

Georgetown University
Liberal Studies Program
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Unraveling the Web: A Primer on Why the Middle East is a Mess

Tuesdays 6:30-9:15 PM

Ori Z Soltes

solteso@georgetown.edu

All too often the problematic of the Middle East is considered from too narrow a viewpoint. Many are the experts and authorities who understand the ins and outs of Arab culture or of Islam or of the Israelis or the Iraqis or the Egyptians. Rarely if ever does one encounter a discussion that encompasses the extraordinary array of complications that interweave each other to yield an answer to the question as to why this is such a difficult region of the world. The intention of this course is to do that: to make accessible to an intelligent reader and auditor that array of complications. As such my intention is to offer a primer: each of the areas encompassed can be studied in greater detail through further discussion or reading.

My goal is not to propose a given solution, in fact, but to explore and explain the problem as a starting point for thinking about solutions. My hope is also to present different issues evenhandedly, from different perspectives, which is a second flaw I find in most presentations of the region: that they are two one-sided, whether obviously or subtly.

It has become fashionable, particularly as the months after September 11, 2001 became years, to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue as the key to a solution to the problematic of the Middle East. There is no question that this is a crux—perhaps the crux—issue, and our discussion will expend a disproportionate focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

But to imagine that, even were this problem to be solved, the region would shift into a calm and forward-looking mood is not to understand its history, its culture, its multiple-dimensional personality. The elimination of Saddam Hussein has not solved the problem of terrorism, much less the larger problem of the Middle East, nor could it. The elimination of Ussama Bin Ladin will not solve it. A change in the nature of the Saudi regime won't. Each of these and a large group of other issues plays a role, but no single one among them is by itself the key, and the same is true for Israel-Palestine: it is only part of the larger problematic.

The Middle East is a web in which threads of two sorts interweave each other in a snarling tangle that appears nearly impossible to disentangle. The threads that run one way (we might mix our metaphor and call them warp threads of a tapestry) are religion, ethnicity, politics, nationality and economics. Those that run counter to these (let us call them weft threads) are conflicting and confusing definitions, aspirations and interferences.

This course seeks to unravel that tangled web – that is, to isolate and elucidate the many threads that make up the web, as opposed to re-organize them into a nice, neat tapestry. Neatness is hardly possible, as I hope our discussions will make clear. But clarity is possible, even in a relatively brief compass. On the other hand, clarity does not mean simplicity.

To ignore any one of the threads is to ignore what to *some* group is important and therefore to miss one of the reasons that the region is a tangled web. To ignore the massive volume of historical detail is to forget how tangled the web is and to be deluded into imagining that it can be easily disentangled. And even at that, our discussion will offer only the tip of the iceberg of detail.

At the end of this course I shall repeat the following mantra: *the key to understanding – and possibly to solving – the problematic of the Middle East is developing the capacity to remember all of its historical complications (not just to cherry-pick the ones that are convenient for one’s own point of view) and at the same time to forget all of the region’s history.* To move forward toward resolution and peace, if it is possible, will only be possible when the protagonists can both keep in mind other protagonists’ histories and abandon the pain of their own; when they can *clear* the slate—without *erasing* it—and ask: where do we go from *here*?

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The text for this course happens to be my own. It is—or should be—available at your ever-lovin’ Georgetown University Bookstore. **There are other readings that I suggest, to supplement this text, along the way—in fact in a separate document I am providing you with a brief bibliography to guide you to other sources (each of which then has its own bibliography and sources).**

The course requirements include engagement in the discussion, to the extent that that seems relevant, and two take-home exam/paper assignments. One I will assign about midway through the semester; the other will be of your choosing: find a subtopic (there are many) relevant to the course content, beyond what we have time to cover in class and make it your own! I am more than available for consultation on this. The two written assignments will be pretty evenly weighted in determining your grade.

Jan 14

1 Introduction: Religion, Ethnicity, Politics, Nationalism, Economics in the Middle East
(and what the difference is between “Middle East” and “Near East”);

Definitions I: Semites and Arabs. (Suggested readings: Hitti, 1-71; Hourani, 1-22; Lewis, 9-25)

Jan 21

(Time line) Muhammad and the Birth of Islam (Suggested readings: Hourani, 23-82;
Lewis, 36-49; Ruthven, 11-43; Williams, 7-106)

Definitions II: (Time line) Hebrews, Israelites, Judaeans, Jews and Christians (Suggested readings: Soltes, *Sacred Signs*, 49-70);

Jan 28

Definitions III: Arabs, Muslims and Jews (recapitulation); Israelis and Palestinians (Suggested readings: Halabi, 1-137; Benny Morris)

Feb 4

Judaism and Christianity in Islam; Jews and Christians within the Islamic World (Suggested readings: Bat-Yeor, 43-98; Katsh, 3-13; Rosenthal, 3-47, 51-62; Stillman, 64-107)

Feb 11

Interfaces and Interferences; Complexities and Complications: The Era of the Crusades
(Suggested readings: Lewis, 49-99)

Feb 25

Aspirations I: Islam within Arab Nationalism (Suggested readings: Hitti, 193-263; Antonius, 1-100);

Aspirations II: Political and Cultural Nationalism among the Arabs, from Mehmet Ali
to World War I

Mar 3

Aspirations III: Jewish Nationalism from Joseph HaNasi to Balfour (Suggested Readings: Avineri, 1-47, 56-65, 73-83, 88-101, 112-25; Hertzberg, 1-100, 141-58, 178-98, 200-26, 248-70)

[FIRST PAPER DUE MAR 3]

Mar 17

Aspirations, Interferences and Conflicts into the Twentieth Century:
from Coffee to Missionaries to Oil; World War I (Oren, parts 1,2, 5 &6);
Interferences II: The New Near East Between the Wars

Mar 24

More Aspirations and Interferences: World War II, the Holocaust and the Problematic of Israel-Palestine
(Suggested readings: Avineri, 151-217; Herzberg, 379-88, 419-32, 556-72,
604-20; Porath);
The Varied Problematic of the Middle East Before and After 1948

Mar 31

Israel and the Palestinians; the Palestinians and Israel (Suggested readings: Avineri;
Shehadeh, 15-103, 225-49);
The United States and Israel-Palestine (Suggested readings: Miller, Ross)

Apr 7

The Larger Contexts of Peace and War I: From the Suez Conflict to Oslo; Syria and Lebanon
(Suggested readings: Hirst, 206-46; Khalidi; Sachar, 37-61, 85-109, 150-63);

April 14

The Larger Contexts of Peace and War II: Iran, Iran/Iraq, Iraq/Kuwait, Turkey
(Suggested readings: Salinger & Laurent; Polk, 169-212)

April 21

Further Contexts: Turkey toward July, 2016; the Kurds; the Second Intifada and Its Ongoing Aftermath:
Israel, the Palestinians, and their Old and New Friends and Enemies

April 28

Ongoing Epilogues: Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Gaza and the West Bank; ISIS; "Arab Spring":
Between Hell and Hope