

Contemporary Politics in the Middle East - Summer Course Syllabus

Instructor: **Syed Taha Kaleem**

Office Hours: By Email (tahakaleem@brandeis.edu)

Course Dates: Monday, June 1 to Friday, July 3, 2026

Class Times: Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday 11:10 AM–1:40 PM EDT

Course Description

This course provides in-depth, thematic exploration of the socio-political and socio-economic landscapes of the region popularly known as ‘Middle East’. The course begins with a broad overview of the politico-historical realities and formations that have come to define and shape the contemporary politics of the ‘Middle East’. Topics include the endurance and adaptation of authoritarian regimes, the role of oil economies and rentier states, grassroots political mobilizations, and the transformative impact of the Arab Spring. We will examine how colonial legacies, nationalism, and global power dynamics have influenced state formation and political identities across the region. Particular attention will be given to the intersections of religion, governance, and social movements, as well as the challenges posed by external intervention and regional conflicts.

Students will engage with a wide range of historical, political, anthropological and sociological scholarship to develop a nuanced understanding of the ‘Middle East’s’ contemporary challenges and its diverse future possibilities. This interdisciplinary approach will also enhance students' analytical, critical thinking, and writing skills as they explore the complexities of a region at the heart of global affairs.

Course Objectives

- By the end of this course, students should be able to:
1. Identify and critique various political regime types in the Middle East.
 2. Analyze the role of religion in political and economic systems in the region.
 3. Examine the causes and outcomes of the Arab Spring.
 4. Explore the concept of state control over resources and its impact on governance.
 5. Develop critical writing and analytical thinking skills.

Assignments and Evaluation

1. Participation: 15%
2. Country Presentation: 15%
3. Midterm Exam: 30%
4. Final Exam: 40%

Class Participation and Attendance

- Since this class meets over Zoom, you are required to keep your cameras always open. If you are unable to do this, please reach out to me.
- Attendance is taken seriously. Each class builds on the next, so if you miss a class your comprehension of the material will suffer. Full attendance is also essential for establishing a productive learning community and class dynamic. For the final exam, you will be responsible for the material discussed in lectures but not appearing in the readings.
- However, we understand that things come up during the semester that can prevent you from coming to class (family emergencies, delayed flights, illness, job interviews, etc.). As a result, you may miss two classes (which include sections, so missing one lecture and one section equals two absences) without affecting your grade. However, *for each additional class that you miss, the attendance portion of your participation grade will be reduced by five points.*
- Please note: Since we give you two freebies, this class does not have a system of “excused” or “unexcused” absences, so please refrain from contacting the professor about reasons for missing class (other than a major medical emergency requiring an extended absence from the university).

Midterm Exam

Students will sit for a midterm exam, which will be held during Week 3 of the course. The exam will consist of multiple choice questions and short essay questions. The midterm exam will be held online during the class hours.

Use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT or similar) to write or assist with quiz answers is strictly prohibited. Any quiz found to have been generated or significantly assisted by artificial intelligence will be considered a violation of the academic integrity policy. Students will receive a failing grade for the quiz and may face additional disciplinary action.

Final Exam

The final exam will be held during the last week of classes and will consist of multiple short answer questions.

Exams will be graded on originality, analytical rigor, use of evidence, and clarity of writing.

AI Policy: The final paper must be entirely your own work. **Use of AI-generated content (even partially) is not allowed.** Detection of AI assistance will result in a failing grade for the paper and may trigger further disciplinary procedures.

Grading

All assignments are graded on a 100-point scale (which allows for finer distinctions than letter grades), and a grading rubric will be distributed in advance for the written assignments and tests. At the end of the semester, final grades (out of 100) will be calculated according to the weight of each assignment (e.g., if you get an 88 on one of the written assignments, it will be recorded as an 8.8 in the final grade -- 10% of 80).

Writing Rubric

WRITING RUBRIC

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION	POINTS
Analysis	<p>EXCELLENT (12): Excels in responding to the assignment and demonstrates mastery of course concepts and materials. The thesis is clear, focused, & innovative. Recognizes the complexity of the subject matter with counterarguments.</p> <p>GOOD (10): Responds well to the assignment and demonstrates a solid understanding of course concepts. The thesis is clear and focused. Acknowledges the complexity of the subject matter.</p> <p>FAIR (8): Responds to the assignment and demonstrates limited understanding of course concepts. The thesis is present but slightly unfocused or not specific enough.</p> <p>POOR(6): Unsatisfactorily responds to the assignment and demonstrates a poor understanding of course concepts. The thesis is unfocused and unclear.</p>	/12
Clarity	<p>EXCELLENT (12): Paper flows logically to craft a natural argument. Written cues (next, enumeration, etc) to alert the reader to the next steps in the argument. Transitions develop strong connections between ideas.</p> <p>GOOD (10): Generally well-constructed flow of ideas. Points are ordered thoughtfully and relate to a central argument. Transitions create a logical progression between ideas.</p> <p>FAIR (8): The paper jumps from one idea to another and lacks a clear structure. Sparse connections between points. Transitions are based on sequencing only and not the logical progression of ideas.</p> <p>POOR (6): Wanders from idea to idea, making it hard to follow. Minimal connection of ideas between points. Sections of the paper lack a clear point.</p>	/12
Evidence	<p>EXCELLENT (12): Argument thoroughly supported by strong, topical evidence. Evidence is clearly introduced analyzed, and connected to the argument</p> <p>GOOD (10): The argument is supported by evidence, though not always the strongest or best-explained quotations/examples. Analysis of evidence needs further development.</p> <p>FAIR (8): Argument is supported by evidence that is only occasionally relevant. Connections between the argument and evidence is somewhat tenuous.</p> <p>POOR (6): Evidence is insufficient or misconstrued or misrepresented. Unclear links between the evidence and the argument.</p>	/12

Mechanics & Citation	<p>EXCELLENT (10 pts): Almost entirely free of spelling, grammar, & punctuation errors. All sources are cited correctly and completely in the text.</p> <p>GOOD (8 pts): Occasional spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors but do not hinder understanding. Sources cited correctly and completely.</p> <p>FAIR (6 pts): A few spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors that make it difficult to read at times. Some Citation Errors.</p> <p>POOR (4pts): Many spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors that make it difficult to read at times. Incomplete citations.</p>	/10
Style	<p>EXCELLENT (4): Displays a unique voice that enhances the writing of the paper. Offers innovative and new ways to think about course material. Words and ordering of ideas chosen demonstrate clear and intentioned editing skills.</p> <p>GOOD (3): Displays a clear and critical voice. Offers interesting interpretations of course material. Word choices are effective, with some evidence of editing and revision.</p> <p>FAIR (2): Critical voice that is bland and generic. Restate course material without much intervention. Word choices at times are confusing and the editing/revision seems adequate but could be better.</p> <p>POOR (1): Critical voice is unclear and frustrated by language choices. Simple, awkward, or overly long sentences that obstruct meaning. Poor word choices and editing decisions that obscure meaning.</p>	/4

The conversion of numerical to letter grades will be according to the following scale:

97-100	A+
93.5-96.9	A
90-93.4	A-
87-89.9	B+
83.5-86.9	B
80-83.4	B-
77-79.9	C+
73.5-76.9	C
70-73.4	C-
67-69.9	D+
63.5-66.9	D
60-63.4	D-
0-60	E

The Writing Center:

The University Writing Center provides free one-on-one sessions to help with your papers. It is located in Goldfarb 232 on the Mezzanine Level of the library, and virtual appointments

are also available. You are encouraged to take advantage of this service. Please find more information and schedule an appointment online:

<https://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/writingcenter/scheduleanappointment.html>

Academic Integrity:

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity (see section 4: “Maintenance of Academic Integrity”--

http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/RR14_15version11.4.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 failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Remember, you must indicate through quotations and citations when quoting from any outside source (internet, AI, or print).

Note: Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to produce content, when an assignment does not explicitly call or allow for it, is plagiarism—the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own. This is an actionable Academic Integrity offense at Brandeis.

“A student’s name on any written exercise ... constitutes a representation that the work is the result of that student’s own thought and study.” --

<https://www.brandeis.edu/student-rights-community-standards/rights-responsibilities/current/section-4.html>

Accommodations:

Brandeis seeks to create a learning environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all students, and I want to support you in your learning. If you think you may require disability accommodations, you will need to work with Student Accessibility Support (SAS) (781-736-3470, access@brandeis.edu). You can find helpful student FAQs and other resources on the [SAS website](#), including guidance on how to know whether you might be eligible for support from SAS. If you already have an accommodation letter from SAS, please provide me with a copy as soon as you can so that I can ensure the effective implementation of accommodations for this class. In order to coordinate exam accommodations, ideally you should provide the accommodation letter at least 48 hours before an exam.

Brandeis also has some resources available in an emergency for assisting in purchasing technology and books, to assist students in need. The form is here:

<https://www.brandeis.edu/student-financialservices/financial-aid/emergency-funding.html>

and the email is emergencyfund@brandeis.edu.

Course Schedule

Week 1: What is the Middle East? Where is the Middle East?

Core Readings:

1. Eickelman, Dale F. *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*. Second edition. Prentice Hall, 1989. pp. 1-5, 14-21.
2. Said Edward. "Islam through Western Eyes." *The Nation* (1980)
3. Rafeq, Abdul-Karim. "A different balance of power: Europe and the Middle East in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." *A Companion to the History of the Middle East* (2005): 229-247.
4. Cleveland, History of The Modern Middle East, pp. 86-92.

Week 2: Arab Nationalism

Core Readings:

1. Khalidi, Rashid. *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*. Columbia University Press, 1991.
2. Rowell, Alex. *We Are Your Soldiers : How Gamal Abdel Nasser Remade the Arab World*. First edition. W. W. Norton & Company, 2025.
3. Mufti, Malik. *Sovereign Creations : Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq*. Cornell University Press, 1996.
4. Makovsky, David, Alan Dowty, Yedidia Stern, et al. "From Zionism to Zion." In *Essential Israel*, edited by S. ILAN TROEN and RACHEL FISH. Indiana University Press, 2017.

Week 3: Oil(y) Borders

Core Readings:

1. Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy : Political Power in the Age of Oil*. 1st ed. Verso, 2011.
2. Arabian American Oil Company. *Aramco World*. Aramco, 1987.
3. Vitalis, Robert. *America's Kingdom : Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*. Stanford University Press, 2007.
4. Le Billon, Philippe, and Fouad El Khatib. "From Free Oil to 'Freedom Oil': Terrorism, War and US Geopolitics in the Persian Gulf." *Geopolitics* 9, no. 1 (2004): 109–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040412331307852>

Week 4: Political Islam

Core Readings:

1. Bellin, Eva. "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East." *Comparative Politics* (2004)
2. Cesari, Jocelyne. *What Is Political Islam?* Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2018.

3. March, Andrew F. "Political Islam: Theory." *Annual review of political science* 18, no. 1 (2015): 103-123.

Week 4: Arab Spring

Core Readings:

1. Dabashi, Hamid. *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*
2. Bellin, Eva. "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism" (2012)
3. Al-Arian, Abdullah, 'Islamist Movements And The Arab Spring', in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East* 2014.
4. Ghobashy, Mona El. "THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERS." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (New York, USA) 37, no. 3 (2005): 373–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743805052128>