



Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

Program in Contemporary Middle East Studies

Philosophy

While the study of the region's pre-history and pre-modern history is often well served at European and U.S. universities, the study of the contemporary Middle East there is often underrepresented. To offset this imbalance, the College's curriculum focuses on the study of the contemporary Arab Middle East.

The Program in Contemporary Middle East Studies offers a wide range of university-level courses. The curriculum is overseen by a special committee (with the president and academic deans as ex-officio members). This ensures that instruction is consonant with the highest academic standards of universities and colleges in Europe and the United States, and that its program of study is both intellectually coherent and rigorous. The faculty for the College's Program of Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies will be drawn a talented pool of scholars connected to the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS), a non-profit academic research institution located in Sana'a, which has been in Yemen since 1978.

Teaching methodology

Courses are generally five weeks long, and are arranged to coincide with the Arabic term. At present, one course is held during the spring and one during the autumn, with at least two courses over the summer. The expectation is that students will take Arabic language courses from the PAL alongside their PCMES studies, as we believe that Arabic language is a vital aspect of understanding the region's culture.

Classes are conducted in English and mostly in seminar format. However, lectures and cultural performances are periodically presented to the whole student body. While the course work of most classes is equivalent to the average U.S. undergraduate work load (averaging four books, or the equivalent thereof in articles, per semester), it may contain a separate graduate component with a greater number of required readings or simply more challenging and specialized assignments. Depending on the nature of the course, the class might include field trips to various places in Yemen.

Courses range in topic and discipline but are usually inter-disciplinary. These are taught on the basis of sufficient demand of five or more students per course and may be general, to reflect important regional knowledge expected of any student concentrating in contemporary Middle Eastern studies. Other, more specialized courses are also offered, representing a range of topics that will vary depending on faculty specialization as well as student interest (See the course list).

Credit and Transcript

Students will receive a grade transcript after completing the course of study. We recommend that contact your university in advance to ensure that you will be able to gain credit. One course usually comprises 50 hours of contact time, and will gain you 4 credits.



Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

Courses taught

The following are courses available at YCMES. * Indicated courses available summer 2011

Basic Courses

Contemporary Politics of the Middle East.

An overview of the different state forms currently in place in the Middle East as well as the politics and ideology of parties, elections, and parliaments. Opposition movements, including Islamic ones, will be considered.

Islam in the Middle East Today

The emphasis of this course is on the way Islam is practiced in everyday life and the way it is experienced by different peoples in the Middle East. Is there a difference, for example, between an official version of Islam as taught in the madrasahs and the way people practice their religion in their ordinary lives? Do women experience religion differently than men (for example, dress codes and freedom to divorce)?

Islam: History, Tenets, and Rituals

A general overview of Islam: the Qur'an, Hadith, Shari'ah, the main rituals such as prayer and pilgrimage, the different schools of law and sects, and the history of the Caliphate. This course is intended for students who have no background in Islamic theology and history.

Modern Middle Eastern History: from later 19th century until the present

An overview of the forces that have shaped the contemporary Middle East, including colonialism, modernization, nationalism and independence movements, the Cold War, the rise of oil economies, Islamic resurgence, and the rise of and war against terrorism.

Peoples and Cultures of the Contemporary Middle East

What is the difference between Berber and Arab, Iranian and Turk? What is a tribal society as opposed to a peasant one? How is a souk organized and run? Is there such a thing as an Islamic city? These and other questions will be examined in this course on the anthropology of the Middle East.

Political Economy of Natural Resources in the Middle East

This course will examine the political economy of oil and water in the Middle East. How important has oil been to certain states in the region? Who has benefited from its revenues and has their distribution been equal or fair? How has water become a political issue in the Middle East today? What conflicts have arisen over its scarcity or degradation? How have their impact been felt, depending on class and gender?

Political Geography of the Middle East

How is the natural environment (for example, a wadi) utilized when it is part of wider social, economic and political systems (for example, customary irrigation laws, regional trading networks, and tribal or state



Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

This basic question informs our examination of several distinct environments in the Middle East (mountain, desert, wadi, and coast), offering a comparison of the way geography and politics are linked.

Twentieth Century Arab Literature (novel, drama, and poetry)

An introduction to the major Arabic writers of the twentieth century and the literary genres in which they worked. Texts will be read in English translation, though advanced students may attempt to read the originals in coordination with their Arabic language instructors.

Specialized Courses

Contemporary Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East.

This course will focus less on the study of political systems or structures (see Contemporary Politics of the Middle East) than on the political ideas that seem to resonate the most with publics in the region and the social or political movements that advocate them, whether they be Islamist, socialist, free market, etc.

Urf, Shari'ah, and Qanūn: Legal Systems in the Middle East

The Middle East was historically the “giver of laws” to the west, and today it is not so much the “absence of the rule of law” that is the problem (as it is so often claimed) but the fact that there are different, deeply rooted systems of law. Three of the principal ones will be examined in this course, the first based in tribal customary law, the second in religious precept of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, and the third in modern civil law. How are they different? Where do each apply? When do they compete or come into conflict with each other, if at all? What institutions carry out these laws, and how are they different from each other?

Electronic Media and Social Transformation in the Middle East: film, television, and the internet

Electronic media have rapidly transformed the face of the world; is the Middle East is any exception? Whether one is talking about Iranian blogs, Maghrabian cinema, or Egyptian television, is it only access to information and images that is at stake or also the power to circulate them to audiences around the world and thereby help shape public opinion? Through select case studies, the form that electronic media takes and its varied (and often unexpected) effects on its audiences, will be the central topic of the course.

Gender and Class in the Contemporary Middle East

In the last three decades, an enormous amount of social scientific research has been done on gender relations in the Middle East. This has been updated by an examination of recent feminist movements, be they in Morocco or Yemen. While work on the poor has also been prominent, only recently have the middle classes and the elites come under scrutiny. Class and gender as well their interconnections are examined in comparative perspective.

Ideas and Practices of Middle East Business

Does Islamic belief regulate business in the region’s Muslim countries? If so, what are they and what are their effects? What about other cultural notions such as knowing a person’s social background, the importance of social networks, the belief in “right timing,” establishing and maintaining “honorable” relations, working



Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

through “intermediaries,” building “trust,” and so forth? Is there a social rhythm to the business day that is particular to the region? Do women entrepreneurs have to operate differently from their male counterparts? Besides reading and studying primary texts and analytical studies, the class will engage business leaders from the Yemeni and foreign community to discuss their experiences working in the region.

International Relations in the Middle East

Why are certain countries in the region considered to be the “power centers” and others at the “margins”? How correct is the conventional wisdom that marginal or peripheral states like Afghanistan or Yemen are not crucial to political events in the region? Which countries exert the most influence on the region (China, Japan, Europe, and the United States) and what form does this influence take? What should the policies of the region’s countries be towards these external powers? What should the latter’s policies be towards the region as a whole and to specific countries in it? These are some of the questions to be considered in this course.

Middle Eastern Politics and Democratic Systems

There has been much talk on the part of the U.S. administration about implanting or advancing democratic regimes in the region. What do the administration and western political scientists mean by democracy? What do people in the region mean by it? To what extent are current Middle Eastern states democratic by either reckoning? To what extent might countries in the region be “democratic” in ways that conventional western political theory might not recognize, with its emphasis on political parties, state apparatuses, and parliamentary elections?

Music, Poetry, Dance, and Theater

How do individuals and societies of the region constitute their diverse cultural identities through performances of music, poetry, dance, and theater? Differences such as male/female, rural/urban, tribal/non-tribal, religious/secular, etc. will be considered. Emphasis will be placed not only on the forms of these artistic expressions but also the cultural and political work they do in their respective societies. Students are encouraged to participate in local artistic performances, under the tutelage of specific artists, in order to understand these concerns.

Politics of Development in the Middle East

The Middle East is one of the poorest regions of the world and has been a recipient of development aid for decades, whether it be from donor countries outside the region or increasingly from the wealthier oil states within the region. This development has a history, and each period or stage seems to offer its own dynamic and dilemmas which also vary from country to country. Should development aid be tied to political agendas? How have recipient countries used or misused their development aid? What are examples of successful development projects and what are the criteria by which one judges them? In addition to reading primary and secondary texts on development, students will meet and talk to development experts who have worked in Yemen and other countries in the region.

Recovering the Past: Problems of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East

All countries of the region support or in some cases discourage efforts to uncover their pasts or to preserve their cultural and linguistic legacies, whether these be the archaeological unearthing of important historical sites, the preservation of World Heritage cities, the restoration of natural environments like the Iraqi marshes,



Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

of the movement to preserve Berber and Kurdish languages and cultures. What are the forces that threaten cultural heritage? What are the forces that encourage its preservation (and why)? How are efforts of cultural survival and preservation affected by political, economic and other factors?

The Discourse and Practice of Rights in the Middle East

Can a “rights discourse” with its roots in Euro-American political thought and the history of Euro-American institutions be “translated” into local terms in the Middle East? Do such local terms already admit of a discourse of rights that may be different from its Euro-American variant because it is rooted in other traditions? If so, how (in)compatible are they? What challenges does a rights discourse face no matter its origins, and whether it be about women, children, or a free press, in the different countries of the region?

The Middle East as a Transnational Area: migration, global cities, refugees and diasporas

Neither the Middle East nor any other world region (Africa, Latin America, the Far East, etc.) is clearly bounded and self-contained in an era of migration and population displacement, accelerated communications, and economic globalization. How does the study of the region change when New York, for example, has more people of Middle Eastern descent than Damascus or Casablanca? How is Dubai not only a Gulf city but a global one like London or Singapore? What influence do diasporas have on the economics and politics of their home countries? What has the lot of refugees been in the Middle Eastern countries in which they have been relocated (for example, Palestinians in Lebanon, Afghanis in Pakistan, Somalis in Yemen)?

“What Do They Want From Us?” Dialogue across Cultures

Why does U.S. rhetoric about human rights or democracy seem hollow at best and hypocritical at worst to Middle Easterners? Why does the phenomenon of veiling appear to westerns as oppression against women? What does friendship entail in many Middle Eastern societies that it does not in many western ones? The course asks: what are the possibilities of dialogue across cultures on these and other topics that will enhance our understanding of each other. Each week a particular subject will be explored through readings and discussion with an expert on the topic.