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## GOVERNMENT 224: ISLAM AND MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

The Middle East is the birth place of three Western religions and the cradle of a deep and abiding animosity to Western civilization. The region has financed the expansion of the global economy but has also recoiled from its embrace. Proclaiming its identity as fundamentally Muslim and Arab, the region is the site of significant but unacknowledged ethnic and religious diversity. Conscious of these contradictions, Government 224 examines the Middle East in terms of its resources, cultural artifacts, and its potential for triggering local and international conflicts. The focus is humanistic – namely, the reading material and the class discussions will investigate how the peoples of the Middle East structure their lives, societies, and politics in order to meet their basic needs and respond to the challenges set before them.

Thus Government 224 can be summarized as a roadmap of questions: What do people expect from a state? How do they know they are part of a community? Does Islam have unique political utilities? How does Islam affect Arab society? Does Arabism influence Islam and if so, in what ways? Are crises in this region handled differently from those in other areas of the world? Is religion more important here than elsewhere in shaping political developments? Are nationality and nationalism unique in this region? Does the Middle East produce distinctive styles of leadership? How and why do tyrants and autocrats remain in power? Do Arab states possess legitimacy? Are state borders politically and culturally meaningful? How have globalization and privatization changed regional politics? Are there common issues confronting all Arab/Middle East states? What are they? Is there a common Arab response? Can a Muslim political dynamic be identified?

A course focusing so intensely on how people understand, interpret, and manage their shared experiences must also consider the events that structure the ways in which successive generations take their bearings. Despite Government 224's simple title, then, the course probes some of the salient characteristics of the region's historical arc. Three broad dynamics generated the states-system that took shape in the Middle East during the first half of the twentieth century: (1) the end of the imperial institutions of governance that had structured regional politics over the previous 600 years; (2) the rise of local nationalist movements in Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and other major urban centers; and (3) the appearance of narrowly self-interested, territorially bounded, mutually antagonistic states. The nation-building process required the termination of foreign controls, the conceptualization of national identities, and the establishment of modern national institutions capable of maintaining the internal and external viability of the new

sovereign entities. In the Middle East, these three dynamics exhibited quite disparate trajectories. In fact, the drive for a state political order congruent with a national identity tended to destabilize political relations across the region. While most nationalist leaders were disposed to renouncing claims to rule territory located outside the generally recognized boundaries of their respective countries, they also did not hesitate to provide material support for movements whose actions weakened the sovereignty of their neighbors. Much political thought and practice in the contemporary Arab world has been rooted in the very different idea that the inhabitants of each particular country share a basic nationhood. State borders never matched the boundaries of any single national identity. The colonial powers that mapped the region's separate countries are blamed for this incongruity—perhaps the reason the colonial experience still arouses such intense anger. Yet, the notoriously brutal dictatorships following the granting of independence have not managed to develop states that satisfy the nationalist aspirations expressed across the region. Whether it is Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, or Jordan, to name only them, the state often appears to be balanced on a precipice of illegitimacy, ready to shatter into smaller units if the wrong blend of intimidation and patronage is deployed. Ironically, the Arab state system—long regarded as guarantor of stability—is also seen as the most perfidious of foreign inventions.

*CAUTION ABOUT POST 9/11 ANALYSES:*

While there may be agreement that 9/11 was the starting point for prolonged volatility across the globe, there is no consensus on its causes. A glance at the newspapers will show the repeated use of slogans and buzz words: the fault for the region's descent into chaos is sometimes attributed to American neocolonialism or to the hubris of neo-con policy wonks or often enough to the recalcitrant sectarian hatreds that undermine all attempts to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in this part of the world. Hence, making sense of the wrenching changes in the Middle East after 9/11 means not exempting from scrutiny all aspects of the conventional wisdom no matter how often repeated.

*CAUTIONARY NOTES ON THE 'ARAB SPRING': CURB YOUR  
ENTHUSIASM AND PESSIMISM*

On December 17, 2010, frustrated by his struggle to earn a living despite having a college degree, and hassled by a police officer for not possessing the proper street vendor license, a Tunisian young man named Mohamed Bouazizi poured gasoline over himself, struck a match, and lit a fire still burning across the Middle East. Consider that a little more than a year and a half ago, Husni Mubarak was under siege but clinging to power, Bashar al Asad was claiming he had nothing to worry about, and the London School of Economics was still proud to list Saif al-Islam Qadhafi as an alumnus. What a difference a year and a half can make in a region known for never changing: two of the region's kleptocrats, Ben Ali and Mubarak are out of jobs, one in exile and the other in the hospital ward of a prison serving a life sentence. Qadhafi is dead, Yemen has elected a new ruler although much of the turmoil stoked throughout the rule of the former dictator

persists. Bashar al-Asad, who boasted, when these disorders began, that they would not reach Syria, is now clinging to power over less and less territory with more and more brutality unleashed on the people who dared call for the end of his dictatorship. The outbreak of protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, even in Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, before they arrived in Syria made it clear that when protests in Tunisia and Egypt prevailed against the security apparatuses of their countries' regimes, they emboldened Arabs everywhere to go into the streets believing, perhaps, that past successes would indeed ordain the ones coming next and somehow carry forward a regional momentum for freedom. The role of the media, particularly the social media, helped strengthen the tide of protests portraying domains these regimes, no matter their brutality, could not control. But the prolonged violence in countries like Syria is also starting to bleed into Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon; sometimes carried by refugees, at other times, pulled toward confrontation by sectarian allies.

There has been a tendency to regard what happened in the Arab world this year as part of a very human struggle for liberation--hence the term, Arab Spring, a metaphor reflective of events in Prague in 1968 and of an annual cycle and natural order. Imaginations, fired by what appeared to be the overthrow of dictators not through violence or military coups but rather through peaceful demonstrations, seemed to signify that the Arab masses, too, like their Eastern European counterparts, long to be citizens and active in shaping the policies that govern their lives rather than simply following the rules made by others. "The people want to topple the regime" was the rhythmic chant that echoed across the Arab lands carried in newspapers and magazines, on Twitter and Facebook, on the airwaves of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya.

These massive protests appeared reflective of some set of underlying forces playing themselves out through the battalions of people gathered together calling for the end to dictatorship, and when successful, unwittingly transporting Islamist parties into power as if some larger historical process is unfolding in accordance with certain laws. But when political developments manage to get promoted to the status of the nature of things, they should be asked for the reasons the linguistic map they deploy suggests such an aura of inevitability. The protests that have erupted across the region may have recycled slogans, but they have not all been proclaimed for the same purpose or with the same meaning in mind. Nor are they devoid of their own particular historical precedents or social and economic interests. Nor will they produce the same outcomes.

Government 224 is intended to make these events legible. Thus Government 224 traces events across time and space but ultimately returns to current headlines and to our own shores to examine how we might or should engage the Middle East and its many issues and conflicts. The questions raised come first and foremost from the discipline of political science and focus on the alternatives before us and the consequences likely to follow.

**NOTE:**

“Eighty percent of success is showing up.” [Woody Allen] Attendance is required and class participation is expected because it serves as a means to increasing familiarity with the Middle East and with the concepts we shall deploy to understand the region’s political dynamics.

**Evaluations** will be based on two papers [five to seven pages], a take-home final examination, and one oral project. The papers will each contribute 25% toward the final grade; the oral 15% and the final 35%. Non-graded short essays [one to two pages] based on the films are also required.

The following books are required reading and are available for purchase at Smith’s bookstore:

Thomas Lippman, Saudi Arabia On The Edge  
Marc Lynch, The Arab Uprising  
Tarek Osman, Egypt On The Brink  
William Polk, Understanding Iran  
Joseph Sassoon, Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party  
Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, Shi'ite Lebanon  
Nikolaos Van Dam, The Struggle for Power in Syria

## SYLLABUS

September 6: What We Want to Learn; What We Can Learn in This Course

In the aftermath of chaos in Iraq and embryonic civil wars in the Palestinian territories and in Lebanon, which regime is likely to blow up next? Will it be Egypt with its disgruntled and marginalized Muslim Brethren triggering a crisis? Will it be Jordan whose King seems increasingly alienated from public opinion? Will it be Syria whose president seems not up to the job of holding together the economy and polity? Or will it be Saudi Arabia whose king is not getting any younger and whose country may face a succession battle that fragments the leadership and society? Has the Iranian regime been changed by the June 12 contested presidential election? Have the forces of repression been strengthened or weakened? How are elections related to freedom and democracy?

September 11: Defining The Region: Defining Its Identities

Excerpts from The United Nations Developments Reports 2002 and 2005

*Discussion:* What is human development and how is it measured? How is freedom related to human development? Who or what forces are responsible for the human development ‘deficits’ in the Arab World?

September 13: Existential Values—Meaning of Life and Death

Excerpts from Jamal Elias, Islam

September 18: Rosh ha-Shanah

Two Film Assignments:

1. “Islam Rising”

**Questions for Response Paper:** What is the film’s message? Does the documentary convey the power of Islam and the appeal of the ritual? Describe the ritual’s appeal? Is the film ‘balanced’ or is it ‘apologetic’?

2. “The Road to Kerbala”

**Questions for Response Paper:** Compare the shi’a pilgrimage ritual in “The Road to Kerbala” with the haj as depicted in “Islam Rising”. Evaluate the ways in which the two rituals are portrayed. Do you believe the impact of each of these rituals is different for the participants? How is each viewed by those outside of the community of adherents? What accounts for the differences?

September 20: Excerpts from Samir Kassir, Being Arab

September 25: Leila Ahmad, “Women and The Rise of Islam”

September 27: Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, Shi'ite Lebanon, pp. 1-49

Nikolaos Van Dam, The Struggle for Syria, pp. 1-48

Thomas Lippman, Saudi Arabia On the Edge, pp.

*Discussion:* Has Islam unified the Middle East? How has Islam influenced social and political perceptions within and without communities? Can Arab and Muslim identities be easily differentiated? Does Arabism reinforce Muslim identity? Does Islam reinforce Arab identity.

October 2, 4 and 11: Coping with Change

Excerpts from James Gelvin,

Tripartite [Sykes-Picot] Agreement on the Partition of the Ottoman Empire [1916]

Political Clauses of the Treaty of Sevres [1920]

*Discussion:* In World War I, the Ottoman Empire was defeated and the landscape of the Middle East was transformed into separate nation states by the victorious Great Powers. The creation of separate Arab states is widely acknowledged as having had a traumatic effect on the region. Why? Because outsiders drew the map? Because the map, itself, was flawed? Because Arabs wanted unity?

*Discussion:* Does imperialism always generate nationalism? Does the character of the imperialist regime shape the nature of the nationalist response? Does imperialism provide any benefits? Does nationalism always speak for the majority? Did the various nationalisms in the Arab states share a common agenda? To what extent were they allied; to what extent were they competitors? How is nationalist power related to identity?

**--FIRST PAPER DUE OCTOBER 15--**

**PAPER TOPIC: The states in the Middle East are the legacy of the Anglo-French partition of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. But their political**

**cultures seem informed more by Arab and Muslim cultural values than by the imperialist forces that structured their state borders and institutions. Select two instances illustrating the struggle between these international political and domestic cultural forces and describe and account for the outcome. Be certain to ground your argument in empirical data and/or historical developments.**

**THE CASE STUDIES:**

October 16 and 18: Egypt

Tarek Osman, Egypt On The Brink, pp. 1-114.

Film: "Nasser 56"

**Response Paper:** Explain the meaning of this movie and why the current Egyptian regime was afraid to allow it to play in theaters.

October 23 and 25: Egypt

Tarek Osman, Egypt On The Brink, pp. 115-245.

**THE FRAGILE CRESCENT:**

October 30 and November 1: Syria

Nikolaos Van Dam, The Struggle for Syria, pp. 49-144.

November 6 and 8: Lebanon

Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, Shi'ite Lebanon, pp. 50-218

**--SECOND PAPER DUE NOVEMBER 17--**

**PAPER TOPIC: Why has the Arab Middle East not built any genuine democratic states structured on institutions that operate in accordance with the broad principles of freedom and individual rights? Your essay must have an empirical foundation. You must also discuss more than one country.**

November 13 and 15: Iraq

Joseph Sassoon, Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party

November 24: Film: "Iraq in Fragments"

November 27 and 29: Iran

William Polk, Understanding Iran

*Discussion:* Is the rise of Muslim political activism a consequence of globalization, a failed leadership, a series of failed state-building efforts? Is Iran a country ripe for another revolution or a country on the move establishing regional hegemony in the Middle East

December 4: UPRISINGS, AWAKENINGS, VIOLENCE  
Marc Lynch, The Arab Uprising, pp.

December 6: A Conversation with Dr. Hussein Ibish on 'The Arab Awakenings'

December 11 and 13: Their Audacity to Hope

Marc Lynch, The Arab Uprising, pp.