

# ISLA370

## The Qur'an: History and Interpretation

McGill University  
Institute of Islamic Studies  
Tuesdays 10:35am-1:25pm  
Winter 2024  
MOR 328

**Instructor:** Professor Sara Abdel-Latif

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**Office Hours:** By appointment



### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the history of the codification of the Qur'an, its content and form, and modes of interpretation in both the modern and pre-modern periods. In class, we will explore the historical circumstances of the Qur'anic revelation, key ideas conveyed in the Qur'anic text, the variety of ways Muslims engage with the Qur'an as sacred text and material object, as well as different

schools of qur'anic exegesis, from classical hermeneutics to modern approaches including queer and feminist interpretations of the Qur'an.

Prerequisites: ISLA200 or permission of instructor.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Describe the history of the Qur'an as a sacred scripture and reflect on its role in Muslim and global cultural heritage
- Explain different ways Muslims experience and interact with the Qur'an
- Identify different communities of the Qur'an and the diversity of their theological beliefs
- Access tools to interpret religious texts through a variety of methods and sources
- Utilize foundational academic skills in research, analysis, and argumentation
- Employ critical thinking and effectively communicate complex ideas

## **CLASS EXPECTATIONS**

Our class consists of lectures and workshops. You are expected to complete required readings prior to each lecture and invited to participate verbally and through in-class activities in order to contribute to an environment of engaged and respectful discussion. Suggested further readings can help enrich your perspective. These further readings are not mandatory but are available to you should you want to learn more about various topics. In-class workshops will deepen your understanding of lecture material and form the basis of your class portfolio, due at the end of the semester.

You are expected to complete your assignments before the stated deadlines and to communicate in a timely manner to your instructor should unexpected circumstances arise that may interfere with your participation in and completion of course components.

You are expected to keep updated on course announcements, assignment guidelines, and changes to the course through MyCourses and your McGill email address. Make sure you have access to MyCourses. Communicate with me immediately if you do not.

Our subject matter engages religion, gender, society, and culture on a number of levels, including personal and political. I aim to provide nuanced and diverse presentations and interpretations of Islam in lecture material, readings, and discussion. All discussion and analysis in our course should be rooted in mutual respect, informed understanding, cultural sensitivity, and open-mindedness to other people's points of view. I ask you to help me and your fellow peers create a safe and inclusive environment in our lecture hall. Respectful discussion, open-minded active listening, and thoughtful presentations of diverse points of view will help us all gain the most benefit from this course. I thank you for your cooperation as we all learn to skillfully navigate a beautifully diverse social context both in our classroom, on campus, and in our educational material.

## REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS

Abdel Haleem, M. A., trans. *The Qur'an*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. (Available at Paragraphe Bookstore)

Sells, Michael Anthony. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Third Edition. London: Oneworld Academic, 2023. (Available at Paragraphe Bookstore.)

All other readings are available on MyCourses or on the McGill Library website.

## EVALUATION

Midterm	25%	Date: <b><u>Tuesday, February 6<sup>th</sup></u></b>
Interpreting a Sura	40%	Due: <b><u>Friday, March 15<sup>th</sup> at 11:59PM</u></b>
Class Portfolio	35%	Due: <b><u>Tuesday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> at 11:59PM</u></b>

### **Midterm** (25%):

Your midterm will consist of 25 Multiple choice questions testing your knowledge of key terms and historical moments in the story of the Qur'an. The midterm must be attended in-person unless prior authorization for alternative arrangements has been arranged through the [Student Accessibility and Achievement Office](#).

### **Interpreting a Sura** (40%)

Each student will choose a sura, which they will analyze thoroughly by: 1) locating a manuscript folio with some of the chapter's verses, 2) locating a recitation of the chapter, 3) comparing translations, 4) identifying different interpretations, 5) producing a well-researched translation and exegesis with strong citations. More instructions will be released on MyCourses and parts of the project will be worked on in class.

### **Qur'anic Studies Portfolio** (35% total = 7 x 5% each):

As part of lecture on Tuesdays, you will be given in-class exercises to develop a deeper understanding of the topics discussed in lecture. You must be present for 7 out of 10 of these in-class workshops and submit completed in-class exercises for feedback. At the end of the term, after implementing the feedback you received from me and refining each submission, you will submit a complete class portfolio through MyCourses which will be graded. Each of the 7 sections of your portfolio is worth 5 marks for a total of 35 marks of your full course grade. It is your responsibility to plan your schedule ahead of time and ensure your attendance at 7 of the 10 workshops as **no alternative arrangements can be made** except through the [Student Accessibility and Achievement Office](#).. If you attend and submit more than 7 workshops, your best 7 will apply to your final grade.

**ALL EXTENSIONS MUST BE ARRANGED AT MINIMUM 2 DAYS IN ADVANCE OF THE DEADLINE** (except in the case of documented medical or personal emergencies).

Work submitted for evaluation as part of this course may be checked with text-matching software.

## **REGARDING THE USE OF CHAT-GPT AND OTHER AI TOOLS:**

For the purposes of this course, I want to discourage you from using AI in any way to generate, complete, or modify any aspect of your assignments. This means I would prefer you do not use AI to produce ideas, outlines, paragraphs, sentences, or edit your writing or tone in any way.

This course was designed to be hands-on and experiential so that you gain a deep understanding of the historical emergence of the Qur'an and its many uses and applications in Muslim lived experience. I designed your assignments as a learning journey that illuminates your academic habits and offers you the opportunity to develop and refine a range of transferable skills over the course of the semester. AI will inhibit this learning journey. Additionally, AI produces lackluster academic work. So, you may earn low or failing grades by utilizing AI for your assignments.

**HOWEVER**, if you still choose to use AI for any portion of this course and specifically in your assignments, you must document your use of AI tools in your assignments and **especially** in your final class portfolio to maintain ethics in scholarship. Missing documentation may be considered an academic offence. The documentation should include what tool(s) were used, how they were used including specific prompts inputted, and how the results from the AI were incorporated into any submitted work. If you have any question about the use of AI applications for course work, please speak with the instructor.

A portion of the course involves in-class written work. This may be used as a baseline for assessing whether AI was utilized in your assignment submissions, so please either avoid AI completely or cite any use of AI for this course.

## **LATE PENALTIES**

Any work submitted late will be penalized 2% per day (weekends included). If you need an extension, you must email the instructor **before the deadline by at least two days**, except in the case of documented medical or family emergencies.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Week 1: Tuesday, January 9, 2024**

##### **Studying the Qur'an**

- Q1, Q96:1-5
- Sells, "Introduction: Approaching the Qur'an," pp. 1-5, "The Opening," pp. 42-43.
- Haleem, "Introduction," pp. ix-x, "The Structure of the Qur'an," xvi-xvii.

## HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO THE QUR'AN

### Week 2: Tuesday, January 16, 2024

#### **Pre-Islamic Arabia**

- Q105, Q106, Q45:24-26
- Q2:124-129, Q14:35-40
- Sells, “Muhammad, the Qur’an, and the Poets,” pp. 5-11.
- Sells, “The Elephant,” and “Quraysh,” pp. 116-119.

#### **Hagiographical Sources on the Prophet**

- Q73, Q74, Q53:1-16, Q81
- Sells, “The Overturning,” pp. 44-47, “The Star,” 141-150.
- Wahidi, “Al-Muddaththir,” *Occasions of Revelation*, pp. 160-161.
- Haleem, “A Chronology of the Qur’an” xxxvii-xxxviii.

**Further reading:** Berg, “Context: Muhammad,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an*, 200-210.

**[ADD/DROP DEADLINE]**

### Week 3: Tuesday, January 23, 2024

#### **Codification**

- Q29:48-51
- Haleem, “The Compilation of the Qur’an,” xv-xvi.
- Gilliot, “Creation of a Fixed Text,” pp. 41–58.

**Further reading:** Motzki, “Alternative Accounts of the Qur’ān’s Formation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, 59–76.

## LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE QUR'AN

### Week 4: Tuesday, January 30, 2024

#### **Meccan Chapters**

- Q82, Q86, Q89, Q93
- Sells, “The Early Meccan Suras,” pp. 13-28.
- Sells, “The Tearing,” “The Night-Traveling Star,” “The Dawn,” “The Morning Hours,” pp. 48-51, 64-67, 74-77, 86-87.

Try out: <https://corpus.quran.com>

## **Week 5: Tuesday, February 6, 2024 - IN-CLASS MIDTERM**

### **Medinan Chapters**

- Q2:1-152, Q2:285-286, Q55
- Haleem, "Meccan and Medinan Suras," "Stylistic Features," xix-xxi, xvii-xviii.
- Sells, "The Sura of the Compassionate," pp. 155-161.
- Ernst, "Medinan Suras," pp. 155-163.

**Further reading:** Cuypers, "Semitic Rhetoric," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13.1 (2011), 1-24.

## **AESTHETICS OF THE QUR'AN**

### **Week 6: Tuesday, February 13, 2024**

#### **Calligraphy and Material Culture**

- Q68
- Q112, Q113, Q114
- Sells, "Sincerity/Unity," "Daybreak," "Humankind," pp. 132-137.
- Deroche, "Written Transmission," *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, 184-199.

Try out: <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en>

[\[Visit to Rare Books Library\]](#)

### **Week 7: Tuesday, February 20, 2024**

#### **Recitation**

- Q39:22-23
- Sells, "The Qur'an as Recitation," "Hearing the Qur'an," "Destiny," "The Quaking," pp. 11-13, 171-183, 196-201.
- Sells, [Audio Tracks](#): 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 22, 29, 30, 32, 33.

Try out: <https://tanzil.net/> (for female reciters, check out the [Qariah app](#))

## **THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE QUR'AN**

### **Week 8: Tuesday, February 27, 2024**

#### **Interpreting the Qur'an**

- Q3:1-8, Q33:33

- Haleem, “Issues of Interpretation,” xxi-xxvi.
- McAuliffe, “An Introduction to Medieval Interpretation of the Qur’an,” *With Reverence for the Word*, 311-319.
- Calder et al., “Qur’anic Interpretation,” *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook*, 152-156, 160-167, 176-182.

Try out: <https://www.altafsir.com>

**Week 9: Study Break – NO CLASS (March 4-8, 2024)**

**Week 10: MYSTICISM: Sufi Approaches to the Qur’an**

**Tuesday, March 12, 2024**

**Sufi Interpretation**

- Q18
- Godlas, “Sufism,” *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an*, 418-429.
- Maybudi, “Surah 18: Al-Kahf,” *The Provision of the Pious*, 295-304.

**INTERPRETING A SURA DUE FRIDAY MARCH 15th at 11:59PM!**

**LIBERATORY: Gender-Sensitive Approaches to the Qur’an**

**Week 11: Tuesday, March 19, 2024**

**Feminism**

- Q4:1-35
- Hidayatullah, “Introduction,” *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*, 1-20.

**Further reading:** Mernissi, “The Prophet and Women,” in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 115-140.

**Queer Islam**

- Q26:160-175, Q24:60, Q42:47-53
- Kugle, “The Reception of the Qur’an in the LGBTQ Muslim Community,” *Communities of the Qur’an*, 71-84.

**Week 12: Black Islam**

**Tuesday, March 26, 2024**  
**African American Islam**



- Q67
- Al-Deen, “African American Communities of the Qur’an,” *Communities of the Qur’an*, 27-38.
- Said, “*The Life of Omar b. Sa’id*,” 49-61.

### **MODERNIST: The Qur’an and the Modern World**

#### **Week 13: Tuesday, April 2, 2024**

##### **The Qur’an and Modernism**

- Q49
- Pink, “Modern and Contemporary Interpretation of the Qur’an,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an*, 479-491.

**CLASS PORTFOLIOS DUE TUESDAY APRIL 2nd at 11:59PM!**

### **STUDYING THE QUR’AN TODAY**

#### **Week 14: Tuesday, April 9, 2024**

##### **Conclusions**

- Q5:3, Q110

### **CLASS POLICIES**

You can communicate with me by email, during office hours, or before/after class. I will strive to respond to your email within 24 hours during weekdays. I cannot guarantee a quick response on weekends or during holidays. Please check the syllabus and class material first for the answer to your question to reduce email traffic and help streamline communications.

Any late assignments will be subject to a late penalty of **2 marks per day (= 2% of your total course grade/day)**. This means for an assignment worth 40%, you will lose 2 out of 40 marks per day and a total of 2% of your final course grade. The maximum penalty you can receive for a late assignment is 10% (5 days late). After 7 days, the portal will be closed and you will no longer be able to submit your assignment.

No individual extra credit options can be arranged in this course to ensure fair access to all students.

Alternative assignments must be arranged as part of ongoing course accommodations through **[Student Accessibility and Achievement](#)**.

**Extensions** can be provided under difficult circumstances if: a) You inform me **at minimum 2 days** before the assignment deadline, explaining your circumstances **OR** b) You provide medical or official documentation while indicating how long of an extension is needed and/or what type of other accommodations you need.



Communicate with me early if you are dealing with exceptional circumstances. The earlier you communicate, the easier it will be to help you successfully complete the course.

Grade appeals can only be pursued in the case of clerical errors or a substantial and unjustified deviation from the provided rubric in assigning marks. A clear explanation of the grading error with corresponding evidence from the submission and the rubric must be sent to the instructor to begin the formal appeal process. Grade appeals must be initiated within one week of the grade in question being released.

If you are struggling academically or personally, do not hesitate to access support and resources from [Student Services](#).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Student Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#). See McGill's [guide to academic honesty](#) for more information.

The University is committed to maintaining teaching and learning spaces that are respectful, safe, and inclusive for all. To this end, offensive, violent, or harmful language arising in course contexts may be cause for disciplinary action.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Please do not share any lecture material outside of the course. I ask for everyone's cooperation in ensuring that lecture and course material are not reproduced or placed in the public domain. This means that each of you can use it for your own educational and review purposes, but you cannot allow others to use it by posting it online or giving it or selling it to others who may copy it and make it available. Thank you very much for your help protecting intellectual property as well as honoring the container of the classroom and the privacy of your instructor and peers.

## **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

McGill University (Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal) is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehà:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. I recognize and respect the Kanien'kehà:ka as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet. I aim to do all within my power to support

Indigenous students, to promote Indigenous ways of knowing, and be mindful of the priorities of Indigenous peoples as I research and teach on their unceded land.

To learn more, you can register for this free online course on Indigenous Canada:

<https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html>