

## **RETHINKING THE REGION:**

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

#### **UNIT: PLURAL IDENTITIES**

The research team generated the theme “Plural Identities” based on our textbook analyses and findings. We found that the textbook authors, in an effort describe a place, often obscured the diversity of life experiences that have existed in these regions throughout time. While occasionally these were noted in sidebars, we felt that rich histories and stories across religious, ethnic, gendered, political, economic, and linguistic lines were not present enough in these texts. We also noted that many of the accounts were written or perceived from a Eurocentric perspective, contributing to the reductive ways in which the region was portrayed.

As a result, the following section provides lesson plans for teachers who may want to focus their attention on the plurality of the region. This section has three lessons that focus on multiple cities and the diversity that existed and exists in each of these. While the lessons focus more on a “people’s history approach” to the region, it is also important to note that they reflect the true geographic diversity of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as these cities span three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe.

All of the lessons are meant to engage students as thinkers, historians, and writers, and assume that they will have an active role in the construction of knowledge. The first lesson is titled “Late Ottoman Life: A Tale of Three Cities,” and hones in on Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Salonika during the late Ottoman Empire (late 19<sup>th</sup> century through 1920). Students will build knowledge about these cities by collaboratively making meaning of many primary and secondary sources about these places before the formation of ethno- and religious centric nation-states transformed the demographics of the region. The second lesson, “Pluralistic Baghdad,” asks students to be art historians and museum curators to explore life in post Ottoman Baghdad. This is particularly important given the contemporary moment (war and occupation) in which most North Americans have come to (mis)understand this city. Finally, the third lesson, “Cosmopolitan Alexandria,” sheds light on a city known for its multiculturalism. This lesson also complicates this idea by looking at events in 1950s Egypt that affected various segments of the population differently, illuminating who benefited from this plurality and who was disadvantaged by it. Students will participate in a structured role-play that will help them unpack how these events shaped everyday lives and experiences.