

Elias Muhanna

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Education

- Ph.D., Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, Harvard University, 2012.
- A.M., Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, Harvard University, 2008.
- A.M., Comparative Literature & Literary Theory, University of Pennsylvania, 2004.
- A.B., *magna cum laude*, Linguistics and Philosophy, Duke University, 2000.

Professional appointments

- Director of the Center for Middle East Studies, Brown University, 2024-present
- Associate Professor of History, Brown University, 2020-present
- Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, Brown University, 2019-present
- Faculty Fellow, Center for Middle East Studies, Brown University, 2018-20
- Faculty Fellow, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2016-18
- Manning Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature, Brown University, 2014-2019
- Assistant Professor, Comparative Literature, Brown University, 2012-2014
- Visiting Scholar, Program on Arab Reform & Democracy, Stanford University, 2011-2012

Publications

Monographs

The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition (Princeton University Press, 2018)

- Morris D. Forkosch prize from the *Journal of the History of Ideas*
- John Nicholas Brown Prize from the Medieval Academy

Translations

Hanna Diyab, *The Book of Travels*, ed. Johannes Stephan, trans. Elias Muhanna (New York: NYU Press, Library of Arabic Literature, 2021).

Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Universal Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016).

- One of NPR's Best Books of the Year
- One of *The Guardian* Best Books of the Year

Edited volumes

The Languages of the Mamluk Empire, special issue of *Mamluk Studies Review*, vol XXVIII (2025).

The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

Articles and book chapters

“Realms of Information in the Medieval Islamic World.” In *Information: A Historical Companion*. Edited by Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja Goeing, and Anthony Grafton. (Princeton University Press, 2021).

“The Art of Copying: Mamluk Manuscript Culture in Theory and Practice.” In *Autograph/holograph and authorial manuscripts in Arabic script*. Edited by Frédéric Bauden and Élise Franssen. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

“What Does ‘Born Digital’ Mean?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50 (2018): 110-112.

“Islamic & Middle East Studies and the Digital Turn.” In *The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies*, edited by Elias Muhanna, 1-9. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.

“The Scattered and the Gathered: Questioning Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi.” In *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, edited by Alireza Korangy, Roy P. Mottahedeh, and William Granara. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.

Articles for *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*: “Encyclopaedias, Arabic”; “Ibn Hamdun”; “Ibn Fadl Allah (in press, forthcoming 2018).

“Why Was the 14th Century a Century of Arabic Encyclopaedism?” In *Encyclopaedias and Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, edited by Jason König and Greg Woolf, 343-56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

“The Sultan’s New Clothes: Ottoman-Mamluk Gift Exchange in the 15th Century.” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 189-207. (*Winner of the Margaret B. Sevcenko Prize from the Historians of Islamic Art Association*)

“Ilyâs al-Mawsilî.” In *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, c. 1350-1830*, edited by J. Lowry & D. Stewart. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2009.

Selected essays and commentary

“Reinventing Islam,” *London Review of Books*, Feb. 25, 2021

“Near Past,” *The New Yorker* (Talk of the Town, Feb. 11, 2019)

“Piano Lessons in the Panopticon,” *The New York Times* (Opinion, September 16, 2018).

“A New History of Arabia, Written in Stone,” *The New Yorker* (Culture Desk, online edition), May 23, 2018.

“Mashrou‘ Leila and the Nightclub’s Political Power,” *The New Yorker* (online), July 31, 2017.

“What Gertrude Bell’s Letters Remind Us About the Founding of Iraq,” *The New Yorker* (online), June 14, 2017.

“The Contradictions of Reza Aslan’s ‘Believer’,” *The New Yorker* (online), Apr. 19, 2017.

“A Lesson in Emotional Geography,” *The New York Times* (opinion), Nov. 19, 2016.

“The Fate of a Joke in Lebanon,” *The New Yorker* (News Desk, online edition), Sept. 26, 2015.

“Hacking the Humanities,” *The New Yorker* (Culture Desk, online edition), July 7, 2015.

“Iraq and Syria’s Poetic Borders,” *The New Yorker* (Page-Turner, online edition), August 13, 2014.

“Translating ‘Frozen’ into Arabic,” *The New Yorker* (Page-Turner, online edition), May 30, 2014.

“Letter from Lebanon: A Bookshop Burns,” *The New Yorker* (Page-Turner, online), Jan. 16, 2014.

Book reviews

- Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, in *The Nation* (Jan. 6-11, 2016).
- Carl Petry, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society*, in *Mamluk Studies Review* 18 (2014-15): 355-57.
- Ramzi Baalbaki, Saleh Said Agha and Tarif Khalidi, eds., *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73.1 (April 2014): 176-78.
- Matthew Ingalls, "Subtle Innovation within Networks of Convention: The Life, Thought, and Legacy of Zakariyya al-Ansari," Ph.D. diss., Yale (2011), in *Dissertation Reviews* (May 10, 2013).
- Reza Aslan, *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*, in *The Nation* (Aug 29, 2011).
- Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle*, in *The Nation* (July 15, 2010).
- Eugene Rogan's, *The Arabs: A History*, in *The National* (December 4, 2009).

Invited lectures

- "Hanna Diyab and his Voyage to Paris," University of Chicago Arabic Majlis, May 20, 2022.
- "A Syrian Storyteller in 18th-century Paris," Stanford University PATH colloquium, May 4, 2021.
- "The Accidental Encyclopedia: Medieval Arabic Book Culture and Encyclopedic Creep," Plenary address, "The Total Library: Aspirations for Complete Knowledge in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," Barnard College Med-Ren Studies Program (December 5, 2020).
- "Antiquarianism and Encyclopedism in the Fourteenth Century," Islamic Antiquarianism Conference, Bard Graduate Center, (May 9-10, 2019).
- "A Syrian Traveler in the 18th-century Mediterranean: Hanna Dyab and his Book of Travels," Farouk Mustafa Memorial Lecture Series, Univ. of Chicago (April 5, 2019).
- "The Analog Humanities in a Digital World." Keynote lecture, "Whither Islamicate Digital Humanities" colloquium, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Dec. 13-15, 2018).
- "The Paper Hippotamus: Literary and Historical Knowledge in a 14th-century encyclopedia." Arabic Studies Seminar, Columbia University (November 29, 2018).
- "Exploring Vernacular Expression in the Digital Realm." DH Asia 2018 conference, Stanford University (April 27, 2018).
- "They Love Me in Shiraz: Teaching the Medieval Islamicate Bestseller." Medieval Bestsellers vs. Masterpieces conference, Univ. of California at Santa Barbara (May 6, 2017).
- "The Register of the Arabs: Classical Arabic Poetry and Distant Reading." Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ (April 5, 2017).
- "What is a Classic? Arabic and the Horizons of Translation." Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, NYU, (Feb 27, 2017).
- "Comparative Literature and Islamicate Languages." Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, Stanford University, January 31, 2017.
- "Reading the Encyclopedia: A Talk on Literary Translation." Distinguished Public Talk at Hamad bin Khalifa University. Doha, Qatar, October 31, 2016.
- "The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition." Invited talk at Early Sciences Working Group, Harvard University, October 25, 2016.

- “Textual Topographies: Some Notes on Patterned Corpora of Arabic Literary Texts.” Digital Ottoman Platform Workshop, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University (June 8-12, 2015)
- “Digital Scholarship in Islamic Studies: A Workshop” (co-taught by Prof. Roy Mottahedeh and Andras Riedlmayer), Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (April 23, 2015).
- “Digital Scholarship in Islamic Studies: A Workshop.” University of Chicago Islamic Studies Workshop (April 16, 2015).
- “Elements of Style: Modeling Mannerism in Classical Arabic Poetry.” DH Forum, University of Chicago (April 16, 2015)
- “New Books from Old Books: Compilation and Authorship in the Mamluk Period.” The Histories of Books in the Islamic World, CSIC, Madrid (March 9-11, 2015).
- “Reading Post-Classically: Poetry and Encyclopedism in the Mamluk Empire.” Dept. of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University (Dec. 11, 2014).
- “Vernacular.” *Political Concepts* conference, Brown University (November 16, 2013).
- “A Mamluk Encyclopedist’s Working Method: The Evidence from Several Autograph Manuscripts of al-Nuwayri’s *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab*.” Autograph/Holograph Manuscripts in Arabic Script Conference, Université de Liège, (October 10-11, 2013).
- “The Aesthetics of Accumulation in Mamluk Literature.” Yale Arabic Colloquium, (March 27, 2013).
- “Archiving the Revolution.” Habits of Living, Brown University, (March 22, 2013).
- “The Imperial Context of Mamluk Literature.” Delivered at the Arabic Studies Seminar, Columbia University, October 25, 2012.
- “Delineating the Post-Classical Muslim Humanitas.” “Imagining Muslim Humanities” Symposium Duke University, April 13-14, 2012.
- “Mamluk Encyclopaedias as Tokens of Decadence and Renaissance.” “Inhithat: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History” Symposium, American University of Beirut, Lebanon, December 8-10, 2010.
- “Historicizing *adab* in Mamluk Literature: The Case of al-Nuwayri’s Encyclopaedia *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab*.” Foundations of Arabic Literature Colloquium, Yale University, April 17, 2010.

Conference papers

- “Proofreading the Nahda: The Role of Editors in Shaping a New Arabic Literature,” Middle East Studies Association (Nov. 16, 2019).
- “Paronomastic Play in al-Safadi’s *Jinan al-jinas*.” School of Mamluk Studies, American University of Beirut, Lebanon (May 13, 2017).
- “The European Reception of the Mamluk Encyclopedias.” School of Mamluk Studies, University of Chicago (June 23-25, 2016).
- “Vernacular and Cosmopolitan Aesthetics in Mamluk Literature.” School of Mamluk Studies, Université de Liège, Belgium (June 25-28, 2015).
- “Innovation and Tradition in Scribal (Best) Practices: The Concept of *istilab* in Chancery Literature.” School of Mamluk Studies, Venice (June 2014).
- “Reception Studies and the Post-Classical Islamic World.” American Comparative Literature Association, New York City (March 22, 2014).
- “Orientalism & Encyclopedism: The European Reception of the Mamluk Encyclopedias,” Modern Language Association (January 9, 2014).
- “The Database and the Eyebrow.” Opening remarks delivered at the Conference on the Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies, Brown University, (October 24, 2013).

- “If it Walks Like a Genre, Quacks Like a Genre, and Swims Like a Genre: Some Observations about Large-Scale Compilation in the Mamluk Period.” American Oriental Society Annual Meeting, Portland OR, March 16, 2013.
- “Antoine Galland’s Eastern Muse: Hanna ibn Diyab’s Contribution to the 1001 Nights.” American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) Annual Meeting, New Orleans, April 1-4, 2010.
- “Eighteen Words for Snow and Everything Else: Eloquence and Encyclopaedism in the Mamluk Period.” Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Annual Meeting, Boston, Nov. 24, 2009.
- “Semantics or Poetics: Reframing Ibn Jinni’s Theory of Greater Derivation.” American Oriental Society (AOS) Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, March 15, 2008.
- “The Word as Wound: The Meaning of *kalam* in the Qur’an.” Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Annual Meeting, Montréal, November 18, 2007.
- “The Sultan’s New Clothes: Ottoman-Mamluk Imperial Gift Exchange in the 15th Century.” Historians of Islamic Art Association (HIAA) Majlis, New York NY, February 17, 2007.
- “The Wandering Sheep: Irony & Imagination in Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s *al-Hawamil wa-l-Shawamil*.” Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Annual Meeting, Boston, November 20, 2006.
- “Imagining the New World: Ilyas al-Mawsili, Hanna al-Maruni, and the *1,001 Nights*.” Middle Eastern History and Theory Conference, University of Chicago, May 14th, 2005.
- “How the *Qaf* Lost its Spots: Aesthetics of Ambiguity in Medieval Arabic Inscriptions.” Penn Humanities Forum, University of Pennsylvania, March 27, 2004.
- “Anastas, al-Shidyāq, and their Dictionaries.” Middle East Studies Regional Conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara, March 20, 2004.

Academic honors and distinctions

- John Rowe Workman Award for Excellence in Teaching in the Humanities, Brown University, 2024
- John Nicholas Brown Prize from the Medieval Academy, 2022.
- Morris D. Forkosch Book Prize from the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2018.
- British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize, 2019, runner-up.
- Manning Assistant Professorship, Brown University, 2014-present
- Bruce D. Craig Dissertation Prize, *Mamluk Studies Review*, 2012
- Margaret B. Sevchenko Prize, Historians of Islamic Art Association, 2008
- Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, Harvard University, 2007

Research grants and fellowships

- Whiting Foundation Public Engagement Fellowship, 2017-18.
- American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship, 2015-16.
- Humanities Initiative Research & Teaching Award, Brown University, 2014-2015
- Humanities Initiative Research & Teaching Award, Brown University, 2013-2014
- Humanities Initiative Research & Teaching Award, Brown University, 2012-2013
- Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities, Harvard University, 2010-2011
- Friends of Princeton Library Research Grant, 2008
- Harvard University Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Doctoral Fellowship, 2005-2010.
- University of Pennsylvania, William Penn Fellowship, 2003-2005
- Fulbright Scholarship, Morocco, 2000-2001

Conferences and workshops organized

- Ninth Conference of the School of Mamluk Studies (June 8-10, 2023, Brown University)
- “Digitizing Early Arabic Printed Books,” (October 21, 2016, Brown University)
- “Distant Reading and the Islamic Archive” (October 16, 2015, Brown University)
- “Textual Corpora & the Digital Islamic Humanities” (October 17-18, 2014, Brown University)
- “The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies” (October 24-25, 2013, Brown Univ.)

Teaching

- The 1,001 Nights (COLT 0510K)
- Narratives of Decline in Arabic Literature (COLT 1813A)
- The Classical Arabic Literary Tradition (COLT 1310A)
- The Encyclopedic Imagination from Pliny to Google Books (COLT 2820Z)
- Desire and Sexuality in Arabic Literature (COLT 0811O)
- The Problem of the Vernacular (COLT 1813)
- Islam and Liberalism (COLT 1440G)
- A Classical Islamic Education: Readings in Arabic Literature (COLT 1310E)
- Before Wikipedia (COLT 0610Q)
- Literary Bestsellers of the Islamic World (COLT 0812H)
- Orientalism in Theory and Practice (COLT 2821M)
- The Arab Renaissance (COLT 1310J)
- The Quran and its Readers (COLT 0711L)
- The Literature of Muslim Spain (COLT 1310M)

Languages

English Native

Levantine Arabic: Native

Classical Arabic: Fluent

French: Reading knowledge

German: Reading knowledge

Persian: Intermediate reading knowledge