

Professor's Work Sheds Light on Islam, Past and Present
by Janette Ballard



While most Americans catch news updates of crisis in the Middle East sporadically, Andrea Stanton has her finger on the pulse of the region. The assistant professor of Islamic studies regularly has a browser page opened to Al Jazeera's live stream. Her interest in the region runs from its history to media and religious identity.

Stanton has a PhD in Middle Eastern History from Columbia University. While pursuing her degree, she spent summers in Damascus studying Arabic and growing fond of the people and the country.

“The refugee crisis today is almost impossible for anyone who knows Syria and Syrians to believe. Syria reminded me a lot of my childhood – different religion and culture, yes, but the same focus on family, family values, a kind of general but non-extreme conservatism and a general contentment with life,” said Stanton, who grew up in Iowa. “Today, these same people struggle to survive as refugees and see their future slipping away day by day.”

“I don't see any hope for displaced and refugee Syrians in the short term, but having spent so much time in the country and having met so many strong, bright, committed Syrians, I believe that this country will have a brighter future than we see today,” she said.

Stanton is often sought after to provide expert commentary on the Syrian crisis and other contemporary Middle Eastern issues. She has been interviewed recently on the evolving role of women in Islamist militant groups, including this piece by CNN in January.

Early in her teaching career at Sarah Lawrence College and the American University of Beirut, Stanton realized that her interests and research involved questions of religious identity and practice, and how those had evolved over time.

“History for me is a crucial lens through which to examine contemporary questions, like what role people in Muslim-majority countries think Islam or religion in general should play in public life,” Stanton said. “I believe that bringing history into Islamic studies helps us be able to better address assumptions that people today, Muslim and non-Muslim, have about Islam.”

Stanton believes that the current controversy over hostile depictions of Muhammad by *Charlie Hebdo* misses the point in saying that Islam forbids images of Muhammad.

“Sunni Muslims today by and large feel that Muhammad should not be depicted visually, but Shii Muslims have many artistic depictions of Muhammad and his family,” she said. “The Qur'an says nothing about visual art or a prohibition on visual depictions of Muhammad. Saying that ‘Islam forbids images of Muhammad’ plays into stereotypes about Islam as an irrational or

inherently extremist religion. History helps us go beyond the stereotype, and understand the complexity of the Muslim world today.”

Stanton joined the DU religious studies department in 2010 to teach Islamic studies. Her research interests include media and politics. Her first book, *This is Jerusalem Calling: State Radio in Mandate Palestine*, was published in 2013.

This winter quarter, Stanton is on mini-sabbatical working on a project about the hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. She currently is in Beirut conducting research on this project.

“I’m looking at the impact that broadcast media—radio, television, film and internet—have had since the mid-1900s on Muslims’ experience of the hajj, and how that is intersecting with the advances in transportation and the growth of the Muslim population worldwide. Together, this puts tremendous pressures on the number of pilgrims who can go on hajj each year,” she said.

Stanton enjoys sharing her expertise with the community and offers an opportunity for area educators, at the K-12 as well as college level, to develop knowledge of Islam, past and present, in an annual, one-day workshop. Participants learn practical techniques for teaching about Islam, as well as prepare for consulting or non-profit work with Muslim communities in the United States and abroad.

Last year, she and a colleague from George Mason University were awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant to host a three-week summer institute at the University of Denver for middle and high school teachers entitled “**Teaching Connected Histories of the Mediterranean.**” The institute, to be held July 2015, will offer teachers the chance to refresh their knowledge and consider new ways to teach about the Mediterranean, past and present, including art history, religion, commerce and society, as well as political histories.

“I’m personally grateful to have been awarded such a big grant, but also delighted because to me the NEH summer institutes fit so well with DU’s mission, to be a great private university dedicated to the public good,” said Stanton. “Educating the next generation is 100% about contributing to the public good, and I’m honored to be hosting the first NEH summer institute held at our university.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ctB7gFV5c4>