

RETHINKING THE REGION:

New Approaches to 9-12 U.S. Curriculum on the Middle East and North Africa

UNIT: EMPIRE AND NATION

It is perhaps unsurprising that in our review and analysis of five of the most popular history textbooks assigned in U.S. high schools, the theme of Empire and Nation emerged. Specifically, we noticed that while attention was given to the empires that emerged in (and extended beyond) the MENA region, these empires were often simply reduced to “Muslim” empires. Certainly, many of these empires did have Muslim majority populations and rulers, but by naming these empires “Muslim,” the diversity of the region, and indeed of the empires themselves, is hidden. Furthermore, as with other units in the resource, we found that the writing is done from a very Eurocentric perspective and that the “Muslim world” — as it is often referred to in the texts — is portrayed as somewhat backward and often contrasted with the “modern” European civilization (which was never referred to as the “Christian world”). Here, modernity is implicitly and at times explicitly equated with ‘better’ and ‘more rational.’ This unit therefore seeks to broaden the view of Empire and Nation within the region by reflecting on the diversity of the people within the MENA region through an illustration of the differing styles of leadership and constructions of identity; ways of governing; and the treatment of minorities in response to colonialism and imperialism.

A central objective of the unit is to challenge the notion that innovation is solely a Western concept. A second objective is to show the ways in which colonial encounters shaped the ideas of Nation in the MENA region. This is reflected through an examination of both secular and religious leaders in three different countries within the region as well as through poetry and various revolutions within the region.

The first lesson — titled “Innovations in Empire” — examines the millet system, which was established to organize minorities during the Ottoman rule. The second lesson, “Three Leaders, Three Traits, Three Paths,” highlights both secular and religious leaders that galvanized their respective nations in very different ways and with very different understandings of nationalism. The final lesson, “Revolution Poetry,” explores the unique history of poetry and the role it has played in inspiring revolutions across the Middle East.