CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST
OLLI WINTER CLASS, 2020

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The political fabric of the Middle East is woven from many threads, some historical, some religious, some cultural—and almost all are unfamiliar to most Americans, who tend to believe that the region is incomprehensible and irrational. This class will look at a collection of issues currently of concern in the Middle East and Western Asia (including Afghanistan) and will examine them in terms of their potency in the region and their implications for United States policy. The issues that will be considered are:

- Islam
- Terrorism
- Palestinians and Israelis
- Saudi Arabia
- Iran
- Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria
- Human rights, economies, and social crises
- Environmental and security issues

GOALS:
The primary goal of this class is to enable students to contextualize, and thus better understand, the highly complex nature of Middle East politics and its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, societies. We will look at the role of Islam in Middle East cultural and political life, the nature and likely future course of terrorism, problems with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria and Iraq, the fate of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, the extent of U.S. vital interests in Afghanistan, the effect of failing economies and increased migration on societies, and the increasing role the environment plays in the security of governments and states.

COURSE OUTLINE
Week 1: Islam
What is the nature of Islam? Is Islam incompatible with democracy? What are the major fault lines within Islam? How representative are ISIS and Al Qaeda of Islam in general? What are the implications for Europe of increasing Muslim immigration?

Week 2: Terrorism
What is terrorism? Why is the Middle East a focal point for terrorism? What is the nature of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban today? Is it more or less of a threat to the U.S. and the West than it was in 2001? How do we counter terrorism, either at home or abroad?

Week 3: Palestinian – Israeli peace
What is the cause of the hostility between Israelis and Palestinians? Is a resolution even possible? Is a two-state solution still possible? If not, what are the alternatives? How can the Palestinians achieve an economically and politically stable state, and can they
resolve internal disagreements? Do Israelis and Palestinians really want peace, or do they actually prefer the status quo?

**Week 4: Saudi Arabia**
What is the nature of the U.S.-Saudi friendship? How transactional is it? Should Saudis be given advanced U.S. military materiel that until now has only been shared with Israel? How trustworthy is the current government in terms of promoting U.S. interests in the Middle East, and how stable is the government?

**Week 5: Iran**
What are some of the cultural and historical elements that support the current Iranian leadership? How likely is a change in regime in Teheran? Can the world live with a nuclear Iran? To what lengths should the international community go to deny Iran nuclearization? What are some of the likely consequences of a unilateral (Israeli) strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities?

**Week 6: Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria**
What are US goals in Afghanistan? What are America’s vital interests? Should the US engage in nation building or just in containing the Taliban? Can we afford a long-term commitment to Afghanistan? Or can we make deals with the Taliban? If so, should we make deals with them? What lies ahead for Iraq? Is democracy possible, or will the country return to a strongman? What’s ahead for the Iraqi Kurds? Why has Assad been able to hold on so long in Syria—and is it probable that he will be unseated any time soon? What lies ahead for the Syrian people, with a broken economy and no evidence of political change for the near future?

**Week 7: Human rights, failing economies, social crises**
What does the future hold for this region, with increasing populations, decreasing natural resources, lagging educational resources, and high unemployment, particularly among young people? What effect has access to the Internet and increasing use of social media had on this generation, and what might be some of the effects? Is there a conflict between Islam and human rights values? What are the most vital of human rights abuses that need to be addressed?

**Week 8: Environment and Security Issues**
What are the major environmental problems in the Middle East? How do they intersect with political issues? Why is water a critical issue in developing a peace accord between Israel and its neighbors? What other resource problems exist? What role did the environment play in instigating the Syrian civil war? How is environmental stress likely to intersect with international refugee issues?