

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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**Zack Al-Witri**


*Associate Director*


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*Program Coordinator*


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# DIRECTOR'S LETTER



## **Lisa Blaydes**

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

A white, handwritten signature of Lisa Blaydes, written in a cursive style, positioned at the bottom of the page.

# 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. I have a particular interest in how legal categories of population, property and economy shaped and were shaped by the everyday experiences of social life. I am 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.

## 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

Maira Hayat

**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.



Image: Blue Mosque, Yerevan, Armenia. Photo by Alexandr Hovhannisyan on Unsplash.

# FACULTY PROFILES

Anna Bigelow, Associate Professor, Religious Studies,  
Stanford University

## How did you become interested in studying the 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.



# FEATURED STUDENT

Ruiheng Li, Ph.D. student & visiting student researcher from Peking University, Beijing, China

## How did you become interested in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies?

As an undergraduate, I studied the Arabic language at Beijing Foreign Studies University. So, my interests and curiosity about Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies were established because of my major. In the very beginning, I never thought about studying a foreign language, outside of English. However, when I saw this major, it sparked my interest because I used to read many books about the Arabs' role in the history of human civilization. After a year studying Arabic, I knew I wanted to continue my studies about the region.

## Have you conducted research in the region?

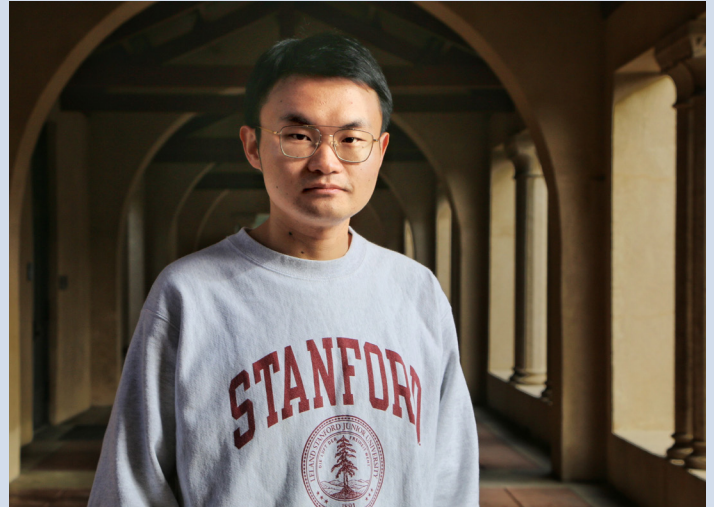
During my master's studies, I went to Morocco for one year, which is why I focused on the Islamic discourse in Morocco's nation state building in my master's thesis. After that experience, I continued to study nation state building in the Middle East, but I transferred my focus from Morocco to Iraq. As a Ph.D. student, I have traveled to many Middle Eastern countries for field research but for a short period of time, including Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

## Why did you decide to come to Stanford, and what is your research focus?

The reason I am at Stanford is to read the Ba'athist archives at the Hoover Institution. I am working on Iraqi Kurdistan, and I'm really curious about the nationalist discourse inside Iraqi Kurdistan. Using the Hoover archives, I would like to make a comparison between the Kurdish perspective and the Arab or Ba'athist Party perspective on this issue so that we can get a more balanced, objective view and know the true history of Kurdish nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## What do you hope to accomplish through your work?

I found that the Kurdish issue is an important clue to help us get to know Iraq and the Middle East because a good question is a question that will lead you to a broader understanding or thinking about the region. In the long run I hope to do research on Iraq's sectarianism and political system, or even the political transformation in the Middle East. Can the Middle East be successful in creating a regional version of consociationalism democracy to make peace come true? Is it possible to keep the sovereignty of the state and the nation-state structure stable while also respecting the diversity of the societies there?



## How did the pandemic affect your work at Stanford?

The pandemic's influence on my work is profound. I could no longer go to the reading room to read the archives, which really means a pity and loss for my work. But work from home did give me a lot of time to think more and write down what I have already collected and reached.

## What are some of the highlights from your time here at Stanford?


I attended a conference focused on Iraq, and I met some famous scholars working on Iraq and the Ba'ath party archives. It was exciting to talk to scholars face-to-face and receive feedback regarding my research. I also had the opportunity to attend the Middle Eastern Studies Association annual meeting in New Orleans in 2019. There, I met more scholars and specialists on Iraq and the Middle East. It was an amazing opportunity!


## As you prepare to head home, what are your thoughts on your year at Stanford?


"I succeeded in collecting primary materials in Arabic for my PhD dissertation writing and getting to know scholars in the U.S. working on Iraq and the Middle East, which inspired me a lot and consolidated my confidence to proceed with my research. The pandemic's influence on my work is profound. I could no longer go to the reading room to read the archives, which was a pity and loss for my work. But work from home did give me time to think and write down what I have already collected.

I used to think what I would miss most would be the academic resources and archives here, but what came up off the top of my head is my advisor, colleagues and friends that I made here, who provided me with their generous help in various forms during my stay at Stanford.

# 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”*



**Ala' Alrababa'h**

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



**Gabby Conforti**

*Arabic Language Study*  
Qasid Arabic Institute



**Dwight Knightly**

*Arabic Language Study*  
Sijal Institute



**Phoebe Quinton**

*Social Science Research Council*  
Brooklyn, NY



**Wallace Teska**

*Arabic Language Study*  
Qasid Arabic Institute



**Callum Tresnan**

*Arabic Language Study*  
Sijal Institute



**Morgan Tufan**

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



**Katherine Waissbluth**

*Social Science Research Council*  
Brooklyn, NY



# 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**

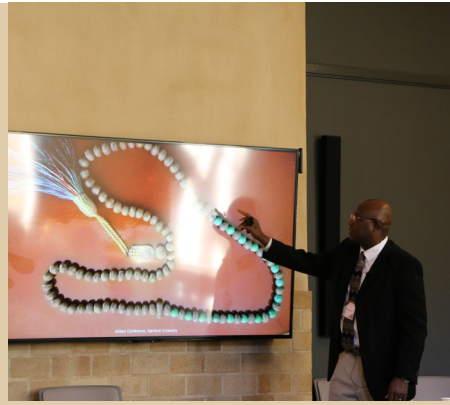
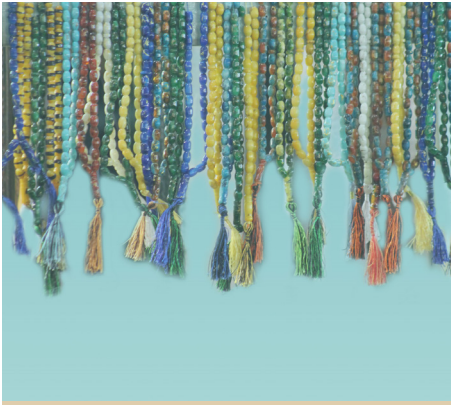
*May 19, 2020*

Abiya Ahmed  
Mucahit Bilici  
Margari Hill  
Shabana Mir

The image shows a webinar title slide. On the left, there is a white coffee cup filled with brown liquid on a wooden surface. In the center, a tablet displays four video thumbnails of the speakers: a woman in a pink headscarf, a man with a beard and glasses, a woman in a pink headscarf, and a woman with dark hair. The background is a light-colored wooden wall.



## Conferences

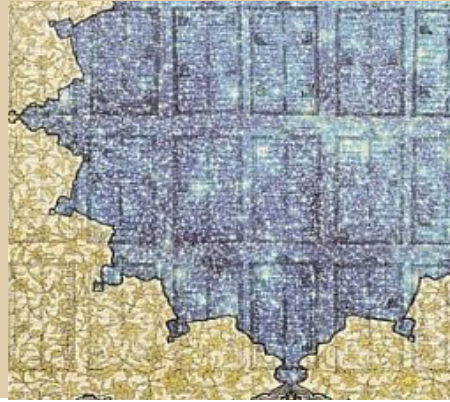


### Islam, Objects and Everyday Life

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

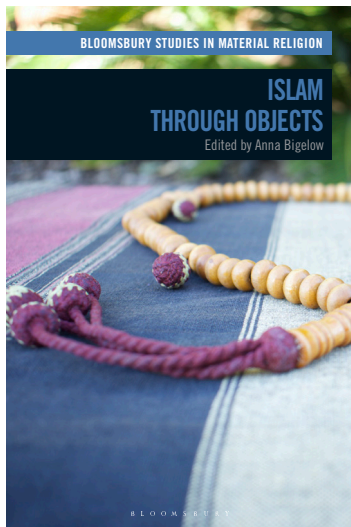
July 22, 2020

Fadi Haddad

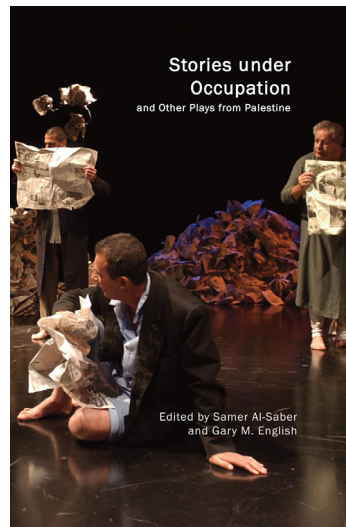


# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## PUBLICATIONS



*Islam Through Objects* 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*, for the first time, 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.

## NEW 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.

## 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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# 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.
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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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