

COURSE NUMBER:

Politics of the Contemporary Middle East

[SEMESTER YEAR]

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Office Hours: TK

Lecture Hours: TK

Lecture Room: TK

Course Description

This course provides an overview of politics in the contemporary Middle East. We begin by covering the important role of colonial rule as a driver of institutional-variation and state formation. This course surveys the variety of political systems in the Middle East and North Africa. We begin by introducing critical concepts and history. The second part of the course surveys the political systems of key cases in the region. How does colonialism and history more broadly shape MENA politics? Why does democratization typically fail in MENA? What role does Political Islam play in MENA politics across cases? What role does oil wealth play in fostering compliances in Gulf regimes, Jordan and Morocco? How do oppositions and non-regime actors exercise political agency in MENA autocracies? Students will be well-prepared to answer these critical questions having taken this course.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be literate and knowledgeable about key political trends animating political life in the Middle East and North Africa. They will be ready for more advanced coursework and study on the region, including thesis research. Tangibly, pupils in this class will:

- Be aware of key political processes across the MENA region. Understand key differences in politics across distinct cases in the region (the Middle East is not a monolith).
- Exercise critical thinking when reading journalism and scholarship about the MENA region.
- Develop expertise in student-selected areas of interest through research assignments.

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

- **10 Points:** Will be determined by a short reflection essay (2-page) in which you will compose a short response to one of the films. Did you enjoy the film? How would you connect the film to the course's themes and readings? I will arrange screenings if you'd prefer to watch the film on a large screen. The review is due by the final lecture.
- **20 Points:** Will be determined by an in-class midterm to take place in-class during mid-term week on [TK Date]. The mid-term will consist of a mix of short-answer, multiple choice and essay-length questions. The exam is designed to assess your understanding of materials covered in the first half of the course.

- **20 Points:** Will be determined by participation in lecture and discussion sections.
- **20 Points:** Will be determined by a 5-page reflection essay. I describe this assignment in greater detail below.
- **35 Points:** Will be determined by a final project. The project can be either a research-paper (15-pages, double spaced) or a multimedia submission such as a website, a documentary film. Final projects will give students the chance to pursue independent critical research on the MENA to align with their personal and career interests. I request that students clear their project with me (minimally by email, ideally in office hours) by the end of week 8

Course Policies

AI Policy

A critical aspect of learning entails becoming an intelligent consumer of intelligent writing on MENA politics on your own. I work hard to foster a welcoming and inclusive environment where you can feel comfortable learning without the help of Artificial Intelligence models like OpenAI's ChatGPT or Anthropic's Claude model. I require all use of AI to be disclosed in a statement accompanying written statements. An AI disclosure must comprehensively detail how AI was used. Ideally, I should be able to clearly delineate where AI was used and where it was not.

Phone and Laptop Use

Laptops are permitted for note-taking reasons. Please close tabs unrelated to our course to minimize distractions to you and your peers.

Attendance

Attendance is expected for all lectures and is required during discussion sections. Attendance will be taken in section and participation in part will be graded according to a sliding scale measuring your record of presence in class across the semester. Contact me if you need an excused absence for a legitimate reason. Assignments and assessments cover materials covered in lectures and required readings.

Commitment to Inclusivity/Reasonable Accommodation

I along with [UNIVERSITY NAME] am committed to making any reasonable accommodation for students with a documented disability. [INFORMATION IN ACCORDANCE WITH INSTITUTION POLICIES]

Email Policy

If you have any questions related to the course, feel free to email me. Please allow for 48 hours for a response. Following Elizabeth Nugent, I steer students, towards the following blog post by Laura Portwood-Stacer: [How to e-mail your professor \(without being annoying AF\)](#).

Student Support and Resources

To be adapted to university policies.

Course Requirements, Format & Grading

This course has no pre-requisites. I expect students to do grading for the course week before the ahead of the first lecture of the week. Each week we will meet for two 50-minute lectures, and we will have weekly discussion section. I assign a substantial amount of reading and media engagement but promise that it will be rewarding. The course assignment includes watching 2 films by astounding female filmmakers from the Middle East and North Africa.

1. Goher, *Happy Birthday*. Egypt. 2025.
2. Kaouthar Ben Hania. *Four Daughter* (Banat Olfa, بنات ألفة). Tunisia. 2023.

I will assign screenings prior to the weeks covered. I will communicate details about the screenings

Writing Assignments

Reflection Essay

The reflection-essay provides you with an opportunity to engage critically with a canonical work in the field best-aligned with your interests. I provide options on (1) legacies of colonialism (2) autocracy and non-democratic politics (3) Social movements and opposition for students interested in these areas.

- (1) **Legacies of colonialism.** *Alasdair Horne's book "A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962"* is a sweeping account of the final years of colonial rule in Algeria. Why did the Algerian Civil War become so violent? What was the role of international actors in the conflict? Which international stakeholders were significant during the conflict? Some scholars have argued that the Algerian Civil War should be seen, at least in part, as a European conflict. Would you agree?
- (2) ***Ambiguities of Domination*:** In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen explains apparent support for the Syrian dictator Hafiz Al-Assad by introducing the politics of 'as if' in which individuals en masse mimic the behavior of individuals? Are you convinced by her argument? What other factors might explain why individuals 'obey' autocratic regimes?
- (3) **Social Movements and opposition:** (Reading: *Mona El Ghobashy Bread and Freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation*) In this essay you will compare Egypt to another 2011 'Arab Spring' case (Libya, Syria, Tunisia). In each case how would you describe the goals of each social movement? Were these goals well-defined, and how were they expressed? Did actors achieve their goals or were they defeated? In answering this question compare the role of the following actors in driving revolutionary outcomes: (1) non-Islamist youth groups and Liberal parties (2) Egypt's military (3) the Muslim Brotherhood.

Final Paper: I offer two avenues for students to final submissions (1) A standard research paper extending a question related to one we have covered or investigating an original question within the domain of MENA politics. Students may also propose a multimedia, creative or critical submission engaging with the course material.

Study and Course Advice

- The course exposes you to a variety of scholarly readings. As you read, consider: (1) What is the main research question? (2) What method broadly speaking does the study use to justify its claim? (3) What are the paper's main findings? (4) What did you take away from the article? If you can answer these 4 points, you have minimally digested an article and can proceed into deeper study as required.
- Forming study groups to discuss course readings is an ideal way to digest course readings ahead of and after the lecture.
- Visit office hours or be in touch with us if you have any questions. I will be in touch within a 24-hour turnaround time during the workweek, and by the end of Monday for a weekend email.
- Please read Hisham Matar's *The Return* ahead of the final week. It is a full-length novel and will take time to fully engage.

Schedule and Reading Assignments

WEEK 1 - INTRODUCTIONS

Studying the Middle East

1. Lockman, Zachary. *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*. Chapter 5. Cambridge University Press. 2004.
2. Jamal, Amaney & Tessler, Mark. "The Democracy Barometers (Part II): Attitudes in the Arab World." *Journal of Democracy*, 19(1). 2008.

Comparative Theory of Regimes

1. Sassoon, Joseph. *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*. Cambridge University Press. 2016.
2. Gandhi, Jennifer & Przeworski, Adam. "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats." *Comparative Political Studies*, 40(11). 2007.

WEEK 2 – STATE-FORMATION AND COLONIALISM

Early Imperial Rule and Colonial Society

1. Barkey, Karen. *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization*. Chapter 5 and 6.

2. Fahmy, Khaled. "The Nation and Its Deserters: Conscription in Mehmed Ali's Egypt" *International Review of Social History*, 43(3). 2001.

Nationalism and Anti-Colonial Contention

1. Lawrence, Adria. *Imperial Rule and the Politics of Nationalism: Anti-Colonial Protest in the French Empire*. Cambridge University Press. 2013. Chapters 2-4.
2. Takriti, Abdelrazzaq. *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976*. Oxford University Press. 2016. Chapter 2-3.

WEEK 3 – THE MAGHREB

Varieties of Maghrebi Politics

1. Charrad, Mounira. *Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation*. Washington & Lee Law Review
2. Shatz, Adam. *Algeria's Failed Revolution*. London Review of Books 2002.

Governance & Society in the Modern Maghreb

1. Stenner, David. "Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State". *Stanford University Press*. 2019. Introduction and chapter 1.
2. York, Erin. "Constituency Service and Electoral Accountability in Autocratic Legislatures". *Comparative Political Studies*, 58(18): 2024.

WEEK 4 – EGYPT

Film 1: Sarah Goher: Happy Birthday. 2025. Egypt.

From Nasser to Mubarak: Varieties of Military Rule

1. Gerges, Fawaz. *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb & the Clash that Shaped the Middle East*. Princeton University Press. 2019.
2. Galal Amin. *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* American University in Cairo Press. 2001. Chapter 1-3.

From Tabrir to today:

1. Nugent, Elizabeth & Berman, Chantal. "Ctrl, Alt, Revolt? Online and Offline Networks during the 2011 Egyptian Uprising. *Middle East Law & Governance*. 2018.
2. Maged Mandour. *Egypt Under El-Sisi: A Nation on the Edge*. Chapter 2-3. Bloomsbury Publishing 2023.
3. All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt. Human Rights Watch. 2014.

WEEK 5 – THE LEVANT

Participation

1. Schwedler, Jillian. *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*. Stanford University Press. 2022. Introduction and chapter 1.
2. Lust, Ellen. "Elections Under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan". *Democratization*, 13(3). 2006.

Conflict

1. Cammett, Melani & Issar, Sukriti. Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon." *World Politics*, 62(3). 2012.
2. Mazur, Kevin. "State Networks and Intra-Ethnic Group Variation in the 2011 Syrian Uprising." *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(7). 2018.
3. Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement, and Mourning in Syria*. University of Chicago Press. 2019.

WEEK 6 – IRAQ

Autocracy & Autocracy

1. Blaydes, Lisa. *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Chapters 8 and 9*. Princeton University Press. 2018.
2. Raphaeli, Nimrod. Understanding Muqtada Al-Sadr. *Middle East Quarterly*, 11(4). 2004.

State-Building after War

1. O'Leary, Brendan. *Iraq as a New Multinational State: A Cautious Defense*. 2009.
2. Dodge, Toby. *The Failure of Exogenous State Building in Historical Perspective*. Third World Quarterly. 2006.
3. El-Shammary, Marsin. "The Iraq Invasion at Twenty: Iraq's Struggle for Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*. 2023.

WEEK 7 – THE GULF

Monarchies

1. Menaldo, Victor. "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs". *Journal of Politics*, 74(2). July 2012.
2. Menoret, Pascal. *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism and Road Revolt*. Chapter 1-3

Rentier States?

1. Bsheer, Rosie. "A Counter-Revolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia." *Past & Present*, Volume 238.
2. Ross, Michael. "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 2001.
3. Tavana, Daniel. "Endogenous Opposition: Identity and Ideology in Kuwaiti electoral politics." *American Journal of Political Science*. 2025.

WEEK 8 –TURKEY

Autocratic Origins

1. Fabbe, Kristen. Disciples of the State? Religion and State-Building in the former Ottoman World. Chapters 6 and 8.
2. Barkey, Karen. 2008. Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 5.

Contemporary Politics: Polarization and the AKP

1. Kuru, Ahmet. "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies towards Religion." World Politics, 59(4). 2007.
2. Carkoglu, Ali & Kalaycioglu, Ersin. Turkish Democracy Today: Elections. 2007.
3. Tugal, Cihan. Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism. Stanford University Press. Chapter 5 and 6.

WEEK 9 – POLITICAL ISLAM

Varieties of Political Islam

1. Carrie Wickham, Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism & Political Change in Egypt
2. Nielsen, Richard. 2020. "Women's Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements: The Case of Female Salafi Preachers" AJPS 2020.
3. Brooke, Steven & Ketchley, Neil. Social and Institutional Origins of Political Islam.

Elections and Islam

1. Grewal, Sharan, Jamal, Amaney, Masoud, Tarek & Nugent Elizabeth. "Poverty and Divine Rewards: The Electoral Advantage of Islamist Political Parties." American Journal of Political Science 2019.
2. Grewal, Sharan. 2020. "From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda." American Political Science Review, 519-535. 2020.
3. Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown. "Islamist Parties and Democracy: A Boon or a Bane for Democracy?" Journal of Democracy 19.3 (2008): 49- 54

WEEK 10 – RADICALIZATION

Film 2: Banat Olfa (Olfa's Daughters). Tunisia. 2023.

Origins

1. Parkinson, Sarah E. "Practical Ideology in Militant Organization". World Politics 2021. ["Practical Ideology in Militant Organizations."](#) *World Politics* 73(1): 52-81.
2. Lefèvre, Raphael. Jihad in the City: Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli. Cambridge University Press.

Militancy After 9/11

1. Hegghamer, Thomas. "Weeping in Modern Jihad Groups." *Journal of Islamic Studies*. Volume 31 (3). 2020.
2. Hassan Hassan. "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context.
3. Revkin, Mara. "What Explains Taxation by Resource-Rich Rebels? Evidence from the Islamic State in Syria. *Journal of Politics*. 2020.

WEEK 11 – POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Mobilization

1. Berman, Chantal, Clarke, Killian & Majed, Rima "From Victims to Dissidents: Legacies of Violence and Popular Mobilization in Iraq". *American Political Science Review*, 118(1). 2023.
2. Hassan, Mai. "Coordinated dis-coordination" *American Political Science Review*. Volume 118 (1). 2023.

Arab Spring

1. Ketchley, Neil. "'The Army and the People are One Hand' Fraternization and the 25th January Revolution." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56(1): 155-186. 2014.
2. Beissinger, Mark, Jamal, Amaney & Mazur, Kevin. "Explaining Divergent Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions." *Comparative Politics*, 1-24(48). 2015.
3. Nugent, Elizabeth. 2020. "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization." *World Politics*, 72(2).

WEEK 12 – *Revolutions & Counterrevolutions*

- Note: This week we conclude with a look at the dramatic sequence of counter-revolution following the Arab Spring and we close on a more hopeful note. I warn you that the first lecture will cover mass-killings documented in graphic detail. Bearing witness to these tragedies that precede regime-formation today is a critical aspect of studying this region.
- We finish thinking about transitional justice and hope. For this reason I assign the *Return* in its entirety, a lengthy but ultimately richly rewarding read.

Counter-Revolution & Repression

1. All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt. Human Rights Watch. 2014.
2. Clarke, Killian. *Return of Tyranny: Why Counterrevolutions Emerge and Succeed*. Cambridge University Press. 2025. **Chapters TBD.**

Politics after the Arab Spring

1. Matar, Hisham. *The Return*.