Middle East Crises: Competing Explanations
POL 162B, Spring 2017
Mondays 2:00-4:50pm, Schwartz Hall 103
https://moodle2.brandeis.edu/

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Course description, objectives, and learning goals.

What caused the protests and demonstrations of the so-called Arab Spring? Why did they spread to some countries but not others? What explains the emergence and behavior of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria? What explains U.S. policy in the Middle East, and how important is who occupies the Oval Office? What explains the development of Iran’s nuclear program and its later consent to rolling back its program for at least ten years? Each of these questions can be approached from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, each of which provides a different tool box for reaching an answer.

The course will be divided into four parts, each focused on a major “case study”/development/episode: 1) the so-called Arab Spring; 2) the rise of ISIS and sectarianism; 3) U.S. policy in the Middle East; and 4) the Iranian nuclear program. Over the course of three class sessions each, these topics will be approached from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including insights form sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, and history. We will come to recognize different approaches to knowledge, including those that tend to generalize and those that seek specific and unique explanations for particular events. Students will be introduced to alternative “tool boxes” for explaining each of the phenomena and come to recognize the benefits and limitations of distinct approaches.

Although not an explicit “gateway” course, the course is designed to serve as an introduction to the various disciplinary approaches used by faculty and students in the Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies Program.

Prerequisites. Previous knowledge of the history and politics of the Middle East region, and of the particular approaches under review, is helpful, but not necessary, for success in this course.

Course requirements and grading. Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, writing and revising assignments, preparation for class discussion, etc.).
The requirements of the course are fourfold:

- You are required to attend all class meetings, having read and thought about the assigned material for the week, and to participate actively in class discussions. Class participation will compose 20% of the final grade.
• A 10 page midterm paper, 30% of the final grade
• A final 15 page paper, 50% of the final grade.
• Students are expected to follow day-to-day regional events and analysis throughout the semester. Regional events will be assumed to be common knowledge and can be expected to come up in class discussions. We recommend we all peruse news sites, such as the following, daily:
  - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/default.stm)

**Course materials.** One book is recommended for purchase. It will be on reserve in the Brandeis Library and can also can be requested via ILL. All others readings will be available via the POL 162B LATTE site. The book is:


**Communications.** Class announcements, syllabus changes, and accommodations for “snow days” and other events will be communicated via e-mail.

**Disabilities.** If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the instructor immediately.

**Academic integrity.** Each student in this course is expected to abide by the policies and Community Standards of Behavior as outlined in Brandeis University’s *Rights and Responsibilities* handbook, which is available at: [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/pdfs/RR%202015-16.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/pdfs/RR%202015-16.pdf).

Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include a failing grade or suspension from the university or both. All outside assistance should be acknowledged, and the student’s academic position truthfully reported at all times. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with university policies and standards regarding plagiarism and other violations of academic integrity. A useful tutorial called “Recognizing and Avoiding Plagiarism” can be found at: [http://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/index.cfm](http://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/index.cfm)
Class 1. January 23.  Introduction

This week will involve an outline of the course structure, readings, and requirements. After introductions and an explanation of what the course will entail, we will go over the syllabus, week by week, and define the distinct approaches to knowledge and theories being explored throughout the course. We will then prepare for next week by discussing the state of the Middle East on the eve of the Arab Spring and beginning to watch *The Square*, a documentary film on the Egyptian uprising.

Class 2. January 30.  The Arab Spring – background and the role of technology

If necessary, finish watching *The Square* film (1h 44m)
Available on Netflix ([https://www.netflix.com/title/70268449](https://www.netflix.com/title/70268449) and on reserve in the Brandeis Library


[http://nyti.ms/2bkjcnn](http://nyti.ms/2bkjcnn)

Class 3. February 6.  The Arab Spring – explaining individual participation and transnational diffusion


http://journals.cambridge.org/article_S1537592713001072


Class 4. February 13. The Arab Spring – crackdowns and breakdowns

https://www.jstor.org/stable/23211807


No class February 20 (President’s Day/Midterm recess)

Class 5. February 27. ISIS – background and origins

http://nyti.ms/2bkjcnv

McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse, pp. 1- 71


Class 6. March 6.  ISIS – How important is religion and ideology?

McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse, pp. 73-159

http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/


Selections from “Syria and the Islamic State.” POMEPS. October 1, 2014


http://www.hurstpublishers.com/a-life-on-the-surface/

Devji, Faisal. 2015. “ISIS: Haunted by sovereignty”
http://www.spiked-online.com/spiked-review/article/isis-haunted-by-sovereignty/17680#.V9hQbLWV6V4


http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S777777770200002X

Class 7. March 13.  ISIS – Geopolitics and sectarianism

http://www.brookings.edu~/media/Research/Files/Papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/English%20PDF.pdf


http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/


Selections from

Class 8. March 20.  **U.S. Policy in the Middle East – the geopolitical and geoeconomic prisms**


Class 9. March 27.  **U.S. Policy in the Middle East – domestic politics: the role of interest groups**


Class 10. April 3. U.S. Policy in the Middle East – the role of presidents


No class April 10 (Passover/Spring recess)

No class April 17 (Passover/Patriots’ Day/Spring recess)

Background Reading – Iran Case Study

Shahram Chubin, Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, ch. 4

National Intelligence Council, “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” (November 2007)

Gary Samore, “Elements of the Iran Nuclear Deal,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015

**Class 11. April 19 (Brandeis Monday). Iran’s nuclear efforts and the JCPOA: geo-strategic prism**

Shmuel Bar, “Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making,” The Interdisciplinary Center in Herzeliya, 2004


**Class 12. April 24. Iran’s nuclear efforts and the JCPOA: the geo-economic prism**


Nader Habibi, “The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,” *Middle East Brief 74* (June 2013)


"Iranian Economy a Year after Sanctions," *Financial Tribune* (January 17, 2017)


**Class 13. May 1. Iran’s nuclear efforts and the JCPOA: the ideological dimension and domestic politics**

Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Conservatives, Neoconservatives and Reformists: Iran after the Election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad," *Middle East Brief* 4 (April 2006)

Chen Kane, “Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: A Rare Glimpse,” *Middle East Brief* 5 (May 2006)

Naghmeh Sohrabi, "The Power Struggle in Iran: A Centrist Comeback?" *Middle East Brief* 53 (July 2011)


Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Reading the Tea Leaves: Iranian Domestic Politics and the Presidential Election of 2013," *Middle East Brief* 65 (July 2012)

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, “A Comprehensive Nuclear Deal with Iran: Not Mission Impossible,” *Middle East Brief* 85 (October 2014)


Amir Hossein Mahdavi, “Iran’s election wasn’t about moderation or democracy. It was about how Iran will re-engage with the world,” *The Washington Post* op-ed (March 6, 2016)