

The Art of the Researchable Question

Interdisciplinary Studies of the Middle East

Week 5 | May 13, 2025

Session Goals:

- Analyze what makes a research question effective
- Transform vague questions into focused, researchable ones
- Apply interdisciplinary approaches to Middle East research
- Develop peer feedback skills for research questions

Opening Reflection

In the chat, please respond:

| *"What makes Middle East research questions particularly complex in interdisciplinary contexts?"*

Take a moment to reflect on your own research journey so far.

Question Transformation

Before

"How has the Arab Spring affected women?"

- Too broad (which women, where?)
- Vague terminology ("affected")
- No methodological focus
- No specific timeframe

After

"How have urban women's cooperative organizations in Tunisia navigated changing political landscapes since 2011?"

- Specific group and location
- Clear timeframe
- Focused terminology ("navigated")
- Implies methodological approach

Framework for Interdisciplinary Middle East Research Questions

- **Contextual specificity:** Time, place, community
 - Which specific period, region, population?
- **Methodological clarity:** Approach and disciplines
 - Which research methods will you use?
 - Which disciplinary approaches are you bridging?
- **Theoretical awareness:** Conceptual frameworks
 - Which theoretical lenses will guide your analysis?
 - How will you integrate regional and Western theory?
- **Ethical considerations:** Positionality, representation
 - How will you address your own position?
 - How will voices be represented?

Strong Question Examples

"How have post-2011 Egyptian films represented urban spatial politics during periods of political transition?"

- **Contextual specificity:** Egypt, post-2011, urban spaces
- **Methodological clarity:** Film analysis, spatial theory
- **Theoretical awareness:** Political transition theories, spatial politics
- **Interdisciplinary strength:** Connects film studies, political science, urban studies
- **Feasibility:** Accessible film corpus, defined timeframe

Strong Question Examples

"In what ways do contemporary Iranian female photographers negotiate religious symbolism and feminist discourse through their exhibition practices in diaspora contexts?"

- **Contextual specificity:** Contemporary Iranian women, diaspora exhibition spaces
- **Methodological clarity:** Visual analysis, potentially interviews
- **Theoretical awareness:** Feminist theory, religious studies, diaspora studies
- **Interdisciplinary strength:** Art history, gender studies, religious studies
- **Analytical depth:** Focuses on negotiation and tension between concepts

Common Pitfalls in Middle East Research Questions

- **Orientalist framing or problematic binaries**

Example: "How has Islam prevented Middle Eastern countries from becoming democratic?"

Problem: Assumes causal relationship and homogeneity of both Islam and democracy

- **Overgeneralizing across diverse MENA contexts**

Example: "What is the Arab perspective on climate change?"

Problem: Assumes a singular "Arab perspective" exists

- **Questions requiring language skills/access beyond capacity**

Example: "How do ordinary citizens in rural Iran interpret Quranic passages about governance?"

Problem: Requires Persian fluency and access to challenging field sites

- **Failing to specify disciplinary approaches**

Example: "How has the Palestinian conflict evolved?"

Problem: No disciplinary lens specified (historical, political, sociological?)

Question Transformation Demonstration

Problem Question

"How has Islam influenced Middle Eastern politics?"

- Islam treated as monolithic
- No specific timeframe
- No specific region/country
- Too broad to research
- No methodological approach

Transformed Question

"How have specific interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence informed constitutional debates in post-revolutionary Tunisia (2011-2018)?"

- Specific aspect of religion
- Defined timeframe
- Specific country context
- Clear focus (constitutional debates)
- Implies methodological approach

Question Transformation Laboratory

Breakout Room Activity (15 minutes)

1. Each person shares their strongest pre-session question (2 minutes each)
2. Group provides constructive feedback using the rubric:
 - Contextual specificity (time/place/community)
 - Methodological clarity
 - Theoretical awareness
 - Interdisciplinary integration
 - Feasibility with available resources
3. Select one question to transform collaboratively
4. Prepare to share your before/after transformation

Group Debrief

Each group: Please share your question transformation

- What was the original question?
- What issues did you identify?
- How did you transform it?
- What improved in the new version?

Discussion points:

- Are there particular geographic areas/time periods that dominate?
- Which methodological approaches seem most common?
- What interdisciplinary combinations appear most frequently?

Question Speed Dating

Structure (25 minutes total):

- 4-minute rounds, 2 minutes per person
- In pairs (breakout rooms):
 1. Present your most promising research question (1 min)
 2. Receive structured feedback using template (1 min)
 3. Switch roles
- We'll rotate 3-4 times - please stay in your breakout room until moved
- Document feedback you receive in the provided template

Feedback Focus:

- Disciplinary integration
- Regional specificity
- Methodological feasibility

Speed Dating Feedback Template

Question being reviewed: [Write it here]

Strengths: [Note at least one specific strength]

Disciplinary integration: [Which disciplines are involved? Are they well integrated?]

Regional specificity: [Is the regional/temporal focus clear and appropriate?]

Methodological feasibility: [Is this question answerable with available methods/resources?]

One specific suggestion: [Offer one concrete improvement]

Remember to complete this for each question you review!

Individual Reflection

| *"Which disciplinary perspective do I need to strengthen in my research question?"*

Take a moment to reflect on the feedback you've received today.

Write down:

1. One specific change you'll make to your research question
2. Which disciplinary approach you need to strengthen
3. One resource you'll seek before our next meeting

Next Steps

- **Refine your question** based on today's feedback
- **Connect with relevant resources:**
 - Middle East Studies Library Guide (see program website)
 - Discipline-specific methodology workshops
 - Faculty office hours (see schedule)
- **For Writing Group participants:** Session begins at 1:00 PM

Questions before we conclude?

INTERIM Week 6 (May 20): Assignments

Topic Development Group

- **Test your top 2-3 research questions** with preliminary research
 - Find 3-5 sources for each question
 - Note which questions yield the most promising results
- **Identify 5-7 key scholars/sources** relevant to your emerging topic
 - Create an annotated bibliography with brief notes on relevance
- **Create a "scope statement"** defining the boundaries of your potential thesis
 - 1 paragraph defining what your thesis will and won't cover
 - Specify temporal, geographic, methodological boundaries

Writing Group

- **Identify a specific methodology question** to explore in the next session
- **Implement one structural improvement** based on today's workshop
- **Map the flow of argument** in one section of your thesis

- Use one of the visual mapping techniques discussed