

SYLLABUS

AMES 3877 | Fall 2021 - The Arab Renaissance: Narrating Modernity

3 Credits

Instructor: Dr. Shir Alon

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Class Time: T, TH 2:30pm - 3:45pm

Office Hours: T, TH 10:00-11:00am, Folwell 230-C

The *Nahḍa*, a word meaning renaissance, awakening, or simply the act of standing up, is the name Arab writers and intellectuals of the 19th c. gave their own historical period. What does it mean to view oneself as living through a revival? How does this view shape the contours of the past, or of the future? This class will address these questions through a survey of the political, intellectual, social, and cultural aspects of Arab modernity. We will examine how Arab thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th century produced new genres, identities, and communal affiliations to narrate their experience of modernity, which they often coded as “the encounter with the West.” Our readings, all in English translation, will cover the first confrontations (and love affairs) with European powers, the self-professed urgency of projects of reforming language, literature, and cultural institutions, the growing schism between religious and secular thought, and the attempts to articulate indigenous alternatives to Western-style modernity.

Student learning outcomes:

By the end of the semester, you will be familiar with the key writers, texts, and concerns of the *Nahḍa* (the Arab renaissance movement). Using both historiographical and literary methodologies, you will be able to contextualize the most influential intellectual and cultural debates of Arab modernity against the broad history of the Middle East in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as identify their legacies today. Some of these debates include Islamic reform and Islamic feminism, the political and cultural schism between secularism and religion, the legacies of Medieval Arab culture in modernity, and the productive negotiations between indigenous cultures and cultural imperialism.

The class assignments are designed to develop as well as assess these skills. You will submit 6 reading responses over the course of the semester, commenting on the readings and developing your own analysis. I also ask you to pay attention to media coverage of the Middle East, and notice the manner in which the same questions and tensions of the early 20th century still remain objects of contestation today. In the last week of class, each one of you will introduce a recent article or news item and explain how it relates to one of the topics of the class.

Liberal Education: Humanities and Global Perspectives

Gaining critical literacy in diverse cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education. This course will give you a comprehensive overview of Arab intellectual

debates and creative production in the 19th and early 20th centuries: the period in which the Middle East grappled with Western imperialism and was integrated into global capitalist modernity. These debates continue to resonate today and shape global politics.

Over the course of the semester you will engage with diverse cultural products, with a strong emphasis on primary sources: novels (Zaydan, al-Muwaylihi), poetry (al-Malaika, Adonis), films (Chahine), histories (al-Jabarti, Mishaqah), philosophical and theological writing (al-Afghani, Abduh), and cultural criticism (Ziyada, Jibran). The course has two emphasis: First, trace the emergence of new genres and modes of writing in Arabic around the turn of the century, answering to a host of new social-cultural needs. Second, analyze the manner in which these writings emerge from, as well as shape, their social and political contexts, whether they advocate for education for women, argue for the compatibility of Islam with modern science, or narrate a mythical history of an Arab golden age. You will engage directly with primary sources alongside selected critical essays in order to place the materials in their cultural-historical context, and to evaluate their modes of intervention and argumentation. Finally, we will see how the debates that emerged during the Nahda continue to be objects of contestation in contemporary Middle Eastern and global political and cultural spheres.

In this Global Perspectives theme course, you will cultivate the following habits of mind:

(1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world:

Our primary sources will reflect on the radical changes facing Middle Eastern societies around the turn of the 20th century from a range of ethical standpoints. Women's rights, the boundaries of nationalism, the place of religion in modern politics, modes of resistance to foreign interventions: All of these questions remain pertinent today, not only in the Middle East but also in shaping American foreign policy. Course materials cover the origins of these modern debates, while class discussions will touch upon how they have developed over past decades and the ethical challenges they continue to posit today.

(2) Reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community:

The general historical framework of the course is the fragmentation of the Ottoman empire into distinct nation-states and the colonial encounter with European rule and culture. Against both these contexts, we will examine how writers and intellectuals defined new communities and identities, based on shared experiences of colonial subjugation and on imagined communal pasts. We will examine the political imperatives for forming new communal bonds and the means of doing so: through creative exploration of new genres, projects of linguistic innovation, and a variety of frameworks for pursuing social justice – religious, rights-based, or revolutionary.

(3) Connecting knowledge and practice:

One of the focuses of the class is the development of new genres of writing in order to actively respond to modern challenges. Throughout the semester, we will highlight the material and lasting influences of these early intellectual debates, demonstrating the inability to separate theory from both praxis and history. Furthermore, I encourage you to put the materials in conversation with contemporary issues closer to home: international intervention (in the Middle East and more broadly), colonial aftermaths, cultural authenticity and appropriation, religious identity and religious political movements, transnational feminism, and growing islamophobia.

(4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

The course materials regularly highlight the role of creativity and invention in coding, comprehending, and intervening in history. While the geopolitical context of the texts might not be familiar to some of you, understanding how writers and thinkers have positioned their work as ethical interventions against racism, sexism, or economic inequalities should make you aware of your own position within racialized histories, and of your ability to envision and articulate alternatives. Furthermore, our attention to translation, transmission, and the entanglements of global histories should encourage you to consider your own positions, modes of agency, and access to knowledge.

REQUIREMENTS:

Participation	15%
Six response essays	30%
Final Presentation (news coverage relating to class)	15%
Take Home Final Exam	40%

Regular participation in class discussions (15%)

Come to class prepared and ready to work. This includes completing the readings attentively and carefully, bringing in notes and questions, and actively joining the discussion. The better you read the class materials, the better the conversation, and the better the conversation, the better the class. We will be dealing with some controversial or explicit material in this course - remember to keep an open mind, not only as you read, but also during your engagement with others in class. While I encourage you all to be honest, mutual respect is a crucial part of this class. No ranting, soapboxing, hate speech, or disrespectful behavior of any kind will be tolerated.

Speaking up in class does not come naturally to everyone; yet, it is a critical part of the learning experience for you and your peers. Discussion offers you a chance to better formulate and deliver your own ideas, while improving your ability to respond to different positions. If you find it difficult to speak up in class, please see me early in the term to discuss your concerns and jointly establish a strategy for increasing class participation.

Reading response (6 x 5 points each = 30%)

Over the course of the semester you will submit 6 reading responses. You can decide which readings you want to write about, and it is also your responsibility to make sure you have 6 by the end of the term. It is impossible to write responses retroactively.

Your response should be 500-700 words. It should briefly summarize the important points or plot of the text, and discuss in more detail a particular issue or two that you find especially significant or interesting.

ATTENDANCE is mandatory. More than two unexcused absences *will* lower your grade. In case you are unable to attend class, please inform me as early as possible.

This applies to more than just your physical presence: **Please put away your phones, tablets, and laptops during class, take handwritten notes, and bring hardcopies of the texts.**

Research shows that students who take notes by hand perform better than those who take notes on their laptops. On the other hand, research also shows that electronic devices can enhance the quality of group work. On days when group work is scheduled, I will inform you in advance. Unauthorized technology use, including of cell phones, will be counted as an absence. If this policy poses any problem, please discuss it with me.

COMMUNICATION: Throughout the semester, I will post reminders and announcements using email and Canvas. You should check both on a daily basis. The best way to communicate with me is in person, either in the classroom, during office hours, or by appointment. *Make use of office hours.* I am always delighted to meet and discuss your work or the course materials. If you make an appointment but cannot show up, it is basic courtesy to email and cancel in advance.

Please see Canvas for additional policies and let me know if you have any questions.

Week 1 **INTRODUCTION**

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| Tues | Introduction to course themes and requirements |
| Thurs | Butrus al-Bustani, "The Culture of the Arabs Today" |
| | Salama Musa, "What Is the Renaissance?" |

Week 2 **WESTERN CONTACTS**

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| Tues | Excerpts from al-Jabarti, <i>Napoleon in Egypt</i> |
| | Napoleon's statement to the Arabs |
| Thurs | al-Jabarti cont. |

Week 3 **TRAVEL WRITING**

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| Tues | Excerpts from Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, <i>An Iman in Paris</i> |
| Thurs | cont. |

Week 4 **FEMINISM and SOCIAL CHANGE**

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| Tues | Qasim Amin, from <i>The Emancipation of Women</i> and <i>The New Woman (Modernist Islam, 61-69)</i> . |
| Thurs | Zeina G. Halabi, from <i>Unveiling and Veiling</i> |

Week 5 **LANGAUGE ISSUES**

- Tues Khalil Jibran, "The Future of the Arabic Language"
- Thurs Excerpt from Faris al-Shidiyak, *Leg over Leg*

Week 6 **WRITING ISLAMIC MODERNISM**

- Tues Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, "Lecture on Teaching and Learning" and "Letter to Renan" (Modernist Islam, 103-115); "An Islamic Response to Imperialism" (*Islam in Transition*, 13-15.)
- Thurs Muhammad `Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, pp. 29-40, 81-154.

Week 7 **NATIONALISM, EMPIRE and the WRITING OF HISTORY**

- Tues Mikha'īl Mishaqah, selection from *Murder, Mayhem, Pillage, and Plunder: The History of the Lebanon in the 18th and 19th Centuries*.
- Thurs cont.

Week 8 **LITERATURE, NEWSPAPERS, and STATE CRAFT**

- Tues Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, from *What Isa Ibn Hisham Told Us: A Period of Time*
- Thurs cont.

Week 9 **THE HISTORICAL NOVEL**

- Tues Jurji Zaydan, *Tree of Pearls, Queen of Egypt*
- Thurs cont.

Week 10 **WRITING BIOGRAPHY**

- Tues Essays and letters by Mayy Ziyada; Marilyn Booth, 1991. "Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt"
- Thurs cont.

Week 11 **THEATRE**

- Tues Tawfik al-Hakim, *People of the Cave*
- Thurs cont.

Week 12 **ARAB JEWS and the CREATION OF DIFFERENCE**

- Tues Yitzhaq Shami, "The Vengeance of the Fathers"
- Thurs Salim Tamari, "Ishaq al-Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine"

Week 13 **THE END of the NAHDA? COMMITMENT and NEW POLITICS**

Tues Film: *The Land*, Yousef Chahine

Thurs Poetry from Nazik al-Malaika, Adonis

Week 14

Tues

Thurs