

2020

# spotlight



Stanford

The Abbasi Program  
in Islamic Studies



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### Photo credits

Cover: "Flares Light Up the Night in Beirut". Photo submitted by Gabby Conforti to SGS Student Photo Contest

Above: Museum of Islamic Art, Skyline of Doha, Qatar during blue hour. Photo by Florian Wehde on Unsplash.

## PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

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*Associate Director*

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# DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It has been a strange and difficult year. As scholars we are used to examining major historical moments of change and disruption; and yet it is no less astonishing to find ourselves living through an unfolding global pandemic today.

Covid-19 has changed life for all of us, and with no exception of its impact on Muslim life and religious practice. At a discussion organized by the Abbasi Program, Mucahit Bilici described a “Netflix effect” as Muslims increasingly turn to the digital public sphere for alternatives to local imams. Shabana Mir noted other ways that Covid-19 has created “shifts and erasures” in religious spaces, pointing out that while virtual congregation creates new opportunities for women to access religious spaces, physical distancing requirements have fallen unevenly on men and women. It will be important to watch closely how Covid-19 shapes Muslim life beyond the pandemic.

The year was also witness to political and social turmoil from Xinjiang to Minnesota to Beirut. Coming to grips with today's issues of racial violence requires understanding the ways the influence of identity in various political contexts. Speakers at our public seminars over the past year contributed enormously to this critical conversation—from the use of surveillance technology to control Uyghur identity and society, to the gains that female politicians are making in traditionally conservative Muslim and Islamist parties in Tunisia and elsewhere.

Our students continue to be an inspiring source for optimism. Facing the disappointments of a remote academic year and restrictions on travel, students have shown their resilience and creativity by pursuing virtual and remote language study, fieldwork and internships. Gabby Conforti '22, an Islamic studies minor student, spent part of her year before the pandemic in Beirut where she took the photo on the cover of this issue of *Spotlight* during the anti-government protests in October 2019. After the deadly explosion in Beirut this August, Gabby created *Biking For Beirut*, a fundraising campaign that raised thousands of dollars to support Lebanese Red Cross and other relief organizations.

In the area of faculty achievement, we congratulate Anna Bigelow, who upon joining the religious studies department at Stanford organized the Abbasi Program's annual conference on the place of everyday items and materiality in Islam. Through individual objects—such as West African prayer beads, the uniform worn by Nation of Islam women, a lamp central to Bektashi practice—participants addressed the question, what makes an object Islamic? The outstanding work of this conference will be published as an edited volume *Islam Through Objects* (Bloomsbury, 2021) that will be an important contribution to the study of material Islam.

As we look toward an uncertain year ahead, it is important to reaffirm the mission of programs like ours to help us understand and process this moment of the human experience, and to provide community and connection when so much of our lives are now lived through a screen. We encourage you to stay engaged with the Abbasi Program and look forward to your continued support.



Lisa Blaydes

Director of the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies  
Professor of Political Science  
Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

# NEW FACULTY AFFILIATES



**Nora Barakat** is an assistant professor of history specializing in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East. Her research focuses on people, commodities and landscapes in the interior regions between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She has a particular interest in how legal categories of population, property and economy shaped and were shaped by the everyday experiences of social life. She is also committed to bringing both the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East into discussions of world history, especially narratives about capitalism and modern state formation.



**Serkan Yolaçan** is an assistant professor of anthropology specializing in the Middle East and Asia. His research focuses broadly on the interplay of past and present in the lives of individuals, diasporas, and states, as well as expansionism, transregionalism, time and temporality. His book project, *Time Travelers of Baku: Conversion and Revolution in West Asia*, weaves the modern experiences of Turkey, Iran, and Russia through the lens of a mobile, diasporic people from the region of Azerbaijan. Yolaçan combines broad space and deep history empirically, and history and anthropology methodologically, to generate geo-historical frames that speak to questions of international order and state expansionism, past and present.

## New Faculty Initiative



*Ottoman and Turkey Encounters @ Stanford* is an intellectual forum housing several series of events that foster critical engagements with contemporary Turkey and the Ottoman world, namely Southeast Europe, the Middle East and North Africa during the Ottoman centuries.

### Visiting Scholars 2019-2020

**Sophie Lemière**  
Christopher Family FSI-  
Humanities Center International  
Visitor 2019-2020

**Ruiheng Li**  
Peking University, Beijing, China

### Lecturers 2019-2020

**Jesse Izzo**

# FACULTY PROFILES

Anna Bigelow joined Stanford in the 2019-20 academic year as an associate professor of religious studies specializing in Islamic Studies and the religions of South Asia and the Middle East.

## **How did you become interested in studying Islam?**

My first trip to India was in 1992, and I happened to be there during the tumultuous time that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid – a mosque believed by many Hindus to have been built on the site of the god Ram’s birthplace. Riots and civil unrest went on for more than a month in some places, but contrarily, I was struck by two quite different things. First, in many places there was no disturbance and, second, that the site had a deeper history that revealed a much more complex story than the simplistic narrative of Hindu-Muslim animosity. All of this made me acutely aware of the importance of studying less obvious things – such as how communities maintain peace in the face of serious challenges to the social fabric. Also, at the time, Islamic Studies was dominated by scholarship on the Middle East, and India was frequently characterized as a Hindu country. So, my interests were piqued by the size, influence, and diversity of Muslim India, particularly by the ways in which Muslim Indians live as minorities, coexist with non-Muslim majorities, and creatively adapt to and shape South Asian culture and history.

## **What are your current research interests?**

My specific research has long been on sacred spaces that are visited by Muslims and non-Muslims, seeking to understand the numerous attachments and practices that enliven these spaces and make them meaningful to a wide cross-section of religions, classes, castes, genders, abilities, and ages. Currently, I am working on a comparative project that examines both contested and peacefully shared sites in India and Turkey, exploring what we can learn through spaces of encounter about how publics in both countries understand religious minorities within constitutionally secular (but rapidly desecularizing) states. I am also finalizing an edited volume called *Islam through Objects* (Bloomsbury) that features 12 chapters, each featuring a particular object or artifact and uncovering through these things 12 distinct Islamic cultures and traditions. I was delighted to bring the authors together last year at a workshop sponsored largely by the Abbasi Program.

## **What will you be teaching next year? How will you adapt your courses for online learning?**

In winter quarter, I will be teaching an introductory course on Islam called RELIGST 61: Exploring Islam. I taught it for the first time at Stanford last fall in-person, and we used the Hajj as a through line to talk about Islamic history and



diversity. I think this theme will adapt well for a virtual classroom as there are many rich audio-visual components that I was not able to take as much advantage of as I would have liked last term. I am optimistic that this transition could actually provide some opportunities and not just the frustrations and limitations of missing our students in-person.

## **How do you approach the teaching of Islam?**

My primary goal in teaching Islam is to illuminate the diversity, subtlety, and creativity of Muslims through time and space. I love to bring art, architecture, fiction, film, and oral histories into the classroom to complicate the texts and chronologies that often dominate the history of religions.

## **How may your work inform our understanding of Islamic history and the Muslim community?**

Most contemporary news concerning Muslims is defined by conflict with Muslims as suffering victims or cruel perpetrators. My work complicates these portrayals as I am particularly interested in how Muslims and non-Muslims imagine and engender peaceful collective lives in most cases. These stories are often mundane and unremarkable, and therefore less newsworthy, but no less essential to our understandings of how plural societies work. Given that the humans on this planet are not likely to consolidate into a homogenous religious culture anytime soon, I find lessons from the past and present about how people find resilience and value in cultural diversity extremely interesting.

# FACULTY PROFILE

Jesse Izzo joined Stanford in the fall of 2019 as Lecturer and Visiting Scholar at the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies. He is a historian of the medieval Middle East.

## **How did you become interested in studying the medieval Middle East?**

For whatever reason, from a very young age I loved all things from the Middle Ages. When I was an undergraduate my childhood fascination began to develop into something a little deeper and more sophisticated.

When I was getting ready to start a Ph.D. program, the first phone conversation I had with my advisor began with him asking: “How do you feel about learning Arabic?” That turned out to be a watershed moment. I had honestly never considered the possibility, but I was really excited by the suggestion, and studying Arabic became a major part of my doctoral training and an incredible passport to the history of the Middle East and the world of medieval Islam.

## **How does your work inform our understanding of the region?**

First, I very much belong to the school of thought that views the medieval Islamicate, Byzantium, and the Latin West as sibling civilizations, all of which were heirs to the legacies of classical Antiquity and the ancient Near East.

Second, one of my hobbyhorses is this: please don't blame medieval people for modern problems! Yes, of course many tensions and fault lines in the modern Middle East—take sectarianism or religious intolerance as examples—have a very long history. But the process of historicizing (rather than essentializing) means being attentive to specific context, particularity, and the subtle dynamic of change and continuity over time. So, in my view, with something like, say, Shia/Sunni hostility, yes, there definitely is a medieval origin. But that hostility has sometimes been more and sometimes less operative across a vast range of time and space. Thus, if we see sectarian tension as a salient feature of the modern Middle East, I tend to be of the mind that we must look to modern history in order to explain it.

Moreover, while a desire to trace the origins of the modern world is certainly part of the reason we study the remote past, it is not the only reason. We also study it to see how *unlike* the worlds of the past were to our own. This helps us escape the mistake of assuming everything has been leading inexorably towards this moment, our moment, and it could not have happened otherwise. Studying the medieval past and trying to understand it on its own terms can help us to denaturalize the present in productive and helpful ways, allowing us to view our own times with a different eye.



## **What are some of your current research interests?**

I'm especially interested in thinking across traditional regional and disciplinary boundaries. Scholars of medieval Europe and the medieval Middle East have usually worked in isolation from each other, but I see myself as really committed to the challenge of working across that divide. I have several research projects ongoing, but the big one is my book, *Franks and Mamluks: Diplomacy, Politics, and War in Medieval Syria*. Previous scholarship has tended to see Frankish–Mamluk relations principally through the lens of monolithic, oppositional ethnic and religious binaries: Christian versus Muslim; East versus West; European versus Arab or Turk. But my book argues that the relationship between Frankish Syria and Mamluk Egypt cannot be understood in such stark binaries. Instead it must be appreciated as something more ambiguous, nuanced, and subject to the vicissitudes and fluctuations of a complex trans-regional system of commerce, diplomacy, and war that spanned virtually all of the Eurasian continent.

## **What classes will you be teaching in the upcoming academic year?**

In the fall I'll be teaching a course called “Peace and War in Medieval Islam.” We'll be paying attention not only to actual peace and war (i.e. political events), but also their normative conceptualizations within the Islamic tradition. In the winter I'll be teaching a course called “The Mamluks: Slave-Soldiers and Sultans of Medieval Egypt.” The slave-soldier was a widespread and fairly unique feature of the Islamic world, and nowhere was the phenomenon as consequential as in Egypt, where these mamluks managed to set up an imperial dynasty that lasted nearly three hundred years.

# STUDENT UPDATES

 Internships

 Language Study

 Research or Fieldwork

The Abbasi Program supported 9 students pursuing their remote summer research, fieldwork, language study, or internship placements over the summer of 2020.



**Feyaad Allie**

*“Marginal Muslims: The Politics of Religious Representation in India”*



**Gabby Conforti**

*Arabic Language Study  
Qasid Arabic Institute*



**Phoebe Quinton**

*Social Science Research Council  
Brooklyn, NY*



**Callum Tresnan**

*Arabic Language Study  
Sijal Institute*



**Katherine Weissbluth**

*Social Science Research Council  
Brooklyn, NY*



**Ala' Alrababa'h**

*“Manufacturing Threats: The Use of Diversionary Rhetoric in Autocratic Media”*



**Dwight Knightly**

*Arabic Language Study  
Sijal Institute*



**Wallace Teska**

*Arabic Language Study  
Qasid Arabic Institute*



**Morgan Tufan**

*“Bordering the Kurds’: Imperial Governance and Traditional Authority in Early Modern Kurdistan”*

# EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

## Lecture Series



**Arab Radical Republicanism: A Hidden Political Tradition**  
*October 8, 2019*  
Abed Takriti



**How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left**  
*February 6, 2020*  
Michael Fischbach



**Shielding Hope, Killing Hope**  
*November 12, 2019*  
Ayşe Parla



**The Origins of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011**  
*February 11, 2020*  
Nada Matta



**The Unforgettable Queens of Islam**  
*January 14, 2020*  
Shahla Haeri



**Edward Sa`id: Exile and the Influence of the Cosmopolitan Ideal**  
*February 18, 2020*  
Terri DeYoung

## Webinars

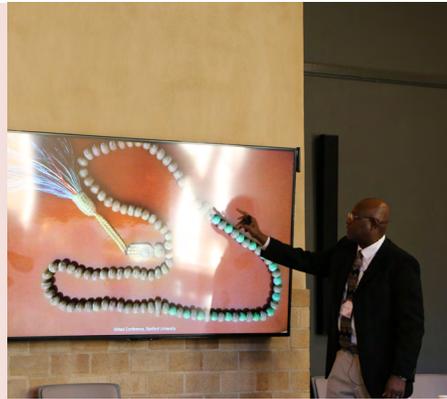


**COVID-19's Impact on Muslim Communities and Muslim Life**

*May 19, 2020*

**Abiya Ahmed  
Mucahit Bilici  
Margari Hill  
Shabana Mir**

## Conferences

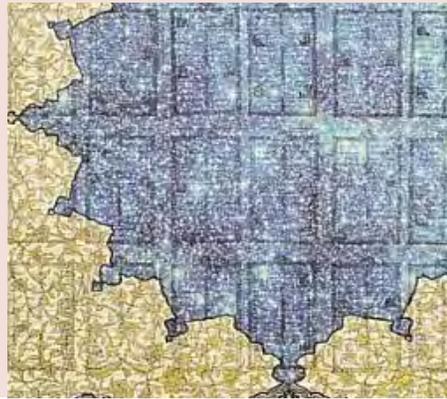


### Islam, Objects and Everyday Life

December 6-8, 2019

Organized by Professor Anna Bigelow

This conference brought together fifteen scholars to examine the questions: What makes an object Islamic? How do everyday items of use, wear, devotion, and observation help us understand the various modes of Muslim materiality?



### Persian Poetics

January 24, 2020

Organized by Professor Marie Huber

This workshop examined theories of the lyric subject in Persian literature, both medieval and modern, and the discussions of poetic practice in the Persian tradition.

## Panel Discussions



### Contemporary Uyghur Society in a Time of "Reeducation"

October 1, 2019

Rushan Abbas

Darren Byler

Sean Roberts



### Journalism, Authoritarianism and Post-Truth Politics

January 28, 2020

Ruşen Cakir

Djordje Padejski

Ayça Alemdaroğlu



### The Rise of Women in Muslim Political Parties

February 26, 2020

Saida Ounissi

Sophie Lemière

## Films

### Jaddoland

October 16, 2019

Nadia Shihab



### When Monaliza Smiled

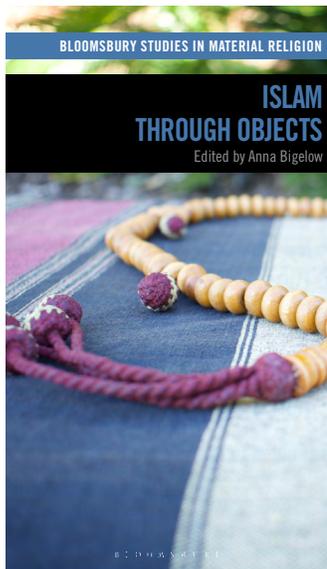
July 22, 2020

Fadi Haddad



# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Publications



### Islam Through Objects Anna Bigelow (ed.)

This volume represents the state of the field of Islamic material cultural studies. With contributions from scholars of religion, anthropologists, art historians, folklorists, historians, and other disciplines, Anna Bigelow brings together a wide range of perspectives on Islamic materiality to debunk myths of Islamic aversion to material aspects of religion.



### Stories Under Occupation Samer Al-Saber (ed.)

For the first time, this volume presents contemporary plays from a number of Palestinian theatres in English. The collection offers a rare look into the dynamic life of contemporary Palestinian theater. The works gathered here arise directly from the physical and psychological realities of the occupation, combining activism and critical self-inquiry.

## Featured Courses for the 2020-2021 Academic Year



**Fall 2020 - Global 190**  
Peace and War in Medieval Islam: from the Arab Conquests to the Crusades



**Winter 2021 - Global 102**  
The Mamluks: Slave-Soldiers and Sultans of Medieval Egypt

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## Public Events

### Borders and Belonging *Identities and Intersections*



In the 2020-21 academic year, the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies will present a series of virtual events and discussions examining Muslim identity and belonging. Speakers will critically address questions of migration, citizenship, political representation, race, community and social justice in contemporary and historical contexts of Islam in America and worldwide.

#### *Calendar preview*

October 8 **Laila Lalami**

October 29 **The Muslim Vote** (a panel)

January 19 **Ayad Akhtar**

 **Subscribe for updates**

# GIFTS & SUPPORT

We at the Abbasi program express our gratitude to our alumni, parents, students, and friends for their support of our activities at Stanford.

Your gift enhances genuine understanding of the histories, cultures, and languages of Islam and Muslim societies by:

- Equipping the next generation of leaders with rigorous knowledge through courses, seminars, and research or internship opportunities.
- Supporting innovative faculty research and scholarship.
- Deepening our public and K-12 outreach efforts.

Your generosity ensures that knowledge of Islam and Muslim societies is an integral part of the future of America and the globe.

For more information, please review **islamicstudies.stanford.edu/give/giving** or contact Scott Sugiura, Senior Associate Director of Development, at [ssugiura@stanford.edu](mailto:ssugiura@stanford.edu) or (650) 723-1208.

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