

Fiker Institute & Dirwaza Curatorial Lab Present *Syllabus of Proposed Works*

About the Syllabus

The Syllabus of Proposed Works is a non-exhaustive list of novels, plays, academic articles, podcast episodes, films, and visual artworks that speak to ongoing debates of identity and conflict as they relate to Arab Gulf states. It is designed to encourage dialogue and facilitate critical discourse in the context of ongoing developments in the region. It is also a supplementary guide for artists and creatives who plan on submitting proposals for Fiker Institute & Dirwaza Curatorial Lab's Microfund Open Call by May 14, 2026. The statements made and the views expressed in the works below are the responsibility of their authors, scholars, and artists, and do not represent the views of either Fiker Institute or the Dirwaza Curatorial Lab.

Fiction

|Novels

- **The Blind Sinbad: An Atlas of Sea & War – Bothayna Al Essa**

Theme: Crisis and Solidarity / Social Structures

Why: A Kuwaiti novel set against the backdrop of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, where a single incident fractures the lives of characters who believed they were guided by political commitment and ideals, only to find those ideals collapse in a world that has permanently lost its innocence. It weaves together honor, violence, displacement, betrayal, and the weight of occupation on ordinary life, told through the intimate architecture of family and city.

- **Mama Hissa's Mice – Saud Alsanousi**
Theme: Friendship, War & Sectarianism
Why: An emotional account of the power of friendship, hope, overcoming division, and unity during wartime, interwoven with a historical narrative of Kuwait through the decades leading into the twenty-first century.
- **The Sand Fish (A Novel from Dubai) – Maha Gargash**
Theme: Bedouin life, Modernity & Tradition
Why: Captures a transitional period in the history of the Trucial States from Bedouin life to modernity, navigating cultural traditions and the beauty of the region's natural landscapes, through the life of a teenage girl.
- **Celestial Bodies – Jokha Alharthi**
Theme: Past v. Present, Tradition & Folklore
Why: An intricate look into Omani society and history by an Omani author, contextualizing the richness of local traditions in a historically transitional period for the country from the abolition of slavery in 1970.
- **The Belt – Ahmed Abodehman**
Theme: Coming of Age, Tradition & Nature
Why: An autobiographical novel documenting life in a small Saudi village as the protagonist comes of age in a rapidly changing 1950s Saudi Arabia, with vivid details of tribal culture and traditions, and the natural landscape.

|Short Stories

- **Oranges in the Sun: Short Stories from the Arabian Gulf – ed./trans. Deborah S. Akers and Abubaker Bagader**
Theme: The Making of the Modern Gulf
Why: Short fiction from Gulf societies on immigration, class, war, and life transitions.

|Poetry

- **Gathering the Tide: An Anthology of Contemporary Arabian Gulf Poetry – ed. Patty Paine, Jeff Lodge, Samia Touati**
Theme: Language, Knowledge & Voice
Why: A strong entry point into contemporary poetry from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.
- **Of Palm Trees and Skies – Afra Atiq**
Theme: Identity, Culture & Resilience
Why: The Emirati poet's debut poetry collection "[explores] the depths of the human spirit with raw honesty and poetic grace," weaving together personal narratives with broader societal reflections and combining traditional Arabic forms with contemporary expression.
- **House to House – Shamma Al Bastaki**
Theme: Community, Oral History, Memory & Belonging
Why: An intricate look at decades of daily life around the Dubai Creek told from the perspective of its residents and community through poems highlighting the beauty of the ordinary.

Non-Fiction

|Academic Articles

- **Nabati Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia – Saad Abdullah Sowayan**
Theme: Language, Knowledge & Voice
Why: Centers vernacular oral knowledge as archive, memory, and social philosophy.
- **"Enough, Enough, Oh Ocean": Music of the Pearl Divers in the Arabian Gulf – Nasser Al-Tae**
Theme: Music, Tradition & Cultural Diversity
Why: Offers insight into the Gulf's rich history at the intersection of pearl diving and musical traditions.
- **On the Decks of Dhows: Musical Traditions of Oman and the Indian Ocean World – Laith Ulaby**
Theme: Interconnectedness, Tradition & Narrative

Why: Highlights intricacies of cultural exchange and the formation of national narratives.

- **Disposable Wars, Disappearing Acts: Theatrical Responses to the 1991 Gulf War - Jeanne Colleran**

Theme: Nationalism, Identity & Discourse

Why: Encourages discussions on media, theater, and their instrumentalization in times of war.

|Books, Essays & Reports

- **The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf - H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Muhammad Al Qasimi**

Theme: Language, Knowledge & Voice

Why: It explores the British East India Company in the Arabian Gulf in the 18th and 19th centuries, arguing that it deliberately exaggerated piracy in the region for its own ends. Unpacks colonial themes and narratives.

- **The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman – Rosemarie Said Zahlan**

Theme: The Making of the Modern Gulf

Why: A historical account that defines and describes the geopolitical framework of the region and the state system which emanated from it.

- **From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates – Frauke Heard-Bey**

Theme: History, Societal Transitions & Independence

Why: A classic social and historical study of the UAE from its transition from seven sheikhdoms into a federal state.

- **Fiker Institute's Working Group on Gulf Foreign Policy: Meeting I – Key Takeaways Report**

Theme: Gulf politics, foreign policy, dialogue & scholarship

Why: As part of its Al-Khaleej Program, Fiker Institute launched the Working Group on Gulf Foreign Policy in March 2026 in response to the Iran War. The Group seeks to establish a coordination mechanism that convenes expert voices from the six GCC countries to exchange views on the current developments and the future policy trajectories of the GCC states. To date, the

Working Group has held 3 meetings, the reports from which can all be accessed and downloaded from Fiker Institute's website [here](#).

Multi-Media

|Podcasts

- **Kerning Cultures – selected Gulf episodes, especially “Birthplace of the UAE”**
Theme: Crisis and Solidarity
Why: Uses intimate audio storytelling to approach medicine, birth, memory, and nation-building.
- **afikra Podcast – Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi episodes on Arab art and cultural institutions**
Theme: Art as Witness
Why: Brings Gulf-led art history, collecting, and cultural institution-building into discussion.
- **Bidon Waraq Podcast – Sabah Mohammad Amin Al Rayes episode on the history of Kuwait**
Theme: The Making of the Modern Gulf
Why: Traces Kuwait's trajectory from the post-oil construction boom to the trauma of the 1990 invasion – a case study in how Gulf modernity was built and undone in a single generation.

|Films

- **Sea Shadow – dir. Nawaf Al-Janahi**
Theme: The Gulf as Space
Why: A seaside Ras Al Khaimah coming-of-age story where family, coast, and convention shape youth.
- **City of Life – dir. Ali F. Mostafa**
Theme: Identity, Multiculturalism & Ambition
Why: Offers a portrayal of contemporary Dubai through the intersecting lives of multiethnic characters of various social strata. A valuable insight into the social complexity of the modern Gulf and how rapid urban and economic transformations have reshaped culture and everyday life.

|Plays

- **Saif al-Arab - 1992**

Theme: Crisis & Solidarity

Why: Using satire, the play processes the trauma of the Iraqi invasion from the inside, portraying what both Kuwaitis and Iraqis experienced during the invasion and the social ruptures it left behind. A document of Gulf theater as an act of witness and resistance.

|Visual Arts

- **Evaporating Suns: Contemporary Myths from the Arabian Gulf, 2023.**
Group exhibition and accompanying publication.

Theme: Art as Witness

Why: Explores myths from the Arabian Gulf through contemporary art. Based on the concept that the mythical and the factual are like two sides of the same coin, the exhibition shows that myths do not simply convey fictions, but are also capable of presenting truth much more vividly than statistics and facts ever could. The accompanying publication showcases the work of 13 contemporary artists from the Arabian peninsula, who explore the folklore and popular myths of their homelands, and use cynicism, satire, and fiction to build their universes and rewrite the parallel history of their contemporary societies. Completed by essays by authors from the region, myths are seen as opportunities for a new approach to the negotiation of current issues such as the environment, gender, and social structures of power.

- **Fatma Al Ali - My Color Became My Accusation, I Was Misplaced,**
2023. Two-channel video.

Theme: Art as Witness

Why: Explores the effects of colonialism on the Gulf region's cultural heritage. The work incorporates archival material from the 1950s and 1960s, where Al Ali discovered that the British replaced the cultivation of purple carrots with the orange variety, attributing it to nutritional superiority. The work

dissects these colonial documents, reflecting on the carrot and its existence, or lack thereof, prompting a reevaluation of the so-called protection offered to the Gulf states, and what sacrifices came from it, cultural or otherwise.

- **Thuraya Al Baqsami - Invasion series**, 1990-1991. Linocut, acrylic, pastels.
Theme: Art as Witness / Crisis & Solidarity
Why: Created during and in the aftermath of the 1990-1991 invasion of Kuwait, Al-Baqsami's work reflects a deeply personal response to the conflict, documenting tragedy, fear, as well as collective solidarity, human resilience, and hope. Speaking of her linocut "No to the Occupation", prints of which circulated in the streets of Kuwait amongst resistance members in the early days of the conflict, the artist notes: "It's a work I am very proud of. The occupation was a painful and difficult experience, but I'm happy as an artist and writer to have been in Kuwait and able to live this experience and document it through my work."
- **Alia Zaal Lootah - Relative Perceptions 1, 2, 3**, 2015. Oil paintings.
Theme: Art as Witness
Why: The artist reinterprets archival photographs found in the Abu Dhabi Armed Forces Officers' Club by painting the subjects, seemingly resurrecting them and removing their remoteness in time. Lootah represents them as people she once knew, full of hope, aspiration, heroism, and power. Within the work, everything else deadens and the human individual's expression comes to life. Exhibited at Emirati Expressions: Conventions of Arts.

Libraries & Resources in the UAE

Some of the works listed in this syllabus can be accessed online or found in one of the UAE-based libraries, theaters, galleries, museums & art centers below. Additionally, we encourage independent exploration of these spaces and sites for further inspiration:

|Libraries

1. Mohammed Bin Rashid Library (Dubai)
2. House of Wisdom (Sharjah)
3. Fiker Institute (Dubai)
4. Al Safa Art and Design Public Library (Dubai)
5. Khalifa Park Library (Abu Dhabi)

|Theaters & Cinemas

1. Cinema Akil (Dubai)
2. Al Majaz Amphitheatre (Sharjah)
3. Zabeel Theatre (Dubai)
4. Al Shindagha Museum Performance Center (Dubai)
5. Qasr Al Hosn (Abu Dhabi)

|Galleries, museums & art centers

1. Jameel Arts Centre (Dubai)
2. Green Art Gallery (Dubai)
3. 421 Arts Campus (Abu Dhabi)
4. Zayed National Museum (Abu Dhabi)
5. Sharjah Art Museum (Sharjah)