

2nd term, Academic Year 2026-2027

Politics and International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

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Dates and schedule: Thursdays 13:00-15:00

Course description

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continue to be characterised by several problems, including unresolved conflicts and ongoing wars, Israel's occupation of Palestine, a general upgrade of authoritarianism, crony capitalism and ever-rising socio-economic inequalities, ethno-religious politics, migration and refugee flows, and environmental degradation. The region is also of strategic importance, with external powers, most notably the US and the European 'neighbour', being mostly interested in the stability of the region (at the expense of other pressing issues). With every 'crisis' in the region, self-declared Middle East experts pop up, but analyses often lack historical background, context, area-specific knowledge, and conceptual and theoretical rigour. Concurrently, Middle East scholars have been accused (and unfairly so) of not having been able to predict crucial events in the region, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, 9/11, the consequences of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the Arab uprisings, the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 7, 2024, Israel's ensuing war on Gaza and the wider region, and the recent US-Israeli attacks on Iran. It remains indeed challenging to research a region that is vast and heterogenous, where European colonialism left deep marks, where conflicts and wars have been frequent, and where the extent of foreign meddling has remained high. In addition, empirical research in the region faces the problems of access and availability of reliable data in light of widespread authoritarianism, ongoing conflicts and hence personal security issues.

Geographically, the seminar focuses on what I call the Mediterranean Middle East, that is, an area stretching from Morocco in the West to Turkey in the East – although Iran and the Gulf monarchies will also be considered. The first part of the seminar will focus on key developments that have had a lasting impact on the politics and international relations of the region, such as the modalities of the emergence of the modern state system in the Middle East, identity formation(s), post-colonial politics in the region, and the question of Palestine. The second part will focus on questions of regional security, war and peace, alliances, foreign interventions, and regional order. It will do so by applying different approaches from political science and IR, thereby highlighting the contributions that political science and IR can make to the study of the Middle East and vice versa.

Learning objectives and outcomes

Researchers who have successfully completed this seminar should be able to:

- Understand the historical, political, and socio-economic processes that have shaped, and are still shaping, the modern Middle East
- Identify the major debates and developments in the specialized literature
- Identify the major empirical questions and challenges in the study of the international politics of the Middle East and North Africa
- Analyse key political developments and challenges in the MENA through different theoretical and conceptual lenses
- Have acquired a solid basis to conduct independent research in the politics and international relations of the MENA by 'digging deeper' and expanding on the seminar readings on specific topics and/or countries

Format

In this seminar, debate and discussion will be the norm. Researchers will introduce and guide the seminar debates by way of short presentations in sessions 2-9. The seminar is worth 20 credits.

Requirements

All researchers are expected to do the assigned reading prior to each session and come prepared to class. Active participation in class discussions is a requirement for all researchers. Researchers are also required to make two short presentations to inform and lead the discussion.

In addition, researchers taking the seminar **for credit** are required to prepare 1 response paper / analytical essay (between 800 to 1,500 words, notes and bibliography included) and one syllabus that is relevant to their PhD project. The response paper is to be handed in by week 4, the syllabus by week 8. Both the response paper and the readings lists will then be discussed with the convener of the course in session 10.

Researchers taking the seminar as an **elective** are required to prepare 1 response paper / analytical essay (between 800 to 1,500 words, notes and bibliography included), to be handed in by week 8.

The seminar is open to all researchers but some familiarity with the history and politics of the Middle East is expected.