

History and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa

Given by Raffaella Del Sarto

Tuesdays, 13:00-15:00

Course description

Almost fifteen years after the Arab uprisings, several pressing problems and dilemmas continue to mark the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). These include unresolved conflicts and ongoing civil wars, political fragility, a general upgrade of authoritarianism, crony capitalism, ever-rising socio-economic inequalities, high youth unemployment, exclusionary ethno-religious politics, migration and refugee flows, and environmental degradation. Yet, the region continues to be of strategic importance, with external powers, most notably the US and the European 'neighbour', being mostly interested in the stability of the region. With every 'crisis' in the region, self-declared Middle East experts pop up, but popular analyses often lack historical background, context, area-specific knowledge, and conceptual rigour. At the same time, Middle East scholars have been accused (and unfairly so) of not having been able to predict crucial events in the region, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, 9/11, the consequences of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the Arab uprisings, and, more recently, the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 7, 2024.

Of course, it remains challenging to analyse and conduct research in a region that is vast and heterogenous, where European colonialism left deep marks, where conflicts and wars have been rather frequent, and where the extend of foreign meddling has remained high. In addition, empirical research in the region faces the problems of access and availability of reliable data in light of widespread authoritarianism as well as personal safety issues. While this seminar cannot be comprehensive of all countries and all issues, it aims to provide researchers with advanced knowledge and conceptual tools to study the Middle East and North Africa. Geographically, it focuses on what I call the Mediterranean Middle East, that is, an area stretching from Morocco in the West to Turkey in the East (although Iran and the Gulf region will also be considered). In this seminar, we will discuss several key developments in the region, including the emergence of the modern state system in the Middle East, post-colonial politics in the region, identity formation(s), and domestic and regional dynamics post-Arab uprisings. The seminar will address significant topics such as the question of Palestine, authoritarianism and protests, and political economy and development. The aim of the

seminar is to introduce researchers to the state of the art in Middle East political science research while engaging with key debates, insights, and approaches in the specialized literature. (A seminar on the international relations of the Middle East will be offered in the second term).

Learning objectives and outcomes

Researchers who have successfully completed this seminar should be able to:

- Understand the historical, political, and socio-economic processes that have shaped, and are still shaping, the modern Middle East
- Identify the major empirical questions in the study of Middle East politics
- Identify the major debates and developments in the specialized literature
- Apply concepts and theoretical approaches to analyse the politics of the MENA
- Write well-structured essays / response papers on pertinent questions by employing conceptual insights from Middle East studies and the social sciences
- Conduct independent research in Middle East politics by 'digging deeper' and expanding on the seminar readings on specific topics and/or countries

Format and requirements

Researchers are expected to do the assigned reading prior to each session and come prepared to class. Active participation in class debates is a requirement. Researchers will introduce and guide the seminar debate in sessions 3-10. In addition, researchers taking the seminar as elective are required to prepare 2 response papers / analytical essays (between 800 to 1,200 words, notes and bibliography included) over the course of the seminar. To receive credit for this seminar, researchers should pass these three requirements (active participation, introducing and guiding seminar debates, 2 response papers / analytical essays).

The seminar is open to all researchers. However, researchers without any prior knowledge of Middle East history and politics should prepare themselves by doing some additional background readings, preferably prior to the start or within the first weeks of the seminar. Students are also expected to follow the news on the Middle East.

Some recommended readings for (absolute) beginners, or to refresh your memory:

- Fromkin, David (2009) *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Kamrava, Mehran (2013) *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War*, 3rd ed., Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Owen, Roger (2004) *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London: Routledge.
- Keddie, Nikki R. (2006) *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Yom, Sean L., ed. (2019) *Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa: Development, Democracy, Dictatorship*, 9th ed., London: Routledge.
- Hourani, Albert (2002) *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Gelvin, James L. (2020) *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tessler, Mark (2009) *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd edition, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Said Aly, Abdel Monem, Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki, eds. (2013) *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

MacQueen, Benjamin (2018) *An Introduction to Middle East Politics*, 2nd