ANNUAL HIGHLIGHTS

EVENTS
STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS
GRADUATE STUDENTS
STAFF
FACULTY
OUTREACH

MAY 2024
As we approach the conclusion of another year at the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies, despite the dynamic nature of the past months, we are concluding the year on a somber note. The events of April 30th and the subsequent developments on our campus have deeply saddened me. Witnessing student arrests and suspensions, something I never envisioned for a college environment, has left me heartbroken. Our community has experienced significant trauma, starting with the tragic shootings and culminating in another traumatic event. It is crucial that we focus on healing, repairing, and moving forward together.

Despite all the challenges, I am deeply grateful for the unwavering dedication and passion of our community. In the center, our commitment to advancing scholarship, fostering dialogue, and promoting understanding remains steadfast. Throughout 2023-24, we expanded our scholarly programs, hosting a variety of major events, workshops, and conferences that have brought together experts and enthusiasts from around the globe. Our dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion continued to underpin all our efforts, ensuring that every voice was not only heard but also valued in our discussions.

This year, we welcomed three new staff members, two of whom are UNC alumni and one a current UNC graduate student. Their transition from students to staff underscores not only their personal growth but also the Center’s commitment to nurturing and retaining talent within our community. We welcomed the Center’s new Associate Director, Dr. Micah Hughes, a graduate of Islamic Studies from UNC’s Department of Religious Studies, Ms. Alaa Hammouda, the Center’s outreach manager and a graduate of UNC’s Gillings School of Global Public Health, and Ms. Megan McIntyre, the center’s graduate student assistant, a PhD student at UNC’s Department of City and Regional Planning.

To maintain the integrity of the Center and address critical moments, we organized and cosponsored a series of events, talks, and panels that engaged with the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. On October 17, 2024, we organized a panel discussion on the causes of the current conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, the future implications for Israel, Gaza, and the wider region as well as what to expect next. On February 21st, 2024, in collaboration with the Program in Public Discourse, the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies, and the Curriculum in Peace, War, and Defense, we sponsored the UNC’s Abbey Speaker Series featuring a discussion titled “The Politics of the Israel-Palestine Conflict.” On April 3, 2024, we sponsored a conversation with award-winning novelist, Adania Shibli, titled, “Palestine as Anti-Narrative.” Through this event, the writings of Shibli were contextualized within scholarship on Arab American, African American, and Indigenous literature. These are only a few examples of how the Center served as a hub and focal point for these conversations this year.
A highlight of the year was our collaboration with various departments and centers across UNC, including the College of Arts and Sciences, the Program for Public Discourse, and others, to present a compelling event featuring Dr. Cornel West on January 30, 2024. Titled “The Intertwined Histories of Social Justice Within Middle Eastern American and African American Communities,” the event facilitated a meaningful dialogue. Dr. West engaged with UNC faculty, including Drs. Nadia Yaqub, Youssef Carter, and Christopher Lundberg, in a thought-provoking discussion. The event drew an impressive audience of 450 attendees, creating an atmosphere filled with warmth and joy. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Dr. West for sharing his wisdom, love, and grace with us.

Our annual lecture series, organized by Prof. Caroline Sibley, focused on "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in The Language Classroom," addressing the unique challenges encountered in language instruction. The series successfully convened expert educators, advocating for inclusive language learning strategies and garnering significant attendance from educators across North Carolina.

This year also marked a significant collaboration between the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies and Carolina Public Humanities, as the center inaugurated its first Public Humanities fellow. Abdul Basith, a first-year PhD student in the History department at UNC, was selected for this prestigious fellowship, highlighting the center's commitment to interdisciplinary engagement and the dissemination of scholarly knowledge to wider audiences. Originally from Chicago, IL, Abdul holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in History from the University of Illinois Chicago. His research focuses on Global History, with particular interests in the Middle East, Global Islam, Muslims in the West, Islamic Intellectual History, and scholarly traditions in the Muslim World.

This year marked a significant milestone as the Center celebrated Arab American Heritage Month for the first time. Organized by Dr. Hughes and Ms. Hammouda, the month-long event in April featured a diverse array of activities, including film screenings, talks, panel conversations, community engagement activities, as well as immersive experiences showcasing the dance, music, and culinary delights of the Middle East. The event engaged a broad audience from the Carolina and local community and beyond.

Looking ahead, we are excited about the opportunities that the new year will bring. We are planning a series of exciting events and initiatives that will further enhance our understanding of the Middle East and Islamic cultures. We remain dedicated to supporting our students and faculty in their research and academic pursuits, providing them with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

As we reflect on the past year and look forward to the future, I am confident that the Center will continue to be a beacon of scholarship, understanding, and dialogue in our community and beyond. Thank you for your continued support, and I look forward to another successful year ahead.

Dr. Claudia Yaghoobi
Director of Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies
Members of Our Team

The Center was eager to have three new staff members added to the CMEIS team, Dr. Micah Hughes, Alaa Hammouda, and Megan McIntyre. The returning team members, Director Dr. Claudia Yaghoobi, Courtney Phillippie, and Jon Outlaw, rounded out a well-equipped team that was able to successfully organize and facilitate Center and Consortium events throughout the 2023–2024 academic year.

New Team Members

Dr. Micah Hughes
Associate Director

Alaa Hammouda, MPH
Outreach Manager

Megan McIntyre
Graduate Assistant

Returning Team Members

Dr. Claudia Yaghoobi
Center & Consortium Director

Courtney Phillippie
Business & Research Coordinator

Jon Outlaw
Technology Administrator
A Year in Review

The year was filled with an abundance of informative lectures, book talks, workshops, and panel discussions. Not only did these events provide learning opportunities for students, faculty, and community members, but they also encouraged moments of community building.

In addition to organizing and sponsoring events throughout the academic year, the Center also provided language fellowships (FLAS) for graduate and undergraduate students.
Event Highlights

“Intertwined Histories of Social Justice within Middle Eastern American and African American Communities: A Conversation with Dr. Cornel West”

The Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies was proud to host Dr. Cornel West for a conversation on January 30, 2024. As part of the discussion, Dr. West spoke with Dr. Youssef Carter and Dr. Nadia Yaqub about collective movements and social justice struggles in the US and abroad.

Attendees

450

This event reached maximum capacity, with 450 attendees listening to the conversation being moderated by Dr. Christopher Lundberg. The audience was able to participate in the event with an online Q&A following the initial discussion. Please check out the recording, which has been uploaded to our YouTube channel.

Celebration of Nowruz, the Persian New Year

Dr. Shahla Adel explains haft-sin (seven S’s), a spread of seven symbolic items, such as sumac, (representing sunrise) to bring in the Persian New Year. Students were able to discuss these Nowruz traditions with guidance from Dr. Adel. Following this event was the last lecture of the CMEIS 2023-24 Lecture Series with Dr. Nahal Akbari-Saneh.
Lecture: Adania Shibli

Award-winning author, Dr. Adania Shibli, speaks with Diya Abdo, Meta DuEwa Jones, and Mark Rifkin in her lecture, “Palestine as Anti-Narrative.” This event was organized by Dr. Nadia Yaqub from the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

Film: Brooklyn Inshallah

CMEIS screen *Brooklyn Inshallah* which follows 3 Arab Americans: an Lutheran pastor, a Muslim activist, and a local community organizer. The event included a live Q&A with the film director and an Iftar, donated by the beloved Med Deli.

Film: Gaza Ghetto

CMEIS screened the documentary *Gaza Ghetto: Portrait of a Palestinian Family*, the ‘first documentary film produced in Gaza.’ Following the screening there was a discussion with the filmmaker Joan Mandell and discussion with Dr. Nadia Yaqub.
Arab American Heritage Month Events

Community Festival
In partnership with NC Arabic Teacher Council and Iman School, CMEIS organized a community festival in Raleigh, which included henna, dabka, kids arts & crafts, and food.

A Celebration of Mideast Food Culture
The Center rounded out a month of lectures and films with a food and dance-filled celebration of Arab American Heritage month. With over 100 in attendance, the celebration included a panel of local experts on Middle Eastern food and culture in North Carolina. The panel was followed by a wonderful dabke performance by the Triangle Lebanese-American Center. We ended the night with local Arab food!
My internship at CMEIS has been an incredibly rewarding experience. One standout moment was speaking at the 2023 leadership conference for North Carolina public educators, focusing on the theme of understanding indigenous cultures. Drawing from my upbringing in Qatar, I emphasized the importance of intersectionality and celebrating diversity. CMEIS provided a platform for meaningful discussions on social issues and empowerment...It’s an experience that not only broadens horizons but also equips individuals with the tools to effect positive change.

Alaa Hammouda, CMEIS’s Outreach Manager, organized the following K-12 professional development events:

- **Foreign Languages Association of North Carolina Conference**, with 500 in attendance
- **International Education Week Conference** (40 attendees)
- **2 Training courses** for K-12 teachers focused on the Middle East
- **Teacher Exchange Project** with the University of Arizona, involving 40 teachers working together to develop projects for their students
- **UNC World View Global Symposium** (140 attendees)
- **Summer 2023 Morocco Trip for NC teachers** with GEEO

**2023 Leadership Conference for NC Public Educators**

*Perspective from our Fall 2023 Undergraduate Intern, Niharika Ghoshal, who spoke at the conference:*

My internship at CMEIS has been an incredibly rewarding experience. One standout moment was speaking at the 2023 leadership conference for North Carolina public educators, focusing on the theme of understanding indigenous cultures. Drawing from my upbringing in Qatar, I emphasized the importance of intersectionality and celebrating diversity. CMEIS provided a platform for meaningful discussions on social issues and empowerment...It’s an experience that not only broadens horizons but also equips individuals with the tools to effect positive change.
Graduate Student Engagement
Meet-and-greets & Workshops

The Center is proud to be able to support UNC students by facilitating knowledge sharing and community building activities. This year, CMEIS organized six graduate student meet and greet events, including one training workshop directed by Dr. Charles Kurzman of UNC Sociology.

Dr. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi met with graduate & undergraduate students during his visit to UNC in November. During this meet-and-greet, students were able to discuss Dr. Tavakoli-Targhi’s research on Iran as well as their own research and academic interests.
My name is Abdul Basith Basheer, and I am a first-year PhD student in the History department at UNC, specializing in Global History. I was lucky enough to be the inaugural CMEIS Public Humanities Fellow during the 2023–24 academic year, as part of the Maynard Adams Fellowship for the Public Humanities. I had the wonderful opportunity of being a part of an amazing cohort of scholars who are all applying the spirit of public humanities and public-facing scholarship to their own fields and interests. I chose to apply to this fellowship because I saw it as the ideal opportunity to learn more about how I can develop my professional work for a larger audience. Additionally, I wanted to benefit from experienced public scholars who could share vital insights into how my proposed project could be further developed. Overall, the fellowship was a great way to cultivate professional skills to be applied outside the academy.

My vision for the fellowship was the creation of a public history project and digital archive. Titled Muslim Carolina, the project documents the history of Muslims in the Carolinas region and aims to highlight the stories and experiences of Muslim Carolinians. Through archival material, oral histories, artistic submissions and more, my goal is to foster an appreciation for this shared history and the contributions of Muslim Carolinians to American society at large. Over the course of the fellowship, I was able to workshop the formation of this digital archive and come up with different strategies for ensuring the public’s involvement. As such, in the fall of 2024, I am organizing a public event for the UNC community, “The History of Muslims in North Carolina: A Public Conversation” will be an opportunity for students, faculty, staff, and community members to come and listen to stories and personal experiences of Muslim North Carolinians, as a way learn more about the history of this vibrant and longstanding religious community. Ultimately, by way of this event, I hope to begin a conversation on the importance of diversity in American society and the ways it is of benefit to everyone.

Public humanities is important to me because it exists as a means for our scholarly work to have real reach and impact outside the academy. Knowledge and knowledge production for its own sake is significant, but if the broader public can interact with our scholarship in meaningful ways, we should explore opportunities to accomplish such. Therefore, I feel passionately about public humanities because I intend to be the type of scholar who thinks more directly about how I can positively impact the community around me. My time as a public humanities fellow with Carolina Public Humanities (CPH) was invaluable in cultivating these professional goals and spending time with scholars with similar aspirations. Our monthly meetings provided a space in which we could share ideas, communicate concerns, and ultimately envision a bright future in which the academy and the public are in conversation with one another. All in all, I would recommend this fellowship for all aspiring graduate students who see the value and impact of public-facing scholarship and wish to develop such projects.
Throughout 2023-24, we hosted leading language scholars and curriculum development specialists from French, Farsi, Turkish and Arabic to share their research and best practices for expanding and enriching intercultural elements of language courses at Carolina and beyond. All language classrooms face common challenges of cultural representation, creating curricula that is at once engaging and exploratory and finally, building critical intercultural communicative capacities among students.

Our First 2 Lectures of the Annual Lecture Series

Disability as the Impetus for Design: Fostering Global Citizenship through Inclusive Teaching

Dr. Tammy Berberi, Associate Professor of French at the University of Minnesota Morris, and expert in disability studies in the language classroom, explored how teachers can create more flexibility and opportunities for engagement in their classroom using mixed methods and a variety of teaching techniques. She also challenged attendees to consider if their current curricula reflect exclusively able-bodied communities in the target language culture. Sean Singh Matharoo, Assistant Professor of French at UNC noted, “through French- and English-language heavy metal, Prof. Berberi and I swapped meaningful memories about how we both use music in the classroom to at once lower the affective filter and encourage students to speak more in the target language. I also think it’s so cool that Prof. Berberi’s alma mater is UNC Chapel Hill!”

Things to Remember When Speaking of Language Inclusivity in the Arabic Classroom

Dr. Laila Familiar, Senior Lecturer at New York University Abu Dhabi and project manager of the educational website Khallina, addressed head on the challenge of teaching a language and culture that not only spans multiple continents from Africa to the Middle East, but also embodies a rich multiglossia that can transform from one conversation to the next. Dr. Familiar’s approach encouraged teachers of Arabic to embrace the difference and explore creative ways to include linguistic and cultural variation into Arabic curricula. Her approach is one that represents a much-needed shift in the field of teaching Arabic as a second language, one that focuses on strengthening student capacity for intercultural awareness while also building strong and flexible communication skills. Caroline Sibley, Assistant Teaching Professor of Arabic at UNC, was reminded of “the need to not only represent all the voices and the experiences of the Arabic-speaking world, but also, give our students - many of whom come to class with ties to this exact world - the chance to see themselves in the curricula!”
Language Teaching in Culturally Plural Societies and Classrooms

Dr. Nahal Akbari-Saneh, Clinical Associate Professor, Director of the Persian Language Program at the University of Maryland, including the Persian Flagship, shared creative ideas for building student engagement in cultural activities. From semester long music lessons, to calligraphy classes to project-based, cross disciplinary learning of graphic design in Persian, she inspired and reminded UNC professors and community members that language and culture are both lived experiences. She proposed a shift in how the language field engages with the idea of multiculturalism, suggesting that as students move through the world in real time, they are not existing separate of other cultures, which in traditional language classrooms would ask students to observe and notice the “differences.” Rather, Dr. Akbari, offered that culture should be taught with the understanding that we live in a plural-cultural world, where our own culture is in constant confluence and interaction with others, leading students to explore their own identities in intersection and interaction with target language cultures, ultimately leading students to a more nuanced intercultural understanding.

Secular Imagery in World Language Education: A critical analysis of cultural representation in Turkish language textbooks

Dr. Yasin Tunç, Assistant Professor of Practice in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University analyzed the current, most-popular Turkish language curricula on the market. He shared from his research on teaching Turkish as a second language, about the significant role of secularism in shaping modern day Turkish language curricula, remarking a nearly complete absence of religion, and posing the question of how textbook narratives and images inform and shape student expectations for interfacing with the target language culture. Abdul Basith Basheer, a first-year PhD student in the History department at UNC, found “the talk a fascinating exploration of the ways both religion and secularism discourse are often a point of contestation in the world language classroom. (He has) been a student of Arabic and Hindi-Urdu at UNC and other institutions but has always been curious of how instructors of other Islamicate languages contend with the representation of religion or otherwise in instruction and curriculum.”
The Center organized two Ali and Lila Paydarfar sponsored lectures this academic year.

Paydar Lectureship I: “Curing Mother Iran”

On November 16th, Dr. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (University of Toronto) discussed the emergence of a “Pasteurian” conception of politics focused on national, social, spiritual, and political health with UNC students, faculty, and community members.

Paydar Lectureship II: “Silk in Ottoman Safavid Trade, Warefare, and Urban Life in the Early Modern Period”

In March, we virtually hosted Dr. Fariba Zarinebaf (UC Riverside), with Professor Eren Tasar (UNC Dept of History) as the discussant. Dr. Zarinebaf discussed trade along the Ottoman-Safavid borderlands in the early modern period.
In 2023, when I attended in the Annual NC Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies Conference at UNC Chapel Hill on the topic of border politics, I was not only impressed by the range of talks, screenings, and conversations among the conference participants joining from various NC campuses, but also inspired to locally organize a similarly small-scale, intimate, and synergistic gathering of Middle East Studies scholars across the Carolinas. When I was invited to organize the next annual conference at UNC Charlotte, I was ecstatic to say least. After forming an interdisciplinary steering committee - Emek Ergun (Global Studies & Women’s and Gender Studies), Ella Fratantuono (History), Hania Al-Shamat (Political Science and Public Administration), Michael Ewers (Geography and Earth Sciences), and Noha Ghali - we collectively decided to focus on migration, diaspora, and belonging across and beyond the Middle East. The conference addressed “migration” as a broadly defined phenomenon encompassing voluntary, forced, internal, and international forms of mobility and explored issues relating to causes and outcomes of migration for individuals, communities, and states. The conference aimed to foster conversations among scholars from across disciplines to discuss physical, cultural, and political processes that produce patterns of migration; the many ways migrants seek and express belonging; and how diasporic formations and networks contribute to migration and its outcomes at the level of the individual and the community.
In order to increase collaborations and exchanges among scholars of Middle Eastern Studies across the Carolinas, we sent invitations to particular individuals at UNC Chapel Hill, NC State, UNC Greensboro, Wake Forest University, Guilford College, Appalachian State, Elon University, Duke University, and University of South Carolina. Since we wanted the event to be accessible and appealing to the local community, we started the conference on March 22, Friday evening with the screening of the 2020 film, The Man Who Sold His Skin, at the local Independent Theater House in Charlotte. Directed by Tunisian Kaouther Ben Hania, The Man Who Sold His Skin was nominated for the Best International Feature Film at the 2021 Academy Awards. The admission to the film was free and followed by a lively discussion among scholars, students, and community members, which was generously moderated by Dr. Nadia Yaqub of UNC Chapel Hill. On March 23, at the Center City campus of UNC Charlotte, we had three outstanding panel discussions by 8 presenters and 3 moderators from UNC Charlotte and a brilliant keynote address by Dr. Akram Khater of NC State. Since encouraging interdisciplinary exchanges and collaborations among locally grounded scholars of Middle East Studies was the main goal of the conference, every session was followed by a conversation break, which we constantly (and sadly) had to interrupt to start the next session. The range of topics covered in the talks included archiving, storytelling, and knowledge production of/on Middle Eastern migrations and migrants as well as refugee resettlement policies and practices in NC.

In short, the Annual NC Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies Conference generated such an engaging and stimulating intellectual environment for all attendees that we humbly call it a success and look forward to the next NC Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies Conference. We are thankful to the sponsors of the conference, UNC Center for the Middle East and Islamic Studies, UNCC Inclusive Excellence Grant, UNCC Global Studies Department, and UNCC Center for Migration and Diaspora Studies. We hope the energy and the synergy that the NC Consortium for Middle East Studies helps unleash every year live on and the connections established in the conference among scholars of Middle East Studies continue to grow.

Dr. Emek Ergun
Associate Professor, Global Studies, UNC-Charlotte
Co-organizer of Annual Consortium Conference 2024

Dr. Akram Khater Ergun, Professor (NC State University) gives a lecture on “The Migrant as Human” during the Annual North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies Conference.
My FLAS experience took place in the heart of Morocco, Rabat, where I took advanced Arabic courses to further perfect my language skills. My experience consisted of one on one lessons as well as immersive excursions throughout the country. I was able to meet so many different people, expand my understanding of the world around me, and connect with my Moroccan roots in a completely different way.

Suhailah Boukarfi  
B.A. - International/Global Policy & Data Science
The center aspires to be inclusive with a participatory approach, to attract and support academically rigorous faculty and students from diverse disciplines across campus, to be a safe space for campus and public community, and to collaborate with other similar centers around the world.