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

PROF. ALESSANDRO QUARENGHI

OVERVIEW

Area: International Relations

Dates: 7-18 January 2019

Campus: Milan

Course Number: IR/PO321

Term: Winter 2018

Credits: 6 ECTS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course aims to enable students to achieve a clear understanding of the key 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, and in-class debates

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- a. Students are expected 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 will have to take a final written exam.

GRADING



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Class participation	20 % of final grade
Final written exam	80 % 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. Unexcused absences will prevent students from being admitted to the final exam. In case of health issues, students will need to inform both UCSC International Office (at international.advisor@unicatt.it) and the professor and provide a medical certificate.

Exam Date: The exam date cannot be re-scheduled. Unexcused absences will result in a failing grade. In cases of unforeseeable circumstances such as illness or injury on the day of the exams, the student must submit a medical certificate and communicate his/her 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, the student will receive an automatic Failed. Unexcused absences will result in a ZERO in the grading scale. In case of health issues, students will need to inform both UCSC International Office (at international.advisor@unicatt.it) and the professor and provide a medical certificate.

SCHEDULE

FIRST WEEK.

Lesson 1: THE STRATEGIC CENTRALITY OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST; ORIENTALISM

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. This class discusses the reasons that justify the strategic centrality of the Middle East. At the end of class, we will briefly focus on the concept of Orientalism.

Lesson 2: THE CREATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST (AND ISLAM)

The 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. 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.

MOVIE: *The Battle of Algiers*, Italy-Algeria, 1966

Lesson 3: THE MIDDLE EASTERN STATE (AUTHORITARIANISM)

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.

Lesson 4: THE 'CURSE OF BLACK GOLD', CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

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



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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.

MOVIE: *The Syrian Bride*, Israel-France-Germany, 2004

Lesson 5: IDEOLOGIES

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?

VISIT/GUEST LECTURE

SECOND WEEK.

Lesson 6: A DEMOCRATIC OR A ISLAMIST 'WAVE'? THE MIDDLE EASTERN 'UPRISINGS', FROM TUNISIA TO THE 'SYRIAN SPILLOVER'

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.

Lesson 7: THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN (ARAB) CONFLICT

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 Nakhsba) 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.

Lesson 8: INTERNATIONAL ACTORS: THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, AND CHINA

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?

Lesson 9: REGIONAL ACTORS: IRAN, TURKEY, ISRAEL, EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

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 characterized the Middle East, and how is it changing?

MOVIE: *Etz Limon*, 2008 (Israel)

Lesson 10: THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE MIDDLE EAST: STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGE

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.



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FINAL EXAM

INSTRUCTOR BIO

Alessandro Quarenghi is a Lecturer in International Politics at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, where he teaches on International Relations, Economic Geography, 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 international order, international relations and politics of the Middle East.

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