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Ethnic religious minorities in Western Asia and North Africa

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Course aims and intended learning outcomes

The course aims to provide students with the basic principles of the relationship between politics, plurality and diversity in the contemporary history of Western Asia and North Africa, focusing on the presence, condition, status and role of ethno-linguistic, religious and cultural minorities in Muslim states and societies. The course proposes to deconstruct and reconsider the category of minority within these two regions, analysing the role of this category in the history of state- and nation-building processes in Western Asia and North Africa from the end of the 19th century until today, in particular in relation to the Arab uprisings.

Knowledge and understanding: the educational goal of the course is to develop knowledge about: 1) the intrinsic complexity of the history of the category of minority and of its normative and political codification and implementation; 2) the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural composition of Western Asia and North Africa's contemporary societies and of the distribution and configuration of the multiple features that compose their diverse socio-cultural fabrics; 3) the development of the institutional concept of "minority" within Western Asia and North Africa, and how regional plurality and diversity have been recomposed and organized according to the logic of the modern state; 4) today's condition of Western Asian and North African diversity and plurality, and its political manipulation, analysing today's identity politics within the region.

Making judgements: Regular and active participation in the course's activities (lectures, reading assignments and group presentations on selected topics) will enable the students to: 1) recall the basic tenets that historically defined the category of "minority" in politics and society within Western Asia and North Africa; 2) recall the multiple contextual configurations that the category of "minority" has embodied within the social-political fabrics of Western Asia and North Africa; 3) exemplify the most common strategies in managing diversity and plurality within Western Asia and North Africa; 4) weigh the logics and rationales that have oriented different strategies in the management of diversity in the history of these regions and today; 5) apply appropriate methodology to research and analyse minority conditions, statuses, roles and issues within Western Asia and North Africa; 6) compare and critically assess different political trajectories in the management of diversity between countries of Western Asia and North Africa; 7) exemplify the geopolitical role that minority issues have played in the history of Western Asia and North Africa as well as are playing today; 8) critically assess the normative, political and geopolitical extents, contents and developments of today's minority issues and statuses within Western Asia and North Africa.

Communication and lifelong learning skills: active and regular participation in the educational activities offered will enable students to learn how to: 1) approach the analysis of minority issues with appropriate ethics and solid and coherent methodology; 2) frame research hypotheses; 3) develop analysis and compare different cases; 4) support coherent results achieved with compelling arguments; 5) organize group work; 6) deliver presentations; 7) practice public speaking. Regular and active participation will also enable students to acquire full ability to communicate and disseminate research results to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Course content

The course is divided into three different parts with the aim of moving across different chronological and analytical levels (from the general to the specific and vice versa; back and forth along short-term perspectives; from critical theory to a case-study approach and vice versa).

Although mainly focusing on Western Asia and North Africa, the first part aims to provide students with the basic principles related to the study and analysis of diversity in politics and society. Accordingly, the first part



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will focus on the following topics: 1) what the most important features of Western Asia and North Africa's diversity are and how they have been mapped and can be mapped and described today; 2) what distinguishes Western Asia and North Africa's diversity from that characterizing other regions and continents; 3) what the most evident socio-political, institutional and geopolitical issues that involve Western Asian and North African diversity are, both as subject and actor of political dynamics.

The second part will enter the field of the history of politics and institutions in Western Asia and North Africa, deconstructing the concept and principle of "minority", its contextualization and developments within both regions. This part will focus on the following topics: 1) the relationship between diversity and its political management and categorization; 2) the history of the idea of "minority" as a concept and an institution; 2) minority statuses and minority issues in Western Asia and North Africa after the Great War; 3) the reconfiguration of minority statuses during decolonization and nationalist movements; 4) the role of ethnicity and religion from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s; 5) today's "minority crisis" in Western Asia and North Africa and the role of identity politics and sectarian divides within these regions.

The third part will focus on case studies with the aim of applying the theoretical and historical knowledge developed in the two previous parts. This part will also offer a space for students' group work and presentations. Possible case studies are: 1) the Kurds in Iraq; 2) the Palestinians between resistance and refugee status; 3) Christian communities in Western Asia; 4) the Amazigh in Algeria; 4) Jews in Tunisia and Morocco; etc.

Reading list

The final reading list will be provided in class at the beginning of the course. The main readings (exact chapters and number of pages) will be selected among the following monographs and articles:

A.N. Longva-A.S. Roald (eds.), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation*. Brill, 2012.

O. Bengio-G. Ben-Dor (eds.), *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

C. Belge-E. Karakoç, *Minorities in the Middle East: Ethnicity, Religion, and Support for Authoritarianism*. *Political Research Quarterly*, 2015.

R.D. McLaurin, *Minorities and Politics in the Middle East: An introduction*, in *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, R.D. McLaurin (ed.). Praeger Special Studies, 1979.

P. Maggiolini, "Disentangling" Some Knots: Narratives and Counter-Narratives Of The Christian Presence In The Contemporary Middle East, in *Shifting Identities: Changes in the Social, Political, and Religious Structures in the Arab World*, Mitri Rahed (ed.). Diyar Publisher, 2016.

P. Maggiolini, *The Origin and Development of the Idea of "Minority" in the Middle East: a Multilevel Analysis*. *Euromesco Working Papers*, 11, 2018.

L. Robson (ed.), *Minorities and the Modern Arab World, New Perspectives*. Syracuse University Press, 2016.

M. Shatzmiller (ed.), *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.

S. Mahmood (April 2012). *Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 25 (2).

P.S. Rowe (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East*. Routledge, 2018.



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Teaching method

Lecture-style presentations with the support of slides and multimedia content; reading assignments given to single students or small groups who must critically read and present results to the class before the beginning of the lecture; class discussion of selected topics previously communicated on the basis of reading assignments; group works and presentations.

Learning activities

Two days before each lecture, students can download the relative slides on Blackboard. The day after each lecture, students can find on Blackboard (in the "Materiali" section) suggested (voluntary) reading that helps to focus topics and dynamics that will be discussed during the next class. These suggested (voluntary) readings can become assignments given to single students or small groups that are willing to autonomously discuss them, presenting their results during the next class. During the third part of the course, group work will be organized on the basis of selected case studies.

Assessment method and criteria

The methods that will be used to assess the knowledge and skills acquired are: 1) oral exam (generally 3-4 questions) to assess: a) knowledge of the concepts analyzed in part 1; b) knowledge and skills for exemplifying the most important historical processes and dynamics affecting minority conditions in Western Asia and North Africa, roles and statuses as seen in part 2; c) capacity to analyze, deconstruct and weigh specificities and characteristics of one single case study that the student will select among specific cases proposed in the bibliography. The grade will vary from 18 to 30 (cum laude). Active participation in class, presentations and work groups will contribute to the final assessment.

Notes and prerequisites

Notes: regular updates regarding the course, timetable, final program, list of readings, reading assignments etc. will be always communicated and posted on the Blackboard. Students are encouraged to subscribe to Blackboard.

Prerequisites: The course does not require formal prerequisites. Nevertheless, students are invited to acquire some basic knowledge of the history of contemporary Western Asia and North Africa and of the history of international relations. More importantly, students must be interested in contemporary history and politics. They must be willing to engage in reading assignments and to follow the development of the main political events occurring and issues in play within the two regions during the course.

Prof. Paolo Maggiolini always receives students by appointment at the Department of Political Science. The office hours will be communicated at the beginning of each semester.