

Annual Academic Assessment Report

(KING FAHD CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES)
(May 21, 2025)

Report annually to the Dean of the college/school the following:

- **Results of analysis of assessment of Student Learning Outcome**

Direct Method:

Indirect Method:

- **Student ratings of their knowledge and reflections (Abedini):**
 - In **PLSC 48403 – Middle East in World Affairs**, student evaluations reported:
 - **Overall rating: 100%**
 - **“My instructor challenges me to think”: 100%**
 - Student comment: *"So knowledgeable! I have loved this class with him!"*
 - Another student noted: *"It is a great course for understanding the Middle East."*
 - In **PLSC 55103 – Seminar in Middle East Politics**, evaluations reported:
 - **Overall course rating: 100%**
 - **“My instructor creates an atmosphere where ideas can be exchanged freely and easily”: 100%**
 - **Overall instructor rating: 100%**
 - Student comment: *"Dr. Abedini has an evident passion for the material. He creates an environment that challenges his students to think and share their opinions. At the beginning of the semester, I was worried because my knowledge of the Middle East was very limited. Dr. Abedini made me feel welcome and let me know my opinion mattered. He is a great professor, and I would definitely take one of his classes again."*
 - Another comment: *"Awesome course."*
- **Student participation in faculty research, publications, and conferences:** I encouraged students to submit their research papers to the MPSA conference, and out of 7 graduate students, 3 were admitted to the MPSA 2025 in Chicago, where they presented their papers. I have encouraged them to submit their papers to the journal.

Honors, awards, and scholarships

Middle East Studies PhD student **Sam Scurry** (PhD History 2024) will start as a tenure-track Assistant Professor at the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies, University of Mississippi, Assistant Professor

At least one student from Abedini's seminar course was accepted into a PhD program with a scholarship

Alshaatha Alsharji, current MEST GA Fellow:

- Fall 2024 Sturgis International Fellowship

Khadidja Bouchellia, current MEST GA Fellow:

- 15 Jan 2025 CLCS Research Award \$600
- 21 Feb 2025 Rare Archival Research at University of Pennsylvania
- 30 April 2025, paper accepted for Middle East Studies Association annual conference: "Arabs Don't Walk": Walking and the Ecologies of Resistance in Raja Shehadeh's Palestinian Walks (2007) and Susan Abulhawa's Against the Loveless World (2021)
- 2 May 2025 "The Valley of Sheep" short story, *Ecotheo Magazine*, <https://www.ecotheo.org/etreview/valleysheep>

Mayssa Hashaad, current MEST GA Fellow:

Awards:

- 2025 National Scholar Award, from the UA Provost's Office and Office of Nationally Competitive Awards
- UA Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies Program Research Award, 2024/2025
- Mid-America Arts Alliance's Artists 360 Graduate Student Artist Grant, 2024
- Vance and Mary Celestia Parler Randolph Fellowship from the UA Department of English (for leadership and academic achievement in language and literature), 2024

Conference Travel Grants:

- UA Graduate School Doctoral Student Presentation Travel Grant, 2024/2025
- Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies Program Small Conference Travel Grant, 2024/2025
- King Fahd Center Conference Travel Grant 2024/2025
- Graduate and Professional Student Congress Conference Travel Grant, 2024

Featured in:

- University of Arkansas *Newsire* (March 13, 2025)
- *Fulbright Review*, The Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas (March 5, 2025)
- *Artists 360* (October 2024)

Nadine Sinno, alumna (Ph.D. CLCS 2009):

- Book publication: Sinno, N. (2024). *A war of colors: graffiti and street art in postwar Beirut* (First edition.). University of Texas Press.

Avery Antill - MEST Undergraduate Scholarship for AY 2024-25 (\$10,000)

Abdullah Asif - Honors College Research Grant (March 2025) – \$4,000; Middle East Studies Undergraduate Scholarship (May 2025) – \$5,000

Avery Ferguson - Domestic Internship Grant- UARK Honors College, a \$1500 one-time award, for work completed at Canopy NWA as an adult education and housing intern working with refugees. Chancellor's Scholarship- UARK Honors College, \$8000 annual award, for high-school achievements and collegiate studies Arkansas Governor's Scholarship- Arkansas State Government, \$100000 annual award, for 4.0 GPA in high school alongside 32 ACT score MEST Scholarship- MEST Program at UARK, \$10000 award renewable for up to three years, for declared MEST major and involvement in the program, specifically restarting the Newsletter

Chiharu Izumi (MEST Undergraduate Scholarship for AY 2024-25 (\$10,000)

Anastasiya Kelley - Arkansas Challenge Scholarship (13,500 over 4 years) August 2024 – Present Donald & Gaylia C. Forston EHAS (\$4,000) August 2024 – Present B&B Lazenby Endowed Scholarship Fund (\$2,000) January 2025 – Present

Abdul Memon - Chancellor's list

Jayakumar Nair - MEST Undergraduate Scholarship for 2024-25 (\$10,000); defended her Honors thesis with Rania Mahmoud: “Limitless *Waqf*: Resistance, Empowerment, and Mobility.” Spring 2025.

Sean Wiegers – Honors College Short Term Research Travel Grant to travel to UAE and Saudi for 20 days in May to conduct research on project “The Intersection of Business, Law, and Sports in the Gulf Economy” (\$4,000); MEST Undergraduate Scholarship for AY 2024-25 (\$10,000).

Student Reflections

Tayma Abueed

During Fall 2024 and Spring 2025, I took four courses that have significantly shaped my academic interests and helped me refine my research focus. In Fall 2024, I enrolled in International Film with Professor Frank Scheid and Gender and Sexuality in Palestinian Literature with Professor Mohja Kahf. Both courses were intellectually stimulating and allowed me to engage critically with questions of representation, identity, and power. I earned an A in both, with a 4.0 GPA. The International Film course, in particular, influenced my decision to concentrate my studies in cultural studies, with a specific interest in film and visual culture as political and social analysis tools. I am currently developing a paper I wrote for this class into a publishable piece, building on the foundation the course provided.

In Spring 2025, I took Arab Cinema with Professor Rania Mahmoud and The Middle East Since 1914 with Professor Joel Gordon, and I earned an A in both, with a 4.0 GPA. These two courses offered complementary perspectives on the region's cultural and political transformations. In Arab Cinema, I wrote a paper on a Jordanian film, analyzing it through the frameworks of cultural imperialism and feminism. This project has since evolved into a conference proposal,

and I am currently preparing to submit it. I hope to develop it further into a publishable piece of academic work. The Middle East Since 1914 provided essential historical grounding that enriched my understanding of the issues I explore in my writing.

Throughout this academic year, I have received consistent support, detailed and weekly feedback from Professor Rania Mahmoud, who is also my supervisor. Her mentorship has been instrumental in guiding my research, strengthening my writing, and helping me think critically and independently. Her input has been vital at every stage, from shaping my ideas to preparing my work for academic presentation. The quality of feedback I have received, the grades I have earned, and the recognition my work is beginning to receive, such as interest in conference participation, possible publication, and cumulative GPA of 4.0 have all affirmed that I am meeting the learning objectives of my courses and continuing to grow as a scholar.

Nina Maziar

Dear all,

I hope this message finds you well.

Reflecting on my graduate studies over the past year, I'm grateful for the academic growth I've experienced through my MA in the Political Science department- Middle Eastern Studies Center. This program has offered a challenging but rewarding structure that has sharpened both my theoretical foundation and practical research skills in political science and Middle Eastern Studies, with particular emphasis on policy, comparative politics, and regional studies focused on the Middle East. Some of the core courses I've taken include American Political Behavior, Research Methods in Political Science, and Qualitative Methods, all of which have provided me with solid analytical tools for academic inquiry. Courses like Public Policy, Comparative Political Analysis, and Human Behavior in Complex Organizations, and Public Administration have broadened my understanding of institutional structures and political decision-making. My regional expertise has been deepened through Seminar: International Politics and Seminar: Middle East Politics, both of which were rigorous in content and highly engaging in class discussion. I've also had the opportunity to pursue Directed Readings in Political Science, which allowed me to tailor my research interests in a more independent and focused way, and I'm currently working on my Master's Thesis, which is supervised by Dr. Shirin Saeidi. Working with Dr. Saeidi has been a formative part of my graduate experience. Her mentorship has challenged me to think more critically and engage with literature on a deeper level. She strikes a valuable balance between guidance and academic freedom, and her feedback has been instrumental in refining my research direction.

I feel confident that I am mastering the objectives of the program. My ability to analyze political systems, apply comparative methods, and engage with both qualitative and quantitative research has improved significantly. I can assess my progress through the feedback I've received on major assignments, successful completion of advanced seminars, and my own growth in articulating complex arguments in writing and discussion. I've attached my transcript, which outlines the specific courses

I've taken throughout my MA program. Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on my academic journey so far.

Kind regards,

Nina Maziar

Mayssa Hashaad

As an advanced PhD candidate, I've completed my coursework requirements. Last semester, I was enrolled in dissertation hours under the supervision of Dr. Mohja Kahf, who continues to be a supportive and insightful advisor. I also worked as a Teaching Assistant for Dr. Kahf in ENGL 35603 – Gender and Sexuality in Arab American Literature. Assisting in this course was particularly rewarding, as it allowed me to deepen my engagement with the material while supporting undergraduate students' learning experiences.

Although I am no longer enrolled in formal courses, I continue to grow through my dissertation research, which focuses on "Trauma and Resistance in Egyptian Women's Prison Narratives".

In addition to making progress on my dissertation and presenting at conferences, I've received several awards and grants that reflect both the quality and impact of my work. These include the 2025 National Scholar Award by the Provost's Office and the Office of Nationally Competitive Awards, the Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies Research Award, the Vance and Mary Celestia Parler Randolph Fellowship, and the Artists 360 Graduate Student Artist Grant. I've also received multiple travel grants to support conference travels. My achievements have recently been featured in the University of Arkansas Newswire, the Fulbright Review, and Artists 360.

These recognitions, along with continued mentorship and scholarly engagement, assure me that I'm meeting program objectives and growing as a researcher, teacher, and writer.

Sincerely,

Mayssa Hashaad

MEST Graduate Assistant

PhD Candidate, CLCS

Emma Bryans

I took Arab Cinema this semester with Rania, and I both enjoyed the course and learned a lot. I feel we covered a lot of ground in terms of topics/themes discussed from history to culture to gender and sexuality to language. I also feel like the range of films we watched and discussed was diverse and adequately representative of the diversity of the Arab world. I think the Coursework load was fair and the final project is really Going to help me with my research in the future.

I've learned a lot in every MEST course I've taken in the past.

Also, Rania is my supervisor and that is going well. I've been doing a lot of work with IJMES And Arabic classes

Course Grades

- HIST 4363/ME Since 1914: 6 A 5 B 1 C 1 D 2 F + 2 I grad section 2 A, 1 I (**Gordon**)
- The students performed exceptionally well in both courses, showing strong analytical skills and engagement in research. Most students received grades of B or higher. The second research paper and policy memo demonstrated clear improvement, reflecting growth in critical thinking and writing. (**Abedini**)

Assignment grades

- **PLSC 55103 – Seminar in Middle East Politics:** Students presented twice and wrote two research papers. The second paper showed significant improvement in content depth, analysis, originality, and use of evidence. Below is the grading rubric used for the final research paper:
 - **Content and Analysis (40%):** Students were expected to demonstrate critical thinking and integrate scholarly sources to support their arguments.
 - **Originality and Argumentation (30%):** Original ideas and a coherent, well-structured argument were essential.
 - **Writing and Style (20%):** Clarity, proper grammar, and adherence to academic writing standards.
 - **Research and Sources (10%):** High-quality, scholarly sources and effective integration of course concepts.
- **PLSC 48403 – Middle East in World Affairs:** Students presented twice and wrote two policy memos. The second memo showed clear improvement, with more thoughtful analysis and stronger integration of course concepts. Below is the rubric used for the policy memo:
 - **Executive Summary (20 points):** Clear, concise overview of recommendations.
 - **Background/Context (20 points):** Thorough understanding of the geopolitical context.
 - **Analysis (20 points):** Balanced perspective on U.S. foreign policy challenges.
 - **Recommendations (25 points):** Feasible, innovative policy recommendations tied to analysis.
 - **Structure and Organization (10 points):** Clear sections and logical flow.

- **Clarity and Writing Style (5 points):** Professional language and clear communication.

Assignment Grades

- Here's a summary of how I assessed my students' learning outcome using multiple methods of teaching, learning, testing, and evaluation (Sadegh Beigi):
- **The first eight weeks:**
- **Critical Response:** Students had total of four Critical Responses in the first half of the semester (every two weeks). It was a short response, between 200-300 words, to my critical question based on the reading materials. (20 points)
- Students addressed my critical questions with their thoughtful engagement and critical comments using the reading materials to support their answer.
- **Midterm:** This exam was a multiple-choice test of forty questions based on textbook, *The Middle East in the World: An Introduction*.
- **The second eight weeks:**
- Early in the semester, I started asking the following question from my students: What are you going to do with your major to contribute to Middle East Studies? (Think about an issue or a topic of your interest in the region). While the question sets the premise of the course, students are deeply engaged in our weekly lessons and discussions thinking about how their major could be related to the Middle East Studies and how they can apply what they have learned to their major.
- Two major assignments: Presentation and Research Paper designed to fulfill the above research question.
- **Presentation:** 10-minute presentations on student research topics for the final paper. Presentation should include the research question, argument, and bibliography. (20 Points)
- **Rubric for Presentation (10 sections/ 20 points total)**
- Make a PowerPoint that includes:
 - Your research topic/title
 - Why did you choose the topic?
 - How are your major related to the topic?
 - Your research question (what is that you are going to find out in this research?)
 - Your claim (working thesis statement): A sentence presenting your argument
 - Your bibliography: A list of minimum 4 sources that you are going to use in your research. It could contain books, articles, movies, interviews, ...
 - So what?! Tell us why your research/paper/analysis/argument matters?

- A question for class on how they think you could improve your argument for your research paper.
- Overall presentation in a comprehensive and timely manner
- **Research Paper:** Students need to develop their essay based on their presentation topic incorporating four to six sources (critical essays, reviews, and articles and other related materials that fit your topic area) into an original argument concerning that topic. (20 Points)
- **Rubric for Research Paper:** Two files attached in this email, one is Essay Assignment Sheet, and one is Revision Work Sheet.
- After mid-term, I presented the Essay Assignment Sheet and how the research paper needs to be developed. On the last week of the semester, we reviewed students' first draft of research paper based on Revision Work Sheet where I put the students in pairs exchanging their drafts and filling the questions based on each other's drafts. I monitored their activities and address their concerns emphasizing that they need to make sure their draft meets the requirements of a research paper before the submission.
- I was pretty inspired by students' presentations and the variety of the topics they chose for their research. Here are some examples:
- "Saudi Arabia Business Landscape" by Sean who won an award for his research project in this class, Honor's Grant to travel to UAE
- "Studying under Sanctions: The Academic Struggle of the Iranian Students" by Javier Benavides
- "Language Effect on Political Perception" by John Storer
- "Mosque Design and Spirituality" by Ansley Baird
- "The Psychological Effect of War on Youth in the Middle East" by Ansley Schleif
- "Khat Production in Yemen" by Jack Nikolson
- "Sectarianism in Lebanon and Syria" by Jonah James
- "How Ottoman Political and Cultural Legacies Influence Modern Turkish Politics" by Phoebe Harris
- "The Islamic Foundation of Modern Science and Medicine" by Abdullah Asif who won Critical Language Scholarship
- **Reflection Papers:** Students wrote total of four Reflection Papers in the second half of the semester. This is a one-page assignment that answers a question based on the graphic novel, *The Complete Persepolis*; and three guest lectures: Dr. McMillen's on Comics, Dr. Abedini's on Social Media, and Dr. Gortler's on Torture and Political Prisoners in Israel. (20 Points)

Students wrote their reflections on:

- Dr. McMillen's presentation on Ms. Marvel as the first Muslim female Superhero (veil, identity, and transformation)
 - Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* considering Volk's ideas on cultural diversity and women's resistance (gender and racial discrimination in Iran and in the West)
 - What they learned from Dr. Gortler's lecture on "Molding of Consciousness" discussed by Walid Daka in "Consciousness Molded or the re-identification of Torture"?
 - Media and Political Movements in Iran (digital campaign/digital resistance) based on Dr. Abedini's lecture
 - Majority of the students got A in this class, only one got B, and one got D (due to his huge number of absences and missed assignments)
- **Any changes to degree/certificate planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis**

The three VAPs we had at MEST this year did an exceptional job at teaching and tracking student learning outcomes. They brought much richness to the program. Abedini, for instance, guided students in attending conferences. Mansoori offered Nina Maziar (MA student) the opportunity to write a paper on prisons in contemporary Iran under his supervision. Gortler gave a guest lecture in Sadegh Beigi's class on "Molding of Consciousness." The program would benefit if we could host VAPs more systematically and routinely. Our program enrollment is continuing to grow. We doubled our number of graduate assistants from six to fourteen students and almost doubled our number of undergraduate students. Our faculty, MEST staff, and I have focused on recruiting, and we are starting to see positive results, so I have no intention of changing any programming in the near future, as consistency has been key to advancing the program goals. I believe we still need to improve our numbers. Renato Despain, MEST's program manager, and Dylan Howard, administrative assistant, are working toward fall recruitment plans. Last summer, Renato visited various Middle East Studies Centers, talked to students, professors, and directors, promoted MEST, and explored potential partnerships for programs, seminars, and workshops. In the fall, he and our team, including Professor Laurence Hare and our graduate assistant, Muneer Al Alawneh, attended the Arkansas State Model Arab League Breakfast. Together, they promoted MEST to high school seniors and discussed scholarship opportunities. Throughout the semester, Renato and I, along with our team, met with outstanding students to discuss the program and funding options, encouraging them to pursue a degree in MEST. These collective efforts have resulted in the program's growth, a testament to our shared commitment and dedication.

- **Any changes to the assessment process made or planned.**

We need to continue planning, tracking, and reminding faculty to maintain a file documenting their teaching successes, innovations, and student learning outcomes. Starting in the fall of 2025,

Renato and I will send multiple reminders throughout the academic year and begin collecting data earlier. We are currently conducting interviews with graduating students to learn about their experiences. Renato is also working on exit interviews to better assess MEST's room for improvement.