

MODERN MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES, MPHIL

MICHAELMAS TERM, 2008/09

MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

Tutorial Programme

1. Aims and Objectives

The aim of the course is to offer an introduction to the study of Middle East politics for Masters level students. Though time is short and the field is large and complex, it is expected that, with vacation reading, the student will by the end of the course have both a feel for the main political dynamics in the modern Middle East and a good knowledge of the main secondary works on a number of key themes and countries.

The course outline contains ten substantive topics, eight of which will be covered directly in class, thereby giving students some room for choice. Each topic contains a series of questions, which it is hoped will stimulate students as well as giving them a feel for the range of the week's subject. Each topic also includes a number of essay questions. Students are expected to write FOUR essays as part of the course requirement, selecting from the sample essay questions. Students should approach their week's reading with the scope of the course and the specific essay questions in mind.

The reading list actually consists of two reading lists. One is a reading list organised thematically, which will give the student an idea of the range of books pertaining to the theme of the week. The student should begin by consulting this part of the reading list. The second part of the bibliography is organised on a country basis, and will give the student ideas on the particular states that he/she might like to look at in order to illustrate the thematic discussion in the week's essay. It should be emphasised that as far as possible the two lists contain different works; therefore both parts should be fully consulted on each topic.

2. Course Content

This course focuses on the **domestic politics** of the states of the Middle East. As such it aims to take some of the major concepts of the discipline of political studies and apply them to the contemporary Middle East. Implicit in

the programme, therefore, is the assumption that while the politics of the region may be different they are not impenetrable using Western social studies analysis. Of course, given that both the ideas and tools of social studies were developed based on a largely non-developing world set of empirical experiences, students should always be on the look out to refine and adapt conventional approaches.

The course adopts a thematic approach to the study of Middle East politics. The reason for this is twofold: first, such an approach allows maximum flexibility for the tutor in teaching the course and for the student in developing their own interests; second, the alternative approach, namely to take a country a week, would leave big gaps in the field of study, mindful of the 24 or so states in the region.

The emphasis of the course is on comparing and contrasting political phenomena across the region. The themes adopted in the course include some traditional fields of study, such as political institutions, the military, ideology and the notion of legitimacy, together with some newer analytical fields, notably public policy, civil society and gender. The influence of major inter-state conflicts and external factors on internal politics will also be considered. Throughout the course students are encouraged to make inter-regional comparative observations where relevant.

The **geographical definition** of the Middle East is an inclusive one; the student is encouraged to range widely, including North Africa, the Levant, Turkey and the Persian Gulf states. The general approach of the course gives considerable latitude to the student to focus on those countries that most interest them.

The **historical span** of the course begins with the establishment of the modern state system of the Middle East in the wake of the First World War. However, the main focus of the course is the time-line from the Second World War and the process of de-colonisation, up to the present day. The course is structured in such a way as to allow the student to concentrate on whichever period of Middle Eastern contemporary political history most interests them.

3. Organisation of Teaching

The Middle East Politics course is taught by Dr. Philip Robins of St. Antony's College (Tel: 274472; e-mail: philip.robins@sant.ox.ac.uk). The course is being offered in Michaelmas Term 2008, and will be taught either in tutorials or as a seminar. The student is expected to write four essays for the course. Moreover, students will be expected to contribute to the discussion in class.

In addition to the tutorials &/or seminars, Dr. Robins gives a series of eight lectures on Middle East politics (in MT in Schools on Fridays at 10.00), in which he examines issues and themes relevant to the option. He supplements these lectures with relevant handouts.

4. Course Outline

1. Identity Politics

Which is the dominant focus of loyalty in the modern Middle East, the state or sub-statal forms of organisation such as clan, tribe, religious sect or ethnic group? Why has kinship proved such an enduring pattern of affiliation, in spite of increasing modernity and the growth of the strength of the state? Why has socio-economic class or gender not proved to be a more potent focus of loyalty? How have kinship, ethnic and sectarian groupings set about managing their relations and why?

i) Compared with sub-state patterns of allegiance the state will always be weak. Do you agree?

ii) Compare and contrast two sub-state political movements in different Middle Eastern countries.

iii) 'Irreconcilable but reconciled'. Do you agree with this characterisation of tribe-state relations in theory and practice in the Arab World, and why?

2. Resource Allocation and Political Power

What characteristics best describe the political economy of the modern Middle East? How does the state distribute resources in order to secure political acquiescence? How important has the notion of rent been in the economies of the Middle East? Why has the Middle East failed to develop a viable industrial base? What are the prospects for economic liberalisation?

i) Has oil wealth been a blessing or a curse for the Middle East?

ii) 'The state is an institution to capture in order to bring about the enrichment of the leader and his supporters.' To what extent does this statement encapsulate the motivation of regimes across the region?

iii) To what extent is it still useful to divide the states of the Middle East into oil and non-oil economies?

iv) Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of applying rentier state theory to the politics of the oil producing states of the region.

3. Institutions of the State

What roles do institutions such as the military and the bureaucracy perform in the states of the region? How do you explain the proliferation of intelligence and security services in the Middle East? Why are the military and bureaucracy so large in size in the Middle East countries? How important have such institutions been as a vehicle for social mobility?

i) How important has the military been in the processes of state and nation building in the modern Middle East?

ii) 'In the 1950s and 1960s the army was an active player in Middle East politics; from the 1970s onwards it has been largely passive'. Is this a fair observation, and why?

iii) How significant has the bureaucracy been in obstructing reform in the region?

4. Public Policy-making

Why has the study of politics in the Middle East (as reflected in the major works of the secondary literature) ignored domestic policy and how that policy is made? How important are education and health policy for the popularity of governments in the region? Should foreign policy be included in a study of public policy-making? What are the particular characteristics of the policy-making process in the region? What is the relationship between different economic groups (e.g. merchants, landowners etc) and the state?

i) How are decisions made in authoritarian regimes in the Middle East?

ii) Can we speak of interest group politics in the Arab World?

iii) Discuss the role of agency in the making of economic policy in the Arab Middle East?

iv) How important have globalising factors, and the 'norm defusion' that they bring, been in policy trends in the region over the last 20 years?

5. Political Ideology

Why have some ideologies prospered in the region (e.g. Arab nationalism), while others (e.g. Marxism-Leninism) have not? Is Arab nationalism now dead? What are the prospects for such ideologies as territorial state nationalism and neo-liberalism in the Middle East? Why has Islamism apparently proved to be so attractive in the contemporary Middle East? How do you explain instinctive Arab support for the Palestinians and the Iraqis?

- i) Is it fair to characterise the Middle East as a highly ideological region?
- ii) Is the ideology of political Islam destined to repeat the cycle of promise followed by failure experienced by Arab nationalism?
- iii) Explain the mobilisational capabilities of political Islam in the contemporary Middle East?
- iv) 'Though their adolescence was a turbulent one the making of individual nation-states in the Arab World is now progressing nicely'. Do you agree and why?

6. Authority and Legitimacy

Why is it conventional wisdom that the states of the Middle East do not enjoy legitimacy? How have successive regimes and leaders set about trying to establish authority in their respective states? What slogans and symbols are most frequently invoked by leaders to bolster their support? How successful have they been?

- i) Which states in the region may be described as legitimate, and why?
- ii) Which regimes in the region may be described as legitimate, and why?
- iii) 'In the Middle East, the greatest source of legitimacy is power'. Discuss this apparent paradox.

7. Leadership

Can you identify any characteristics that all Arab leaders possess? Have these changed over the past five decades? Why is there such a tendency towards the cult of the leader in the Arab World? How do leaders in the Middle East set about retaining power? What is the relationship between Middle Eastern leaders and their populations? What is the relationship between leaders on the one hand, and institutions (e.g. army, bureaucracy, political parties, media etc.) and constituencies (e.g. socio-economic groupings, the ulema etc.) on the other?

i) Is the image of the sole, all powerful leader in the Arab World myth or reality?

ii) How representative were Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Asad of the leadership paradigm in the Arab World?

iii) Is the nature of leadership in Israel and Turkey basically the same as in the democracies of Western Europe?

8. Civil Society and Democratisation

How powerful has the legacy of authoritarianism been for the contemporary Middle East? Why did the early experiments in constitutional politics immediately following decolonisation fail? Is Islam a cultural barrier to the adoption of such notions? Does civil society exist in the Middle East? Will global trends towards democracy prove strong enough to bring about change in this direction?

i) Are democracy and civil society alien concepts for the Middle East?

ii) 'Liberal reform in the Arab World has come from above and has been more an exercise in political control than democratisation'. Do you agree and why?

iii) Why do Turkey and Israel have functioning democracies, but not the Arab World?

9. Gender

What roles do women play in Middle Eastern societies? What levels of social development (e.g. health, literacy, higher education) exist as far as women are concerned? Where are women found in the labour force? How inhibitive are the value systems (e.g. religious, patriarchal etc.) of the region to

women's participation in public activities? To what extent do women control economic resources? What impact, whether direct or indirect, do women have on the internal politics of the region?

- i) Are women important in Middle East politics?
- ii) Would you describe the political order in the region as 'gendered'?
- iii) How useful is the private-public dichotomy in judging the political influence of men and women in the region?
- iv) Why has the Arab World failed to produce a Golda Meir, Benazir Bhutto or Tansu Ciller?

10. Political Change and Succession

Why was political change so frequent in the 1950s and 1960s, yet so rare in the 1970s and 1980s? Why are rulers apparently so reluctant to designate their successors? How do you explain the prevalence of violence and the use of force in regime change in the region? How have the traditional regimes of the Middle East (e.g. the Gulf states and Jordan), the imminent downfall of which was routinely predicted in the 1950s, been able to survive as long as they have?

- i) Why has it proved so difficult for Middle Eastern states to introduce an institutionalised process for political succession?
- ii) How do you account for the smooth successions in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco (all 1999) and Syria (2000)?
- iii) Are the monarchies in the region better able to arrange political successions than the republics?
- iv) 'The Middle East has witnessed more national than social revolutions.' Do you agree?

Philip Robins
St Antony's College
6/10/08

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This reading list is divided into two parts: the first part takes a country by country approach; the second is organised thematically.

In addition to the actual bibliography, students are encouraged to follow the journals and publications which deal directly with the Middle East, especially with a view to gleaning more contemporary material. Attention should be given to the following:

i) Specialist Journals

British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies
International Journal of Middle East Studies
Jerusalem Journal of International Relations
Journal of Palestine Studies
Mediterranean Politics
Middle East Contemporary Survey (Yearbook)
Middle Eastern Studies
Middle East Quarterly
Middle East Journal

ii) Non Specialist Journals

Foreign Affairs
Foreign Policy
International Affairs
Survival

iii) Non Academic Publications

Economist Intelligence Unit Country Reports (quarterly)
Financial Times surveys
Le Monde Diplomatique (monthly)
Middle East International (fortnightly)
The Economist country surveys
The Middle East (glossy monthly magazine)
The World Today (monthly)

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