

# HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HIS 395-01 (SPRING 2015)

GRINNELL COLLEGE

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OFFICE HOURS: T 10:15-11:15, TH 2-3

In the words of Tarif Khalidi, “Historians may be informative in either of two very different ways: for what they may or may not tell us about the past or for what they tell us about *thinking* about the past.” While these two things are not necessarily mutually exclusive, Khalidi’s insight is very important. Like virtually everything else, the way that communities think about and debate the past changes with time—and with it how the communities think about themselves. By tracing historiographic change we gain insight into how communities imagine (and debate) the bonds that draw them together and the ends or goals toward which collective life proceeds.

Together, we will investigate historiographic change in the Middle East, focusing especially (though not exclusively) on Muslim-majority communities. We begin with the development of classical Islamic historiography, reading selections from al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings*, written in the early tenth century. We will then consider the work that intellectual historians have identified as a turning point in Islamic historiography, Ibn Khaldun’s fourteenth-century *The Muqaddimah*. Finally, we will turn to the modern period, during which time historiographic change became explicitly and inextricably linked to the transformation of community life in the Middle East. Of particular concern in the latter part of the course is the relationship between secular and sacred forms of historiography.

## COURSE TEXTS

I have assembled a reader containing a good number of our course readings. Readings in this collection have an (R) next to them in the syllabus. We will also be reading most or all of three books, which you can either purchase or read on reserve at the library.

Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*. New York: Zed Books, 2007.

## COURSE EVALUATION

### *Course Engagement: 35%*

The success of this venture will depend on the degree of engagement you bring. This is not just about participation in class discussion. You need to come to class prepared to help move discussion forward. This means a couple of things.

First, you need to come to class having read and prepared the readings. Whether we are discussing primary or scholarly sources, you should have a well-developed sense of the author's main goal, how they set about accomplishing it, and whether they accomplish that goal in persuasive fashion. For primary sources, you should also come to class having considered what fundamental assumptions about the nature of history the author brings to their work and how that relates to a particular understanding of community.

Second, I would like each of you to post two questions by 9 a.m. of class meeting days. You will find a Blackboard discussion forum named "Questions!" Select the appropriate class meeting and submit your questions, which will inform the direction of our discussions.

### *Course Journal: 10%*

Each week, you will identify one topic that you consider to have been especially interesting or significant. Your weekly journal entry should include a description of the topic, how it relates to the core themes of the course, and one question about the topic that you would like to think about further. Your journal will function as a running record of your engagement with the course.

### *Presentations: 15%*

You will present twice during the semester, once just before spring break and once toward the end of the semester. The first presentation (5%) will be an opportunity to draw together your reflections on the first two units of the course. The second presentation (10%) will be an opportunity to share your historiographic research with your colleagues.

### *Short Essay: 10%*

At 4-5 pages, this short essay will be a narrative treatment of your presentation.

### *Final Project: 30%*

Your final project, a 15-20 page paper, will grow out of the work you have done identifying topics and questions of interest in your weekly journals. As we approach the end of the semester, you will use the journal to reflect on the development of your thinking over the course of the semester. Is there, for example, a theme that draws

together the topics you have identified and the questions you have posed? Or does one topic or question stick out as being particularly significant? Using the work or works from class that spurred your interest as a foundation, you will identify four scholarly works that engage your topic, theme, or question and write a review of literature on the subject. There are examples of multi-review works on the course site.

## COURSE POLICIES

- Email policy part I: I am generally good about returning email in a reasonable amount of time. Please always reach out to your colleagues first with logistical questions about our course; you can do so via the email function on the course site. If no one can figure out the answer, then by all means get in touch. You can always ask in class, too, and you will find that I am quite accessible outside of class. I'd much rather meet you in person—and you can email to set up an appointment! [This policy does not apply to real emergencies.]
- Email policy part II: I encourage you to use email to share interesting news or course-related information you come across. This is actually a great way to help promote a collective learning experience.
- Unless I instruct otherwise, submit written work to [elfenbei.grinnell@gmail.com](mailto:elfenbei.grinnell@gmail.com). Please be sure to submit all work as pdf. The subject heading of your submission should include “HIS 395” and the name of the assignment. All work is due before the start of class.
- Know that I am pre-disposed to saying no to requests for extensions. I provide plenty of notice for each of the assignments—it is your responsibility to plan your time accordingly. That said, please do not be shy about approaching me for an extension if you have extenuating circumstances. It is essential to keep lines of communication open.
- If I suspect that you are using computers in class for anything other than note taking or document viewing, you will lose your computer privileges for the remainder of the semester. (If I suspect that you are texting in class I will ask that you leave your phone with me at the start of each class. Cell phones should be set on silent.)
- If you are involved in an extracurricular activity that will take you away from campus be sure to let me know beforehand. Regardless of the reason (except for dire family emergency, hospitalization), if I do not hear from you *before* you miss class I will assume you are simply skipping class. An after-the-fact note from Health Services will not suffice.
- Breaches of academic integrity will result in an official disciplinary process guided by the Dean's office. Although I will inform you of any action I take, I will not negotiate with you privately about such matters. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism I suggest you consult the Student Handbook immediately.
- It is essential to me that everyone in the class has the same opportunity to thrive. Please let me know of any particular learning needs you have (assuming they are on file with the College) and we will work together to make sure that you get the most out of this learning experience.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

January 21

- Introductions and Logistics

## CLASSICAL HISTORIOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

January 26

- Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 1-48 and 65-82 (R)

January 28

- Tabari, *History of al-Tabari (History of Prophets and Kings)* (R)
  - Volume 1: 157-198

February 2

- Tabari, *History of al-Tabari (History of Prophets and Kings)* (R)
  - Volume 2: 48-104, 125-131

## A NEW HISTORIOGRAPHIC TRADITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

February 4

- Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 83-111 and 182-234 (R)
- Humphreys, "Turning Points in Islamic Historical Practice," 89-100 (R)

February 9

- Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (R)
  - "On History"
    - Volume 1: v-xvii, xxix-lxvii, 3-16, 55-60, 63-65, 184-202, 264-265, 300-302, 343-347, 382-385
    - Volume 2: 103-11, 137-156

February 11

- “Khalifa.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (R)
- Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (R)
  - “On the Caliphate”
    - Volume 1: 385-472

February 16

- Individual Meetings

February 18: Essay Due

- Presentations
- Discussion: Is a turning point a rupture? Thinking about classical historiographical traditions today.
  - Donner, “What Became of the Classical Historiographical Tradition?”

CONVERGING HISTORIES AND HISTORIOGRAPHIES

February 23

- Kecia Ali, *Lives of Muhammad*, 1-78

February 25

- Kecia Ali, *Lives of Muhammad*, 79-154

March 2

- Kecia Ali, *Lives of Muhammad*, 155-242

## HISTORIOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

March 4

- Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 1-71<sup>1</sup>

March 9

- Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 72-120

March 11

- Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 121-171

March 30

- Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 172-233

April 1

- Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 234-278

April 6

- Sayyid Qutb, *This Religion of Islam* (pweb)

April 8

- Almog, *Zionism and History*, 9-14 and 23-83 (R)

April 13

- No Class. In addition to preparing the readings for April 15, please read one from among the multi-work reviews that you can find on our course site.

April 15

- Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism* (selections)

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<sup>1</sup> The Burling Library collection has an electronic copy of this text. You can access it via the Library catalogue.

April 20

- Research

April 22

- Research

April 27

- Research

April 29

- Research

May 4

- Presentations

May 6

- Wrapping Up