

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2022

# CMENAS



## ABOUT THE CENTER

The study of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region began at the University of Michigan (U-M) in 1889. Since the inception of the Center for Middle Eastern & North African Studies (CMENAS) in 1961, U-M has been committed to area studies and language training. In 1993, the center became a member of the university's International Institute, which seeks to stimulate research and teaching on critical areas of the world and foster cooperation among the university's departments, schools, and colleges.

### Ryan Szpiech

*CMENAS (Interim) Director and Associate Professor, Romance Languages and Literatures, Middle East Studies, and Judaic Studies*

### Muzammil Hussain

*CMENAS Associate Director and Assistant Professor of Communication & Media*

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#### Cameron Cross (Elected)

*Assistant Professor, Middle East Studies*

#### Jay Crisostomo (Elected)

*Associate Professor, Middle East Studies*



## DEAR CMENAS COMMUNITY,

As spring approaches and COVID-19 rates continue to drop in many regions across the country, 2022 promises a new beginning for us all. Thanks to your ongoing support, CMENAS has been busy over the winter, continuing to promote scholarship and understanding of the Middle East and North Africa.

As we monitor the worsening of conditions for citizens of Afghanistan and Syria, and face news of violence and war in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we see that this work is more important than ever. Cultural knowledge and intercultural dialogue help deepen our solidarity and prepare a new generation of scholars and leaders to meet the challenges ahead. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective." At CMENAS, we continue to work tirelessly to help students, faculty, and community members from across Southeast Michigan develop such a perspective through education and cultural outreach. With your ongoing support, we can continue that critical work.

In this issue, we offer you a sample of what we've been up to over the past months:

- Our **Fall Colloquium, "Public Health and Pandemics across the MENA,"** held on Zoom, was a great success. Featuring ten speakers from universities around the world, we debated

the significance of our current pandemic crisis as it relates to MENA history and culture. Here is a retrospective of the event. (p. 4)

- Read our interview with new faculty member **Umayyah Cable**, who joined the Departments of American Culture and of Film, Television, and Media. (p. 10)
- Read our piece on alumna **Shireen Smalley**. (p. 8)
- **Undergraduate student Omar Masood** is one of the 12 fellows of the Global Islamic Studies Summer Fellowship award. He traveled to Amman, Jordan to study Arabic at the Sijal Institute. Read more about his adventures below. (p. 6)

We urge you to join us and be a part of our ongoing work by donating to the center and attending our regular events. We welcome engagement with our global community, so wherever you are, please feel free to reach out to us via email, Twitter, or Facebook.

Thank you again to our generous CMENAS alumni and donors whose sustained support enables us to fulfill our educational mission.

Last but not least: Ramadan Mubarak! Islam's holy month of fasting begins on April 3rd.

Kind regards,

**Ryan W. Szpiech**  
*Director*

**PUBLIC HEALTH AND PANDEMICS ACROSS THE MENA**  
**EXCERPTS FROM THE FALL 2021 COLLOQUIUM SERIES**

By **Madeleine Virginia Gannon**

The Center for Middle Eastern & North African Studies hosted its annual colloquium series in Fall 2021. As the world continues to learn and adapt to a new “pandemic-normal,” the colloquium turned a critical eye to the discussion of public health across the Middle East and North Africa. Featuring a variety of speakers from across the globe, the series’ presentations offered a fresh and valuable examination of the interdisciplinary nature of public health and pandemic response across topics, nations, and even empires.

**Michael Low**, *Assistant Professor, History, Iowa State University*

**Ecologies of Empire: Ottoman Arabia, the Indian Ocean Hajj, and the Global Crisis of Cholera**

There is irony, Professor Michael Lowe acknowledged, in presenting his fifteen years of research at the height of a global pandemic. In his presentation, Lowe explored the intersection of public health, politics, and religion during

the cholera outbreak in the Ottoman Empire. In this period, the Ottoman Empire would become a global leader in pandemic response, characterized by contact tracing, quarantine, disinfection, and more. The Middle East’s history with cholera, Lowe argued, continues to echo in its approach to public health standards today — especially in response to the covid-19 pandemic. Lowe brought to light an important and extremely relevant idea: The world should look beyond U.S. and Euro-centric perspectives in the fight to protect and promote global public health.

**Somdeep Sen**, *Associate Professor of International Development Studies, Roskilde University*

**Public Health Under Siege: A View From the Gaza Strip**

During the pandemic, Professor Sen turned his gaze to studying public health in the Gaza Strip. His research found that the pandemic crisis in Gaza was deeply intertwined with the sociopolitical history of Israel and Palestine, and the blockade of Gaza since 2007. Sen posed the question: Can we “depoliticize”

health? “The stigma associated with engaging with the Gaza Strip has meant that the policy towards Gaza is in a vacuum,” he noted. The pandemic, Sen suggested, presents a unique opportunity for the international community to simultaneously address a public health crisis *and* the sociopolitical situation in Gaza.

**Ambreen Kazi Kamran**, *Assistant Professor and Princess Nora Bint Abdallah Research Chair for Women’s Health, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia*

**Gender Differences in Approaches to Pandemics in the MENA Region**

Professor Kamran’s focus lies in the intersections of gender and public health, where she has studied the impact of the pandemic on women. Kamran’s presentation explored gender disparities within education, domestic violence, the economy, and health under the strain of the pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa. In all of these areas, her research shows that women have been experiencing a greater burden than their male counterparts. To address these gender disparities, Kamran emphasized

the availability of a variety of solutions — all it takes is the awareness and willingness to put them in action.

**Sameer Naser Olimat**, *Assistant Professor of Translation Studies and Computational Linguistics, English Department, and Salt Faculty of Human Sciences, Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan*

**Do We Speak COVID-19? Language and Translation in the Era of Global Crises**

In his presentation, Professor Olimat explored the intersection between language and the covid-19 pandemic. A study on language choice among Jordanians to describe the pandemic showed a preference for euphemistic language — the intentional substitution of an inappropriate expression with a more polite expression, often when speaking of taboo topics. Language, Olimat explained, can be used as a lens to study sociopolitical phenomena and public health. Language choice can reveal changing trends in behavior, culture, and pandemic response on an individual and national level.

**Justin Thomas**, *Professor and Chair of Psychology, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates*

**Panic, Pestilence and Religious Coping**

**Ibrahim Aref Kira**, *Managing Director, Center for Cumulative Trauma Studies, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia*

**Public Health and Pandemics Across the MENA: A Psychological Perspective on Arab Countries**

Both speakers explored the relationship between the covid-19 pandemic, levels of mental stress, and the role of religion as a coping mechanism across the MENA regions. Studies show a dramatic increase in levels of anxiety and depression during the last two years, as well as an increase in dependence on faith and spirituality as a coping mechanism. As covid-19 becomes a new “normal,” Thomas and Kira argued, the global community will need to address pandemic trauma. While “religion” cannot be prescribed like medicine, the role of faith as a coping mechanism points to the power of arming individuals with a steady support system in the face of prolonged trauma.

**Huda M. Al Hourani**, *Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Nutrition and Diabetes, Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan*

**Obesity in Schoolchildren and its Link to Chronic Diseases**

**Sarah Trainer**, *Medical Anthropologist and Research and Program Coordinator, ADVANCE Program, Seattle University*

**Weight and Body Image in the Middle East: Perspectives From 2021**

Professor Hourani highlighted rising obesity levels and chronic disease among children across the MENA. Elaborating upon Hourani’s research, Dr. Trainer pointed out that increasing levels of child obesity paired with sociocultural norms which emphasize individual responsibility create a dangerous double burden in which children grow up with a damaging,

inaccurate understanding of their health and bodies.

**Lilian Ghandour**, *Associate Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, American University of Beirut, Lebanon*

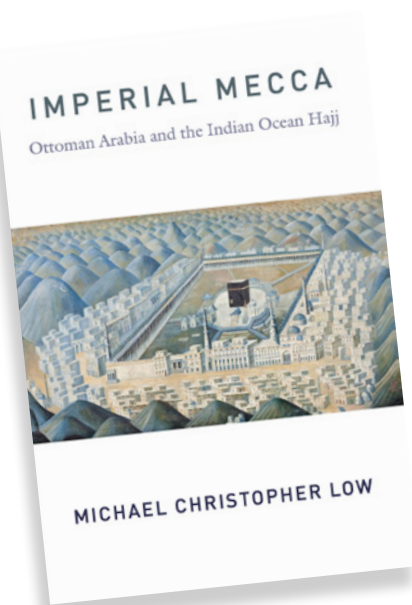
**Alcohol Harm Reduction in Lebanon: The Context, The Industry and the Young Consumer**

Professor Ghandour explored alcohol prevention and harm reduction in Lebanon. A recent study measuring alcohol consumption shows that in the past several years frequency of consumption has increased, especially among younger age groups. Alongside her peers, Ghandour has tried to improve the quality of the policy debate regarding safe alcohol consumption. Across the Middle East and North Africa, little policy development for alcohol harm reduction exists. The solution, Ghandour emphasized, is encouraging “all stakeholders to work together — be it NGOs, parents, physicians, policy makers — to achieve success.”

**Peter Walton**, *Independent Researcher, United Kingdom*

**The Role of Islam in Public Health Policy on Smoking Cessation**

Walton’s research focuses on the intersection between social factors, like religion, and epidemics, like smoking. “Does Islam — or religion in general — have a key role to play in reducing tobacco use?” Walton asked. It played a role, he discovered, but “it can’t be a pillar of a tobacco control program.” Ramadan and Hajj are “teachable moments,” Walton explained, to encourage and educate people against smoking. This, in combination with policy implementation, like laws against tobacco advertising, can be a successful formula to address the harms of smoking.



CMENAS caught up with **Omar Masood**, a dual degree student, who is pursuing his graduate studies at University of Michigan in Global Islamic Studies and Public Policy.

**A**fter four years of living in Saudi Arabia as a high school student, Omar Masood returned to the United States to pursue a degree from the University of Rochester in New York. “College was my re-entry to the United States,” Masood reflected. Masood began his studies in Computer Science, but quickly shifted his educational focus to history and political science, where he rapidly moved through the few courses offered in Middle Eastern and religious studies.

“I always knew I wanted to go to grad school,” said Masood, but on the advice of his family he decided to work for a few years in order to gain some experience outside of academia. Masood spent two years working for a software company in Wisconsin while simultaneously considering what his next steps would be. During this time, he applied to the Peace Corps, Law School, and graduate school at the University of Michigan. As the application process was finalizing, COVID-19 began to spread worldwide and Masood was faced with the challenge of deciding what move to make in the midst of a global pandemic. Peace Corps was no longer an option and law school felt like a risky financial burden during uncertain times, so Masood made the decision to pursue a dual graduate degree in International and Regional Studies with a focus on Global Islamic Studies (GIS) and Public Policy here at Michigan.

“If I am being completely honest with myself, Islamic studies is what I am most interested in,” Masood reflected. However, his interest in the Peace Corps and Law School were rooted in his passion for public service, and “that’s where public policy folds in.” Masood chose to pursue both degrees in order to ground his education in both academia as well as the public sector. “I am someone who is doing International Policy with a focus on the Middle East,” Masood explained, “Islamic Studies gives me the opportunity to have a unique specialization in both areas.”

Masood has explored various courses across departments during his time at Michigan thus far. “Previous to this program, I had a very narrow sense of what Islam was,” Masood admitted. The myriad of knowledge bases from history to anthropology have contributed to broadening his sense of the global impact and influence of Islam. Masood believes that having the opportunity to study Islam in an educational setting allows learners to deepen their geographic and historic understanding of Islam — “What it means to be Muslim in Indonesia is completely different than what it means to be Muslim growing up in Chicago.”

Public policy courses, which tend to be more professionally oriented, have offered Masood an opportunity to better understand the ins and outs



of the public sector and how his studies in GIS may impact working in government as a “more informed civil servant.”

In 2020, Masood was awarded a FLAS scholarship to study Arabic in Jordan. The language institute where he was studying placed him at Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, which is a local think tank that does domestic research in Jordan. Due to the pandemic, a lot of their work at the time he was there focused on the social impacts of COVID-19. The center was looking at the domestic implications for women in Jordan throughout the pandemic as a part of the broader global conversation about similar issues. Masood explained that the center had a two-fold focus: first, what does the research tell us is happening right now in these unprecedented circumstances; and two, how might the center tangibly address these challenges. This international experience deepened Masood’s interests in the overlapping nature of GIS and Public Policy and how these two fields can be applied in the real world.

Masood has been pleased with how supportive faculty have been as he navigates his educational experience at Michigan. He has been impressed by how broad and unique their areas of expertise are. For prospective students, Masood says “whatever the research interest might be,” if a professor cannot help you directly, “they can certainly point you in the right direction.” The flexibility of the Islamic Studies program is a great fit for self-motivated students who may have a particular area of interest in mind before pursuing their studies.

Masood is approaching his graduate studies with mindfulness. His genuine sense of humility provides him with the ability to be both grounded in his personal history while maintaining the openness to learn and grow. Masood reflected that “prominent Muslim government officials can be counted on one hand,” which is part of his underlying motivation to pursue public policy as a Muslim and contribute to the public sector in a meaningful and intentional way. We are eager to see the good work he does in our world.

**“If I am being completely honest with myself, Islamic studies is what I am most interested in,”** Masood reflected. However, his interest in the Peace Corps and Law School were rooted in his passion for public service, and **“that’s where public policy folds in.”**



## CURRENT STUDENT FEATURE

# OMAR MASOOD

By Melika Belhaj

# WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By Melika Belhaj

**Shireen Smalley** graduated from the University of Michigan in 2018 with a Master of Arts in Middle Eastern and North African Studies and a Master of Public Policy. CMENAS had the opportunity to check in with her about what she has been up to since completing her graduate studies at University of Michigan.

*Since finishing your program, what have you been up to? What have you enjoyed about your experiences and positions so far?*

After I graduated, I worked for the National Network for Arab American Communities (a project of ACCESS, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) as an Organizational Development Manager. There, I had the honor of strengthening a national network of 27 Arab American community-based organizations located around the United States, and assisting individual member organizations with nonprofit management practices to become more impactful in their own communities.

In 2020, I transitioned to If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice in order to develop a data-driven membership strategy for the organization's movement-building arm and to help launch the Reproductive Justice Lawyers Network. The move to the field of reproductive justice has been very fulfilling — I was excited and have been

very gratified to work for an organization fighting for reproductive rights for all, not just for those with the privilege and means to access them.

*Tell us about the work that you do with If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice. What elements of your graduate studies have influenced how you engage with your current work?*

At If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice, I manage the organization's membership data to better understand our constituents and to further engage them in our work and mobilize them against reproductive oppression. My work involves data management and day-to-day operation and optimization of our constituent relationship management (CRM) software. While I don't reference Middle East Studies coursework in my current role, my MENA coursework and my coursework from the Master of Public Policy program taught me how to recognize systems of power, and (in) justice, lessons that continue to drive and motivate me today.

*Tell us about the ways that you have used knowledge and lessons learned from MENA-related coursework at U-M in your positions so far.*

My coursework at the University of Michigan broadly focused on instances of global and local oppression, and possible policy solutions to combat that oppression. For example, during my public policy program I was able to write, publish, and

present my research on a patrilineal law in the Iranian constitution which conferred citizenship through the male line and not the female line, thereby marginalizing children of Iranian mothers and foreign fathers like mine. (This law has since changed.) Activist women in Iran fought against this and other misogynist laws by connecting them to the broader struggle against patriarchy and state-sanctioned violence against women.

This research and the lessons learned were invaluable for me, and I applied these principles to my work at NNAAC and in my current role at If/When/How. For example, this intellectual framework has helped me connect struggles in immigrant rights and reproductive justice under the broader struggle against racism and white supremacy. Whether it is a federal law to ban Muslims from entering the United States or a state bill preventing all but the white and wealthy from managing their own abortion care, it's important to recognize these as coordinated acts of violence against people of color to uphold white supremacy. Developing this understanding has been instrumental in my day-to-day work and in my professional career in the nonprofit sector and in social justice fields.

*Looking back, what aspects of your time as a Middle East studies student at U-M did you enjoy most? Why?*

I really enjoyed my final year at the University of Michigan, when I

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:  
**Erin Panichkul**, Student Organizing Manager;  
**Jon Wong**, Program Coordinator; **Shireen Smalley**, Network & Membership Manager;  
**Melissa Torres-Montoya**, Senior Manager of Lawyer Engagement; **Jeryl D. Hayes**, Movement Building Director.



took a course on Autobiography in Modern Arabic Literature taught by Professor Anton Shammas. I then wrote my Master's thesis on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Forough Farrokhzad, with the guidance of Professor Shammas and Professor Cameron Cross. This experience nourished my natural curiosity and my love for poetry and artistic expression, two traits which have had an enormous positive influence on my professional development and on my personal life.

I also loved Professor Kathryn Babayan's courses on Iranian religion and society, courses which were especially fulfilling to me as an Iranian-American student. Lastly, while I was a Middle East studies student I had the opportunity to work for Eryn Kropf transliterating the bibliographic information of Persian and Arabic lithographs for the collection at Hatcher Graduate Library, which was just plain fun!

*During your time as a student, what did you find to be most valuable about your Middle East studies degree (e.g. doors that it opened, opportunity to tailor degree to your interests, etc.)*

The most valuable element of my Middle East studies degree as a student was the ability to explore many different disciplines and to concurrently pursue a Master of Public Policy, marrying my two academic interests.

*What initially prompted you to make the decision to pursue graduate studies? Why did you choose Michigan?*

I owe so much of my good fortune at Michigan and beyond to my undergraduate advisor, John P. Turner, a wonderful human being and an Associate Professor of History at Colby College, my alma mater. John mentored me and encouraged me to apply to the University of Michigan, where he earned a PhD in Near Eastern Studies in 2001. Being introduced to the field of Middle East Studies through his excellent teaching

and then continuing my education at the source, as it were, has been a true gift in my academic life and in my ongoing journey as a seeker of knowledge.

*Looking forward, what are some of your hopes for your career in the future?*

I feel very humbled to have been able to take part in the causes and join the communities in which I have worked thus far. In the future, I hope to continue specializing in data management and CRM administration to deepen my impact in social justice.

*What advice or wisdom would you like to offer current students working on and/or in the Middle East or North Africa?*

My advice for students would be to stay open to new experiences, and embrace diversions or departures off the beaten path. Sometimes what you find will enrich your life in ways you won't see until many years later, and you'll be grateful for your unique journey!

NEW FACULTY  
FEATURE

DR.  
UMAYYAH  
CABLE

By Melika Belhaj

Melika had the opportunity to check in with **Dr. Umayyah Cable** who joined the University of Michigan in 2020. They bring a wealth of knowledge about representations of Palestine, media activism, and the arts to our community. They are currently Assistant Professor of American Culture and Film, Television, and Media Studies.

*What brought you to the University of Michigan?*

The University of Michigan department of American Culture is highly renowned in the fields I specialize in. Both my undergraduate and graduate degrees are in American studies, with the latter having emphasis in the study of race and ethnicity. U-M is also one of only a handful of universities that have institutionalized Arab and Muslim American studies (AMAS) in the form of an undergraduate minor. So as someone who specializes in Arab American studies, working at U-M is like a dream job! I've worked at other institutions where I've had to struggle to justify my research and teaching interests, and that's simply not the case here because there is an undergraduate minor in AMAS. I was also really interested in working with graduate students whose research interests overlap with or are related to my specializations. Also, fun fact: I applied to the U-M American Culture doctoral program, but I ultimately ended up at the University of Southern California. So that is all to say, I've wanted to join the U-M intellectual community since the very beginning of my path toward becoming a professor.

*What are some of the things you love about teaching university students?*

It may sound like a cliché, but I love the absorption capacity of young minds. They are sponges, and I mean that in the best way possible. I think it's easy to lose perspective after completing the grueling education of a doctoral program and forget the fact that eighteen, nineteen and twenty-something year-olds haven't done the kind of deep study that we as faculty have undertaken. My favorite part about teaching undergraduate students is taking them on a deep dive of concepts that *they think they already know*, and helping them really learn and comprehend them, and then use that knowledge to explore larger issues and topics. A great example of this is in my course "Stereotypes in American Culture." A lot of students enter the class thinking "Oh, I totally know what a stereotype is." But when they enter the class and are



pressed to actually explain what a stereotype is, the history of how it developed, how it functions, and the effects of that stereotype in society and politics, the commonsense knowledge they enter the class with suddenly evaporates. At which point the sponge is dry and ready to absorb new info.

Likewise, the thing I love about working with graduate students is that they are sometimes the ones taking us faculty on a scholarly deep dive. Graduate students are the most well-read scholars in any given field. They are in the throes of studying the foundational texts of a field *and* the latest scholarship, and they use all that knowledge to carve out new and exciting research questions and projects. Their curiosity and enthusiasm for study inspires me and I enjoy mentoring them as they think through their projects and figure out how to craft their writing.

*How would you describe your research interests and why were you drawn to them?*

In the broadest sense my research focuses on representations of Palestine, Arab American politics, and media activism in the United States. More specifically, my book project focuses on how Arab American activists and allies have used various forms of grassroots media production, distribution, and exhibition to craft how the issue of Palestine is represented, discussed, and understood in the context of the United States. The project looks at how film and media have been used to resist harmful

**A**lthough there is still censorship and turmoil over discussion of Palestine in the United States now thirty something years later, the discourse has changed dramatically. **My research emerged from a desire to historicize and trace the trajectory of that discursive change."**

stereotypes, produce knowledge about Palestine for general audiences, and cultivate solidarities among various constituencies, including liberation theologians, feminists, leftist LGBTQ communities, progressive Jews, and various other groups.

I was compelled to pursue this research for a distinctly personal reason. I myself am Palestinian-American. My mother was born in Nablus. In 1967 she lost her home and her family was scattered to various parts of the world when Israel occupied the West Bank. She is also an educator, an activist, and a feminist, and I grew up amidst a community of Arab American feminist activists and allies. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I witnessed firsthand how difficult it was to undertake Palestine solidarity activism when even uttering the word "Palestine" was perceived as incendiary. Although there is still censorship and turmoil over discussion of Palestine in the United States now thirty something years later, the discourse has changed dramatically. My research emerged from a desire to historicize and trace the trajectory of that discursive change.

*Tell us about your work in cinematic and media activism. What excites you the most about this topic?*

I've always loved art and cinema. I have a past life as an artist and documentary photographer. My first attempt at grad school was actually for an MFA in photography and I joke often about the fact that I am an art school drop-out. I worked as a freelance

**W**hat excites me about studying cinema, media, and activism together is the interplay between the media's formal and aesthetic qualities and a social movement's topics and goals. **Even if a media activism campaign 'fails,' it still accomplishes something in that failure, even if that something is simply pushing activists to innovate or reconsider their communication methods."**

photographer for about five years before pursuing a doctoral degree. My experience as an artist and documentary photography practitioner greatly shapes my interests not only in the visual components of media activism, but in the structural and organizational components, and the processes behind the imagery.

I also think it's really important to recognize that we can't always siphon things into discrete categories. You cannot advance a social movement without a medium through which to communicate the issues and goals of that movement. Likewise, there is no media that is devoid of ideology or rhetoric. What excites me about studying cinema, media, and activism together is the interplay between the media's formal and aesthetic qualities and a social movement's topics and goals. Even if a media activism campaign "fails," it still accomplishes something in that failure, even if that something is simply pushing activists to innovate or reconsider their communication methods.

*Tell us more about the Media Activism course that you taught in Fall 2021?*

Last fall was the second time I've taught this course at U-M, but because I joined the university in 2020 amidst the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was my first-time teaching in-person here. It felt great to be back in the classroom! My students were awesome and by the end of the semester I felt like we had really developed a great rapport. The course

focuses on various leftist social movements and issues which students can readily relate to current events. We started out by studying AIDS activism of the 1990s, then moved on to anti-War and Palestine solidarity activism, immigration, Black Lives Matter, and disability justice. In addition to studying the histories of these movements, we unpack and analyze the particular media methods used to communicate issues and advance the causes, from documentary film, video art, culture jamming and street art, to performance art, tactical media, and the use of the internet and social media. Throughout each course module, our class had robust discussions on the methods, ethics, goals, successes, and failures of various media activism campaigns, while also readily relating the topics we were studying to the current COVID-19 pandemic in relation to public health, disability, race, as well as state and federal responses to social movements and how public funding is used (or not used) in the interest of public good.

While I was really glad to be back to in-person teaching and believe that online course delivery is beneficial in mitigating public health hazards during a pandemic, there really is no adequate substitute for the kind of social connectivity and spontaneous learning that takes place in the classroom. That said, last semester was difficult for myriad reasons. My anxiety around COVID-19 was pretty high and I felt like my nervous system was on high alert all the time, which was exhausting. My students also just seemed totally

drained and by the end of the semester many of them seemed numb, which I found really disconcerting. One way that I tried to balance all of this stress was to slow things down so that I could teach in a more thorough way, and students could sit with material longer in an effort to really absorb and comprehend difficult topics. I think my students appreciated this approach; a bunch of them gave me a little homemade zine/thank you card on the last day of class, which really warmed my heart.

*What courses do you hope to design and teach at the U?*

I would really like to teach a course on Palestinian cinema. It is such a rich and dynamic cinematic movement and in the last two decades it's finally gotten more widespread exposure in the United States, which I argue in my book is due to the institutionalization of Palestine-themed film festivals. One reason I want to teach this course is because Palestinian cinema is not solely allegorical, it's not *only* about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There is a lot of work made in diaspora which is about identity and belonging, and some of it is really beautiful, haunting, and sad, but also quirky and funny. I love introducing students to films that move them in unexpected ways, whether it be through sadness, beauty, or humor.

*What are you currently reading, watching, or most interested in?*

Well, bell hooks recently passed away, so I am currently re-reading *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. It's such a beautiful book and in my humble opinion it should be required reading for all educators. I also recently experienced a loss in my family and read *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk. It's an incredibly intense book, but I also think it's important for educators to read, not just to understand one's own relationship to and experiences of trauma, but for understanding our friends, family, colleagues, and perhaps most importantly, our students.

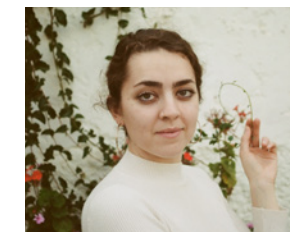
As for what I'm watching, I'll be totally honest and confess that I watched *Single All the Way* solely because I stan Kathy Njamy and Jennifer Coolidge. I just started watching *Derry Girls* on Netflix and it's providing some good laughs. I'm also really looking forward to the new film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Michelle Yeoh as heroine of the multiverse? Yes, please!

*Anything else you would like to add?*

My dog Jasper says hi.

## CMENAS STUDENT ASSISTANT FEATURE

CMENAS would like to recognize its student assistants for their commitment and work to the Center. We appreciate and value their effort and contributions this year!



CMENAS Newsletter Editor

**Melika Belhaj**

*Master of Urban and Regional Planning Candidate*



Student Researcher, Program in International & Comparative Studies and CMENAS

**Madeleine Virginia Gannon**

*History of Art Major, Concentration in Political Science and Criminal Justice*



CMENAS Outreach Assistant

**Lubna Saleh**

*Master of Public Health in Population and Health Sciences Candidate*

UNDERGRADUATE  
COURSE FEATURE WITH

DR. JAY CRISOSTOMO



Director of Graduate Studies and Associate Professor,  
George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern  
Civilization and Languages and Civilizations

Course Title: **Science  
and Technology in the  
Ancient Middle East**

**“Whatever our reasons, we as humans have  
been curious about the world around us  
and we have tried to take that knowledge and use it  
to improve our lives (whatever that means for us).”**

Interview with Melika Belhaj

**W**hat inspired you to create this course?  
My colleague Professor Katherine Davis (Middle East Studies) and I worked together to create this course, because we wanted to offer a topical course that might resonate with students majoring in or with interests in other fields, namely STEM disciplines. We both have research interests in the history of science and mathematics in the ancient Middle East and wanted to bring some of that research into the classroom. Professor Davis and I rotate teaching the course every winter term, so if students prefer a more Egyptian-centric version of the course, they can take it with Professor Davis (WN 23) or for a more Mesopotamian-centric (= modern Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria) course, they can take it with me (WN 24).

*What is something that you think people may find surprising about scientific and/or technological advancements in the ancient Middle East?*

Some of the most surprising things we talk about in the class are actually how fundamentally similar ancient

technological achievements are to our own technology. Most of the things they did involved the same processes we use: engineering, mathematics, human power and ingenuity. The tools we use to complete tasks might be different, but there are similarities in the ways in which we do things. And that means, despite thousands of years separating us and them, we are able to understand them as fellow humans.

*What do you hope students gain from this class?*

We spend the first few classes examining our own ideas and assumptions about science and technology. What counts as science? What counts as technology? Who is a scientist? We look closely at ourselves so that when we look at science and technology in the ancient Middle East, we can recognize that the things they're doing are different ways of being human and part of the history of science and technology. That ancient does not equal savage or un-evolved or lesser and that our ways of doing things are not necessarily better. That science, technology, mathematics — these are

not immutable forces; they are culturally shaped, fulfilling particular roles within societies to allow people to live as they need and to understand the world around them in ways that make sense to them.

*How do you think the knowledge students build in this class might impact the way they understand science and technology in our modern world?*

I think I got a little carried away with the previous question, because I think these two questions overlap. Helping students learn about how people interacted with science and technology in the ancient Middle East hopefully helps students understand science and technology in our modern world. Whether humans tracked the movements of Jupiter through observation and geometrical calculation like ancient Babylonians or whether we utilize telescopes and calculus, we as humans have considered it worthwhile to predict where a shiny object in the sky was going to be months in advance. Maybe they did to better understand the signs the gods placed in the sky; maybe we do it in order to better understand the physics of

the universe. Whatever our reasons, we as humans have been curious about the world around us and we have tried to take that knowledge and use it to improve our lives (whatever that means for us). So I hope that our students come away from this class with a finer appreciation for how they understand and interact with their computers, their phones, their vaccines, and their refrigerators simply because they have a better appreciation of the way people in the past understood and interacted with their tools and because they can see where they stand in the history of science and technology.

*Anything else you would like to add?*

We make sure that we put all of our conversations in the context of how and why we know what we know. We think a lot about the Colonial and Imperial practices that allow us to examine the ancient Middle East and how that affects our interpretations or how previous generations of scholarship may have defined science and technology in ways that silenced voices (including local populations and groups that were and

remain underrepresented). We try to expose these biases and then attempt to offer corrections that also consider how our work affects the local communities in the Middle East and the heritage effects of our study of the people and cultures who interacted with science and technology.

Future social health policies permitting, we try to make this class as exploratory and experiential as possible. Our students can design experiments to try their hand at building using ancient methods, or making food or beer or glass the way they did in the ancient Middle East. We try to take trips to the Kelsey and let them handle ancient tools, or pots, or mathematical homework, as well as to the planetarium to see the night sky as the Babylonians or Egyptians would have. We give our students a chance to write cuneiform on clay and make pinch pots. So we don't want our students to just learn about science and technology in the ancient Middle East, we want them to experience it in ways that make sense to them.





(Top left) DMZ, South Korea; (top right) still-standing section of Berlin Wall; (mid right) remnants of the Iron Curtain, Fulda region of central Germany; (bottom right) Israel's Separation Wall snaking through Bethlehem neighborhood; (bottom left) the US-Mexico border wall. Photos by Amy Perkins

## AT OUR DOORSTEP: GLOBAL MIGRATION AND EDUCATION

**Editor's Note:** *A long history of Middle Eastern migration to Latin America and Mexico in particular exists. More recently, seeking asylum in the US, North African refugees have taken the much longer, and much more dangerous, route through South America to the US/Mexico border. The Global Migration Education Initiative (GMEI) is a new collaboration between, on the one hand, multiple NRCs at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, and, on the other, San Diego State University. GMEI is funded by Title VI grants awarded by the US Dept of Education. CMENAS funds GMEI teacher travel and provides subject matter expertise to explore regional connections, as well as make comparisons with examples of migratory flows and borders from the Middle East and North Africa, and beyond.*

In late January 2022, with teachers from California, I participated in the GMEI “Global Migration and Inclusive Pedagogy Pilot Workshop” in San Diego. This four-day workshop enriched my understanding of the complexities associated with the San Diego-Tijuana artery, a well-worn pathway that involves the fluid flow of laborers, students, and consumers. Throughout the workshop we met with scholars whose research spotlights the economic, cultural, and political ramifications of fortified international borders. These conversations included a profound discussion with Victor Clark-Alfaro, the founder of the Binational Center for Human Rights. Professor Clark-Alfaro leveraged insights he gained from his 30+ years of advocating for marginalized populations, distilling for us the harsh realities that migrants face near the US-Mexico border and along the routes they follow in pursuit of safety and freedom. His recitation of migrant stories reinforced the details we heard from Dr. Jill Holslin, a visual artist who uses her lens to document the lives and movements of migrants as well as the obstructions — most notably, the Border Wall — that frustrate individuals’ efforts to escape persecution, poverty, and violence in their homeland. Our teacher cohort also met with visionary K-12 administrators and coordinators of binational (US and Mexico) education programs designed to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of an ever-increasingly diverse population of students in Baja California and the greater San Diego community.

These invaluable conversations with academic experts and community leaders, however, took on new meaning following the experiential component of the workshop. On the second day of the pilot program participants crossed the US-Mexico border on foot, walking alongside migrants, passing through security checkpoints, and trodding under the shadow of the closely-guarded and highly controversial US border wall. We subsequently gathered together at the “El Chaparral” refugee camp, a site that is a temporary home to 500+ migrants. This visit further personalized the details of human migration. We engaged in direct conversation with the individuals who fled their homes and traversed dangerous terrain with the hope of securing refuge in the United States. Speaking candidly, I was ill-prepared for the distressing sight of a makeshift camp composed of plastic tarps and cardboard boxes. The flood of children who exited the camp to greet us nearly broke me emotionally. This is not my first time visiting a refugee camp, but it was my first time seeing such desperation at my nation’s doorstep. This experience interacting with migrant children, paired with our visit to the section of border wall within Friendship Park in Tijuana, offered me penetrating insights into the content I teach in my US and World History courses. For years I’ve discussed with students the history of the US-Mexico border, the flow of migrants along this boundary, and the controversy surrounding the construction of a border wall. However, my instruction lacked the

insight and the emotional experience the GMEI workshop afforded me.

As a veteran teacher with a student audience that includes the children of migrant workers, I now have more insight into some of the economic, political, and cultural realities that are immediately relevant to my student population. Additionally, as a World History and US History teacher, I am better positioned to help students conduct comparative analyses of international borders, patterns of human migration, and the laws and fortified barriers that restrict human mobility. What I saw at the US-Mexico border mirrored realities I witnessed first-hand along Israel’s Separation Wall in the West Bank. The stories I heard of separated families in Tijuana echoed testimony I heard from residents in South Korea who desperately missed loved ones located just north of the DMZ. Finally, from a historical standpoint, the accounts migrants shared with us about their death-defying trek through Central America were, in many ways, similar to the extraordinary risks taken by East Germans and East Berliners at the height of the Cold War. GMEI has helped me to see these comparisons globally and historically, and it has done so while also connecting me with the experts and resources that will help me build upon the knowledge I’ve gained as a participant of the pilot workshop.

GMEI is designed to meet a desperate need shared among teachers and students alike. The population gathered within our classrooms is increasingly diverse. Educators are hungry for guidance, resources, and support networks that can help us ensure that K-12 education continues to empower all learners, regardless of their language, ethnicity, citizenship status, and racial identity. Furthermore, we are eager to test new strategies and explore new materials that promote empathy and global competency among our youngest generation, most especially as these scholars prepare to assert themselves within a truly interconnected world.

### OUTREACH HIGHLIGHTS BY

# AMY PERKINS

2019–20 MENA-SEA Teacher Program Fellow, 2022 Armenia Genocide Education Project Fellow, History Teacher, Lakeshore Public Schools, Stevensville, Michigan





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## NIGHT'S STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

Ali Chahrouf's "Layl" resurrects classical Arabic literature and pairs it with music and dance, exposing the audience to a raw, profoundly moving portrayal of love and heartbreak. The performers, both musicians and dancers, engage the audience in a retelling of a romantic tragedy: the passionate bond that unites two lovers also entraps them in a chaotic, even torturous exchange. This story arc plays out as poetic words from antiquity narrate the drama unfolding on stage. My initial impression was that this performance was about a love affair between two people, but insights shared during the post-performance Q & A revealed a broader truth: the passion, longing, and friction displayed on stage also mirror the choreographer's complicated relationship with his homeland, Lebanon. His affection for Lebanon remains steadfast despite the region's political and economic turmoil. This deeper message resonated with several members of the audience who, like Chahrouf, remain connected to their homeland, even as the harsh realities of the region forced their departure. Alas, a devotion to one's homeland can be as passionate (and cruel) as the bond shared between two lovers.

I remain grateful to the MENA-SEA Teacher Program for sponsoring my attendance of Ali Chahrouf's "Layl."

**Editor's Note:** "Layl" (Night) is a performance by Lebanese choreographer and theater maker Ali Chahrouf put on by the University Musical Society on February 12, 2022. The dance-theater work was inspired by the dense archive of love and romance in classical Arabic poetry and from contemporary stories of lovers and their cruel separations. Referring to stories from the cultural memory of the Levant and Mesopotamia about the fate of lovers who challenged social and religious systems, "Layl" shows the full emotional impact of love, from destructive passion to ardent desire and hushed farewell. Chahrouf studied theater and dance in his native Beirut and in various European schools, creating a language inspired by Arab myths and by the political, social, and religious context of his country.

## KARIMA BENNOUNE RETURNS TO MICHIGAN

On February 15th, CMENAS and the Program for International and Comparative Studies (PICS) hosted CMENAS alumnus Karima Bennoune. During her conversation with students, Bennoune spoke fondly about her time at U-M; her post-graduation studies in international law; and about her father, who before her was a CMENAS alumnus and for whom the Mahfoud Bennoune Memorial Thesis Fund is named. Bennoune will be a visiting scholar at the Law School for the remainder of the academic year.



**"Really listen to the voices of people that you meet, be careful of your own preconceptions, and, rather than speaking for people, try to find ways to amplify their voices and create space for them to be heard."**

Karima Bennoune

## OLD GEM PLAYS AT ANN ARBOR'S STATE THEATRE

By Rima Hassouneh



TOP: Faten Hamama stars in the 1959 Egyptian classic "Nightingale's Prayer." BOTTOM: The marquee of the Michigan Theater.

The 1959 Egyptian classic "Nightingale's Prayer" played at Ann Arbor's State Theatre on Sunday, February 20th, starring the first lady of the Arab silver screen Faten Hamama. Based on the novel by the great Egyptian author Taha Hussein and directed by Henri Barakat, this compelling tale of love and betrayal is set in the upper Egyptian countryside and follows the story of Amna (Hamama) as she plots her revenge on the engineer (Ahmed Mazhar) who destroyed her family's honor. A gripping portrait of a courageous young woman's rebellion against tradition and poverty, this film is an undiscovered masterpiece of world cinema. The Michigan Theater Foundation thanked CMENAS for its sponsorship of the screening: "After a difficult year, we were so thrilled to be able to once again have people in our theater and we couldn't have done it without you!"

Dr. Wessam Elmelig, assistant professor in Arabic literature and language and director of the Comparative Literature Certificate and the Arabic translation Certificate at UM-Dearborn, gave post-film remarks and led Q&A. Besides the popcorn, Dr. Elmelig loved the audience's engagement and passion. The multi-generational audience, which included students from U-M's Department of Film, Television and Media, was quite interested in Hamama's career and the series of films she made with Henri Barakat that focused on women's rights. Dr. Elmelig also addressed the difference between the novel's and film's endings.

**"I realized while watching the film that I have watched it, taught it, and given talks about it countless times but I have never watched it in an actual theatre before."**

Dr. Wessam Elmelig

Members of the audience wanted to know:

1. "The theme of this film (an employer taking advantage of a powerless employee) is particularly notable in the age of the 'Me Too' movement. Was this film Henri Barakat's statement of that movement before it had a name?"
2. "As this film is set in the 1930's, but it was filmed in the 1950's, was the scenery accurate?"
3. "The women all have names in the film but, other than the uncle, the men are just referred to by their positions... Was this deliberate by the author and what was the commentary there?"

"Thank you so much for this opportunity and for connecting me to such a marvelous space," Dr. Elmelig later expressed. "I realized while watching the film that I have watched it, taught it, and given talks about it countless times but I have never watched it in an actual theatre before." He continued, "I'd give talks about old gems like that if only for the chance to watch them in a real theatre among a real audience, and have that entire cinematic experience that brings us closer to what the original audience had."

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