

PEPPERDINE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

COURSE SYLLABUS

MMEP 653. THE BATTLE OF IDEAS IN UNITED STATES MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Martin Kramer, Fall 2026

Class Meeting Information:

Friday 8:30-11:30

Instructor Contact Information:

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Office Hours: After each class.

Introduction

"All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible."

—T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

American policy toward the Middle East has been shaped not only by strategic interests and immediate crises but also by competing ideas about the region's character. Policymakers and the intellectuals who influence them have repeatedly disagreed over basic questions: Are the region's political difficulties rooted in institutions, political culture, religion, or historical circumstances? Can liberal democracy take root in the Middle East? Does modernization push societies toward greater political convergence with the West, or do enduring cultural differences limit that process? And how far should the United States go in trying to encourage political change?

This course examines these questions through seven influential thinkers and the broader debates they shaped. It begins with Montesquieu, whose analysis of despotism, political liberty, and intermediary institutions established categories that profoundly shaped later Western thinking about "Oriental despotism." Elie Kedourie carried the argument into the modern Middle East, questioning whether imported ideologies and institutions necessarily produced liberty. Bernard Lewis brought many of these questions directly into American debates about Islam, democracy, and political reform.

The course then turns to the great post-Cold War debate between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy had emerged as the only political system capable of making a universal claim to legitimacy, while Huntington rejected expectations of convergence, arguing that culture, religion, and civilization would remain powerful forces in world politics. Fouad Ajami brought these arguments into the politics of the Arab world and into American policy after 9/11, arguing that authoritarianism itself had become a source of instability and radicalism. Joseph Nye concluded that the appeal of American ways, while irresistible in much of the world, met unique resistance in the Middle East.

Through these seven thinkers, students will examine a recurring tension in American Middle East policy: the tension between accepting the region as it is and attempting to change it. The final session will consider how these competing traditions inform current American policy.

Official Course Description

This course examines the interplay between ideas and national interests that has shaped United States policy toward the Middle East. It focuses on the intellectual frameworks American policymakers have used to interpret the region: the nature of political authority, the prospects for democracy, the relationship between Islam and political freedom, the effects of modernization, and the possibility of enduring civilizational difference.

The course focuses on influential thinkers whose arguments helped shape these debates. Beginning with Montesquieu's analysis of despotism and political liberty, the course moves through Elie Kedourie and Bernard Lewis, then to the post-Cold War arguments of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, and concludes with Fouad Ajami's case for political transformation in the Arab world and the limits of Joseph Nye's "soft power" thesis. Students will examine how these thinkers understood the Middle East's political character, how their ideas entered American policy debates, and how events challenged or reinforced their claims.

The course pays particular attention to the tension between universalist and particularist approaches to the region. Can liberal institutions take root across diverse historical and cultural settings, or are there limits to political convergence? Does authoritarianism provide stability, or does it create conditions for radicalism and upheaval? How far should the United States go in promoting political reform, and when does an effort to transform other societies collide with the realities of state power, regional interests, and unintended consequences? The course concludes by asking which of these intellectual frameworks still shape policy today, which have been discredited or abandoned, and what their persistence reveals about the power—and limits—of ideas in foreign affairs.

Course Objectives

This course provides a deep dive into the first two of the program's desired educational outcomes, while also introducing students to the ways intellectual frameworks shape policy analysis, strategic choices, and decision-making. By examining competing interpretations of the Middle East and their influence on American policy, students will consider how ideas interact with political interests, historical circumstances, and the limits of state power.

The Program Educational Outcomes for the MMEPS include:

- Understand political, historical, cultural, ideological, and religious factors in Middle East;
- Appreciate American engagement, role and influence in the region;
- Apply policy designs and decision frameworks prudently balancing tradeoffs;
- Develop the analytical, executive and decision-making skills necessary to formulate and lead solutions.

Texts and Course Materials

REQUIRED:

Students will access all readings via a printed reader. Most are excerpts, not full texts. A few selected works will be recommended for purchase as essential for a personal library going forward.

Course Requirements and Grading Policy

Students will write a 20- to 25-page paper on a topic proposed by the student and confirmed by the instructor. To support this work, students will compile a folder of research materials in Gemini Notebook and query its contents via chat. Students will submit the paper and the link to the folder at the end of the semester. This is a research paper: both the underlying research and the paper will be assessed.

Grading:

- Class Participation: – 50%
- Paper: – 50%
- Total – 100%

Course Policies and Disclosures

This course follows Pepperdine's policies on student privacy, intellectual property, plagiarism detection (Turnitin), accommodations for students with disabilities, and academic integrity. Full details will be provided in class.

Course Timeline

Session 1: Montesquieu and the Despotism Debate

- Background: Machiavelli and the Ottoman model of government
- Montesquieu on despotism, monarchy, and political liberty
- *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*
- Debating "Oriental despotism" and its legacy

Session 2: Elie Kedourie and Modernized Despotism

- "Civil Politics" in the Middle East
- Traditional political authority and the absence of representative institutions

- Nationalism, modernization, and imported political ideologies
- Can modernization strengthen despotism?

Session 3: Bernard Lewis and the Freedom Agenda

- The Islamic tradition
- Between Communism and the West
- “Islam and Liberal Democracy”
- “Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East”
- Hope Springs Eternal: Iraq and the Arab Spring

Session 4: Francis Fukuyama and the Universalist Case

- *The End of History and the Last Man*
- Liberal democracy as a universal political idea
- Islam and the challenge to the “end of history”
- 9/11, the Arab Spring, and the importance of institutions

Session 5: Samuel Huntington and the Clash of Civilizations

- “The Clash of Civilizations?”
- Modernization versus Westernization
- Islam and the West
- Counterpoints by Fukuyama, Ajami, Edward Said, and others

Session 6: Fouad Ajami and the Case for Political Transformation

- “The Arab Inheritance”
- Arab authoritarianism and political failure
- Iraq and *The Foreigner’s Gift*
- The Arab Spring and the argument for democratic change
- Ajami’s changing assessment of Huntington

Session 7: Joseph Nye and Soft Power + Summation

- “Soft Power” Meets the Middle East
- Which arguments have survived Iraq and the Arab Spring?
- How does the current Iran war debate relate to earlier debates?

Course Policies and Disclosures

In the modern classroom, several legal and procedural issues arise that require clarification. Below are the statements about the policies for this class around some of these important issues.

- ❑ **Student privacy.** Our classrooms are a laboratory of ideas and students are encouraged to take intellectual risks and explore ideas within this setting. In order to safeguard the privacy of all our students and faculty in modern learning environments, no individual may record, reproduce, screenshot, photograph or distribute any video, audio, or visual content from the course without the permission of the persons involved in the exchange or conversation and the professor.
- ❑ **Intellectual property rights.** All class lectures and materials herein, including but not limited to, pre-recorded and live lectures, live discussions and discussion boards (and recordings thereof), posted course materials, visual materials that accompany lectures/discussions, and virtual whiteboard notes (collectively “Course Intellectual Property”) remain the intellectual property of the faculty member or their authors. No individual may record, reproduce, screenshot, photograph, or distribute any Course Intellectual Property in partial or full-format without the permission of the professor. Any violation of this policy may subject the individual to disciplinary and/or legal action.
- ❑ **Use of TurnItIn.com.** This course may require electronic submission of essays, papers, or other written assignments through the plagiarism detection service Turnitin (<http://www.turnitin.com>). Turnitin is an online plagiarism detection service that conducts textual similarity reviews of submitted papers. When papers are submitted to Turnitin, the service will retain a copy of the submitted work in the Turnitin database for the sole purpose of detecting plagiarism in future submitted works. Students retain copyright on their original course work. The use of Turnitin is subject to the Terms of Use agreement posted on the Turnitin.com website. You may request, in writing, to not have your papers submitted through Turnitin. If you choose to opt out of the Turnitin submission process, you will need to provide additional research documentation and attach additional materials (to be clarified by the instructor) to help the instructor assess the originality of your work.
- ❑ **Accommodations for Students.** Pepperdine University provides services and accommodations in accordance with the ADA and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Pepperdine recognizes that each student is a unique individual and that the effect of a particular disability can vary from student to student. As a result, accommodations are determined through an interactive process with the student, the Office of Student Accessibility, and medical/mental health professionals.

Any student with a documented disability (physical, learning, or psychological) needing academic accommodations should contact the Office of Student Accessibility [located at Student Assistance Center #105, phone: (310) 506-6500] , email: student.accessibility@pepperdine.edu] as early in the semester as possible. All discussions will remain confidential. Please visit <http://www.pepperdine.edu/disabilityservices/> for additional information.

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- ❑ **Right to Revise Syllabus.** The professor reserves the right to modify the syllabus as the semester progresses in response to external events, University directives, or to advance the progress of learning in the course.

Course Rules and Procedures

- ❑ Students will generally be expected to be present and prepared in each class session.
- ❑ Cell phones should not be used in a manner that disrupts the classroom learning environment.
- ❑ Students are expected to complete the assignments and activities by the timelines and deadlines specified in the syllabus. Responsibility lies with the student to review these materials and deadlines on a regular and timely basis. All times in all assignments will be in the Eastern time zone.
- ❑ Students should allow adequate time for a response by the professor. Generally, I will try to answer all communications within 24 hours, but there may be occasions when this is not possible. Email is preferred for communications. If you need to reach my cell (either through text or a call), please be mindful of the time and reserve cell phone interactions between the hours of 9pm and 7am Eastern for matters of some urgency.
- ❑ Some written assignments must be submitted electronically via the attachment feature on the courses digital platform for the designated assignment. Presentations should be submitted in Microsoft PowerPoint format while memoranda should be submitted in Microsoft Word format. All presentations and written assignments should be prepared using the templates provided by the instructor. Other formats are not acceptable and will be returned to the student or group for resubmission (with a late penalty). Assignments submissions are expected on time and welcomed early.

Student Conduct

Students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the policies set forth in the School of Public Policy's Academic Catalog.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

The issue of academic honesty has become a serious issue for universities and colleges throughout the world. Not only are students expected to conduct themselves in the manner prescribed in the Academic Catalog, but special attention should be paid to issues of academic honesty. Students are expected to properly cite all materials from which they borrow ideas and information (citations should comply with the standards set forth in the Chicago Manual of Style or a comparable style sheet). Violations of the principles of academic integrity will be treated very seriously and aggressively.

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