
ON TEACHING THE MIDDLE EAST

Notes from Experienced Educators

The following short reflections are written by educators with a wide range of experience in teaching about the Middle East region. In different ways, the pieces address some common questions: Why teach the Middle East? Why is understanding this region important to U.S. citizens? How does one approach teaching about this complex region and the issues people and governments face there? What are some effective strategies for connecting with our students around these issues? What keeps us passionate about our work?

In answering these queries, some consistent themes emerge. Of course, combatting stereotypes is at the top of most of our lists. After 9/11 and now again today we are witnessing the rise of groups such as the Islamic State (or ISIS), and a shroud of fear surrounds popular knowledge of the region. However, other themes are more oriented to cultivating a new way of seeing the region in all its

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complexity. Presenting multiple perspectives that represent the diversity of local populations themselves is key to many of our approaches. Crafting lessons that encourage critical thinking is also crucial so that students may learn to analyze and synthesize information—and form their their own opinions—from multiple sources. All of these educators also model various forms of engaged global citizenry that are deeply rooted in American democratic ideals. We hope the readers of this volume can glean confidence and inspiration from hearing about these varied experiences, which above all champion the importance of being open to new

perspectives. Developing empathy and a connection with the people of the Middle East is also an important touchstone. Many noted that the rise of social media and other new forms of communication assist immensely with cultivating these connections. Perhaps our stories will inspire you and your students to join us in teaching and learning about the Middle East.

Michael-Ann Cerniglia

Michael-Ann Cerniglia is a high school history and global studies teacher at Sewickley Academy, just north of Pittsburgh, PA. Now in her 20th year of teaching, Michael-Ann develops and teaches courses about regional areas such as the Middle East and East Asia, as well as interdisciplinary global issues.

For me, the next best thing to traveling to the Middle East is teaching about it. The first time I taught about this region was in October 2001 — just one month after September 11th. It was then that I realized how much I had to learn about this region, and I set off to learn as much as possible through my own professional development and travel. I lived forty-five minutes outside New York

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City and only twenty-five minutes from Yale University's PIER Outreach program for teachers. I felt that my best response at the time was to understand the politics and culture of the people that our country was engaged with, so that I could help my students to do the same.

Because the Middle East is a region with which we are allied and in conflict, yet remains dramatically misunderstood, the its curricular importance is unavoidable. It is also a region in constant flux, so the task of staying current and analyzing the

nuances of change can be daunting. World-renowned linguist and political commentator Noam Chomsky has written that he commits to talks far in advance and titles them "Current Crisis in the Middle East" because he can be sure there will be one. Sadly, though he wrote this in 1993, it remains true today.

When it comes to teaching about the Middle East, even a discussion of basic geography can get controversial, as both natural and political geographies are contested. It is also important to understand the *language* of conflict in the region, from understanding the political implications of "Arab Spring" to "Occupied" to "War for Independence" to "Civil War" to "Islamism." Each of these terms may serve as a rallying cry for one group and a thorn in the side for another.

I have found three things to be most effective in teaching about the region: non-fiction literature and film, Socratic-style seminars, and simulations. While I need to fill in historical background and have students conduct research, texts such as *The Lemon Tree* (Sandy Tolan) and *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi) and films such as *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (Bahman Ghobadi) generate empathy for people in the region. After students have read about the lives of individuals in the assigned narratives, Socratic seminars in which students evaluate government policies are far more effective and compassionate. Through simulations, students step into roles such as nations or individuals in a conflict to make hypothetical decisions. This is especially effective when the conflicts being discussed are currently in debate. My most valuable professional development has been the result of seizing travel and research opportunities. These hands-on experiences refresh my knowledge and enable more engagement and sharing with my students.

Elisheva Cohen

Elisheva Cohen is a PhD Student and Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellow at the University of Minnesota in International Development Education. She has four years experience supporting education about the Middle East and has been studying the Middle East for more than ten years.

Two weeks into my freshman year at Columbia University, my new home of New York City was attacked. My efforts to understand the tragedy of 9-11 and the political landscape it created opened the door to a whole new world. I eventually declared my major as Middle Eastern studies, and began studying Arabic, reading Middle Eastern novels and listening to music from the region. In the summer of 2003, I traveled to the Arab world for the first time to study Arabic in Cairo. It was only a few short months after the American invasion of Iraq, and a strong media campaign was portraying the region as dangerous, repressive, and in need of freedom. My time in Cairo furthered my growing conviction that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was drastically misrepresented in the American media. I grew compelled to challenge the discourses that perpetuated these misunderstandings and hoped instead to foster tolerance and understanding.

It quickly became clear to me that education was the most effective way to address these grave misconceptions about the MENA region.

As educators, we can combat the portrayal of

the Middle East as monolithic, static, and rife with conflict. We can instead begin with the cultural, linguistic, political, historical and religious diversity that defines the region. We can give voice to the people of the region in our classrooms through primary sources such as paintings, poems, short stories, and music. We can use rap and graffiti and other forms of art and music as well as other multimedia materials to help our students build personal connections to the region.

It is important for students to understand current events, to have a grasp of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the importance of oil and the scarcity of water, and the impact of Islamist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. But in teaching these topics, I issue a warning to educators. It is all too easy to focus only on negative and violent events, and in doing so, perpetuate the stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the American psyche. The notable Middle East scholar Edward Said wrote in his 1997 book *Covering Islam* “It is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, and apprehended either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists.” It is critical to think about the framing of current events by placing them in their postcolonial context and illustrating the role of Western forces in shaping the Middle East and North Africa today.

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Given the continued oversimplifications, misperceptions, and bigotry in the media and the portrayal of the Middle East as a violent, angry region, it is essential to teach students critical media literacy. The best lessons about the Middle East not only provide students with new knowledge, but also teach skills to analyze and evaluate information. This helps students identify propaganda and bias, and forces them to consider the ways in which various media (and their funding sources) shape the messages that are disseminated.

Teaching about the Middle East should be an opportunity to introduce students to new cultures and ideas, share information about the rich histories and diverse peoples of the region, and ultimately promote understanding, tolerance, and peace.

Betsey Coleman

Betsey Coleman is a Master Teacher at Colorado Academy in Denver and has been in the classroom for 40 years. Her literature classes often focus on the Middle East, and she has received multiple Fulbright and other state department grants to the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Currently, she is serving a second term on the Middle East Outreach Council board.

In the courses, “Coming of Age in the World” for grade 9 and “Contemporary Voices from the Middle East” for grades 11 and 12, I seek to open my students’ eyes to diversity in the region. The students’ initial knowledge of the Middle East is limited. For example, many believe that only religious Jews live in Israel and that all Palestinians are Muslims living exclusively in the West Bank and Gaza. Soon, through accessible lessons based on film and literature, popular culture, history, and current events, they begin to discover that these are real people with whom they can often identify. They also realize that these people are exceptionally diverse ethnically, culturally, and religiously.

I have learned, as a teacher of the Middle East, how to approach a vast and largely unknown region with adolescents. After first making the people immediate through individual stories, music, and art, I then move on to questions of history, politics and geography. For Iran I use the graphic novel *Persepolis* to introduce students to the Iranian Revolution. Marjane Satrapi, the young and feisty protagonist, is easy for students to relate to, perhaps due to her suspicion of authority. I pair Satrapi’s memoir with resources that explore more complex historical and political issues, such as the Watson Institute’s *Choices* program on Iran. For Iraq, my students watch teenagers struggle with the day-to-day problems of living in times of war in the documentary *Baghdad High*. I also explore current events and the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. For Egypt, I use the journalism of Mona Eltahawy as well as a multitude of resources on the “Arab Spring.” Hisham Matar’s coming of age novel *In the Country of Men* provides just the right introduction to the complexities of North Africa today.

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I also explore complex but accessible themes such as freedom and oppression, nationalism, war and peace, justice and injustice, wealth and poverty, and coming of age. These themes present an interdisciplinary way to connect the Middle East to my students' worlds. My work on the Middle East has pushed me to include history, geography, art and even mathematics and has often led to collaboration with other teachers.

I also scour local universities and the community to find speakers who will engage students in a more immediate way. Parents, religious leaders, writers, and artists can be excellent resources. For example, I have invited Dr. Nabil Echchaibi, originally from Morocco, to speak to students after they have read Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. In conjunction with my unit on Iran, my students had the opportunity to hear from the architect Nilou Vakil, who grew up in post-revolutionary Iran. During our study of Palestine, Ibtisam Barakat, author of *Tasting the Sky*, visited our school.

To me, it's all about diversity, diversity, and diversity. I want to make sure my students do not end up with a monolithic impression of the Middle East. However, doing this in an accessible way, in which students feel connected to people and their stories, is the challenge.

Kevin Conlon

Kevin Conlon has been teaching 9th and 10th grade World History courses and Middle East, International Relations and Economics electives at Francis Parker School in Chicago since 1997. Conlon spent his adolescence in Ireland and lived and studied in Germany and France for a few years. He is planning a student trip to the Middle East at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

I find it useful to think of history as a huge puzzle. The more time you spend learning about the past, the more puzzle pieces you are able to place. The puzzle's size also grows as you learn more about the complexities of the past. Nonetheless, with each new piece comes the satisfaction of greater knowledge, even as you realize that perfect understanding will be elusive. You can, nonetheless, carry on and enjoy interpreting your incomplete puzzle and making arguments as to the "how" or the "why" of the past.

One of the first questions you can ask is what gives this region a coherence that allows it to fit under the geographic label "The Middle East." Some areas within the region share political and cultural connections. The development of agriculture and urban societies and what is known as "civilization" had their earliest beginnings in the Middle East. At a certain point in time, the Abrahamic faiths became a sort of common denominator in the region (and beyond). Their interactions have generated myriad historical events as well as modern sociopolitical developments. While a pioneer in monotheism, the Middle East is considered a late-comer to the modern development of the nation-state, and is sometimes referred to as "a region without regionalism." This can be lost on students who see the nation-state as the only legitimate political unit for organizing the world. By looking at the emergence of nation-states in the Middle East in contrast with other parts of the

world, one can develop useful comparative lessons. For example, ask students to speculate on how their peers in another part of the world might learn and understand a history lesson, particularly when the topic is about the Middle East. The United States is a globally important country, perhaps owing to its founding principles and ideals as well as its growing influence and reach in economic,

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cultural and military spheres. This makes it all the more important to remind American students that their peers elsewhere might view the world differently. Asking “why?” is a good starting point to a set of lessons and student inquiries on different points of view.

In a democracy, one purpose of education is to encourage students to realize the importance of an informed and engaged citizenry. Teachers and parents expect students to be agents of change, purposefully acting to maintain and strengthen democratic society. Students also need to appreciate that the world is becoming more connected through technology and social media. As such, building awareness and

acquiring tools to learn about other cultures and political systems is empowering for adolescents as they consider their futures in our increasingly interconnected world. As a school teacher I model and encourage the habits of mind of active citizenship, both locally and globally, as an essential part of the learning process. Good classroom teaching puts students in the position of making informed decisions based on their values and the values at the core of a democracy. This approach to teaching history helps bring it alive for both students and teachers.

The long history of the Middle East can be broken down into different time periods to help us explore the past. At one point, these periods were “chunked” by historians into digestible pieces that usually corresponded to an overarching theme. It’s generally useful to move past these fixed start and end times to allow for a different interpretation of the past. My piece in this volume mainly focuses on U.S. policy from the post-1979 era to the present (August 2015). What stands out in this 36-year period is both how entrenched the relations between nations can appear and how tenuous that permanence can become when people—from unknown citizens to long-serving statesmen—act to bring about a new reality, throwing the status quo out the window.

Shyla Doğan

Shyla Doğan is a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona in Educational Leadership and Policy, where she has been instrumental in the Center for Middle Eastern Studies’ K-12 outreach program. Her research, which focuses mainly on Turkey, revolves around minority groups, nationalism, identity and schooling.

When teaching about the Middle East, I try to practice mindfulness. I work to confront my own biases, what I believe my students know about the Middle East and my opinions of the identity of

my students. When teaching at the college level, I have had students come into class in full army fatigues. This has forced me to confront how I personally feel about military intervention in the Middle East and my students' role in that intervention. I force myself to consider and reconsider why a student may be interested in learning about the Middle East and to see this individual as a human before anything else. We all have prejudices, so pure objectivity is impossible. However, as teachers we have a responsibility to strive for that ideal. Students should be given information and allowed the space to form their own beliefs about a particular topic. It should not matter whether I agree with my students' conclusions.

I start each semester by having students anonymously write down three things they think are facts about the Middle East region and the people who live there. There is always a wide variety of responses, but in general the first day of class begins with a series of stereotypes: women as domestic and sexual servants, Islam as a religion that encourages holy war against nonbelievers, a desert land filled with genies ready to bring wealth to the first Indiana Jones-style adventurer to arrive.

At the end of the course, I ask the students to do this exercise again. This time, terms like *hadith* and Orientalism, and events like the Green Movement in Iran emerge. I am never disappointed at the yawning gap between the answers provided in the first class and the last. This activity helps me better understand my students when they first arrive in my class, and it also allows me to see a glimpse of what topics have made the deepest impressions. I am able to learn what works and what needs improvement. If students do not leave my class at least with the realization that there is diversity in Middle East geography, religion, ethnicity, language, and thought, then I have not done my job.

Additionally, I find that multimedia sources are a great service to my constantly connected students. If I want to discuss Sufism, why not show a YouTube clip of an actual **Zikr**? It takes research on the part of the teacher to find good materials, but students have a better chance of absorbing information when they are allowed to learn through various means.

Lastly, I do my best to remember that when teaching students in the “West” about the Middle East, I am single-handedly combatting a lifetime of ingrained biases, stereotypes and hatreds. No question is “silly,” no student is “foolish.” Every student comes into my class as an equal to me and everyone else in the room, and they should feel free to express themselves in a safe space. If I show them respect toward the subject matter, they will probably be more inclined to be respectful. I want their experience in my class to be memorable, both for what they learned and how they attained that knowledge.

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Kevin Grisham

Kevin E. Grisham, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at California State University, San Bernardino. He teaches about revolutions and rebellions, geopolitics and strategic geography of the Middle East. He has worked in the Middle East, including working with the Yemeni government in 1999 and 2000.

Socrates once remarked, “wisdom begins in wonder.” In teaching about the Middle East, this should be at the core of everything teachers do. The Middle East is a fascinating place to study. In teaching about the region, it is vital to engender admiration in students for the people and places of the Middle East and then provide the tools to explore them.

It is not my job to teach students what I think about the region. Instead, it is the job of a teacher to provide objective information alongside the critical tools necessary for students to interpret information on their own. It is the job of the students then to draw their own conclusions. This allows them to become scholars of the Middle East and not merely ideologues repeating what they have heard others say about the region. In this approach, understanding is achieved and not merely reinforcement of previous views or the views of the teacher.

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This is generally contrary to the manner in which Middle East studies are currently approached. In our field today, one can generally see two schools of thought: those who view the region through the eyes of the West (sometimes referred to as Orientalists) and those who view the world through the eyes of those living in the region (sometimes known as sympathizers). I believe each approach is flawed because it starts with the premise that all other perspectives are wrong. Due to this fact, a small group of Middle East scholars – of whom I am one – has created a third school of thought. Our approach is to look at information from all sources, and, using critical thinking tools, draw one’s own conclusions. This helps us to assess the myriad issues facing the region as objectively as possible. Of course, complete objectivity is elusive, but we strive to replace finger pointing with critical thought.

Bram Hubbell

Bram Hubbell teaches World and Middle Eastern History at Friends Seminary and regularly takes high school students to Israel, Jordan, and Palestine. He has taught at Friends for 15 years and helped launch the school's Arabic program in 2008.

Teaching Middle Eastern history is never easy. Every day seems to bring another story about tragedy or war. Understanding these stories is what my students often cite as their reason for enrolling in my Modern Middle East History class. These are thoughtful and motivated students opting to take a challenging elective in their senior year. They want to understand why there isn't

peace in Israel or why there is tension with Iran. In many ways, my approach to teaching about the Middle East both frustrates and surprises students. I rarely talk about what states do as states don't do things; people do. I want to challenge students to stop seeing the Middle East (and the world, for that matter) from a top-down perspective in which states simply seem to exist to frustrate other states or cause misery for the nameless masses (Palestinians, Syrians, Israelis) that show up in news stories.

It's not easy teaching about the Middle East from a humanist perspective. Students often accuse me of making what seems like a somewhat complicated story into a far more complicated one. Sometimes I have to talk about the big picture and regional patterns, but I quickly bring the focus to the individuals making the choices that shape and influence those regional patterns. Instead of spending days going over the causes of the many wars in the twentieth-century Levant, I have students read and discuss Wadad Makdisi Cortas' powerful memoir *A World I Loved: The Story of an Arab Woman*. By focusing on individual stories, students might see that historical processes don't simply happen. Events are the culmination of hundreds of individual decisions made by everyone from individual peasant families in nineteenth-century Lebanon *choosing* to grow silk for the global market to powerful state leaders, such as Nasser, *choosing* to threaten Israel.

Through teaching students to view the past from a humanist perspective, I hope they are able to see there is no such thing as the average Arab, Israeli, Iranian, or Kurd. Some Israelis support Netanyahu and the Likud party, but others support Meretz, the left wing party. Other Israeli citizens struggle with being called Israeli and think of themselves as Mizrahi or Palestinian. Some Syrians fully support Bashar al-Assad and his regime, while other Syrians are working to bring about a more secular and less sectarian state. Once students replace the nameless, faceless Arab or Iranian or Turk with individuals struggling to survive and live meaningful lives, those same students might feel empathy for the peoples of the Middle East. The Middle Easterner shifts from the nameless and faceless other to an individual for whom it's possible to feel compassion.

My approach to teaching about the Middle East usually omits what specific events caused the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, but it has hopefully taught students that individuals make choices that shape historical events and that those same students can be agents of change in the world.

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Khaled Islaih

Khaled Islaih is an independent Arabic Interpreter and interpreting instructor at Glendon School of Translation, York University in Toronto. Khaled is also working on his doctoral studies in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

I am originally from Palestine. Arabic is my mother tongue. In 2005, I arrived in Canada as a new immigrant, and settled in Mississauga near Toronto. My linguistic experiences over the last ten years have changed my beliefs, perceptions and attitudes toward languages. I found that the growing diversity within multicultural cities such as Toronto is enabling paradigm shifts in the study of languages in classrooms, workplaces, and communities. For example, traditional monolingual

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assumptions about homogeneity, stability, and boundedness are being replaced by new worldviews such as hybridity, translocality, and heterogeneity. Super-diversity accelerated by globalization, migration, and information technology is changing the sociolinguistic order around the globe.

I experienced this process of sociolinguistic transformation in the early months of my arrival in Toronto as a new immigrant. My attention was drawn to Arabic texts in public spaces

such as billboards or storefronts. These encounters made me feel welcome. I felt as if the city were giving me the keys for settlement, employment and integration. After a few months, my encounters with Arabic texts evolved and manifested themselves in unexpected employment opportunities. In late 2005, I got a temporary job with Google, working from home as a web rater for Arabic websites. Then I worked as settlement worker for Arabic-speaking families. Currently, I work as an Arabic interpreter and interpreting trainer at the Glendon School of translation at York University, while pursuing a doctorate in language and literacy education at the University of Toronto.

My language-teaching philosophy is shaped by everyday linguistic encounters. I encourage students to challenge the influence of monolingual ideologies on their worldviews. I introduce students to linguistic biography writing, asking them to write reflections about how linguistic practices and choices shape their daily outcomes. They enjoy reflecting on their exchanges with speakers of foreign languages as well as their encounters with foreign texts and words in both real and virtual settings. I encourage them to use their phone cameras to capture multilingual signs they encounter in classrooms, schools and communities. I use real-world audiovisual materials available online to inspire linguistic plurality as a worldview among my students.

In teaching about linguistic pluralism in the Middle East, it is important to move beyond the official monolingual ideologies of the region's governments. I encourage teachers to introduce students to issues pertaining to linguistic minorities and their rights. Teachers might also be interested in

exploring the history of the region through a linguistic lens, where, for example, one could investigate linguistic borrowing as a way of understanding contact and exchange among populations over time. The material history of Middle Eastern languages is also very rich, with fascinating writing tools, examples of calligraphy and other artifacts of material culture. By learning these new ways of seeing history, students can gain new frameworks for both reading the present and envisioning a different future. It is my hope that students will develop a linguistic awareness that recognizes languages beyond mere words and sentences, instead embracing them as continuously evolving forms of life.

Greta Scharnweber

Greta Scharnweber has more than 15 years of experience working with teachers to promote Middle East Studies in K-12 classrooms and has led eight study tours for teachers to the Middle East. She is currently Associate Director of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, where she has been since 2008. She is currently President-Elect of the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) and has served on the MEOC board since 2006.

As a white American woman, I am frequently asked why and how I got into the field of Middle Eastern Studies. My answer is always the same: I had great teachers. When I began college, I thought I would become a biologist, but distribution requirements landed me in worldview-shifting classes on Islam and cultural anthropology. My undergraduate experiences at Kenyon College with the amazing Vernon Schubel and Rita Kipp paved my way to the study of Arabic, a deep appreciation for religious pluralism, a prioritization of real time spent in travel and study, and a lifelong advocacy for learning and teaching about a grossly misunderstood region.

The incredulity with which many people ask me this question about my motivation has always bothered me, as it unsubtly masks the presupposition of an implicit danger or backwardness inherent to “the Middle East” and the people who live there. If I had to pinpoint one reason for my commitment, it is a deep desire to challenge this presupposition and convince every American of the importance of the Middle East and Muslim World to global civilization. In addition, there is the hope that fear would not envelop the mere mention of the terms Islam, Muslim, or Middle East; a plea that we could view the region’s inhabitants as human, and not as terrorists in the making; a drive for a sense of responsibility in our own citizenry that champions the dignity of our fellow human beings, regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, or religion. These desires may be naive, but they motivate me nonetheless.

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For the past 15 years I have been involved in curating K-12 teacher-training programs at Title VI Middle Eastern Studies Centers, at Georgetown, Yale, and now at NYU. Title VI is a federally funded program, the origins of which are deeply nestled in cold war ideologies, designed to train Americans

in foreign languages and international studies. I think these programs are, despite the somewhat controversial frameworks that support them, critical in the U.S. today. They aim to connect scholars with educators outside of academia; they support cutting-edge language training; and they support the exploration of interdisciplinary research. The teachers in these programs, if I have been successful, glimpse a world of knowledge-seeking that is often contradictory to the media or completely outside of the topics deemed news- or textbook-worthy. My hope is that my programs generate more questions than answers, while also reminding participants of the ordinary, everyday humanity of individuals.

In my view, acknowledging and embracing the unknown and the limits of one's expertise—indeed, admitting the very impossibility of attaining total expertise in anything—are fundamental. The U.S. (and the world) is full of Middle East “experts”; in a way (despite any feelings of inadequacy) I am one of them. Perhaps, when people ask me why I am in Middle East studies, instead of crediting my good teachers, I should credit my good “learners” and the fine examples they set in their classrooms. If there is any advice I would give to educators newly exploring the teaching of the Middle East, it is to be a good learner and to embrace the questions more than the answers. I hope this volume evokes that sentiment as it explores some of the complex, fascinating and sometimes tragic shifts societies in the Middle East have experienced.

Joan Brodsky Schur

Joan Brodsky Schur is a curriculum developer and author who serves as Social Studies Consultant to the City and Country School in New York City. Her interest in teaching about the Middle East dates to 1998; since then she has traveled extensively in the region.

A wealth of institutional, scholarly and pedagogical support for teaching about the Middle East already existed in the 1990s when I first made this region the focus of my teaching. Just imagine what is out there today! Were teachers fully acquainted with the resources at their disposal, they would face less trepidation embarking on academic journeys with their students to the Middle East.

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While we have to be careful not to reduce the region to its religious components, teachers do worry about how to incorporate information about faiths when teaching about the Middle East. Clear guidelines exist in the First Amendment Center's *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public School* and the American Academy of Religion's *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public*

Schools in the United States. The key is that teaching religion belongs only in faith-based institutions, whereas teaching *about* religion is acceptable; indeed social studies standards now incorporate teaching about religion throughout world history.

Teachers need to stay abreast of new historical research and contending interpretations in any field, especially this one. Witness the slate of new books on the centenary of World War I in the Middle East. Opportunities for teachers to study with the experts exist, especially at federally funded Title VI university campuses, which have a mandate to enhance area studies. In addition to running seminars for teachers, many universities use Title VI funding to maintain websites for teaching about the Middle East. The outreach centers at the University of Arizona, the University of Texas at Austin, and Georgetown University are good examples. The Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) brings together program directors of Title VI programs to better support teachers, the organization's main constituency. MEOC offers members access to the listserv where teachers can post questions and receive knowledgeable advice, as well as an online newsletter, *Perspectives*. It also keeps teachers abreast of funded travel opportunities to the Middle East.

I suggest that teachers contact the Middle East studies department nearest to where they live whether or not it receives Title VI funding. Get on the department's listserv to the general public. In addition to taking advantage of the Title VI programming at NYU and Columbia University, I am also on their listservs to the public and have thus found entrée into a large number of symposiums with experts on topics related to the Middle East.

However we make an effort to stay informed, nothing can take the place of travel to the regions we teach about. I find it a welcome challenge to compare what I have learned from books to what I see and experience on the ground. How can I synthesize the two sources and reevaluate the image I arrived with? No matter how you feel about selfies, teachers have convinced me you should take at least some photographs with yourself in view to make it easier for students to imagine being there themselves. Photographs are the stuff of slide shows you create based on the primary-source documents you generate. Your photographs become a geography lesson when displayed on a large map on the coordinates where you took them (or attached to a Google Earth map). Small items I picked up at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul became the basis of hands-on lesson plans. Examples include a scarf with the *tughra* (calligraphic signature) of an Ottoman sultan, a bottle of rosewater (used for both cooking and beautification), or a bit of *oya* — traditional Turkish lace originating in ancient Phrygia and even today meaningful in the life of Turkish women.

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Numerous opportunities can be found for funded travel for teachers, by applying to the Fulbright-Hays seminars abroad, for example. I recommend traveling with GEEO (Global Exploration for Educations Organization), which I did—to Tunisia the summer before the Arab Spring, and to Turkey in 2014. No essay-writing application is necessary; the trips are reasonably priced; the guides knowledgeable; and you get to travel in the company of other U.S. teachers. In fact, some university outreach centers are now pairing up with GEEO to run trips with affiliated professors on board or leading the way. NYU's Hagop Kevorkian Center ran such a trip to Central Asia in 2014.

Short of traveling with students to the Middle East, how can we provide them with a sense of the richness and complexity of the societies they are learning about? This is best effected by including multidisciplinary resources in our courses. Students should be assigned to read folklore, poetry, essays and novels generated by men and women who have lived in the region. As early as 1917, Egypt had its first film-production company and by the 1940s a flourishing film industry. Iranians have directed some of the most highly esteemed films of our era. Students can learn plenty about politics and identity through music available on the web, from traditional Ottoman band music (*mehter*), to songs of the great female Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, and more recent “crossover” artists of Mahgrebi *rai* music. Museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art have extensive images from their art collections online, as well as accompanying guides to teaching about the arts generated in Islamic lands.

Throughout our teaching of the Middle East, it is important to remember that the region has never been isolated from the rest of the world; indeed geography ensured that it would be a crossroads linking continents and their societies. Our focus on dividing the world into continents, as well as the way in which university departments are organized around “regional studies” often obscures this

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basic fact. Two websites designed for teaching about *interactions* among world societies that include the “Middle East” are *The Indian Ocean in World History* and *Our Shared Past in the Mediterranean*.

I believe in teaching about the past to understand the present, as do all impassioned teachers of history. However, we cannot get around the fact that teaching about the Middle East in today’s world is tough. Post “Arab Spring,” most of the experts I listened to admitted that they had not seen it coming; afterwards many were too quick to predict it would flower. According to an article about Jimmy Carter’s terminal cancer in the New

York Times (08/21/2015), “Mr. Carter, who as president strove mightily to bring peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, said it seemed as though ‘the prospects are more dismal than any time I remember in the last 50 years.’” As events unfold, as we search sometimes helplessly for answers, and as an older generation of peace seekers passes from the scene, we cannot give up the quest to educate and empower the next generation to find a better future.

Hanadi Shatara

Hanadi Shatara is a doctoral student in Social Studies Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she pursues research interests in global education, global citizenship and the teaching of the Middle East in K-12 classrooms. For 7 years, she taught 7th grade World Cultures and Geography and 8th grade U.S. History in Philadelphia, where she was a Fulbright Scholar and National Board Certified Teacher.

As a Palestinian American growing up in the states and attending American public schools, I noticed early on that the Middle East is not really a part of the Social Studies curriculum, nor are teachers very familiar with the region. My teachers struggled with pronouncing my name, and I was in the English as a Second Language program for some time. In middle school, one assignment was to do a report on any country of the world. I asked to do Palestine and my teachers agreed. However, the library did not have many books on the topic, and the internet did not provide much help. I decided to conduct an oral-history interview with my grandmother, who had lived in the region for most of her life prior to emigrating to America. As 9/11 shocked our society, I witnessed people relying on stereotypes and blaming anyone from the Middle East or anyone perceived to be Muslim. This was a turning point for me. At university, I began to study Middle East history in the hope of becoming a Social Studies teacher—to help the next generation become more knowledgeable.

My ultimate goal is to foster my students' global citizenship skills.

One of my goals as a teacher is for students to be aware and critical of the world around them. Most students are used to listening, but not questioning. Given the barrage of information and media they are exposed to in the real world, it is essential to teach students how to question every piece of evidence, whether it is a primary or secondary source. By being critical, students can get closer to seeing a full picture of historical and current events.

I taught World Cultures and Geography (the Eastern Hemisphere) to 7th grade students. Although it was an introductory class, I had room to dig deeper on certain topics. For one of my first units on the Middle East, I split the material into two parts, Ancient/Medieval and Modern. Within each part, the five fields of Social Studies framed the lessons: geography, history, government, economics and culture. Within the unit, students were exposed to various Social Studies skills (close reading, cause/effect, timelines, geographic skills, sourcing, etc.) as well as critical thinking through primary-source readings, interpretations of artwork and current events. One of my main foci was on diversity in the Middle East, emphasizing different aspects of culture and unpacking stereotypes. The culminating project had students select a Middle Eastern country, research the five fields of Social Studies for their country and critically analyze a current-events article that drew upon one of the fields.

My ultimate goal is to foster my students' global citizenship skills. I try to raise awareness of important issues in the region while also helping students develop a sense of global competency by understanding how the Middle East and its people are portrayed.

Joseph T. Stanik

Joseph Stanik, a retired Naval Officer with 25 years of teaching experience, is a 12th-grade social studies teacher at the New Era Academy in Baltimore, MD. He also teaches a Middle Eastern History survey course at Anne Arundel Community College, has been a Fulbright-Hays recipient and is a long time board member of the Middle East Outreach Council.

In the spring of 1977, as an undergraduate, I took a Middle Eastern history course as a way to fulfill a regional requirement for my major in history. I have been hooked on the field ever since and have had the great fortune to teach the subject at the college and high school levels since 1991.

When it comes to recounting the rich history of the Middle East, I strongly support the axiom that many past events are still regarded by many people in the region as current events. Thus, I endeavor to present a chronologically balanced sequence of lessons, running from the era immediately preceding Islam to the post-9/11 world. Since the origins of many modern conflicts can be traced back several centuries (and in some cases more than a thousand years) there is an intrinsic value in understanding the successes and problems associated with the formation and expansion of the Islamic state. For example, the seeds of the bitter feud between the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the *Ba'th* Party in the 20th century were planted during the 7th and 8th centuries, when deep enmity emerged between the earliest converts to Islam and later ones, many of whom were non-Arab. For a text that provides even chronological coverage, I recommend *A Concise History of the Middle East* by Goldschmidt and Boum (11th edition, 2015).

By analyzing primary-source documents, my students obtain a below-the-surface understanding of important religious and cultural writings and significant political issues and developments. For examples in the former category, my students read and discuss excerpts from *al-Qur'an*, Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and the poetry of *sufis* Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya and Jalal ad-Din Rumi. In the latter category, which often involves analyzing conflicting views of a significant issue, my students examine excerpts from Ottoman *Tanzimat* documents of the 19th century, comparing them to the U.S. Constitution; Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* and Arab responses to it; conflicting promises made by the Allies during World War I that affected the future of the Arab Middle East; and speeches outlining the major theories of Ba'thism and Nasirism. I also require my students to parse the nuanced language of the Balfour Declaration (which they are surprised to learn is actually one long sentence) and U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. For a comprehensive collection of primary-source documents, I recommend *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*, edited by Gettleman and Schaar (revised edition, 2012).

I have noticed over the years that interest in Middle Eastern history waxes and wanes. When a crisis erupts, enrollments spike, but as the "crisis" rolls on for months and even years, curiosity ebbs. Some noteworthy spikes were generated by Saddam Hussain's invasion of Kuwait (for spring 1991), the 9/11 attacks (for spring 2002), the start of the Arab Spring (for fall 2011), and the ISIS offensive

in Iraq (for fall 2014). Enrollments sagged in the late 2000s, perhaps reflecting the popular fatigue brought on by the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One other thing I have detected while teaching this fascinating subject is the shift in what constitutes the core countries of the Middle East. In 1991, I began using a wall-sized CIA map that was squarely centered on the Fertile Crescent and Arabian Peninsula but included all of Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan. Eighteen years later, I figured that my trusty map had sustained enough wear and

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tear and to reach “retirement age.” When I went searching for a replacement, I found that the regional focus had shifted to the east. Many maps cut off Egypt west of the Nile Delta yet featured the “stans” of Central Asia, which many scholars consider outside the Middle East. So what did I do? I took my old map to Kinko’s and had it laminated. I hope to get another 15 years out of it.

In summary, I advocate a Middle Eastern history course that adequately covers all eras from the time of Muhammad and that makes use of primary-source documents as a means of enhancing student understanding of many of the region’s complex issues and controversies.