Understanding the Middle East: Regional and International Identities, Interests and Strategies

PROF. ALESSANDRO QUARENGHI

OVERVIEW

Area: International Relations  
Dates: 8 - 19 July (2 weeks)  
Campus: Milan  
Course Number: IR/PO321su  
Term: Summer 2019  
Credits: 6 ECTS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course aims to enable students to achieve a clear understanding of the main issues that have shaped and are characterizing the politics of the region, its role in contemporary international politics, as well as the strategies available and employed by the main international actors towards it. Finally, it aims to investigate the usefulness and the shortcomings of ('Western') international relations and political science approaches and concepts to the region, highlighting both the differences and similarities between the Middle East and other political regions.

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be familiar with the events, facts, and issues that have shaped and are shaping the politics of the region, and have gained a good knowledge of its trends and specific features. Lastly, students will be able to assess the effects on the region of the strategies that international powers can deploy towards it.

COURSE CONTENTS

In recent years, the Middle East has arguably established itself as the centre of international politics or, at least, as the region that no international actor can afford to stay away from. Why? How did this happen? This course will explore the politics of the plural and changing Middle East from an international perspective, focusing on its features, internal processes, and the main problematic issues, while emphasizing its relationship with the West, itself a plural entity.

METHOD OF TEACHING

The course will combine lectures, in-class debates, and a role-play activity. About the latter: students will be asked to choose a political actor from among the suggested ones and to: a) study it in depth and provide a position paper on it (deadline: 16/1 h. 24.00); b) to briefly present the position paper during classes; c) to play the role of that political actor: after the first week of the course, students will be encouraged to play the role of the chosen political actor and try to achieve its aims during and outside of classes, and to prepare for a fictional UN-sponsored conference on Middle Eastern Regional Order, which will take place at the end of the course One student will play the role of the United Nations: its presentation will focus on the Arab Uprisings, while its position paper will outline UN's strategy for the mock negotiation process. More detailed instructions will be given in class by the instructor.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

a. Students are expected to regularly attend sessions and to actively take part in debate;
b. Before each class, students are expected to have read the compulsory readings (and are strongly advised to read the recommended readings);
c. Students are required to write a short position paper (1500 words) about a political actor of their choice – Deadline: 16/1 h. 24.00;
d. Students are required to orally present their position paper or a topic;
e. Students are required to engage in the role-play activity;
f. Students will have to take a final written exam.

GRADING

Class participation 10 % of final grade
Position paper 15 % of final grade
Presentation 10 % of final grade
Role-play activity 15 % of final grade
Final written exam 50 % of final grade

COURSE READINGS AND MATERIALS

All the readings and the lecturer's slides will be available on Blackboard.

RULES OF CONDUCT

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory and no absence/s will be excused. Please consider that Field Trips are consider equal to regular classes and indeed you are expected to attend the visits. Unexcused absences will not be accepted. An excused absence will only be granted if you are seriously ill and can support your claim with a local doctor's certificate dated the day you missed class (therefore you must go to the doctor that same day) that has to be delivered to the Professor or to UCSC International Office. Any other absence will not be excused and will result in not being admitted to the final exam, which corresponds to a 0 (zero) in the final exam.

Exam Date: The exam date cannot be re-scheduled. Should the dates of the final exams be moved for force major reasons, UCSC International Office and the Professor will promptly inform you in class and/or via e-mail on the new date agreed. Unexcused absences to the exams will result in a failing grade in the course. In cases of unforeseeable circumstances such as illness or injury on the day of the exams, you must submit a medical certificate and communicate your absence to the Professor and UCSC International Office via email prior to the exam. If the student does not justify his/her absence through sufficient documentation and with adequate notice before the final test, you will receive an automatic Failed. Absences for other unforeseeable circumstances will not be accepted and will result in a failing grade.
SCHEDULE

First week.

FIRST PART: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Lesson 1: THE STRATEGIC CENTRALITY OF THE MIDDLE EAST (9/1)
Since 11 September 2001, the Middle East has increasingly looked like the place no Great Power can afford not to be involved in, or the new ‘centre’ of international politics. Is that really the case? And if so, why?

Required Reading:

Material:

Lesson 2: THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST: CREATION, BOUNDARIES, AND ‘FAULT-LINES’ (10/1)
This class deals with the processes that created the political region and its contemporary shifting definition, and of its boundaries, before summarizing its ‘identity fault-lines’ which, even though they are not on the geographical map, matter a great deal in its political life, and make understanding it particularly complex.

Material:
- Sykes-Picot Agreement Map (1916-1917)
- The Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917)
- The McMahon Letter to Sheriff Hussein (24 October 1915)
- Linguistic, Ethnic, Oil, and Religious Maps of the Middle East

Required Reading:

The first part of this class focuses on the main research agendas to apply IR Theory to the study of the Middle East, pointing out their respective strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, the class will briefly focus on the construction of Otherness in Western-Eastern relationships by discussing Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Westoxication. The final part of the class will try to recall the most important events in the history of Islam and the political concepts developed from those events; That will allow us to gather a preliminary but sufficient knowledge to understand Middle Eastern political discourses.

Required Reading:
SECOND PART. FROM STRUCTURAL FEATURES TO CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS

Lesson 4: THE MIDDLE EASTERN STATE (12/1)

The introduction of a foreign political structure to the region at the end of the First World War was characterized by imbalanced power relationships between Europe and the political and economic powers of the region: the Middle Eastern state, therefore, developed features that have marked its development since then.

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

MOVIE OF THE WEEK: La battaglia di Algeri (The Battle of Algiers), Italy-Algeria, 1966 (12/1, h. 15.00)

VISIT/MEETING: TO BE CONFIRMED (13/1)

Second Week.

Lesson 5: THE ‘CURSE OF BLACK GOLD’, CONFLICT AND COOPERATION (16/1)

This class deals, firstly, with the political economy of the Middle East, and particularly with the use of its resources. Despite being blessed with an abundance of ‘black gold’, Middle Eastern states have some of the lowest rates of development, literacy, and human health and well-being in the world. Is this a matter of culture (and religion), or politics and economics?

Secondly, we focus on the creation and maintenance of conflict and on the lack of political cooperation. The Middle East is the region with the highest rates of military expenditures in the world, and one of the areas of the world where conflict is the most recurrent, both within and outside states. Indeed, the military has always played an essential political role in regional politics, sometimes stabilizing states’ institutions, sometimes overthrowing governments, sometimes fomenting regional instability.

Required Reading:
- G. Luciani, "Oil and Political Economy in the International Relations of the Middle East", L Fawcett, ed, International Relations of the Middle East, New York: Oxford University Press 2013, 103-126.
Lesson 6: IDEOLOGIES (17/1)
This class deals with recurrent ideological trends that have swept the region: Nationalism, Arabism, liberalism, pan-Islamism, pan-Ottomanism, Islamism, Zionism, anti-Zionism, communism, etc.: some are forgotten by history, but many are alive and well, influencing the political life of the region. In particular, political ideologies claiming to be Islamic are alive and well. Through what process has a religion been transformed into a modern political ideology? Is Islam as a religion really to be blamed?

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:
- M. Kramer, "Islam Vs Democracy", Commentary (January 1993) 35-42M.

Lesson 7: A DEMOCRATIC OR A ISLAMIST 'WAVE'? THE MIDDLE EASTERN 'UPRISINGS', FROM TUNISIA TO THE 'SYRIAN SPILLOVER' (18/1)
After the unsuccessful 2009 and 2010 Iranian 'Green Revolution', since December 2010 peaceful popular movements have spread through the Middle East achieving regime change in some cases and developing into civil wars in others. After attempting to define the political phenomenon, this class will try to compare features and trajectories of the different experiences, in order to understand if the revolts are potentially able to structurally transform the international politics of the Middle East.

PRESENTATION (The Uprisings)

Required Reading:
Lesson 8: THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN (ARAB) CONFLICT  (19/1)
The cause of all Middle Eastern troubles or just one of many? We look back at the history of the conflict, from the first step of the Zionist movement towards the creation of Israel (and the Palestinian Nakhba) to today's wall, Road Map, latest rounds of conflict, and consider the identities of the movements, the issues at stake, and the opposing perspectives involved.

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

MOVIE OF THE WEEK: Etz Limon (Lemon Tree), Israel, 2008 (19/1, h. 15.00)
THIRD PART. THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Lesson 9: INTERNATIONAL ACTORS: THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, AND CHINA (23/1)

The class deals with the goals, interests, and policies of the most important external actors. Firstly, it focuses on the ‘nature’ of the European Union and its alleged ‘exceptionality’, which is supposed to give rise to a different type of foreign policy. The problem is: can this policy work? And has it worked in the Middle East? Secondly, the class looks at the role of the US in the Middle East, from the end of the Second World War to 11 September, through the end of the Cold War, in order to assess if President George W. Bush or President Barack Obama have brought real change. And finally: is US hegemony in the region going to last or it is already over? Finally, it deals with ‘returning’ (Russia) and new Powers (China), which have attempted to establish a political presence in the region. What are they looking for? And, will they be able to fill the vacuum left by the US and the EU?

PRESENTATION (The European Union)

PRESENTATION (The United States)

PRESENTATION (Russia)

Required Reading:

- P. K. Baev, “Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East?”, The International Spectator, Vol. 50 No 2 (2015) 8-21

Recommended Reading:

Lesson 10: REGIONAL ACTORS: IRAN, TURKEY, ISRAEL, EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE (24/1)

In the last few years, established regional powers have seen their regional relevance decline (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia), while others (Turkey, Iran) have acted so to increase their regional power. In addition, non-State groups have increased their power, so much that some are aiming at achieving statehood (the Islamic State). Indeed the ‘Arab Uprisings’ and their aftermath have increased the speed of regional change. What kind of regional order has characterised the Middle East, and how is it changing?

PRESENTATION (Iran)

PRESENTATION (Turkey)

PRESENTATION (Israel)

PRESENTATION (Egypt)

PRESENTATION (Saudi Arabia)

PRESENTATION (The Islamic State)

Required Reading:

- ‘The ISIS Atlantic Debate’:

Recommended Reading:
- P. Robins, "The War for Regime Change in Iraq", L. Fawcett, ed., International Relations of the Middle East, New York: Oxford University Press 2013, 304-320
- M. Khan, "Islam, Democracy and Islamism after the Counterrevolution in Egypt", Middle East Policy, Vol. 21 No. 1 (Spring 2014). Available at http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=muftetadar_khan
- Isis, Dabiq, any issue
- Foreign Affairs, The ISIS Crisis (March 2015)
- R. Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters. What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case", Egmond Paper 81, Royal Institute for International Relations (March 2016)
- A. Speckhard, A. S. Yayla, "Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit", Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9 No 6 (December 2015)

MOVIE OF THE WEEK: The Reluctant Fundamentalist, United States, 2012 (24/1, h. 15.00)

Lesson 11: IN CLASS ROLE-PLAY: THE UN-SPONSORED CONFERENCE: FOR A PEACEFUL AND STABLE MIDDLE EAST (25/1)
Students will attempt to negotiate a regional agreement that would bring peace and stability to the region. Each student will play the role of a relevant actor; one student will act as the United Nation. The instructor will act as facilitator.

Lesson 12: THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE MIDDLE EAST: STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGE (26/1)
The final class wraps up the course, and reviews the main points discussed, by focusing on the dynamics of the role-play activity and highlighting processes of structural regional resilience and change.

Required Reading:
B. Korany, “The Middle East since the Cold War: Initiating the Fifth Wave of Democratization?”, L. Fawcett, ed., International Relations of the Middle East, New York: Oxford University Press 2013, 77-100


Recommended Reading:


F. Volpi and E. Stein, "Islamism and the state after the Arab uprisings: Between people power and state power", Democratization No 18 (2015) 276-293


FINAL EXAM (27/1)

INSTRUCTOR BIO

Alessandro Quarenghi is a Lecturer in International Politics at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, where he teaches on International Relations and International Relations of the Middle East. He holds a degree in Law, a PhD in International Relations, a Specialization in International Economics and Politics, and Masters Degrees in Postcolonial Politics and Cross-cultural Mediation. His work focuses on Middle Eastern Order, regional security issues, Democratization processes, and regional cooperation.

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