

EVENTS

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.

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Assistant Professor, Comparative Literature; Assistant Professor, Residential College

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

In these early months of 2025, we are overwhelmed by the news of domestic and world events that elicit both anxieties and cautious optimism. As ever, the Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) region frequents our newsfeeds. As we follow

these stories — from the devastation from the hostilities in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Yemen to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria to the geopolitical and social dynamics shaping the region — we strive to understand the complexities, human impact, and evolving narratives that define this moment in history.

We also await how the new administration in Washington enacts its plans for relations with MENA countries. We are also conscientious of how the second Trump presidency's policies affect our communities here in the US. As we attempt to navigate the administration's prerogatives and values, our priorities and mission at the Center for Middle Eastern & North African Studies (CMENAS) have never been more important. The work of CMENAS is vital to highlighting the wide variety of human experiences and cultures and in countering the ongoing threat of Islamophobia and Antisemitism on campus and in our



community. We are more committed than ever to our mission of promoting a broader and deeper understanding of the MENA region — its histories, cultures, languages, and peoples — through our research, education, and outreach programs. In this newsletter, we spotlight how those programs are demonstrating our dedication to our values and strengthening our resolve to an empathetic and informed consideration of the many issues that the MENA region and the people of our community encounter and how we can offer our resources and support.

Our support for educators in Michigan and nationwide continues to be a focal point of our programming. Our community outreach coordinator, Jennifer Lund, has led several efforts addressing curricular needs for K–14 educators. This past Fall this included two impactful book discussion groups, the World History Learning Community and

COVER PHOTO: Intricate Moroccan Door in Fes, Morocco by Youssef Sikht, pexels.com



Author Omar Mohamed received a warm welcome at the Refugee Development Center in Lansing.

the MENA Reading Cohort, with sessions featuring interactions with authors, faculty, and journalists (page 9).

Associate Director Khaled Mattawa led our annual student colloquium, “Echoes of Displacement: Refugees and Migration.” Along with CMENAS Academic Program Specialist Warsan Salah, Professor Mattawa put together a captivating program of speakers who narrated stories of displacement or addressed multiple contexts related to migration and refugees from the MENA region. Read more about the colloquium and the speakers on pages 6–8.

One of the main highlights from the colloquium was the visit of Omar Mohamed, author of National Book Awards 2020 finalist in Young People’s Literature, the graphic novel *When Stars are Scattered*, a personal memoir of his journey from Somalia to the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and his pursuit of education. Mohamed addressed our students in the colloquium as well as local students at Scarlett Middle School and Logan Elementary. He also spoke at the Ann Arbor District Library Downtown Branch and at the Refugee Development Center in Lansing. Mohamed’s story of sacrifice and perseverance and his ongoing work with students in refugee camps and centers was an inspiration to all the

people he encountered during his time in Ann Arbor and Lansing. Read more about Omar Mohamed’s visit on pages 10–11.



Greg Thomas

Greg Thomas, an activist and professor of global Black studies and media at Howard University, gave a challenging and incisive presentation, “Black-on-Black Solidarity: Falasteen between George Jackson and Kwame Ture (An Anti-Curator’s Talk),” for our annual MLK Jr Day lecture on February 5th. Thomas spoke about his experiences as curator of the traveling exhibition “George Jackson in the Sun of Palestine,” which focuses on the revolutionary George Jackson and a poem written by Samih Al-Qasim but ascribed to Jackson and how that poem inspired Palestinian revolutionary efforts. He also detailed his work in Guinea curating *Sur les Traces du Black Panther: Kwame Ture/ Stokely Carmichael*, which was dedicated to the activities and writings of Kwame Ture, another revolutionary. Thomas’s talk highlighted the enduring work of these two Black revolutionaries and their impact on activists in the Middle East and Africa.



Warsan Salah

Finally, I share exciting news: our academic program specialist, Warsan Salah, received the Outstanding New Staff award at the International Institute (II) staff holiday appreciation luncheon. This award, given to a staff member who joined the institute within the past three years and has demonstrated an outstanding work ethic, a positive attitude, and a dedication to the II’s mission and core values, is richly deserved, and we all congratulate Warsan for the award. It is undeniable that CMENAS is extremely fortunate to have Warsan on our team and we could not provide the programming we do without her. Congratulations Warsan!

While the U.S. Department of Education supports some of these initiatives, our funding is regularly threatened by shifting political and financial forces in Washington and around the globe. Now more than ever, CMENAS relies on the critical support of allies and alumni like you to be able to continue to realize its mission, even in the face of such uncertainty. Your

donation enables us to fund language teaching, faculty research, undergraduate and graduate study-abroad, as well as educational outreach to K–12 teachers who spark the imagination of the next generation. If you believe in CMENAS’s educational vision, we hope you will take a moment to translate your goodwill toward CMENAS into a tangible investment in the future.

Your contribution — **whether \$5 or \$500** — will ensure that our mission of service and scholarship continues to be fulfilled. Can we count on your support? **Your help has never been more important.** To donate: ii.umich.edu/cmenas/donate

If you have ideas about the work ahead or would like to invest in a new generation of students and leaders with moral and material support, please reach out to us. I am happy to discuss the center’s strategic plan and talk frankly about monthly charitable pledges or named benevolent gifts to support the CMENAS initiatives you wish to honor most. Simply contact me at cjcrisos@umich.edu, or call: 734-647-4143. And feel free to connect on social media: Facebook, X, and LinkedIn—we *LOVE* to hear from our CMENAS community!

Thank you! And Go Blue!

Jay Crisostomo

Interim Director, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies

George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations; and Associate Professor, Middle East Studies

ECHOES OF DISPLACEMENT:
REFUGEES AND MIGRATION

By Azar Kafei

The CMENAS Fall Colloquium series is part of the CMENAS course “Comparative Perspectives of the Middle East and North Africa” (CMENAS 493/593). In this course and public colloquium, the center brings together a uniquely diverse cohort of specialists, opening multiple perspectives of comparative research to students, faculty, and the public. The theme of the colloquium series changes every year. In fall 2024, the CMENAS colloquium theme was “Echoes of Displacement: Refugees and Migration,” organized and moderated by CMENAS Associate Director Khaled Mattawa.

The series is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Center (NRC) grant.



Petra Molnar
York University

The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

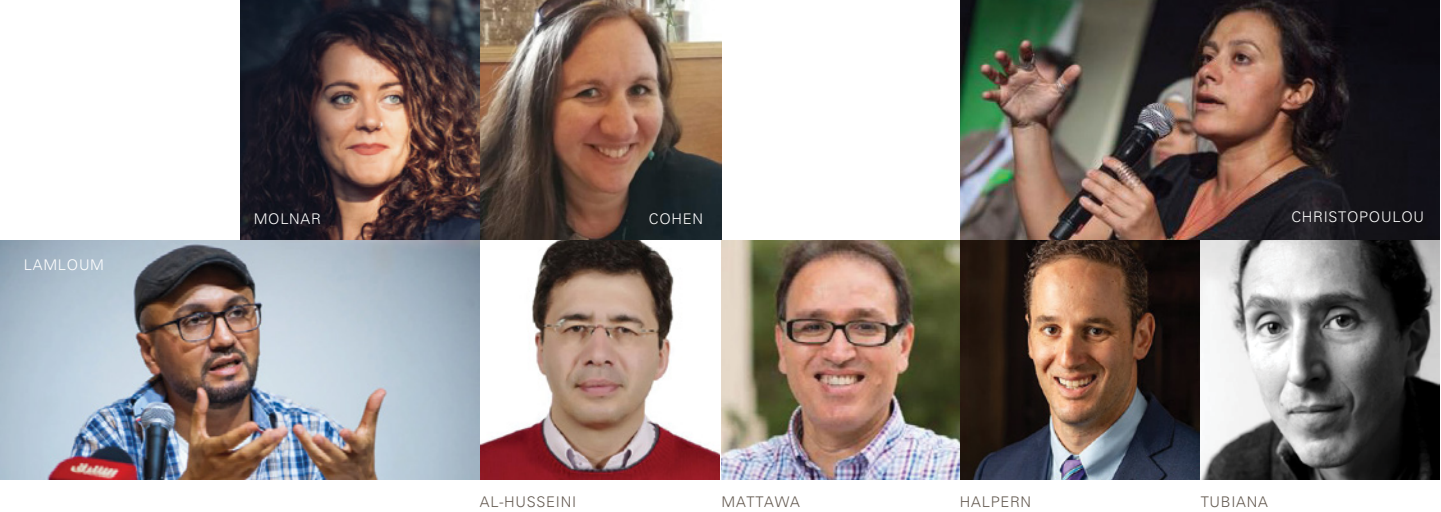
How does technology impact human migration? Petra Molnar kicked off CMENAS’s Fall Colloquium by presenting the audience with her research on the impact of surveillance and artificial intelligence on human communities crossing borders as migrants and asylum seekers. Drawing from her academic research as well as her legal practice, she drew comparisons about the increasing employment of technology to monitor the movement of people across the globe and in far-apart locations such as Mexico, Greece, and Kenya. Monlar’s long-term transnational fieldwork and use of comparative methods

highlighted the importance of employing border frameworks for how technology impacts people on the move, separates peoples, and further exacerbates historical discrimination. She also highlighted the use of artificial knowledge by the receiving governments in processing asylum applications, stressing that the unregulated use of technology has had an exclusionary impact. To efficiently meet the challenges and harms enabled by the under-examined role of technology in monitoring human movements, Molnar suggested, communities should challenge racialized representation of migration and demand transparency regarding the use of surveillance technology.

Elisheva L Cohen
Indiana University

Uneven Belonging: How Refugee Youth in Jordan Experience Inclusive Refugee Education

Elisheva Cohen presented the audience with her ethnographic research on the challenges faced by refugee youth in educational settings in Jordan. She highlighted the high number of refugees that reside in Jordan, and the complexities of manufacturing and contesting social belonging in such a setting. Over the past decade, Cohen pointed out, refugee education policy in Jordan has shifted towards a model of inclusion with the aim of integrating refugees into national systems. Youth refugees, many displaced from neighboring countries, attend Jordanian schools, study the Jordanian



curriculum from Jordanian teachers, often alongside Jordanian students. Cohen’s fieldwork highlighted the experiences of refugee students from varying national backgrounds, with a focus on their sense of belonging at the local and national level. Through ethnographic stories about the various ways refugee youth navigate and negotiate their belonging, Cohen underscored the uneven outcomes of the inclusive refugee education policy.

Tarek Lamloum
Migrant and Asylum Seeker Case Researcher

Libya’s Ongoing Crisis: The Plight of Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Tarek Lamloum opened his dual-language presentation, with the help of a live translator, by highlighting the turbulent status quo of contemporary Libya. The events of the Arab Spring, followed by foreign intervention and a civil war, have resulted in widespread instability across the entire country. Against this volatile context, the migrants and asylum seekers who find themselves in Libya en route to Europe, suffer from extremely vulnerable conditions. Most of the communities on the move have left various Saharan nations in the hope of a journey across the water to reach the European coast. They face extremely difficult and dangerous conditions on the way such as kidnapping, detention, and sexual violence. This situation, Lamloum highlighted, is further exacerbated by the actions and policies of the European Union and their treaties with North

African partners. These policies, such as the coast guarding agreement between Libya and Italy, often place already vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers in even more peril. Rejected entry by European countries and finding themselves stuck in Libya, many migrants end up either in detention centers or struggling to find work or study opportunities in Libya. Addressing these issues requires confronting the root causes and ending the exploitation and harsh policies imposed by the European Union and transit countries.

Jalal Al-Husseini
Institut français du Proche-Orient (French institute of the Near East)

The Evolution of the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan

Speaking to the audience from Amman, Jordan, Al-Husseini offered his reflection on the evolution of Palestinian camps in Jordan since their establishment in the wake of the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars. Palestinian Refugees in Jordan outnumber those residing in Gaza, West Bank, Syrian or Lebanon. Historically, the first generation of the refugees were mostly farmers and laborers. The current generation residing in the camps still faces pronounced socio-economic hardships and struggles with high unemployment and social stigmatization. The relationship between Palestinian refugees and their host Jordanian society has been unique. Many live in Jordan as ‘Jordanian Citizens with Palestinian Origin,’ a

relatively more integrated legal status compared to those afforded in other host countries. Nonetheless, Al-Husseini emphasized, Palestinian refugees in Jordan who reside in camps live under serious material restrictions and face marginalization from the wider society. In this context, the agency responsible for providing assistance to the refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), has fulfilled a dual responsibility of providing humanitarian assistance and incorporating the refugees into the Jordanian labor market. These efforts have been complicated by the symbolic status of camps, their role as spaces of community formation, and by the refugees’ hope and protected Right of Return, which has encouraged a politics of steadfastly enduring the misery of life in the camps.

Khaled Mattawa
University of Michigan

Lyric Documentation: A Discussion of Mare Nostrum

In this talk, Khaled Mattawa, associate director of CMENAS, reflected on his research and writing practice, which has spanned over a decade and focuses on poetic representation of migration and the plight of refugees. Mattawa works in the Arabic and English languages and frequently travels and visits the spaces and people about whom he writes. Mattawa highlighted his familial connection with Libya and reflected on his method of

documentation and research, which often entails fieldwork travel across the Mediterranean. He contrasted his practice of documentation and spontaneous conversations with those affected with journalistic practices of collecting testimonies of hardship and pain. Mattawa traced the path of his journey through Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Libya and highlighted the connections that he made with small local grassroots groups providing solidarity and support for the migrants along the way. Some of these included local efforts to collect and exhibit belongings left behind by the migrants to highlight their shared humanity and conjure understanding among societies through which the migrants make their passage.

Nadina Christopoulou
Melissa Network

Melissa Network: Building Beehives of Solidarity

Joining the audience virtually from Greece, Nadina Christopoulou reflected on her personal journey from a postdoctoral academic researcher to an activist-researcher. Christopoulou's research focuses on diaspora narratives, migration, childhood, and solidarity networks for migrant and refugee women. Her activism has been focused on the same questions and has taken shape in her involvement with Melissa Network. Committed to shifting the discourse on migration from one focused on humanitarian aid to one focused on the agency of migrants themselves, Melissa Network uses frameworks of drama therapy to provide a safe space for women who are current or former migrants and refugees. The participants, along with artists and researchers, engage in conversations, skill-building, and problem-solving. Christopoulou credited the intergenerational aspect of the circle with providing much-needed support for newcomer migrants to navigate unfamiliar situations. The network works as a place for women to join together, share stories, find solutions

to common problems, and validate each other's experiences. Melissa Network, Christopoulou notes, is determined to change the representation of migrants from an image of vulnerable victims to one that is focused on migrating individuals and community's potential and aspirations. In order to humanize migrants and create bridges between them and the local societies, the circle participants work to gain new skills and imagine integration pathways, such as community building, literacy improvement, investing in mental health, and engaging in art and creativity.

Jake Halpren
Journalist

The Art of Storytelling in Words, Pictures, & Sound

How can writers use different tools to tell contemporary stories of migration most effectively? In his talk, Halpren stressed his career journey as a writer along with his experimentation with storytelling forms. In addition to the written word, Halpren has produced stories using audio, video game visuals, and narrative podcasts. His audience has been similarly diverse; he has written for legacy media and young adults alike. Halpren briefly reflected on the current status of media, the fast-paced nature of the news cycle, and the difficulty of sustaining readers' attention. He then highlighted his workflow for stories featuring migrants and refugees, such as his 2017 story, which follows a Syrian refugee family's complex journey to America on the day of the 2016 election, navigating hope, fear, and resilience in a new land. Like many other speakers of the colloquium, Halpren stressed his interest in centering the personal voice of families experiencing the hardship of migration. To center these voices and humanize them, Halpren noted, is to create solidarity bonds with the audience that will result in material improvements. During the Q&A, Halpren reflected on his craft, highlighted the benefits

of teaching for a writing career, and encouraged students to pursue their dreams and work through self-doubt.

Jérôme Tubiana
Doctors Without Borders

Telling Migrants' Realities in a Hostile Political Context: Renewing the Discourse and its Forms

In the final presentation of the colloquium, Jérôme Tubiana stressed the importance of telling impactful stories about migration. These stories might require innovative research and communication techniques. He noted that there exists a sense of public fatigue on migration issues, even as there is continuing interest within the public and the media for more stories about communities who cross borders. Organizations on the ground such as Doctors Without Borders or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), are especially responsible for communicating stories that circumvent said fatigue. He likened his approach to storytelling about migration to those writing travelogues. He walked the audience through his process of writing about war refugees from Darfur as an example. In his reporting, Tubiana tends to focus on the plight of refugees who escape from war and violence in order to balance common perceptions about the economic basis of contemporary migration. He especially pays attention to the origin story of migrants instead of narrowly focusing on their journey, and his preferred method of research is collecting testimonies. During one trip on a migrant-carrying vessel, he was able to hold a writing workshop while on board. Writers and migrants collaborated and were able to write together. To see themselves reflected authentically in the stories written about them, Tubiana noted, should be a goal of any writer reporting on similar topics. Tubiana also highlighted his experimentation with form, and his graphic reportage of war and refugee experience, which is becoming more popular among journalists covering migration and war.

CMENAS Reading Group Recaps

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR K-14 EDUCATORS

By Jennifer Lund

The CMENAS Title VI grant administered by the Department of Education sponsored two Fall 2024 reading groups: the MENA Reading Cohort and the first session of the International Institute's World History Learning Community. For the third year running, these professional learning communities cater to K-14 educators with the goal of gaining deeper knowledge of MENA cultures and histories. These groups enable educators to deepen their understanding of not only MENA history and culture abroad but also diaspora communities in the United States.

The MENA Reading Cohort offers three two-hour in-person sessions each academic year for a community of educators who share a common interest in learning more about the Middle East and North Africa region through reading and discussion. The first session met on Saturday, November 9, 2024, at Weiser Hall and included a lively discussion from 11 Michigan and Ohio educators of the 2024 graphic novel "Women Life Freedom," edited by Marjane Satrapi. The book

explores the 2022 events that sparked the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, the contemporary history of Iran, and the diverse perspectives of citizens residing within Iran and in the diaspora. Three Iranian women scholars from the U-M community attended to share their perspectives and field questions from the cohort. One MENA Reading Cohort educator remarked, **"I gained historical context, real-world stories, and an understanding of some of the ways the book came together."**

The CMENAS World History Learning Community session took place virtually on December 3, 2024, to an audience of 16 educators from across the U.S. to discuss Nobel Prize-winning Yugoslavian author Ivo Andric's "The Bridge on the Drina." This work of historical fiction spans a time period from the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire to WWI. The book's central character is a bridge in the Bosnian town of Visegrad that stands witness to the changing political and cultural landscape of the region. Tatjana Aleksić, associate professor of comparative literature, and Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Michigan joined the community of mostly social studies/world history educators to provide historical background and insights for the novel's stories that chronicle the lives of Christians, Jews, and Muslims living side-by-side and connected by a region that has itself been a bridge between East and West for centuries.

Through discussions of compelling fiction and non-fiction stories, participants of both reading groups have the opportunity to discuss what resonated for them in each book and how it might transfer to their classroom context. Facilitated by CMENAS Outreach Coordinator Jennifer Lund, each reading group is provided with additional related resources to accompany each discussion and participants often share ideas with each other beyond the sessions to create lesson material for their students.





CMENAS HOSTS OMAR MOHAMED

Author of *When Stars Are Scattered*

EVENTS SUPPORT ANN ARBOR COMMUNITY
AND REFUGEE YOUTH IN LANSING

By Jennifer Lund

Omar Mohamed's *When Stars Are Scattered* has captured readers' hearts worldwide with its moving and deeply personal narrative. The graphic novel powerfully depicts the refugee experience and tells the story of Mohamed's childhood in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, where he and his younger brother, Hassan, spent 15 years of their early lives. The book was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2020, the winner of the Josette Frank Award in 2020, and the Walter Dean Myers Award for Young Readers in 2021. It has also received starred reviews from *Booklist*, *The Horn Book*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*.

Mohamed visited Ann Arbor and Lansing from October 21-23, 2024, to share his journey from a refugee camp in Dadaab, Kenya, to becoming a published author and advocate for refugees worldwide. Attendees heard him discuss the inspiration behind his book, the challenges he faced, and the message of hope and resilience that lies at the heart of his story.

Mohamed began at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor campus with the CMENAS Fall 2024 Colloquium Series on refugees and migration, where he gave a talk and answered questions from nine graduate students in the Masters in International and Regional Studies (MIRS) program and other attending community members. The same evening, he spoke to 45 community members gathered at the Ann Arbor District Library Downtown Branch where when asked who had already

read *When Stars Are Scattered*, over half of the audience, many of them school-age children and their teachers, shot up their hands. In sharing his story at each venue, Mohamed related some of the many challenges faced by primary and secondary students in the camp, especially girls and those with mental and physical disabilities, to attend school and achieve higher levels of education. As the founder and director of the non-profit Refugee Strong in 2017, he returns every year to the Dadaab camp to deliver school supplies and resources. The camp now has a newly opened library with electricity powered by solar panels funded by Refugee Strong. Mohamed noted that "99.9 percent of projects by Refugee Strong are sponsored by children" and he encouraged young people to get involved to help refugees around the world who are living in conditions with limited resources and opportunities. Booksweet, a locally owned book shop in Ann Arbor, was on hand to sell Mohamed's book after the event as the author signed copies for his young fans.

According to the UNHCR, as of October 8, 2024, there are 37.9 million refugees and 40 percent are children under 18 years of age. On Tuesday, October 22, Mohamed had the chance to meet some of the less than one percent of refugees that are considered for resettlement (International Rescue Committee website accessed on 10/31/24) at the Refugee Development Center (RDC) in Lansing, MI. While visiting the RDC, Mohamed toured the facility, met with staff, and spoke with about 50 teenagers in the Center's after-school program, which provides language support, social and wellbeing

activities, and cultural integration to life in the United States. Mohamed's message of finding opportunity in challenges was shared through the RDC's cultural brokers, who translated his words into Dari, Pashto, Arabic, Kinyarwanda, and Kiswahili for students developing English fluency after seeking refuge in the United States from conflicts in Afghanistan, Sudan, Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to name a few. The students, in turn, asked the author questions that ranged from "What did you want to be when you grew up?" to "How do you manage your emotions when you think about your story?" and "How can we view challenges as an opportunity for growth?" Mohamed also deeply encouraged them not to forget where they came from or who they are. He also said that he hopes his story encourages them to share their own. "It has to be us who tells our stories," he said. Thanks to an RDC donor, every attending student left the event with a signed copy of Mohamed's book.

Omar Mohamed spoke to students at Ann Arbor Public Schools Scarlett Elementary (1) and Logan Elementary (3, 5); presented to community members at the Ann Arbor District Library (6); and visited the Refugee Development Center in Lansing.

Mohamed spent his final day in Ann Arbor with 200 sixth graders from Scarlett Middle School and 110 fourth and fifth graders from Logan Elementary. At Scarlett, the University of Michigan African Studies Center purchased books for each student with the center's Title VI Grant funds, and students had the chance to engage with Mohamed in small groups for book signing directly following the discussion and up close as he walked the hallways and spent time in two Language Arts classrooms and toured the school's library where he had the chance to interact with Social Studies teachers and their students. The students at the Title 1 School had been prepping for his visit since mid-September. They created a thank you video reflecting on what they learned and how the book impacted them. Likewise, the students at Logan Elementary prepared ahead of time by reading and discussing the book and had ample opportunities during Mohamed's presentation to ask questions and interact with the author as they learned about the daily life of refugees in Dadaab, one of the oldest and largest refugee camps in the world.

Co-sponsored by the U-M African Studies Center, the Ann Arbor District Library, and the Refugee Development Center in Lansing. These events are part of ongoing efforts by CMENAS to bring diverse voices and stories to schools and community organizations and foster meaningful conversations with funding from the CMENAS U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant.



GLOBAL MIGRATION EDUCATION INITIATIVE

By Azar Kafei

The Global Migration Education Initiative (GMEI) held its 4th annual educator workshop on August 14-16th, 2024, with the participation of U-M International Institute, San Diego State University, and the Secretariat of Education of Baja California, Mexico. The topic for this year's program was "Migration and Language: Developing More Inclusive Pedagogies in the Classroom and Beyond." The program's main components were designed to provide support and share best practices with Michigan teachers who serve multi-lingual, migrant students and their families.

The program was led by the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS), while the Center for Middle Eastern & North African Studies (CMENAS) sponsored two teachers and the speaker from the Refugee Development Center of Lansing, Jackson Schooley. One of the major objectives of this year's program was to increase the teacher-to-teacher engagement between educators on both sides of the border.

Participation was opened to teachers from the United States who had proficiency in conversational Spanish. Eleven teachers were selected to be funded; nine of the teachers were from Michigan, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C. Teachers came from a variety of disciplines, including social studies, math, and science. Eighty-two percent of teachers come from schools with majority-minority student populations. In addition, almost all teachers work at Title 1 eligible schools.

This year's program had not only the largest number of Michigan-based, multilingual teacher participants, but it also included direct exchanges with bi-national teachers from San Diego and Tijuana. A participating teacher noted, "I am excited to have made connections with teachers in Tijuana. We have talked a bit on Facebook since leaving, and are planning on doing a pen pal unit with students between my school and the students in Tijuana." The emphasis on direct, practical classroom application and experiences was complemented with several school visits to award-winning dual immersion schools



in California as well as schools and community organizations working on innovative, migrant inclusion programs in Mexico. Another participant noted, "The workshop allowed me to connect theory and practice by witnessing real examples of how schools have been responding to the increasing needs of migrant students and learning from their challenges and successes."

The program was composed of community and school visits, panel presentations, and pedagogical workshops. Organizers arranged several visits to local sites on both sides of the border in order to foster greater dialogue among educators. This included dialogue and classroom observations with current teachers and administrators, which gave teacher participants an opportunity to experience dual-language, globally minded curricula in practice. Each classroom was organized by a different nation, such as Nepal, Cuba, and Palestine. Students received instruction both in Spanish and English, and participated in learning about the culture and history of their assigned country.

The program also held several area studies panel presentations sponsored by the participating National Resource Centers (NRCs). Panel presentations' topics ranged from the connection between contemporary literature and African diasporic communities to pedagogical research on how teachers can better engage migrant students' cultural backgrounds via the case study of Southeast Asian refugees and indigenous peoples' folklore and myths. Lastly, Saúl Maldonado (LACS), associate professor of the Department of Dual Language and English Language Learner Education at San Diego State University, led a critical



"We developed comprehensive plans to not only help students succeed academically but also support their families as they navigate the complexities of migration. **The experience was deeply valuable, inspiring, and transformative.**"

discussion on holistic assessment in the classroom as it related to newcomer and multilingual students in Michigan schools.

The final component of the program was the pedagogical workshops. Organizers facilitated critical pedagogical sessions to help teacher participants apply concepts and practices to their own classrooms and schools. Curriculum specialists and the LACS Teacher Advisory Committee collaborated to develop a pedagogical guide that helped teachers identify the needs, resources, and positive changes needed to implement change within their particular educational context. A pedagogical session was held each day, utilizing the guide, and concluding with a critical learning session at Friendship Park in Tijuana to examine the Border Wall and community art. One participating teacher shared, "Working closely with educators from both countries, we developed comprehensive plans to not only help students succeed academically but also support their families as they navigate the complexities of migration. The experience was deeply valuable, inspiring, and transformative."

“I began to translate poetry from Arabic because **I felt a need to.**”



FACULTY INTERVIEW WITH

KHALED MATTAWA

By Rosa Razmi

In an engaging conversation, **Khaled Mattawa**, CMENAS associate director and William Wilhartz Endowed Professor of English Language and Literature, reflected on his unexpected academic journey and deep passion for poetry. With decades of experience in translation, Arabic poetry, and mentoring students, he offered candid reflections on the experiences that have shaped his career.

Within academia, students are often asked, “What is your research adding to the existing literature?” More simply, students are asked, “What is the new thing that you are bringing to the table?” This question can be found at the center of their imposter syndrome. At its core though, this drives many with their work. There is often a gap, something that needs to be addressed, and this is something that Khaled Mattawa has built his career upon.

Born in Benghazi, Libya, Professor Mattawa is a poet who writes his own pieces and translates poetry from Arabic to English. He also critically reviews the literature and poetry of the Arab world,

including Arab American literature. His work includes critical studies of poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Tagore, and Derek Walcott through a comparative, post-colonial framework. Mattawa has been an academic for nearly 30 years now and has been at the University of Michigan for 21 of them.

“I began to write poetry because I felt very drawn to it as a means of artistic expression,” he explains, “Academically, my interest in writing, research, and even in translation, was just beginning to feel like there are some gaps, perhaps, that I could help fill. I began to translate poetry from Arabic because I felt a need to.”

He began to write more critically

after translating and presenting one of Darwish’s poems during the Iraq War: “There was an anti-war reading, and just instinctively felt that we can’t have an anti-war reading and not have a poem from the Arabic language itself represented.” This sparked Mattawa’s desire to speak for a moment and, subsequently, speak to the gaps in research he had found.

Now, as a full-time professor and academic, Mattawa has been actively working in the art scene in Libya, following the Revolution. “Libya, my country, opened up to me as a cultural space, a field of action,” he says. He and his wife started a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with several artists, and he served on the ground for 2.5 years, hosting festivals, exhibits, and a cinema club. In Tripoli in 2012, he hosted an international poetry festival, bringing poets from the United States, Europe, and other Arab countries. This stands out to him as one of his most remarkable international projects, along with what he describes as a residency with Doctors Without Borders where he volunteered on a migrant rescue ship in the summer of 2022. Boats took off from Libya, filled with migrants going to Europe, and he describes what he witnessed as the dangers that these migrants put themselves through to make it to better living conditions and better opportunities.

As for the University of Michigan itself, Mattawa found himself in Ann Arbor because he felt it would be a strong place for him to advance his work institutionally. He notes that the Arab American community in Dearborn played a small role in his choice to leave the south and head toward colder weather. In his role as CMENAS associate director, he speaks fondly of his experience with the colloquium, recalling it as wonderful: “It’s truly wonderful to see the incoming graduate students and advanced undergraduates come together and engage with the program. Assisting

in organizing the lecturers and presenters is equally rewarding, especially witnessing how engaged the students are with the subjects. I think the colloquium is a great opportunity to expose the students to the kinds of scholarship and creative endeavors that people are engaged in, in an immersive way.”

At the end of our interview, I asked Professor Mattawa what piece of advice he would give to his younger self. While he hesitated to give unsolicited advice to his younger self as he said young people tend to reject it, he did say he would encourage himself to read more. To read and to learn more. To keep finding gaps

and keep filling them with knowledge for yourself and for others to come, to add more to what already exists out there. Mattawa built his career upon seeing what was missing and addressing it, and he works as our associate director to help graduate students do the same.



FACULTY NEWS

Juan Cole

Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History

Juan Cole was awarded an LSA Michigan Humanities Award for 2025–2026 for his project, “The Victorian Persianate: The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám and the Pre-Raphaelites.” He was also the keynote speaker at the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi at a conference held October 17–18 on Islam and the Beloved Community.

Mostafa Hussein, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Frankel Center for Judaic Studies

Mostafa Hussein published *Remembering Jews in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern Media* by Penn State University Press in 2024. The volume explores the cultural legacy of Jewish emigration from the Maghreb and the Middle East after 1948, offering a new framework for understanding Jewish-Muslim interactions through the lens of loss. By examining the cinematic and literary output of the last two decades, the book traces the contours of Jewish absence in these regions, moving beyond narratives of turmoil, taboo, and nostalgia. This interdisciplinary collection will engage scholars and readers in Amazigh studies, Arabic studies, Middle Eastern studies, Jewish studies, and memory studies.

Yasmin Moll

Assistant Professor of Anthropology

Professor Moll’s *Hanina’s Homesick*, a short animated film exploring Nubian memories of displacement, was produced with support from the Narrating Nubia project at the Humanities

Collaboratory. Illustrated by Karson Schenk with original music by Sayed Gayer, the film received an honorable mention for Best Short at the Society for Visual Anthropology Film Festival in November 2024. In addition to co-authoring an article in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Professor Hanina’s upcoming book, *The Revolution Within: Islamic Media and the Struggle for a New Egypt*, will be published by Stanford University Press on April 1st.

Hakem Al-Rustom

Assistant Professor of History, Assistant Professor of Anthropology (by courtesy), Alex Manoogian Professor of Modern Armenian History

Professor Al-Rustom’s book, *Enduring Erasures* published by Columbia University Press in July 2025. His book is a historical ethnography of survival in the aftermath of catastrophe, examining how the specter of genocide still looms over the lives of the survivors’ descendants and the social fabric of Turkey.

Cameron Cross

Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies

Professor Cross’s book, *Love at a Crux*, has been honored with the Saidi-Sirjani Book Award by the Association for Iranian Studies on behalf of the Persian Heritage Foundation. He has also been awarded a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study at Durham University, UK, where he will be in residence during Winter 2026. Additionally, in Fall 2025, he will join the Retracing Connections team as a visiting scholar at Uppsala University, Sweden.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By Warsan Salah



Mekarem Eljamal received her dual degrees in Masters in International and Regional Studies (MIRS) and Master of Urban and Regional Planning in 2021, as well as a BA in International Studies and Modern Middle Eastern and North African studies in 2016, all from the University of Michigan. She also served as a Program Assistant for CMENAS prior to and throughout her graduate studies at Michigan. Eljamal is now a PhD candidate in Urban Planning at Columbia University.

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

After finishing my MA programs in 2021, I began my PhD in urban planning at Columbia University's Graduate School in Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. My doctoral research centers on questions of urban citizenship, placemaking, and public space within '48 Palestine, but I'm looking at Lydd in particular. Currently, I'm living in Palestine (between Jaffa and Lydd) for my fieldwork. The chance to build and create a community here has been such an amazing experience for me; it's really difficult to describe, but having the time to spend an extended amount of time in and around Lydd and Jaffa—even with having moved here in the middle of the genocide—is an experience that I am continuously grateful for.

How did your academic background in Middle Eastern and North African Studies influence your career path?

When I started my MA at Michigan, I knew I wanted to continue on to a PhD. What was helpful about CMENAS, though, was the flexibility I had in selecting coursework. After the first year in the program, I applied for a dual

degree in urban planning. Since the CMENAS team was accommodating, I was able to explore further my interest in the intersection of urban and Middle East studies without worrying about the bureaucratic side of doing a dual degree.

Can you share any memorable experiences or lessons learned during your time at the University of Michigan that have been valuable in your professional life?

The last year and a half of my time at Michigan was remote due to COVID, so we lost a good amount of the social part of these programs. That said, though, one of the memories of that time that I hold dearly is a coffee walk that another CMENAS MA student and I would go on every single week. It would be the dead of winter and we would meet, all bundled and masked up, at Argus Farm Stop for a coffee and just walk around the neighborhood for an hour. It was a much-needed time to break the loneliness of being in academia during COVID. More than that, though, it also reminded me of the importance of putting work into friendships.

How do you continue to stay connected with the University of Michigan community and your alma mater's programs and initiatives?

I'm not going to lie, it requires effort to stay connected to people. Right now, I also have the added challenge of living with a seven- to ten-hour time difference from friends. But honestly, reaching out and dropping a quick note of when people come to mind is one of my main ways to stay connected. That one-sentence message often then turns into a phone call. Another helpful thing that came out of COVID was coworking sessions, so I also have writing workshops and co-writing sessions with other Michigan friends in academia. Additionally, since I grew up in Ann Arbor, whenever I come back, I try to see people still in the area in-person. I was



“I knew I wanted to continue on to a PhD. What was helpful about CMENAS was the flexibility I had in selecting coursework.... I was able to explore my interest in the intersection of urban and Middle East studies without worrying about the bureaucratic side of doing a dual degree.”

lucky to have the opportunity to work at CMENAS and the II before starting my graduate programs, so it's always nice to meet up with friends who were staff while I was there. UM programs are also very good at keeping connected with their alumni; in 2023, I was invited by the International Studies program to participate in a panel about post-graduate life and work, and the Islamic studies program has given me the chance to moderate the Q&A session for *Lydd* as part of their Falasteen on Screen series.

What advice would you give to current students or recent graduates who are interested in pursuing a career path similar to yours?

I always feel as though I should warn people against doing a PhD; it's difficult and lonely, and the academic job market is rough. That said, if people are interested in continuing in academia, I would first suggest that they read and read widely about their region and topic of interest;

this not only gives you a good sense of the field, the scholars, and the questions being asked, but it is also a chance for you to discover what piques your interest, what conversations you're continuously drawn to and want to delve into further. The second piece of advice is to build your community, and by that, I particularly mean the relationships that will sustain you through some challenging times.

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.

Given that my research topic is squarely within MENA studies, and specifically Palestine studies, nearly all of my MENA coursework at Michigan has come into play at one point or another. Much of my day-to-day life is in Arabic now, so I'm grateful for the Arabic coursework I took during my undergraduate years at Michigan. A majority of my archival documents—from redevelopment plans

to municipal press releases—are in Hebrew, so, again the language training I received at Michigan is of frequent use for me these days. Beyond language, there are a few MENA courses that I took at Michigan that often come to mind. Especially as I work on writing up my dissertation research, I frequently return to Professor Charlotte Karem Albrecht's "Arab and Arab American Feminisms;" recalling the course's variety of assignments, particularly its zine construction, I'm thinking through the different ways of writing and producing knowledge. In Fall 2020, I had the chance to do an independent study with Professor Carol Bardenstein where we looked at a variety of texts in Palestine studies, and just yesterday I returned to one of the books we read and the discussion we had about it.

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

I really treasure the impromptu social moments that came after classes ended. Whether it would be grabbing a coffee or just sitting around one of the open areas on campus, it was refreshing to debrief after class or just talk about random things. On a more professional level, the chance to TA during my time was also incredibly important. I gained so many facilitation and communication skills through teaching—both in person and online—and now that I am a TA at Columbia, it has been helpful to have some prior teaching experience.

How has the community you built at U-M helped you?

In many ways, the community was what made my time at U-M and CMENAS memorable; they are the folks who made a year and a half of Zoom classes tolerable and are the ones who I think of when I remember my undergrad and grad years at Michigan.

CMENAS MIRS Graduate Student Spotlights

By Warsan Salah



McKenna Kump is from Tobaccoville, North Carolina, and is pursuing a Masters in International Studies (MIRS) with Middle Eastern and North African Studies (MENAS) specialization and a Master in Public Policy. During her undergraduate studies at Utah State University, she collected data and completed research revolving around topics such as climate security, renewable energy, human rights, and political science. McKenna also has interests in advocacy, Arab/Islamic culture, and the humanitarian system.



Anawar Mahagoub Ali, a Sudanese scholar and law graduate, is interested in heritage and archaeology, focusing on local community representation and development. He has co-presented at the Warsaw University International Conference for Nubian Studies. And in 2023, he co-presented a research paper at the Archaeological Institute of America. Anawar has spent over seven years working with the University of Michigan archaeological team in Sudan, excavating and preserving ancient monuments at the Kush kingdom's royal cemetery. He is now collaborating with the University of Michigan team to create the El-Kurru heritage center that reflects Sudan's heritage and Kush Kingdom history, supporting the village's basic needs and providing income for many.



Zhanyang Liu, from Yichang, China, is pursuing a dual degree: a Masters in International and Regional Studies (MIRS), specializing in Middle Eastern and North African Studies (MENAS), and a Master of Science in Information with a focus on big data analytics. During her graduate studies at the University of Michigan, she has conducted fieldwork in the Middle East, collecting data and employing ethnographic research methods while further developing her proficiency in Arabic dialects. Zhanyang's academic interests include social movements, war and conflict, and identity studies.



James Brown is pursuing a dual degree in JD and MIRS. His main research interest and career goals focus on international diplomacy and the intersection between culture and human rights, and the extent to which cultural relativism can and should be tolerated. In the summer of 2022 James worked at the United Nations in Geneva. Since then he's been working in the international department of the U.K. law firm, Leigh Day LLP.

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