

# The University of Virginia

## Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures

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A Sermon in Stone.....1

Notes from the Chair:  
We Believe in the Enduring Power  
of Words .....3

Peacebuilding: A Life .....4

One Journey: Through the Heart of  
Peacebuilding .....5

Women in the Media.....6

Introducing Iranian Cinema .....8

Project Global Officer .....8

A Unique Program at U.Va.....9

New MESALC Courses 2012 ..... 10

Spring in Hindi-Urdu’s Garden ..... 11

New in the MESALC Library..... 12

My Year Abroad..... 13

Critical Language Scholarships..... 14

Jefferson Trust Grant..... 14

Calendar of Events ..... 15

Thank You, Jessica Strang ..... 16

Writing Beyond Lives: Reflections on  
the “Alternative Biographies”  
Symposium ..... 17

### A Sermon in Stone

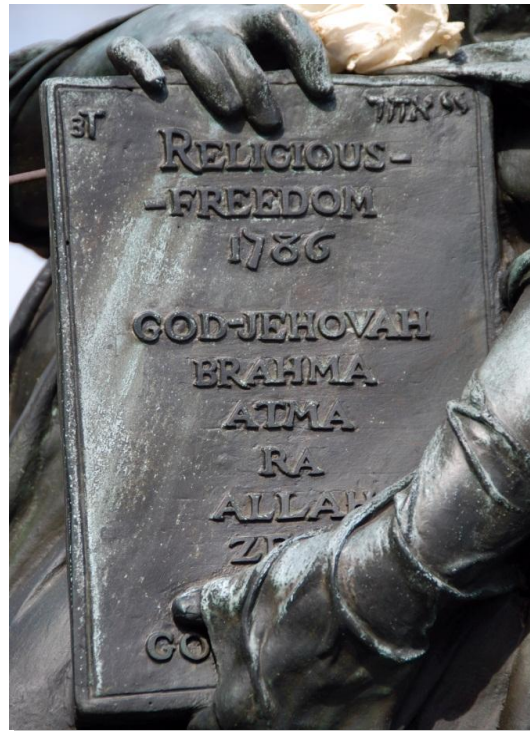


Photo Credit: James Bowen

The next time you walk by the Jefferson statue in front of the University of Virginia’s Rotunda, look a little closer on the west side facing the chapel. Ponder why the sculptor, Moses Ezekiel, inscribed the names of God on a tablet: Jehovah, Brahma, Atma, Ra, Allah, Zeus.

The answer is a “sermon in stone.”

When the Jefferson sculpture by Moses Ezekiel was unveiled at U.Va. in June 1910, then President Edwin Alderman waxed eloquently of how “endless generations” of students would be inspired by this “sermon in stone.” In the “graven image” of a 33-year-old Jefferson, reading from the text of his American Declaration of Independence, Alderman saw a “young man caught

## A SERMON IN STONE

up in the heaven of a great idea; a young man on fire with revolutionary impulse.... holding up to the world... the most significant political document ever written by man.”

Today, we hear echoes of Jefferson’s hope for the “ball of liberty” to “roll around the world” in the unfolding struggles for freedom across the Middle East and North Africa.

Yet there are still deeper “lessons in bronze” on the sculpture. Jefferson is perched on top of a recreation of the Liberty Bell. Around the bell are, in Ezekiel’s words, “four female figures, the winged spirits or genii that embody the great Jeffersonian ideas” – namely, Liberty, Equality, Justice and Religious Freedom.

Ezekiel dubbed the religious freedom figure “Vox Populi, Vox Dei” (the voice of the people is the voice of God), and she “holds jealously to her heart” a special tablet.

At the center of her tablet is “Religious Freedom, 1786” – which refers to the seminal Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom. (Jefferson late in life deemed the statute one of his three greatest legacies, the other two being the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the University of Virginia).

Ezekiel further explains the tablet in a letter to his father: “on the left I have placed the Aum of the Hindus,” and on the right, in Hebrew, a reference to

“the one God.” Under the Religious Liberty inscription, he placed

“the names of the deities of other nations, to show that between Liberty and Justice, and under our government, they mean, and are all God—and have no other meaning and have each an equal right and the protection of our just laws as Americans.”

A sculpture on Religious Freedom and Jefferson had especially poignant meaning for Ezekiel, who was born in 1844 to a large Richmond family of Sephardic Jews. Ezekiel was the first Jew to enroll in the Virginia Military Institute in the fall of 1862.



Photo Courtesy of HMdb.org  
Photographer J. J. Prats

Incredibly, Ezekiel’s VMI roommate was one Thomas G. Jefferson, grandson of a cousin to Thomas Jefferson. Both were among the VMI cadets called

upon to fight the invading Northern Army in 1864 at Haymarket. Jefferson was wounded and later died in Ezekiel’s arms – after Ezekiel read to Jefferson the Gospel of John passage about the “mansion with many rooms.”

After the war, no less than Robert E. Lee encouraged Ezekiel to devote his life to art, and he earned fame as a sculptor based in Rome, Italy. Ezekiel’s portfolio includes famous busts of iconic figures -- Washington, Lee, Jackson, and Poe – and of course Homer (on the U.Va. lawn) as well as the “New South” monument at Arlington National Cemetery.

Yet Ezekiel also repeatedly did major works devoted to themes of faith, to Israel, and to religious freedom.

Tellingly, when Ezekiel first arrived in Rome in 1874, he was required to live behind the walls of the Jewish Ghetto, the abominable “place of tears.” Those walls were not torn down until 1888.

As Rabbi David Philipson reflected in an early tribute, “because Ezekiel was a Jew, religious liberty appeared to him the greatest of all the achievements of the founders in the front rank of whom Jefferson stood.”

As such, Ezekiel “loved to portray this idea... in stone whenever the opportunity offered.”

WM. SCOTT HARROP

## We Believe in the Enduring Power of Words

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Photo Courtesy of Dan Addison

As history is being made in front of our bedazzled eyes, as politicians in the region come and go, and as governments are voted into office and chased out, we, in the department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures continue to believe in the impeccable power of words. Even if at times, the languages we teach and the poems, songs, films, and novels we analyze tell harrowing tales, even when they bleed with sorrow and grief, an inspiring sense of courage and resistance shines through them. They are the luminous accounts of an audacious sense of survival. They are indeed declarations of victory, promising better days and recognizing the regenerative power of words.

Take the inspiring legend of a young woman who declined to be complicit in a ruler's vindictive fury and murderous revenge. At a time of national crisis, she did not remain silent or uninvolved; nor did she look the other way or leave the dictator to his antics.

On the contrary, she engaged in public service of the highest order. Leaving the opulent palace of her father—the grand vizier—she put her life at risk to save the lives of other innocent citizens. She volunteered to marry a spouse who was not only unruly and wicked, but also driven to abysmal reprisal.

This activist, the iconic storyteller, Scheherazade, who should also be recognized as a master strategist and accomplished negotiator, was wise enough to know she could not solve the crisis at hand by returning to the tactics that had created the crisis in the first place. Violence, she knew, is futile. It breeds more violence.

For one thousand and one nights, under the looming threat of decapitation, she lived with a serial killer, her husband King Shahriyar, in a claustrophobic space so that she could stop murder and mayhem. And that she did, without shedding a drop of blood. She relied solely on the art of storytelling. She trusted words, and words, in turn, saved her and her compatriots.

Several of the pieces in our third newsletter confirm the validity and long-term efficacy of Scheherazade's strategy. Through a combination of strategic narration, careful listening, and open-minded tolerance of all sides of the conflict, she established peace under impossible circumstances.

Sue Williams tells the fascinating tale of how she and her husband made a career out of peacebuilding across the world, from Uganda to Northern Ireland, through careful self-education, historical

contextualization, patience, and cross-cultural understanding. Tolerance, especially in the religious sense, was a founding tenet of Mr. Jefferson's University as well as his statue gracing the entrance to the Rotunda and the Statute on Religious Freedom, as revealed by the amazing interfaith "sermon in stone" that Scott Harrop identifies and analyzes in his article.

The fact that our department represents the languages and cultures of such a large and diverse part of the world, with myriad long and rich histories of nations both at war and at peace, makes it more important than ever to recognize, as Roy Hange puts it in his piece: "learning together how to agree to disagree with an emerging sense of mutual respect."

Scheherazade certainly did not agree with King Shahriyar's brutal tactics, nor could she justify his profound and domineering distrust of women, but she understood that every political appeal must begin with empathy, with the power of carefully chosen words, and genuine interest in listening to the words of the other.

Shoulder to shoulder with our engaged students, we, too, in the department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, recognize the elusive yet magical power of language over violence, of words over swords. And we continue to dream with our eyes wide open for a better world and better days.

FARZANEH MILANI

# Peacebuilding: A Life



Sue and Steve Williams in Burma

I wanted to be a lighthouse-keeper when I grew up. Of course, by the time I grew up, there were no more lighthouse-keepers; they'd been replaced by automation.

Instead, I've ended up a peacebuilder. This was not a possible career when I was a student, though it is now. At age 21, I took my degrees in French and Politics and became a university lecturer. Over time, it seemed important to move my voluntary (largely anti-war) activities to the center of my life, instead of the margins. So, for 12 years, my husband and I were volunteers, successively in Haiti, Botswana, Uganda, Kenya, and Northern Ireland. We worked with street children first, then refugees, and gradually focused more directly on war.

We lived and worked in several war zones, describing our work first as reconciliation, later as political mediation, and finally as peacebuilding.

Our first explicitly war-oriented assignment, for British and Irish Quakers, was characteristically vague: *We hear there's a war in Uganda. Why don't you go and see what you can do?*

It was a great privilege to have so much autonomy in analyzing, and then trying to help solve, the many aspects that war presents as a problem.

We worked with local people, learning how they understood and experienced the war, supporting their efforts, and finding niches where we could perhaps do something they could not.

We worked with people who inspired us with their perseverance, creativity, and determination. And we learned what we were asking, when we encouraged people to lay down their arms in a war.

Others may describe their work as peacemaking. To me, that's too transitive a verb, too oriented toward a product. In my experience, peace comes from the combined efforts of many people, and more closely resembles building something than making something. You take the specific problems of your situation, the resources available, including human resources, and collectively craft something that gradually transforms a society at war into a society building peace.

We went on to Northern Ireland, where we were privileged to be part of a successful peace process. We had a small role over a long time.

Initially, we spent a lot of time meeting with politicians, armed groups, governments, and

prisoners to understand how they saw the problem, and to help them assess the words and actions of people they refused to meet with directly.

Over time, one by one, they began to be willing to meet those they didn't yet trust, first in confidential meetings through us, and later in direct negotiations.

Important work was done by many people at many levels, with the eventual result that change did happen.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, we lived there 20 years, in later years working more in support of peacebuilders in other countries such as Congo, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Abkhazia.

In my field, many people work their whole lives without seeing much success.

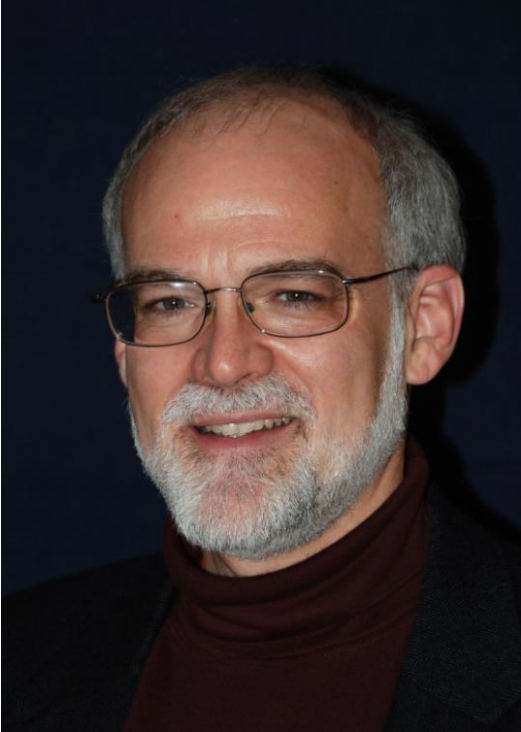
That's discouraging, but it does not mean that they have failed, but that the change has perhaps not yet happened. Situations do change, for better or worse. And, often, people make the difference.

SUE WILLIAMS

<sup>1</sup> For a study of what brought about the change in Northern Ireland, please see:

[http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/casestudy/rpp\\_cumulative\\_case\\_northern\\_ireland\\_final\\_Pdf.pdf](http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/casestudy/rpp_cumulative_case_northern_ireland_final_Pdf.pdf)

# One Journey: Through the Heart of Peacebuilding



Roy Hange

I first came to the University of Virginia in 1997 to study Persian and Islamic studies before moving to Iran in 1998. Our family had just spent six years in Syria working at peacebuilding during a time when a regional peace was very close on a few occasions. In Syria we built many relationships and hosted many delegations from the United States and Canada while attempting to build parts of a peace bridge. President Clinton had even visited Damascus when a peace deal was very close.

At one point peace was so close that Israeli tour operators were visiting Damascus and beginning to imagine putting together package tours. Such a

peace deal could have set Syria on a very different trajectory than it faces now.

My studies at the University of Virginia in 1997 were preceded by an invitation to move to Iran and participate in a student exchange program that would also bring Iranian students to the West. Members of our family were some of the first non-Muslims allowed to live long-term in Iran's religious capital Qom. There we engaged in high level religious and cultural encounter as one element of the "Dialogue of Civilizations" that newly elected President Khatami had called for in a CNN interview in January of 1998. Khatami's vision named this dialogue of civilizations as a counterbalance to the emerging sense of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West.

While in Iran we were warmly welcomed and graciously hosted. Though I and our hosts in Iran held profoundly different views on religion, culture and politics, we were learning together how to agree to disagree with an emerging sense of mutual respect. The mutual respect in this dialogue of civilizations grew to take a number of new forms.

A biannual conference between scholars was inaugurated and I attended the first two conferences: in Toronto in 2002 and in Iran in 2004. Iranian students were hosted for training in peacebuilding in the United States and Canada and Western

delegations were welcomed in Iran on learning tours.

In 2003 Iran offered a grand deal that would have promoted a regional peace. This offer came near the end of the Khatami administration but was rejected by the United States. In September of 2006, then-former President Khatami visited the University of Virginia and gave a speech in the Rotunda again promoting a dialogue of civilizations. The University of Virginia has hosted Iranian scholars from various perspectives within Iran in ways that have enriched both the U.Va. community and these visiting scholars.

Though the situation in Iran is much different now, elements of this dialogue of civilizations continue. I have seen how active peacebuilding over decades can provide a way out of the cycles of violence in the Middle East and South Asia. Successful efforts in peacebuilding have included a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt and the end of the civil wars in Sudan, Lebanon, and Nepal. Though facing new challenges, many countries in the region have practitioners and diplomats trained in peacebuilding and their long-term work will make a difference.

ROY HANGE

# Women in the Media

## TWO NEW MESALC COURSES

As a visiting instructor I have introduced two new courses on women and media in the MESA region. The first, which I am teaching this semester, examines depictions and images of women in the media in five selected countries—Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan—plus the presentation of MESA women in U.S. media. The course addresses three major questions. What positions do women hold in the production of media in the countries studied, and how are those roles changing—especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring? What images of women prevail in the media produced in their home countries and in the United States; what are the historical sources of these images; and do they reflect any change in the status of women? And, are these changes empowering women?

The 27 students in the class are studying a range of sources, from monographs and scholarly essays to fiction and poetry, news publications and Twitter feeds. Images are a special focus of the class, including films, videos, paintings, posters, advertisements, and graffiti. Identifying and injecting a diverse array of contemporary female voices into current debates about women's status is a primary goal of the class, so students are paying particular attention to the current output of women journalists, photographers, and filmmakers in the region.

Technology plays an important role in the class. At the beginning of the semester I established a Wordpress site for the class, and assigned students to choose a female blogger or Tweeter based in one of our five countries to follow for the whole semester. On the Wordpress site students post assignments as well as items of general interest, and share tweets they think are especially interesting. Students have been enthusiastic about posting images on the Wordpress site, and this has multiplied many times over the images of women in media the class has been able to share. One of the unexpected benefits of the Twitter assignment



Lisa Goff

has been the initiative several students have taken to start dialogues with their Tweeter or blogger.

In the fall, I will teach a sequel to my current course. Entitled “Women and Social Media in the Middle East and South Asia,” this course will examine how women in selected countries (Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan) are using social media to rebut, embrace, or amplify depictions of themselves in mainstream or state-owned media. Women in the Middle East have figured prominently in media accounts of the Arab Spring, and have proved themselves particularly adept at using social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook to promote a dual message of political reform and women's rights.

## WOMEN IN THE MEDIA continued from page 6

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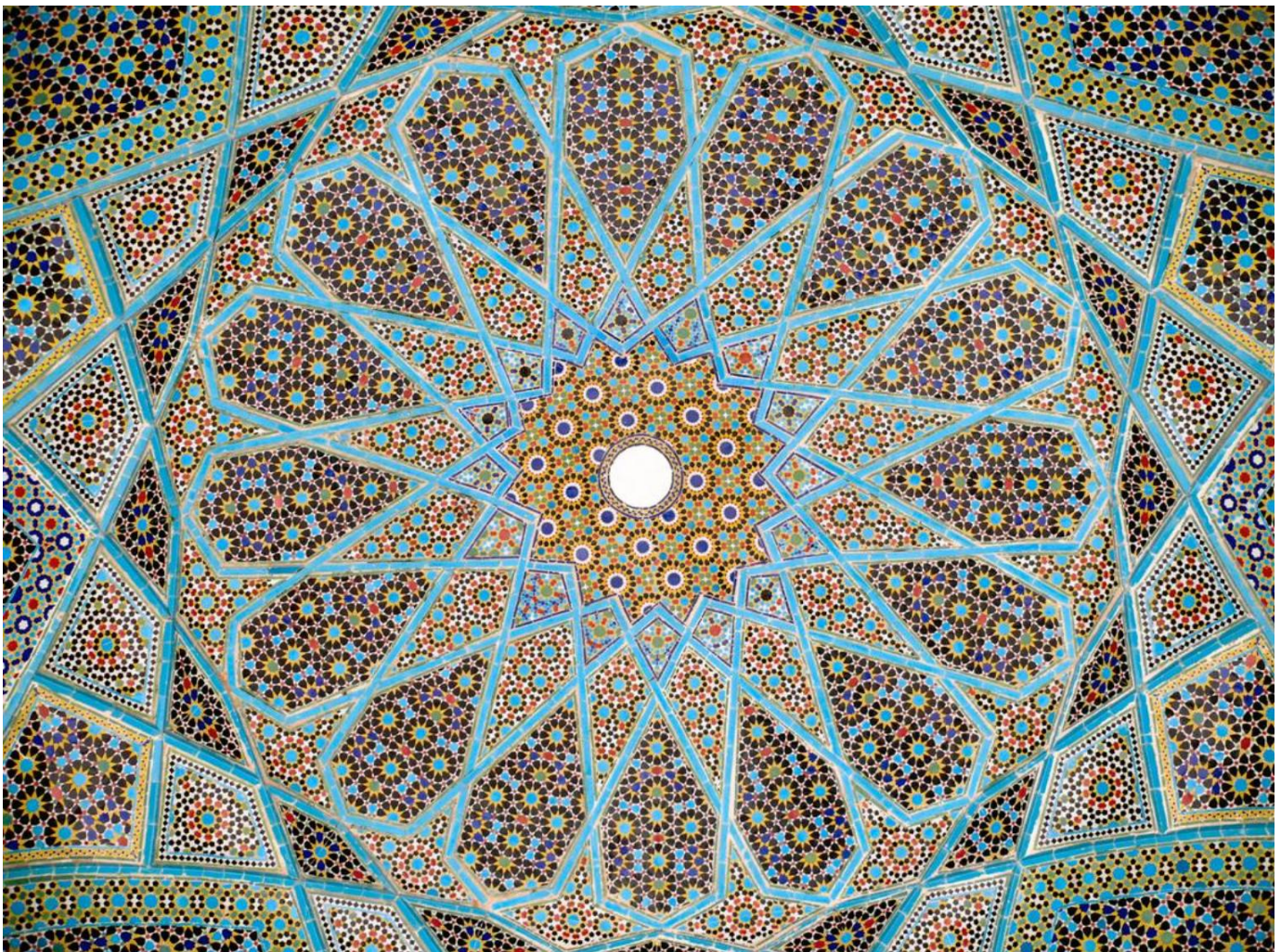
Similarly, women in South Asia have embraced social media as a tool for expressing their identities and promoting causes important to women in the region. In this course, students will explore the ways in which social media both facilitate and limit women's roles as creators of culture and agents of social change.

A wave of post-Arab Spring literature, films, etc. from across the region has just started to break. The readings in this course will reflect this flood of new material, but they will also look back to earlier revolutions and uprisings, including those that overthrew colonial rulers, in order to compare pre- and post-revolutionary depictions of women in media. One aim of the class will be to examine the ways that political and religious leaders have historically used women's bodies to define pro- and anti-

revolutionary forces, as well as nationhood. How are women now, with the tools of social media at their command, (re)defining themselves?

The course will address themes of mobility and public space, and will examine the multiple ways in which women in the region have both fueled revolutions and been affected by them. Finally, the course will address the current backlash against women in these regions, and the ways in which women remain divided on issues of how best to achieve, and even to define, their own empowerment. Students will be encouraged to start personal dialogues with female bloggers and Tweeters from these countries, and to bring their writings and broadcasts directly into the classroom.

LISA GOFF



# Introducing: Iranian Cinema



Sahar Allamezade

Winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film is the final seal of approval on the inexhaustible efforts of Iranian filmmakers after almost three decades. Prior to Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning film *A Separation*, however, prominent Iranian filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, and others had also won major film festivals and gained international attention. The thriving and exciting medium of cinema has helped academics, critics and ordinary people alike to sneak a peek into the lives of Iranian people and learn about the pressing issues facing Iranian society domestically and globally.

When I was invited to teach a course on Iranian Cinema at U.Va. I was filled with a sense of pride and joy. The course that I have designed is an introduction to this exciting field. The objective of the course is to introduce students to Iranian cinema and to relate it to its historical, political, economic, social, cultural, literary, and artistic contexts. Through a selection of some of Iran's best, critically acclaimed movies, this course discusses, among many other themes, the roles (and depictions) of women, children, and rural and tribal society, and theoretical issues concerning religion and politics.

My experience so far at U.Va. has exceeded my expectations. The course was welcomed by an overwhelming number of students and they are among some of the smartest students that I have worked with. Their sharp eyes for detail and enthusiasm have resulted in excellent analysis and vibrant discussions in every session. It has been a pleasure and an honor to be a part of this stimulating dynamic.

SAHAR ALLAMEZADE



## Project Global Officer & MESALC

Richard Cohen, MESALC faculty member and Managing Director of the Asia Institute, is the principal investigator for a National Security Education Program-funded grant that provides scholarships to ROTC cadets and midshipmen to study one of seven critical languages, three of which are taught in the department: Arabic, Persian and Hindi/Urdu. Now in its third year, the grant is valued at \$798,000, and has provided faculty summer salary and a total of 88 scholarships to pursue language study in the U.Va. Summer Language Institute, Summer Sessions, and Study Abroad (in China, Jordan, and Morocco), as well as other domestic and international programs.



Richard Cohen



# A Unique Program at U.Va.

## FROM A GRADUATE STUDENT

You never know just what to expect when you begin something new. In graduate school at U.Va., I found a community that felt like home, lifelong friends, and a Master's program that exceeded my expectations. The Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies' unique interdisciplinary structure allowed me to take advantage of U.Va.'s tremendous resources and mold my education in the way that was best for my future. To my knowledge, few other programs permit such an opportunity.

When I finished my undergraduate degree, I knew at least two things I wanted from my graduate program. I wanted to continue my studies focused on the Middle East and in the field of foreign affairs. I applied to a number of different programs, some of which offered dual degrees, and others that were simply foreign or international affairs schools. Few of these schools offered all of what I was looking for, but they had good reputations and I thought I would be willing to settle for something that wasn't a perfect fit.

U.Va.'s Middle Eastern Studies program, on the other hand, was the only one of its kind to which I had applied. The MA track was new and I hadn't really considered area studies. I

liked the fact that I could study Arabic while also pursuing other fields of study, but I wasn't sure I could get out of it what I hoped for. When I spoke to Professor Dan Lefkowitz – who was heading the program at the time – I addressed this concern. He assured me that he and my other professors would work hard to make sure I was able to get the most out of my time at U.Va.



Within the first semester I knew I had ended up in the right place for me. I was able to direct my studies toward foreign affairs through the Department of Politics, and the Batten School of Public Policy, while my courses in the History and Anthropology departments allowed me to approach my interests through new and engaging disciplines.

My education would have prepared me equally well for a professional career or to pursue a Ph.D. My friends in the program have focused their own studies on religion, history, or languages of the

Middle East – a testament to the unique diversity the MA offers.

One final thing I learned in my time in the Middle East Studies program at U.Va. – the value of area studies, particularly in my chosen field. I believe some of the great policy failures of the United States in the Middle East have come of a critical lack of understanding of its diverse peoples, cultures, and histories. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, efforts toward a broader and more objective understanding of those we share it with will be ever more valuable. It is just this sort of breadth of knowledge that MESALC's MA offers.

I would like to thank all of my professors who have always been available to me whenever needed. Thank you to Professor Hueckstedt who, whenever I approached him about my interest in an unusual course, never hesitated to give support – so long as my research focused on the Middle East. Thanks to all of those whose helpful criticism brought my own writing so far. Thanks to my Arabic professors for their patience. I am grateful for my time here. I know the education I received in U.Va.'s MESALC department will pay great dividends in short order.

**BRIAN MICKEN**

# MESALC Starts

NEW ARABIC  
ORATORY SOCIETY

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Every Wednesday, instructors Bilal Maanaki and Alla Hassan meet with students of Arabic to practice reciting Arabic poetry. They are working right now on the theme of Udhri love poems. They meet under the auspices of the Arabic Oratory Society that was established by students of Arabic here at the University of Virginia. This activity won Bilal the faculty-student interaction grant offered by the U.Va. College Council. The money will be utilized to pay for a video production in the near future.



(L to R) Professors Hassan & Maanaki, Carli Haselden, Zachary Wittaker, and Christine Clark

# NEW COURSES 2012

## HIME 1501

### **Pirates of the Mediterranean**

Joshua M. White  
Mon 3:30 – 6:00 PM  
Nau Hall 242

## HIME 4501

### **Empire in Distress: The Ottoman Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

Joshua M. White  
Tu 6:00 – 8:30 PM  
New Cabell Hall 412

## HIME 4511

### **Roots of the Arab Spring**

E.F. Thompson  
Thu 1:00 – 3:30 PM  
Nau Hall 142

## HIME 5052

### **World War I: Birth of the Modern Middle East**

E.F. Thompson  
Thu 3:30 – 6:00 PM  
New Cabell Hall 319

## MESA 2559-001

### **Major Dimensions of Arabic-Islamic Civilization**

Ahmad Z. Obiedat  
Tu 7:00 – 9:30 PM  
New Cabell 325

## MESA 2559-002

### **Women in Social Media in the Middle East and South Asia**

Lisa Goff  
Mon/Wed 2:00 – 3:15 PM  
Monroe 111

## SATR 3300

### **Literature and Society in South Asia: Breaking the Cast(e)**

Mehr Farooqi  
Mon/Wed 2:00 – 3:15 PM

## SATR 3359

### **Contemporary Pakistani Literature: Complexities of Culture in a Global World**

Mehr Farooqi  
Tu/Thu 11:00 – 12:15 PM

For more information on new Fall 2012 courses, please check the website:

[www.virginia.edu/mesa](http://www.virginia.edu/mesa)

Please continue to check the Student Information System (SIS) for up-to-date details on these and other MESALC courses.

## SPRING in Hindi-Urdu's Garden

With four students being awarded the prestigious Critical Language Scholarship in South Asian languages, our Hindi-Urdu Program is stepping into national spotlight (The CLS is part of a US government effort to increase the number of Americans studying and mastering critical foreign languages). John Vater, Rukhaiya Amir, and James Duke have won the award for Urdu; Caroline Gonya for Hindi. They will be pursuing their language study in the historical city of Lucknow in north India in the summer of 2012. These students are also among the steadily growing group of majors and minors in South Asian Studies.

I spent a lovely spring afternoon on grounds chatting with them over coffee, discussing their forthcoming trip and their future plans.

James Duke, a first-year and Echols scholar, was introduced to South Asia when he visited New Delhi in 2010 while still in high school, as a participant in his school's community development and leadership program. In high school, James was actively involved in the global ambassadors program. But Urdu or Hindi were not offered at his high school. He is learning Urdu because he is interested in knowing more about the history of the region through its culture. James is particularly interested in the socio-political history of Pakistan and is curious about U.S. interest in Pakistan. James is presently taking courses in Urdu-Hindi literature, politics and history. He expects to have South Asian Studies as one of his majors.

John Vater, a rising fourth-year, is double-majoring in English and South Asian Studies. He visited India as a participant in the January Term



(L to R) John Vater, Rukhaiya Amir, and James Duke

of 2011. Until then, he was a Foreign Affairs major. As he described it to me, the focus in Foreign Affairs was mostly on South Asia, and his visit was an important definitive moment in his career path. John is learning both Hindi and Urdu at the advanced levels. He relates to and perceives literature in English in a wider sense. The diversity of English writings from different regions of the world prompt him to think about the synergy between English and regional cultures. His wide-ranging interests seem to have a convergence in his desire to learn more about cultures, religions and civilization as a whole. John will be writing a thesis on Dalit literature, Indian mass media and discourse control for his Distinguished Major.

Rukhaiya Amir, a rising third-year, has just declared her major in South Asian Language and Literature. "Urdu is my first language," she said, "but my reading

and writing skills were rudimentary. I hoped to get out of the language requirement by testing out of it. But I got drawn to the language and its literature after a semester of Hindi-Urdu." Rukhaiya followed an intensive program of studying Urdu and Hindi. She is currently in the advanced Urdu class reading and writing fluently, looking forward to her first "real" visit to India as a serious student of language-literature.

Caroline Gonya has declared an Interdisciplinary Major in Arts Administration, South Asian Studies, and Art History. She is currently in India for the semester, so she was not available for our tête-à-tête. Caroline will join the Critical Language Scholarship Program directly from there.

On behalf of MESALC, I wish them a very happy and productive summer of Urdu-Hindi.

MEHR FAROOQI

## New in the MESALC LIBRARY

### *Anxiety of Erasure* by **Hanadi Al-Samman**

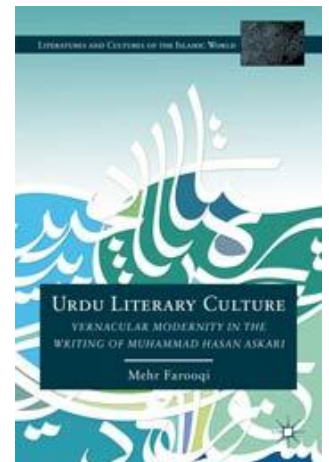


Hanadi Al-Samman

Far from producing another study that bemoans Arab women's repression and veiling, *Anxiety of Erasure* asks what it means to develop a national, gendered consciousness from diasporic locales while staying committed to the homeland. The process of reestablishing this connection involves resurrecting and overcoming certain traumatic memories pivotal to the healing of both individuals and nations. *Anxiety of Erasure* articulates the therapeutic effects resulting from revisiting forgotten historie(s) as well as the collective, cultural memories of the *maw'udah* (buried female infant) and of Shahrazad. The journeys in time and space undertaken by Muslim and Christian diaspora women writers, residing in Europe, take them beyond Shahrazad's conventional fixed locale and into multiple locations from whence they assert the value of maintaining mobility, fluidity, non-fixity of roots/routes, and of multi-axial sociopolitical critique. The result is a nuanced Arab women's poetics that at once celebrates rootlessness and rootedness, autonomy and belonging.

### *Urdu Literary Culture* by **Mehr Farooqi**

*Urdu Literary Culture* examines the impact of political circumstances on vernacular (Urdu) literary culture through an in-depth study of the writings of Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919-78), Urdu's first and finest literary critic. Askari's life was lived at the crossroads of early nation formation in South Asia—this study provides a detailed treatment of the intellectual world that Askari inhabited and complicates previously held notions about his life and work by looking at some of his writing through the lens of sexuality. Mehr Afshan Farooqi argues that Askari's work challenges the assumptions of rational Western thought and provides profound ways to think and reflect on the damages that colonial subjugation has imposed on selfhood, culture, and literature. Askari was a postcolonial before its time, writing in a language (Urdu) that has not drawn the attention of the Western academy. This book is an effort to address the problem (Macmillan, 2012).



# My Year Abroad

STUDYING PERSIAN AND URDU-HINDI LITERATURE

Coming to University of Virginia for my year abroad, I had no precise idea of what I was going to study. My school in Paris – *La Sorbonne* and *Sciences Po* – didn't impose anything on me, and as a literature and social sciences major, I can pick classes within a broad range of subjects without feeling incoherent.

I signed up for Persian 1010 at the last minute. Only one school in Paris offers Persian classes, and unfortunately, it's not mine. I had been willing to study it since high school, when I saw the movie *Persepolis* and loved it without adopting an analytical perspective on it. The class went far beyond my expectations both in its content and in its method. Having been used to attending two-hour-long language classes during which the teacher has to struggle to make the students speak, I am happy to meet four times a week with a group of people who have chosen to study the language.

We mastered the script really quickly, and learned a lot of vocabulary as well. We were able to write and play short dialogues halfway through the semester and it gave meaning to our learning. Persian is a really interesting language in that it draws influences from Arabic and has influenced its neighbors. I think the most rewarding thing related to my learning that I experienced so far was realizing that I knew words that both an Arabic-speaking friend and a Hindi-speaking friend of mine knew as well.

I also took literature classes last semester, and as the focus in *La Sorbonne* is on European literature,

I studied Modern Poetry in the English department. But after having taken a Persian language class and an anthropology class about Iran, I felt ready to tackle its literature during the Spring semester, and intended to take a class about Persian Literature in translation. My plans fell through when I realized there would be no such class. I still wanted to discover some new genres, subjects and worlds of imageries. Considering the huge common ground Persian and Urdu literature have, "Modern Urdu-Hindi Literature" sounded perfect to me.

I had studied India's history before the Partition in my home school, and I came to the class having in my mind an overview of the colonial situation in which the first authors we tackled wrote. I had expected modern Urdu and Hindi writers to focus on nationalism and its politics in a dry way – Victor Hugo's political poems are, to me, far less interesting than his poems about his daughter's death for instance. But the first texts we read were poems of Muhammad Iqbal, and I was deeply impressed by his ability to be philosophical, political and very lyrical at the same time. We didn't spend much time on Partition and started reading modernist authors I knew nothing about. I am now learning about how diverse Urdu and Hindi writers are, and I feel more and more enriched by reading them in the ways I write and also the issues I'm interested in.

Even though my experience within the Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures department is going to end in May, I

intend to bring back home the things I have learned here. To me, writings carry the voices of people's subjectivities and allow me to learn about different perspectives on the world and life. That's why next year, I would like to take a M.A. in *La Sorbonne* in comparative literature. At the same time, I intend to keep on studying Persian at the INALCO – the Parisian institute for study of "Oriental" languages. Hopefully, I will find a research director who will help me to use the materials I have drawn from my classes here. We may lack the infrastructure of departments such as MESALC in France, but I hope I will be able to help change this in one way or the other. But my contribution has to go through progressive steps. That's why I'm now rushing off to my Persian exam.

HÉLÈNE ALAYRANGUES



# CRITICAL LANGUAGE SCHOLARSHIPS

## 5 MESALC STUDENTS WIN PRESTIGIOUS AWARDS

Five of the eight U.Va. students recently selected by the United States Department of State for its Critical Language Scholarship Program are majoring or enrolled in MESALC language courses. The India-bound students will spend ten weeks in intensive language and cultural courses in Lucknow and Jaipur. Caroline Gonya, a third-year interdisciplinary studies major, who has a special interest in Indian art, will study advanced Hindi at the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) program in Jaipur. John Vater, a third-year double major in South Asian Studies and English, Rukhaiya Amir, a second-year South Asian Language and Literature major, and James Duke, a first-year student in the College, will study Urdu at the AIIS campus in Lucknow. Anna Morgan Lewis, a third-year foreign affairs and Middle Eastern Studies double major, will study Arabic in North Africa.

The scholarships cover all expenses, and are very competitive. Program participants are expected to continue their language study beyond the scholarship and apply their critical language skills in their future professional careers. Congratulations to the students, and their professors for preparing them for this intellectual adventure.

RICHARD COHEN



## JEFFERSON TRUST

FUNDING NEW 2012 MESALC COURSES

This initiative impacts how the MESALC faculty interact with one another, conceptualize their courses, and construct teaching materials. It contributes to strengthening the disciplinary profile and identity of the department. It expands the course offerings of the department in ways which will not only help to define the department in the estimation of the undergraduate student body, but attract students to the serious study of the Middle East/South Asia through the election of a MESALC major or minor. It creates opportunities for the MESALC graduate program to grow. The grant facilitates the design and implementation of symposia that provide undergraduates a rationale for the rigorous study of the Middle East/South Asia and how they can apply their knowledge in a future career after graduation. Finally, there is funding in the grant to present colloquia for the local Charlottesville community on Middle Eastern and South Asian current events.

RICHARD COHEN

# Calendar of Events

..... Spring 2012



## March 27

6:00 – 7:15 PM  
 “The Prospect of  
 Peacebuilding in  
 Afghanistan”  
 Guest Speaker  
 Sue Williams

## April 18

4:00 – 5:00 PM  
 “Civil Rights, Black  
 Power, and Palestine”  
 Guest Speaker  
 Michael Fischbach

## May 1

Cabell Hall 431  
 11:00 – 12:15 PM  
 “In Conversation”  
 Guest Speakers  
 Uday Prakash with Jason Grunebaum  
 A lecture by Indian fiction writer, poet, and  
 freelance journalist, Prakash and his  
 translator Grunebaum

## SYMPOSIUM

### Alternative Biographies in the Middle East and South Asia: The Porous Boundaries of a Genre

#### *The Rotunda*

**April 16:** Morning Session  
 9:30 – 12:00 PM

Opening Remarks:  
**Dean Meredith Jung-En Woo**,  
 University of Virginia

Moderator:  
**Mehr Farooqi**, University of Virginia

Presenters:  
**Deborah Baker**, “A Prodigal  
 Daughter: The Life of a Maryam  
 Jameelah as a Parable of Islam and the  
 West”  
**Marie Ostby**, “(Dis)Embodiment and  
 the Arab Spring: Facebook, Twitter,  
 and Intertextuality in Iran and Egypt”

Discussant:  
**Jasmin Darznik**, Washington and  
 Lee University

**April 16:** Afternoon Session  
 2:00 – 4:30 PM

Moderator:  
**Hanadi Al-Samman**, University of  
 Virginia

Presenters:  
**Shahla Haeri**, “Imagining  
 Biographies of the Queen of Sheba”  
**Saideh Pakravan**, “The Biography of  
 a Movement: Before the Arab Spring,  
 There Was the Iranian Summer”

Discussant & Closing Remarks:  
**Kaveh Safa**, University of Memphis

This symposium was generously co-  
 sponsored by the Center for  
 International Studies, the Center for  
 South Asian Studies, and Studies in  
 Women and Gender.

# Calendar of Events

## Fall 2012

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### Forthcoming in October 2012

“Unveiling the Self: Women’s Life Narratives in the Middle East and South Asia”

With generous support from the Page-Barbour and Clay Endowments, our 2012 conference is co-sponsored by Studies in Women and Gender and Loughborough University in England.



# Thank you, Jessica Strang

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Jessica Strang

Jessica Strang has worked with MESALC since April 2011, helping with the bi-annual newsletter and maintaining the department website. At the end of this semester, Jessica will end her work with MESALC and focus full-time on her position in the Office of the Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer as their Web Communications Coordinator.

Jessica plans to continue to expand her expertise in the computer sciences field and will begin taking courses in the upcoming semester. On behalf of all my colleagues, I would like to thank Jessica for her dedicated service to the department and her impeccable professionalism. We will miss her and wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

FARZANEH MILANI

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# Writing Beyond Lives: Reflections on the “Alternative Biographies” Symposium

The Rotunda | April 16, 2012



Dean Meredith Jung-En Woo

In the evocative words of the UVA Today announcement that was issued the Friday before the event: <sup>1</sup> “When is a piece of writing considered a novel and when is it a biography?” One might say that none of the four presentations given on April 16<sup>th</sup> in the Rotunda’s elegant Dome Room fit quite neatly into either category, and taken together, I believe they pushed the boundaries of both genres—creating inter-genre and inter-subjective spaces that comprise a spectrum, rather than a stark division between binaries like fact and fiction, biography and autobiography, novel and memoir.

Professor Mehr Farooqi, moderator of the morning session, opened the conference with a transcendently evocative couplet by Ghalib, the master of Urdu poetry: “I am there from where, even to me / No news about me comes.” Our fascination with biography, Professor Farooqi explained, lies in its paradoxical project of representing and rendering into language “an extremely slippery, chaotic, elusive essence of being”—the Self—simultaneously to an audience and to oneself in the process of writing.

Dean Meredith Jung-En Woo then offered an eloquent set of introductory remarks. She summed up the intimate connection between biography and history that is richly woven into the fabric of everyday life and architecture at UVA, so often referred to as “Mr. Jefferson’s University,” but hastened to add: “You will see many different kinds of biographies on these Grounds.”

Dean Woo insisted that the project of studying marginalized life stories and finding new ways to tell them is more important than ever, in a historical moment when the once “self-evident” truth that “All men are born equal” is no longer so obvious in many contexts. She concluded that part of the purpose of the conference should be “to really cogitate on why that is so, how that is so, and what strategies we as scholars, writers, poets, educators must employ so that the dream that was so beautifully articulated 236 years ago remains true today.”

Deborah Baker’s genre-bending process of writing the biography of Maryam Jameelah, the enigmatic *Convert* in her book’s title, was a labyrinthine path through archives and interviews that came to shape the form of the narrative itself, as she so cogently explained in her talk. Baker detailed how becoming a biographer had initially seemed to her a project of embracing a kind of facelessness, which gradually became impossible as she realized the growing stakes of telling the tale of a woman who came to symbolize, for her,

1 <http://www.virginia.edu/uvatoday/newsRelease.php?id=18067>

a “parable of Islam and America.” My own talk investigated the persistence of biographies in the digital age, and how self-narration in media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube draws on both traditional values and modernizing impulses. Focusing on the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 and the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 as case studies, I suggested that key aspects of online authorship and digital intertextuality, from a martyrdom aesthetic to the incessant migration to new platforms to evade censorship, have carried over into the art and literature emerging from those revolutions, and vice versa.

Jasmin Darznik, professor of English and Creative Writing at Washington & Lee University and bestselling author of *The Good Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother’s Hidden Life*, acted as discussant for the morning session. She offered insightful comments about how readers’ expectations, when approaching biographies, are shaped by paratextual factors such as book covers and endorsements. In turn, this develops into a kind of author-reader relationship that differs from fiction, Darznik reflected, and the process of reading and uncovering the “tensions between truth and fiction” can produce feelings of trust, but also betrayal. She also asked us to reflect on the limitations of digital biographies and social media’s life narratives, and whether they perform erasures of their own. The resulting Q&A session raised many intriguing issues, from the question of constructing a retrospective self-image through the fabrication of Jameelah’s letters, to the possibilities of self-narration from *purdah*, to new definitions of women’s empowerment in the digital space.



Morning Session

In the afternoon session, moderator Professor Hanadi Al-Samman introduced the notion of imagined biographies with the question of who has the *right* to “author” autobiography and fill in the gaps of knowledge surrounding selves and others. Does a writer distanced from her subject by history or geography, whether a biographer of an ancient figure or a novelist basing her fiction on real-life stories and political personas, have permission to alter, add to, or subtract from life stories? Ultimately, Professor Al-Samman asked, “whose narratives do these become?”

Shahla Haeri, professor of Anthropology at Boston University, posed the intriguing question of why there has been such universal interest in the biography of the Queen of Sheba, whose mystique seems to transcend cultures, historical periods, art forms, and genres—from paintings to folklore, from

scripture to scholarly work. Haeri’s talk explored what exactly makes for a cross-cultural archetype, and her co-panelist, the Paris-based novelist Saïdeh Pakravan, carried this question from the ancient into the contemporary. Pakravan spoke of the process of writing her novel, *Azadi*, as the “biography of a movement,” and of her own role as a kind of medium for the unexpected, socially transgressive new voices emerging from the youth of the Iranian Green Movement.

Discussant Kaveh Safa, in his response, described Pakravan as “an author with a thousand tongues, and a thousand eyeballs, and a thousand hands to write things with.”

He opened up a conversation around the anthropological notion of “liminal time” and how it affects the process of turning a multifaceted and ongoing phenomenon like the Iranian Green Movement into a dynamic collective biography. With respect to Haeri’s vision of the Queen of Sheba, Safa reflected on how, when cross-cultural and



Afternoon Session

This month's symposium on "Alternative Biographies" offered a crucial and exciting forum in which to reflect on how those lives will be presented and represented, across borders and across genres. Just as we have seen a refreshing diversity of voices emerge in the democratizing sociopolitical impulses and movements in the region, this month's symposium carried that democratic spirit over into the realm of literature—expanding, even exploding, what it means to tell the story of a movement.

Marie Ostby

historically recurring legends are the subjects of biographies, their authorship must, in a sense, always be collective.

Immersed in the fragile beauty and uncertainty of the spring after the "Arab Spring," the eyes of the world remain glued to their screens for news of how lives are unfolding in a Middle East that looks very different than it did a generation, even a year ago.



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