

Regional

Scholar probes ideas about Islam, Middle East

How do we make sense of the Middle East? There are so many different people, cultures and religions there – oftentimes with conflicting opinions – that it seems that even attempting to make sense of the region is an insurmountable task. Yet, one local scholar has devoted much of his career wrestling with these very questions.

Steve Tamari, a professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, has a rich and varied personal background. His father worked for a relief organization, and as a consequence, Tamari grew up in places as varied as East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, Algeria and Haiti. He returned to the United States to attend high school and college, but later lived in France, Germany, Syria, Palestine, Israel, Algeria and Lebanon.

“Part of my purpose in my teaching and my research is to bring the perspective of one who has traveled around the world, who has lived around the world to the classroom,” he said.

Tamari brings this valuable international experience and perspective to his teaching and to his scholarship. He teaches the history of the Middle East at SIUE and his research specialty is 16th and 17th century Syria, with a particular interest in the Ottoman Empire.

Tamari has published a number of articles, presented papers at professional conferences, and received two Fulbright awards to research and teach abroad. He also writes a blog entitled “Inside the Middle” through which he discusses teaching and researching about Middle Eastern history. He won an SIUE Teaching Award and received an Excellence in Undergraduate Education grant to support his work.

Tamari said that the biggest challenge he faces in teaching students about Middle Eastern history is dispelling the stereotypes that many people have formed about the people and the region. The media often portray Middle Eastern people as divided by ancient grudges and feuds based upon religion and ethnic differences.

“We tend to view the Middle East as a region plagued by extremism and violence,” Tamari said. “It is a challenge to help students overcome these negative stereotypes, especially of Muslims.”



SIUE photo

Dr. Tamari with students in front of the New Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey.

Tamari said that television and movies dangerously reinforce the image of people in the Middle East as unshaven extremists who want to live by medieval rules.

To break down some of these stereotypes, Tamari takes SIUE students to the Middle East and he brings the Middle East to SIUE through the Internet. Tamari has led classes to Turkey and had plans for Syria.

“On the eve of the Syrian uprising in

2011, in the midst of what we call the Arab Spring, I had five students scheduled to go with me to Syria,” he said. “We had rented a flat in the middle of the old city of Damascus, I had speakers set up and we bought our tickets. Then the uprising took place and within nine months you had a civil war underway. We did everything but actually go there.

“Now the problem really is trying to put people as close to the Middle East as possible in a time when it’s very hard

to be there,” he said. “What I’ve focused on is bringing the Middle East to SIUE.” To that end, Tamari regularly brings guest speakers and has organized film series. This semester he has introduced a Web-based component to his class on the Middle East that allows SIUE students to engage with their counterparts in Europe, the Middle East and the broader Muslim world.

Some of the classroom time is spent interacting with students in Europe, the

Stephen Hansen College Talk

Middle East and South Asia on topics related to Islam and the Middle East via a Web camera. Tamari said that a trained moderator facilitates the interactions. Even with such technology, teaching college students about Middle East history does have its challenges, Tamari added.

“I don’t think it’s unique to our students, but in the United States and in the Western world, particularly after 9/11, there’s been a lot of negative stereotypes about the Muslim world and about Middle Easterners,” he said. “I think there’s a deeper sense within the Western world and within Christendom as well, of ambivalence about Muslims. I feel like my challenge is to give my students who come from predominately Western, Christian orientations an understanding that Middle Easterners and Muslims are actually very much like everyone else. It may sound trite, but given what many people think of the region it’s no easy feat.”

One of Tamari’s special research interests is the Ottoman Empire, which spanned centuries and covered all of North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, Greece and the Balkans. It reached as far into Europe as Vienna. This vast and sprawling empire encompassed a variety of ethnic groups and religions and yet, according to Tamari, was able to maintain peace and flourish. In trying to understand how the Ottoman Turks were able to accomplish this task while modern nations in the Middle East have not, Tamari discovered an important characteristic about the Middle East and the concept of nationalism.

“Nationalism is a Western concept where people transfer their main loyalty and identity to an entity larger than their specific group or region,” he explained. “In the Middle East, people form attachments to a place and to the land, but not to a more heterogeneous and larger entity such as a nation. “This system of beliefs helps to explain why people in the Middle East are so tenacious in their loyalty and attachment to place and land.”