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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 also recoiled from its embrace. Fundamentally Muslim and Arab, the region is the site of significant ethnic and religious diversity. Acknowledging these contradictions, Government 224 examines the region 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.

But engaging these existential issues inevitably leads to a consideration of international relations because the balance of global power often has a substantial impact on local political developments. 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.

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:

Ervand Abrahamian, A Modern History of Iran

Adeed Dawisha, Iraq: A Political History From Independence to Occupation

Jamal Elias, Islam

Maye Kassem, Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarianism

Volker Perthes, Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and The Limits of Change

SYLLABUS

September 8: 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?

September 10: 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 15, 17, 22 and 24: Existential Values—Meaning of Life and Death

Jamal Elias, Islam, pp. 1-81

Samir Kassir, Excerpts from Being Arab

Adeed Dawisha, Iraq: A Political History From Independence to Occupation, pp. 1-66.

William Harris, Excerpts from The New Face of Lebanon: History's Revenge

Leila Ahmad, "Women and The Rise of Islam"

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.

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 Karbala" 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 29 and October 1: Coping with Change

Bernard Lewis, "What Went Wrong?"
Dan Dinur, Excerpts from Lost In The Sacred

October 6 and 8: Imperial Follies

Rashid Khalidi, Excerpts from Resurrecting Empire
Fouad Ajami, Excerpts from The Foreigner's Gift
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?

October 15: The Fragile Crescent

James L. Gelvin, "The Other Arab Nationalism"
Lisa Wedeen, "Seeing Like a Citizen, Acting Like a State: Exemplary Events in Unified Yemen"
Lisa Wedeen, "The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres"

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 20 and 22: Egypt

Maye Kassem, Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarianism pp. 1-48

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 27 and 29: Egypt

Maye Kassem, Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarianism, pp. 49-192

November 3 and 5: Syria

Volker Perthes, Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and The Limits of Change

November 10 and 12: Lebanon

William Harris, Excerpts From The New Face of Lebanon: History's Revenge

--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 17 and 19: Iraq

Adeed Dawisha, Iraq: A Political History From Independence to Occupation, pp. 67-170

November 24: Film: "Iraq in Fragments"

December 1 and 3: Iraq

Adeed Dawisha, Iraq: A Political History From Independence to Occupation, pp. 171-289.

December 8 and 10: Iran

Ervand Abrahamian, A Modern History of Iran
Vali Nasr,

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? Does Abrahamian's analysis anticipate or offer an explanation for the reactions in Iran to the officially proclaimed victory of Ahmadi-Nejad as president.

December 15: Where do all of these developments leave us?