

2021

spotlight



Stanford | Sohaib and Sara Abbasi
Program in Islamic Studies



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Photo credits

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Above: "Balloons in the Sky". Photo submitted by Afnan Tolba to the 2021 SGS Student Photo Contest

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DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It has been a busy year for the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies. Entering the second year of the pandemic has allowed us to reflect on our role as an academic program at a time of great adversity worldwide. We adapted to new ways of programming and outreach, and though we missed convening in person with our local community, we were able to reach a record number of participations in our programs. We received almost 4,000 registrations for our events and were pleased to welcome approximately 2,500 guests worldwide – a 75% increase in attendance to our events!

This academic year, the Abbasi Program launched a broader theme for its events and programming as they relate to frameworks of collective belonging, cultural construction, identity and heritage formation entitled, “Memory, Heritage and Cultural production.” To kick-start this theme, we hosted a popular webinar marking Ashura on the topic of the “Universal Imam Hussain”, and continued along this theme with our last event in the fall quarter, an in-person seminar by Professor Nebil Husayn, who spoke on his latest book on Imam Ali. Professor Samer Al-Saber taught a course on Introduction to Arab Studies Seminar under the same theme, “Memory, Heritage and Cultural Production”, a first-of-its kind hybrid seminar: in-person for Stanford’s students and open to the public via the web. Stay tuned for the launch of a heritage forum directly related to the Gulf region, which will be launched by Professor Nora Barakat.

One of our event highlights was hosting Dr. Rania Awaad, the Founding Director of the Muslim Mental Health Lab at Stanford, who spoke to us about the effects of Covid-19 on Muslim mental health. We also hosted a series of webinars on the Palestinian struggle entitled, “Making Sense of Palestine.” We also hosted a number of theater arts and film events, such as screening ‘Honeyland’ for the Stanford Global Studies Summer Film Festival and the ‘Gaza Monologues’ as organized by Professor Samer al-Saber, as well as sponsored the launch of a digital guide to theater of the Middle East.

The Abbasi Program also welcomed a new Associate Director, Dr. Farah El-Sharif, whom we are delighted to have onboard. We also launched a new monthly newsletter for our community and highlight a faculty member each month with our new “Scholar Spotlight” corner.

Despite the difficulties of the past year, we look to the coming year with much hope and optimism, and reaffirm our resolve to provide avenues for recovery, reflection and connection at a time of great uncertainty. We urge you to stay engaged with the Abbasi Program and thank you for 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

FEATURED AFFILIATES



Betty Shamieh is an Arab-American playwrite and was one of this year's Denning Visiting Artists at Stanford. While hosted by the Department of Theater and Performance Studies, the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, and the Abbasi Program, Betty was able to participate in a long-duration developmental workshop of the Stanford world premiere production of her newest play, *As Soon As Possible*. She worked with students, faculty and staff to create a virtual lab environment for testing various scenes, the overall structure, and providing real-time feedback in the process. The play was presented virtually at the end of the Spring Quarter.



This year, the Abbasi Program is delighted to host **Dr. Sohaira Siddiqui** as a Visiting Scholar. Dr. Siddiqui is an Associate Professor of Theology at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar. Her work focuses on the relationship between law, theology and political thought in classical Islam, Islamic law during British colonization, Islamic law in contemporary Muslim societies, and secularism and modernity in relation to Muslims in the West. While at Stanford, she will be working with Professor Alexander Key on her translation of al-Juwayni's *Kitab al-Ijtihad*, which explores the ontological possibility of multiple correct legal rulings.



Yusuf Zahurullah is the inaugural Abbasi-Markaz Fellow. He is a current Junior majoring in History, with an interest in applying to law school in the future. On campus, he is involved in the Muslim Student Union, Stanford Students for Justice in Palestine, American-Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford, and the Legal Design Lab. He will be curating events throughout the year on Muslim culture and tradition in different historical contexts. The work he will be doing in the fellowship program revolves around sparking conversations on campus within the faculty and student body on a variety of Islam-related topics.

FACULTY PROFILES

Nora Barakat joined Stanford in the 2020-21 academic year as an assistant professor of history specializing in the late Ottoman Empire and the Modern Middle East.

Tell us a little about your work and what excites you most about your research

My work is very broadly concerned with people, institutions and commodities in the interior landscapes between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I'm especially interested in historical forms of bureaucracy, administration and exchange that constitute everyday life – taxes, civil law codes, credit mechanisms – and how people shaped and changed these processes in imperial and national settings outside of large towns and cities. I spent years reading records of subsidies to tent-dwelling communities who lived around the pilgrimage route between Damascus and Mecca, and I use those records to tell a story about how Bedouin men, and by extension their relatives, entered the Ottoman bureaucracy on different levels between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

What excites me most? My scholarship and teaching focuses on the history of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula, but I see the phenomena I study as global processes and I love reading about other historical spaces and pulling out connections, resemblances and divergences with the lives, institutions and landscapes I work on in closer detail.

What will you be teaching next year?

I will definitely teach an introductory historical survey on “Formation of the Contemporary Middle East” in 22-23. This course focuses on themes of migration, colonial occupation, nationalism, mass politics, revolution, and various brands of social movement. More and more I find my research dealing with the production of rural-urban divides through law, administration, and different kinds of cultural media, so I've been thinking about a class tentatively called “The Country and the City”, which would look at the creation of this divide in the modern period with a focus on the region between Oman and Palestine, but in global perspective.

Tell us a little bit about how you approach “the modern Middle East”

My approach is historical! I see “the Middle East” as the



product of a particular twentieth-century moment of shift from British to American imperial frameworks. Those frameworks are still very much with us today in our understanding of geographical and human categories and boundaries, although I think we can start to see the beginnings of different ways of thinking. A lot of my approach to teaching the history of these constructions is about understanding the ruptures and continuities of this moment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when nation-building becomes this very widely shared goal, which of course is happening here in the US as well, when compared with an earlier more imperial context.

What would you say to a student potentially interested in minoring in or entering a graduate program in Islamic studies/Middle East studies?

I think language training is one of the most crucial things these programs offer, and something that will stay with you throughout your academic career and beyond. That's also related to a question about academic discipline and how we approach Islamic/Middle East studies as objects of study, that I think is important for students considering this kind of interdisciplinary program. Having a sense of your disciplinary interests and proclivities would help you make the most of the very diverse skills affiliate faculty bring to the program, but they would also give you a path to placing Islamic/Middle East studies in a broader context.

FACULTY PROFILE

Serkan Yolaçan joined Stanford in the 2020-21 academic year as an assistant professor of anthropology specializing in the Middle East and Asia

The Abbasi theme for this year is “Memory, Heritage and Cultural Production”, which aligns closely with you work; what do you wish more people knew about your area(s) of study?

My scholarship straddles anthropology and history to broadly investigate questions of human mobility, historical practice, and sovereignty. My current work in the Caucasus looks at how old trans-imperial routes of trade, scholarship, and pilgrimage have reemerged in the wake of the Soviet collapse and how people trading these routes have cultivated new historical sensibilities. These sensibilities find their expression in the return of old textual genres such as the biographical dictionary, or tazqirah, as the genre is known in the Islamic tradition. A closer look at these texts opens a vista on a rich history of empires and diasporas as well as mobile individuals who navigated them. I study these longer histories to understand what makes them speak to the present experiences of Azeris I follow in Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Doing so helps me build geo-historical frames that place puzzling contemporary developments within the transnational histories of Muslim societies in the Middle East and Asia.

Tell us more about your book, *Time Travelers of Baku: Conversion and Revolution in West Asia*

My book asks how ideas and ideologies travel between culturally disparate regions and what gives them force in places where they arrive. How, for example, do liberal constitutionalist ideas penetrate a centuries-old monarchy, and even topple it? How does ethnic nationalism overrun a cosmopolitan city at a bewildering pace? Stranger yet, how does religiosity take root in a country after seventy years of communist rule? I show that behind such large-scale revolutionary transformations are everyday conversions of mobile individuals who have a change of heart upon rediscovering a shared past that may be forgotten on one side of the border but is alive and well on the other side. Travel in space inspires travel in time, and places become repositories of different pasts. Time-traveling individuals relate to these pasts and places as their own and find new spirit to cast the future in their image. I have developed these insights through conversations with mobile Azeris I have been following over the past decade. During my fieldwork, I joined Azeri study circles in theological seminaries in Qom and Mashhad (Iran), hearing stories of them leaving behind a communist past



in former Soviet Azerbaijan and discovering their Shi'a roots in Iran. I then traveled with these young clerics back to Baku (Azerbaijan), where I met their friends and relatives—some of whom, to my surprise, went to Turkish boarding schools and embraced a Sunni Muslim outlook, looking to make their careers in Istanbul. These mobile Azeris saw their transformations not as conversions to a foreign faith or ideology but as returns to a forgotten past that they rediscovered. Shrines they visited, rituals they picked up, saintly stories they heard, and family genealogies they traced conjured different temporal orders, in which they could place themselves alongside known Azeris of earlier times. Exploring these histories with my informants broadened the temporal horizons of my research from the contemporary moment to a deep, sedimented history of migrations, revolutions, and religions. My goal in the book is to convey how that broad history reverberates into the present.

What are you most looking forward to for the academic year 2021-2022?

I most look forward to experiencing the campus culture at Stanford after spending my first year overseas and teaching remotely from Istanbul. I am teaching a graduate course titled *Time Travel: Pasts, Places, and Possibilities* in the Autumn Quarter. The course explores diverse historical practices worldwide to develop a critical perspective on the basic tenets of Western historicism. I will also teach an undergraduate course titled *Cults: Mystics and Messiahs of the Modern World* in the Winter Quarter. The course demystifies cultic formations to discover fresh insights into enduring forms of human sociality and thought. We will explore the themes of embodied authority, millennialism, cosmology, eschatology, charisma, solidarity, and protection.

STUDENT UPDATES



Internships



Language Study



Research or Fieldwork

The Abbasi Program supported 8 students pursuing their remote summer research, fieldwork, language study, or internship placements over the summer of 2021.



Afnan Tolba

Social Science Research Council



Sophia Vahanvaty

Social Science Research Council



Marina Bergenstock

Arabic Language Study



Sunil Persad

Arabic Language Study



Hasan Tauha

Arabic Language Study



Callum Tresnan

Arabic Language Study



Chun-Yu (Jo Ann) Wang

Malay Language Study



Suhaila Meera

"Playing Children: Statelessness and the Performance of Childhood"



Minor in Global Studies with a Specialization in Islamic Studies

Focus on knowledge of Islam in all its internal complexity, the history of Islam from its beginnings to the 21st century, Islamic social contexts, and the diversity of human experience as seen in literature and the arts originating in societies affected by Islamic civilizations.

Visit our website to find out more: islamicstudies.stanford.edu

"After Stanford, I intend to pursue a career focused on the intersection of human rights and international security in the Middle East"

Islamic Studies minor Gabby Conforti, '22, seen here promoting Biking for Beirut, a fundraiser she helped organize following the devastating explosion of 2020

EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

**The Universal Enemy:
Jihad, Empire, and the
Challenge of Solidarity**

September 24, 2020
Darryl Li

**Conditional Citizens: On
Belonging in America**

October 8, 2020
Laila Lalami

**Religiosity, Coping and
Mental Health: Muslims
and the COVID-19
Pandemic**

October 22, 2020
Dr. Rania Awaad

The Muslim Vote

October 29, 2020
Abraham Aiyash
Nada Al-Hanooti
Abdullah Hammoud
Sadaf Jaffer

**Ayad Akhtar in
Conversation with Samer
Al-Saber**

January 19, 2021
Ayad Akhtar

**A Cultural Conversation:
Betty Shamieh & Lou
Hamou-Lhadj**

April 29, 2021
Betty Shamieh
Lou Hamou-Lhadj

**The Sea that Binds and
Divides: Our
Mediterranean**

March 18, 2021
Iason Athanasiadis

**The Influence of the
Khorāsani School of
Mysticism on Musical
Practices in Khorāsān**

May 11, 2021
Ameneh Youssefzadeh

**Digital Guide to Theater
of the Middle East
Website Launch**

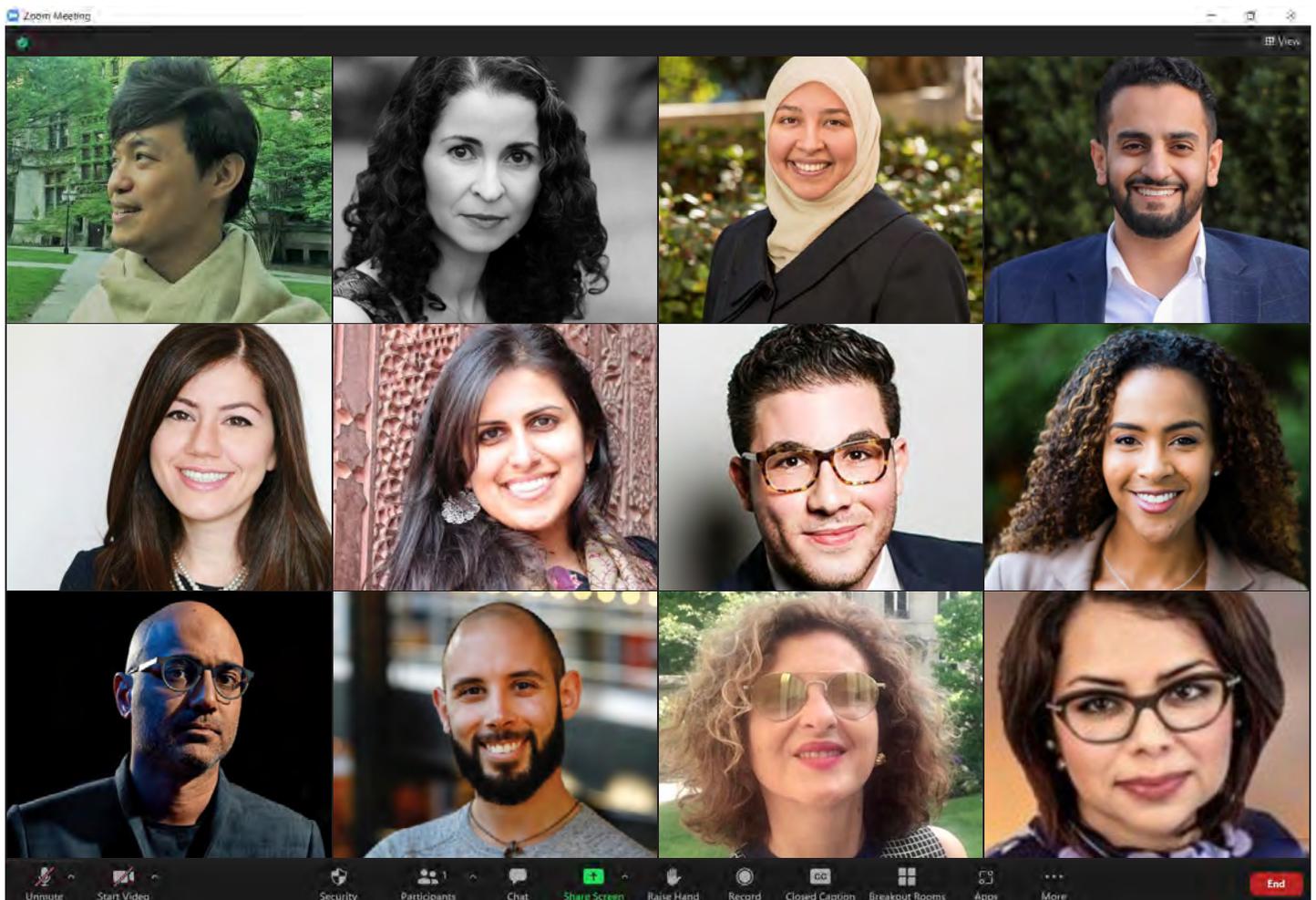
July 30, 2021
Marjan Moosavi

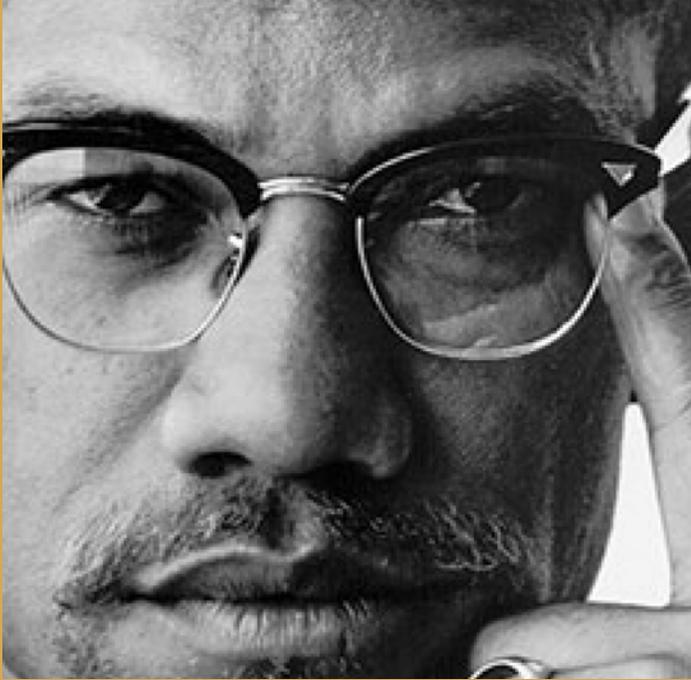
**The Universal Imam
Hussain**

August 18, 2021
S. Akbar Hyder
Mahjabeen Dhala

**Honeyland Film
Discussion**

September 1, 2021
Anna Gade





Black Islam and the Legacy of Malcolm X

February 23, 2021

Killed a few months shy of his fortieth birthday, Malcolm X was struck down not only in the prime of his life, but also at a moment where his previously rigidly held beliefs about race, religion, and international solidarity were shifting and morphing into new ideas about the universality of Islam as a religious tradition. In honor of the fifty-sixth anniversary of Malcolm X's assassination and Black History month, Stanford University and the Sohaib and Sara Abbasi Program in Islamic studies presented a panel celebrating the legacy of Malcolm X and Islam in the Black American and African Diasporic tradition.



Making Sense of Palestine Today: A Panel Series

May 26th, 2021

Shira Robinson (George Washington University)
Karam Dana (University of Washington)

June 2nd, 2021

Dana El Kurd (University of Richmond)
Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins (Bard College)

June 3rd, 2021

Muna Dajani (London School of Economics)
Basma Fahoum (Stanford University)

THE GAZA MONOLOGUES



The Gaza Monologues

May 27th, 2021

Organized by Professor Samer Al-Saber

31 Monologues, 31 Actors, 31 Directors, 31 Universities

Since October 2010, over 2000 youth from around the globe in more than 80 cities in 40 countries have presented the monologues that are translated and presented into 18 languages, leading to people from around the world becoming more aware and in standing in solidarity.

FALL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Lecture Series



Introduction to Arab Studies *Memory, Heritage and Cultural Production*



Thursday, 9/30: Zachary Lockman (NYU)

Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States



Tuesday, 10/5: Hanan Toukan (Bard College)

The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan



Tuesday, 10/12: Ziad Fahmy (Cornell)

Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt



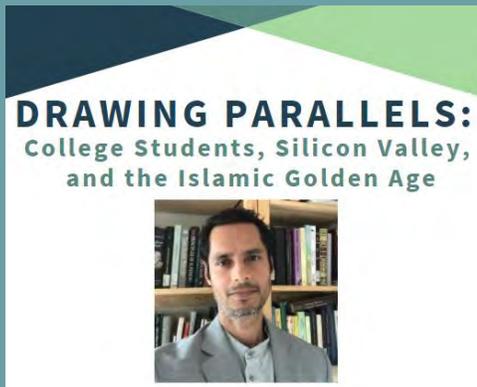
Thursday, 11/11: Marcia Inhorn (Yale)

America's Arab Refugees: Vulnerability and Health on the Margins



This series of events will highlight the framework of collective belonging, cultural construction, identity and heritage formation, and is this year's academic theme for the Abbasi Program

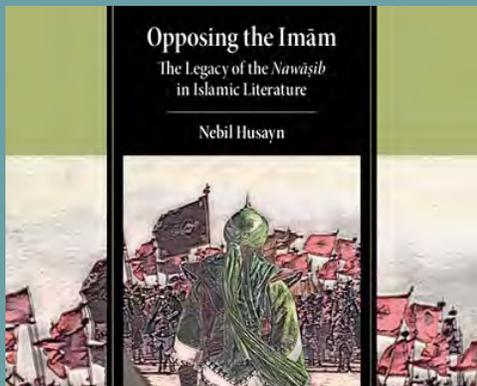
A Return to In-Person Events



Drawing Parallels: College Students, Silicon Valley, and the Islamic Golden Age

Wednesday, November 3, 2021

What is the Islamic Golden Age? Why should it matter today? The Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies and the Markaz invite you to a talk and discussion with Dr. Asad Ahmed, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at UC Berkeley.



Deconstructing Memories of Ali is Sunni and Shi'i Islam

Tuesday, November 16, 2021

Islam's fourth caliph, Ali, can be considered one of the most revered figures in Islamic history. Dr. Nebil Husayn, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Miami, considers the diverse ways in which early Muslims remembered Ali and contextualizes the rise of both Sunnism and Shi'ism.

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/about/make-gift or contact Scott Sugiura, Senior Associate Director of Development, at ssugiura@stanford.edu or (650) 723-1208.

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