Richard E. *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2003.
- Scheindlin, Raymond P. *A Short History of the Jewish People*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.
- Segev, Tom. *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post-Zionism and the Americanization of Israel*. Trans. Haim Watzman. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002.
- Spouler, Bertold. *The Muslim World; an Historical Survey, vol.2: The Mongol Period*.

Stillman, Norman. *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979.

Suggs, Jack M, et al. *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible, with the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Yehoshua, Abraham B. *The Continuing Silence of a Poet: The Collected Stories of A.B. Yehoshua*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Creators of this Course Outline:

Christine D. Baker is a PhD historian with more than 15 years experience in higher education where she has taught large survey classes on the ancient and medieval world, often focusing on the Middle East. She published *Medieval Islamic Sectarianism* with ARC Humanities Press in 2019. When not teaching college history classes, she also does professional copywriting and copyediting. You can follow her on Twitter at @christineDbaker or learn more about her at her personal website: <https://christinedbakermes.wordpress.com>

Melanie Magidow is the founder of Marhaba Language Expertise, providing Arabic to English translation (specializing in Academic & Literary), English editing, and related Consulting in Arabic language, literature, and culture. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures from the University of Texas at Austin. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Fulbright Commission. She is also a co-host of the Goodreads MENA Lit Book Group. For more on her projects, see melaniemagidow.com.