Faculty Statement of Solidarity with the People of Afghanistan  
October 2021  

Recent events in Afghanistan have once again captured the attention of the media. Many of the headlines do not describe the terrible humanitarian toll on Afghanistan’s people during the past 20 years of US/NATO occupation and the Karzai-Ghani administrations. The Middle East/South Asia Studies Program (ME/SA) expresses its solidarity with the people of Afghanistan and encourages all stakeholders to come together to alleviate the Afghan people’s suffering and ensure their well-being and prosperity in the future.

Since its establishment, ME/SA has fostered research and teaching about Afghanistan’s rich history and culture. We invite students to take our classes and consult recent scholarship on this important region of the world. We believe only an informed and educated public can take action conducive to enduring peace.

Undergraduate courses on Afghanistan, Islam, the Middle East, Persian:

**HIS 6: Introduction to the Middle East** and **HIS 80: US in the Middle East** (both offered annually) include at least one lecture on the history of modern Afghanistan.

**RST 60: Introduction to Islam** (offered yearly). Taught by Professor Syed, the course offers a brief overview and history of Islam, which is essential to understanding modern Afghanistan.

**PER 1, 2, 3** Elementary Persian, Navid Saberi-Najafi  
**PER 21, 22, 23** Intermediate Persian, Navid Saberi-Najafi

**COM 53C Literature of the Islamic World**, Jocelyn Sharlet. Focuses on pre-modern Arabic and Persian literature as well as selections from Ottoman Turkish and Urdu.

**AHI 1E: Islamic Art** Offered yearly. Taught by Professor Heghnar Watenpaugh, the course covers aspects of the medieval and early modern art and architecture of present-day Afghanistan. This course introduces the art, architecture and urbanism of societies where Muslims ruled or where they formed significant minorities from the 7th through the 20th centuries CE, in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. It examines the form and function of architectural settings and works of art; as well as the social and cultural contexts, functions, and meanings of art. Themes include the creation of a distinctive Islamic visual culture; the development of urban institutions; key architectural types such as mosque or caravanserai; the arts of the illustrated book; luxury art objects; cultural interconnections around the Mediterranean; arts related to trade, travel, and pilgrimage.

**RST163: The Social Life of Islam** (next offered in the Fall of 2022). Taught by Professor Miller, the course features readings on Afghanistan such as Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi’s recent book *Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (2021) and David Edwards’ *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (2002).

**COM 175/MSA 121A Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings**. Taught by Professor Sharlet, the course explores the stories in the Shahnameh by Ferdowsi as well as Persian and other literature based on them. Probably offered in 2022-23.
**COM 155 Classical Islamic Literature**, Jocelyn Sharlet. Focuses on major works of Arabic and Persian literature 700-1500 as well as selections from Ottoman Turkish and Urdu.

**PER 101 Topics in Modern Persian Culture 1900-Present.** Taught by Professor Motlagh. Integrated work on reading, listening, discussion and writing about modern Persian cultural production using fiction and poetry as well as cinema and theory. Focus is on readings in Persian; students without the requisite level of Persian can request permission to enroll. Offered Spring 2022

**AHI 155: The Islamic City** Offered every other year. Taught by Professor Heghnar Watenpaugh, the course covers aspects of the medieval and early modern architecture and urbanism of present-day Afghanistan. The Islamic city is a fundamental concept in the study of the visual culture of the Muslim world. This course explores the development of Islamic visual culture through the prism of architecture and urbanism. The goal of the course is to provide the student with a comparative historical understanding of the development of cities in this region, and to gain a sense of the debates and directions of the current historiography. The course emphasizes selected themes: urban design and aesthetics, architectural form of civic institutions, representations of power in art, architectural responses to the social construction of difference, including gender, ethnicity, race and religion, and visual objects related to spaces of sociability. Additional issues include mapping, and the representations of cities. The course will cover the period of the formation of Islamic society (7th c) to the modern era, with particular emphasis on the Middle East.

**AHI 156: The Arts of the Islamic Book** Offered every other year. Taught by Professor Heghnar Watenpaugh, the course covers aspects of the medieval and early modern book arts (calligraphy, painting, binding) of present-day Afghanistan, particularly Herat as a center of painting and design. Critical study of the development of the arts of the luxury book in the Islamic world. Includes themes such as the question of representation in Islam, the relationship of word and image, the discipline of calligraphy, ideas about beauty, representational strategies in Persianate painting, the development of art histories and of connoisseurship in Islamic societies. The course also considers the reception of Islamic books in the modern world – how they were collected, studied and displayed in museums and private collections in the last two hundred years.

**ASA 150F: South Asian America** and **ASA 100: Asian American Communities**, both taught by Professor Sunaina Maira, include research and literature on/by Afghan Americans.

**MSA 180: History of Afghanistan** (taught once by Professor Anooshahr). This is a history of Afghanistan from antiquity to the present. The goals of the course are to detail the rich history of the area especially in connection to its neighboring regions of Central Asia, Iranian plateau, and the Indian subcontinent. This course is intended to show the area was the seat of great world-economic activity and cultural innovation. It also historicizes and explains the modern political situation.

**MSA 180: Desire and Power in Persian Literature**, Jocelyn Sharlet (taught once). The intersection of desire and power in selected works of Persian literature from Central Asia, Iran, and India.

**Publications on Afghanistan and Persian by UC Davis faculty and alumni:**
Fatima Mojaddedi participated in a recent two-part series by NPR: https://www.npr.org/2021/09/14/1037085221/afghanistan-the-rise-of-the-taliban


Flagg Miller’s The Audacious Ascetic: What the bin Laden Tapes Reveal about Al-Qa’ida (Oxford University Press: 2016). Basing his research on a collection of audiotapes discovered in Osama bin Laden’s guest house in Kandahar, Afghanistan just after 9/11, Miller explores the ways in which the idea of “Al-Qaeda” -- a base or rule, in Arabic -- was understood in political speeches, sermons, training-camp lectures and everyday conversations preserved in the archive. He also shows just how much stories about al-Qaeda were formed, curated and given new life by American and Western post-Cold War security officials and media outlets, largely to bin Laden’s benefit in the years leading up to the 2001 attacks.

One of the first ethnographic studies of the Afghan American community in Fremont/Hayward; it also includes discussion of imperial interventions in Afghanistan, the "Af-Pak war," and surveillance of Afghan Americans after 9/11.


Jocelyn Sharlet, Patronage and Poetry in the Islamic World: Social Mobility and Status in the Medieval Middle East and Central Asia (IB Tauris, 2011, Honorable Mention, British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize, 2012). This book explores the uncertainty and flexibility of relationships between panegyric poets and their political patrons depicted in poetry by the Arabic poets of the Abbasids Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi and the Persian poets of the Ghaznavids 'Unsuri and Farrukhi. In addition, it analyzes the portrayal of patronage interactions in medieval Arabic and Persian literary criticism, political advice, biographies of poets, and encyclopedias.

Ali Anooshahr, The Ghazi Sultans and the Frontiers of Islam (Routledge, 2009). This book studies the phenomenon of “ghazis” or “holy warriors” in the medieval and early modern periods. It shows that individuals in both Anatolia and Afghanistan were aware that they were part of a frontier culture between Muslims and non-Muslims, and they evoked the memories of famous ghazis in order to fulfill near-archetypal expectations of what a ghazi should be.


Emelie Mahdavian (Performance Studies) produced, wrote, and edited MIDNIGHT TRAVELER, which won numerous international prizes and was nominated for a Gotham Award for Best Documentary. When the Taliban puts a bounty on Afghan director Hassan Fazili’s head, he is
forced to flee the country with his wife and two young daughters. Capturing the family’s uncertain journey firsthand, Fazili documents their harrowing trek across numerous borders revealing the danger and uncertainty facing refugees seeking asylum juxtaposed with the unbreakable love shared amongst the family on the run.

Jamil Jan Kochai, M.A. ’17, taps into his memories of visiting Afghanistan as a child for his novel, 99 Nights in Logar (Viking, 2019).


Ali Anooshahr, “The Ghaznavid Empire in India”, Indian Economic and Social History Review, 58, no. 4 (forthcoming). Argues that the Ghaznavids did not merely raid India, but on the contrary built an imperial structure there based on the king-of-kings model, with the emperor in Ghazna and tributary rajas in north India.


Sunaina Maira. 2014. “Surveillance Effects: South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American Youth in the War on Terror.” In At the Limits of Justice: Women of Color on Terror, edited by Suvendrini Perera and Sherene H. Razack (pp. 86-106). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Jocelyn Sharlet, “A Garden of Possibilities in Manuchehri’s Spring Garden Panegyrics” Journal of Persianate Studies Vol. 3 (2010), 1-25. This article focuses on the use of the garden to articulate ideas about patronage in a poem by the Persian poet Manuchehri (d. 1040) who worked at the Ghaznavid court.

