

History as a Creative Act: A Conversation with the New Director of Middle East Studies

Shahzad Bashir, the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Humanities, became director of the Watson Institute's Middle East Studies program on July 1, 2018. Bashir specializes in the intellectual and social histories of the Islamic societies of Iran and Central and South Asia. Before coming to Brown in 2017, he was professor of Islamic studies at Stanford University for 10 years.

Bashir sat down with us to discuss his research, teaching, and vision for Middle East Studies at Brown.

WI: What is the focus of your scholarship?

SB: My first few books are on the evolution of movements that combined religion and politics from the 15th century through the present in Iran, central Asia, and South Asia—areas in which Persian was the major language of culture. I was very interested in messianic movements—for example, Sufi groups that became politically prominent, sometimes actually turning into dynasties. More broadly, I've always been interested in how ideas matter for large-scale societal changes. At the moment, I have become more interested in the way history is created.

WI: You've talked about questioning the idea of a reliable historical narrator. What does that mean?

SB: The basic notion is that anything that is said about the past is a claim that is being made in the present. For a current discussion, you have to construct a past, which you then use for your particular purposes. When we read people who are commenting on the past, we tend to think we know what actually happened. But we *don't* know what happened: we know about *what someone said* about what happened. Most of my efforts recently have been examining the lenses through which the past is constructed.

My work is concerned very much with evaluating 19th-century European philosophies of history, because whether we like it or not, we've been conditioned by them. I try to take questions about the problem of history and pose these to people who are writing 500 to 700 years ago. In other words, I focus very much on the frames within which history is produced, rather than what is being talked about.

WI: Do you find your students are interested in this question of frames?

SB: The graduate students are very interested in it, because in some ways this is connected to the destabilization of knowledge production in the academy over the past 30 or 40 years, by movements like deconstructionism, Foucauldian analysis, and neohistoricism. And of course when it comes to the Middle East, there's also Orientalism.

But the question that's been less studied is, What's the solution? We still have to produce knowledge. How then to approach it? What I am trying to do is find the new modes, new methods of looking at this. To get away from notions of objectivity so that we see ourselves as participants in the production of the past. It was a creative act for the 19th-century historians, as it was for someone writing in the 8th century.

WI: You are a professor of religious studies, but you speak like a historian.

SB: I identify very much as a historian in the sense that I am most invested in historical questions. Until now, most of my work has been looking at histories in which religion was central. Now it's actually moved a bit away from that, toward history as such. The good thing about religious studies is that it has no method of its own. So you can be a historian, you can be a philosopher, you can be an anthropologist.

WI: Your study of religion puts the idea of creative history or questioning historical narrators into practice. Can you walk us through an example?

SB: My general attitude is that we have to get very comfortable with instability. That's where it's interesting. If we're looking for stability ... the world is just too complex for it. Instead we can focus on why certain people come to represent certain things in a certain way.

Take the history of Islam. The first modern books on the topic were produced in the late 19th century in Europe and were written by people who were able to read the original materials in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and so on. They read those materials and constructed a notion of what the history of Islam is, and this became very stabilized in the late 19th century, and now this is the history that Muslims most often tell about themselves.

History becomes part of a certain way of thinking about what a fact is, what knowledge is. It becomes interesting then to wonder why it is that they produced *this* history. And the best way to do that is by looking at other versions.

With respect to Islam, we can look to when the new Muslim empires were created in the Middle East in the 9th century. These states were inheritors of ancient Rome and ancient Persia. And so they processed all the previous material to create a certain way of thinking about who they were and what their past was.

In the 13th century, the Mongols come and destroyed these states. Right after that, there was a bonanza of writing history, because now this world had been made sense of in a new way. So they in turn re-processed the past. The same thing happened in the early 16th century, for other reasons, and then in the 19th century. Each time, people recreated, rethought what the past was.

WI: They're storytelling.

SB: Exactly. But it's a storytelling that also depends heavily on being able to claim what a fact is. There are rules of causality. If you're writing in the 15th century, citing a miracle as a reason for why something happened is entirely normal. In the 19th century, you can't do that. Every time a very basic notion of what reality is changes, the notion of history has to change.

It's destabilizing if one wants a "real" history. But for me this is actually much truer to what human experience actually is. For me, this is a way to fully humanize the people who wrote these materials, and to see them as enmeshed in the process as much as we are in processes that affect us.

WI: How do you feel, as a humanist, sitting in an institute of social scientists?

SB: I certainly do identify very much as a humanist. The strength of the humanities is in the details, in the particularities of language, texts, materials, iconography, and so on. But the social scientists provide thinking about structures and how to think about large-scale patterns. I would call myself a humanist whose work is inflected strongly by the qualitative social sciences.

WI: What has been your experience in the undergraduate classroom here? How do you find the students?

SB: I taught two undergraduate courses last year. I found the students exceedingly willing to engage with the materials, to rethink them through active discussion. In my own work, I am very interested in rethinking categories. So when I teach I'm inclined not just to assign a reading, but actually to ask students to think about why this person is saying what they're saying. How can we question it? For that kind of teaching attitude, the Brown students are just amazingly good, and attentive.

WI: What will you teach next semester?

SB: I'm teaching an undergraduate seminar next semester, which is called On Human Longing: Persian and Urdu Poetry. It looks at poetic expression through translation, but also through films and music videos, and at how societally significant it is in Iran and Central and South Asia.

WI: What interested you in the role of director of Middle East Studies?

SB: What compelled me is the way the Middle East Studies program here has developed. Brown is quite unique for the study of the Middle East at an advanced level in the United States. Until the end of the 20th century, there were a few professors here who were working in Arabic and history. After 9/11, there was more interest from a security standpoint. Then, in 2012, when [founding director] Beshara Doumani came, the university committed extra resources to match his vision. And that vision was constructed on not replicating the shortcomings that have happened other places – the tendency in Middle East studies to be inward looking.

So now we need to combine learning the languages and deep specific knowledge about these societies with an intellectual agenda that is forward looking, that attends to all the complexities these societies are contending with, without being subsumed by any one area.

Beshara's leadership allowed for the reinvention of fields, such as with Palestinian studies. I'm trying to do something similar with Islam and the humanities. That was actually one of the major reasons I even came to Brown in 2017.

WI: How would you describe your leadership style?

SB: My general attitude is to facilitate. This semester I made a concerted effort to have meetings separately with faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates, to get a sense of what people are feeling. Generally, I think the program is doing well and growing.

I am not inclined to build an exclusive enclave for the field. In a way, I prefer the idea of building a kind of republic, with citizens who want to be a part of it. I think that as a director, one has to have a vision,

since someone has to make decisions. But the more open and inviting that decision-making can be, the better.

The other thing is, the Middle East is not in any way homogenous. I want to make sure we represent this diversity. We started a new series on Iran, for example. As for Turkey, we've improved the teaching of Turkish, and plan to teach high-level Turkish from here onward. The same for Persian.

Language by itself is kind of a dead end unless we can provide related courses and events as well, on politics, music, art, and so on. I want us to see the complexities of these worlds.

- Sarah C. Baldwin