

Rationale for LL Designation Requested: Global

- Identify and explain norms, values, and practices across different societies or regions to critically evaluate worldviews.

POL 357 – Middle East Politics

This course introduces students to politics in the Middle East and North Africa – a region of the globe that extends from Morocco in the west to Iran in the East, from Turkey in the north to the Sudan and Yemen in the south. This region straddles Europe, includes both West Asia and an important portion of the African continent. It comprises multiple ethno-linguistic and confessional groups including Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, Kurds (among others) on the one hand, and Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians (among others), on the other. This is a very rich culture zone and we study its distinctive features and comparative-historical experiences over the 14 weeks of the semester. As per the course description, we study the politics of the region from both a comparative and an institutional perspective.

In the first part of the course we consider the structures and institutions that impact politics and governance in these states. We begin with imperialist intervention in the region, the rise of nationalism, and post-colonial state building. We study the peculiarities of monarchical rule, of authoritarian governance and the special case of religiously-defined governance – as in Iran and Saudi Arabia. -- and how these particular governing structures impact relations with society. From a scholarly article entitled, “Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle East Regime Type” students gain a better understanding of the main features of monarchical systems in the region. In our class meetings on political economy, students learn about the various developmental challenges faced by oil-rich states and oil-poor states respectively. Beyond that, readings such as one entitled, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?”, pushes students to think more deeply and critically, and apply concepts learned earlier in the semester and in other comparative politics classes to make connections between economic endowments and political effects. In the second part of the course, we consider the politics of social mobilization and political dissent in the countries of the region. Students learn about “Islamic activism” and confrontations against national governments in religious terms and using the language of Islam. Students learn about the confrontational relationship between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people – that has persisted for more than 70 years and about which there is considerable misinformation in the western media -- and gain a deeper understanding of the concerns and beliefs of the two entities. Students also study the goals and impact of foreign intervention in Iraq in 2003, and how that encouraged sectarian conflict and political “extremism” in the region.

This course falls under the subfield of Comparative Politics, an exclusively global subfield which examines the internal politics of different countries, typically organized by geographical region or culture zones, and using various tools, concepts, and methods of analysis. In this course, the instructor aims to develop students’ understanding of and sensitivity to Middle Eastern societies and cultures by exploring with them how peoples from that region understand themselves, the context of their lives and the challenges they face. Students gain a deeper understanding of

norms, values, and worldviews in Middle Eastern societies through course units that treat, for example, the place of Islam in politics. In a unit called “Islamism as political alternative”, students read several articles – among them, one entitled, “Islamic Revivalism and the Crisis of the Secular State” – and then are called upon to respond to the following question: what best explains the attraction and popularity of Islamism as an alternative to the status quo, and why? In course units on politics in Iran and in Saudi Arabia, students read about the ways in which women in those societies push back against their discriminatory treatment and insist upon their agency. [See, for example, articles in syllabus: “Women, Religion, and Political Agency in Iran,” and “Caught between Religion and State: Women in Saudi Arabia” and the feature film, Wajda. Importantly, this film and these articles are produced/written by Saudi or Iranian women. Thus, students gain greater appreciation for how women from that region make sense of and take control of their lives.] Furthermore, to encourage students to think critically and independently, while developing greater cultural sensitivity, a typical take-home essay assignment in that class is to respond, on the basis of materials read and viewed, and discussions in class, to the following question: “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”

To further enhance students familiarity with the states and societies of the Middle East and North Africa, a requirement of the course is that they follow the news from the region and come to class prepared to discuss the news. This activity not only enriches their knowledge base, but allows them to remain informed global citizens. Another requirement is that students become experts on a single country of the region: in pairs, they conduct independent research on their country following the topics covered in the course syllabus.