Geography of the Middle East
ENVI 423, classroom section, TR 9:30-10:45 am, Science 0012, fall 2011
General Education (International Cultures) and Foundational Studies (Integrative Upper-Division Electives)

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Course Description: Environmental and cultural patterns of the Middle East, with emphasis on strategic location, significance in world history, Islamic culture, water and energy resources, and evolving geopolitics and conflicts.

Course Goals and Organization: Geography is an interdisciplinary field of study straddling nature and culture [all that is manmade]. It integrates and synthesizes a whole range of academic disciplines and intellectual approaches to gain knowledge. Geography of the Middle East is focused on training students to interpret selected environmental & cultural Middle East Geography patterns & issues of our time. First, the course puts emphasis on the region’s (1) strategic location, (2) significance in world history, (3) Islamic culture, (4) water & energy sources, and (5) evolving geopolitics & conflicts. Second, it involves interdisciplinary learning in environment, history, religion, language, economics, politics & international relations. Third, it is grounded in a critical thinking approach designed to identify, describe, explain & try to solve specific Middle East problems. The thematic/regional focus, interdisciplinary perspective & critical thinking approach are designed to ensure that the students will be able to (1) analyze problems, (2) think critically & creatively, (3) integrate a variety of approaches to gain knowledge, (4) recognize the ethical, social & cultural implications of issues, and (5) communicate professionally, persuasively & effectively. The course fulfills the Foundational Studies (Integrative Upper-Division Electives) & General Education (International Cultures) course requirements at Indiana State University. Course materials include class presentations & discussions, online readings, PowerPoint slides, videos/video synopses & current issues in the news. Assigned course materials MUST be used & referenced in course assignments. No textbook is required for this course. You can earn up to 15 extra credit points (15% of the final grade). The course is organized around the following five Middle East Geography topics:

Topic 1: Global Geopolitics of the Middle East. Topic 1 introduces students to the region and its global connections. It examines the nomenclature and delimitation of the region, its distinctive tri-continental junction, its major strategic waterways, its cultural significance (as the birthplace of monotheism and the cradle of civilization), its petroleum and natural gas resources, and its relations with the United States (the region straddles the USCENTCOM, USEUCOM, and USAFRICOM).

Topic 2: Geography of water and energy resources. Topic 2 examines (1) Environmental patterns (mountain ranges, desert environment, major river systems), (2) Cultural patterns (ethno-linguistic groups, languages, religions, historical geography), (3) Water resources and water conflict, (4) OPEC and oil reserves, production, competitive production cost, politics, geopolitics and prices, (5) U.S. dependence on net petroleum imports, and (6) the critical question of "Who gets what from Middle East oil?"

Topic 3: Geography of Islam’s Cultural Unity and Political Diversity. Topic 3 focuses on (1) The Quran, (2) Prophet Muhammad, and (3) The Five Pillars of Islam. Our goal is to understand some aspects of Muslims' culture, behavior, and politics as far as they can be grounded in Islamic rituals, Islamic scriptures, and Islamic prophet.

Topic 4: Geography of the Palestine-Israel Conflict and the United States. Topic 4 aims at helping students (1) understand the gravity of the Palestine-Israel conflict, (2) articulate and state the central problem of the conflict, (3) describe its manifestations and consequences, (4) explain its roots and causes, and (5) identify and discuss a fair and peaceful solution to it.

Topic 5: Geographies of War, Occupation, Resistance, and Terrorism. Topic 5 presents (1) the basic geography of Iraq and the background to the Iraq war (the Palestine-Israel Conflict, the American-Soviet Cold War, the American-Vietnam War, the Soviet-Afghan War, the 1991 Gulf war, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks), (2) the “what” of the Iraq war (human/economic/moral cost of the war), (3) the “who” and the “why” of the Iraq war (weapons of mass destruction/al-Qaida/democracy/oil/Israel/Gulf states), and (4) the consequences and ramifications of the Iraq war.
Course Assignments and Grading: First, there will be one short exam (consisting of multiple choice questions) about the top 10 to 12 core issues covered in the readings, PowerPoint slides, and videos or video synopses assigned for each one of the five Middle East Geography topics. Second, the students will be asked to discuss a specific problem/issue (under each topic) and write a (one-page/single-spaced, about 500 words) critical thinking essay. The short essay must (1) involve analysis and synthesis, (2) identify and articulate the specific problem/issue, (3) describe the manifestations and expressions of the problem/issue, and (4) suggest some solutions or resolutions for the problem/issue. Third, the students will be asked to discuss a current or controversial Middle East issue in a homework assignment focused on encouraging the students to stick to the facts and to ground their moral and political judgment into facts, not the other way around. Final grades will NOT be “curved” and will be based on performance in the course. They will be based on scores obtained out of a total of 100 points: (1) five short exams (60 points, 12 points each), (2) five short essays (25 points, 4 points each; the 5th essay is 3 pages & is worth 9 points), and (3) five homework assignments (15 points, 3 points each). Occasionally, the students may have the opportunity to earn extra credit points through extra credit questions in exams and/or extra credit assignments such as blogs (designed for all students, NOT on an individual basis) to cover a current issue or an issue not covered in course materials. Grades are assigned according to the following scale: A+ (96% and above), A (93 to 95%), A- (90 to 92%), B+ (86 to 89%), B (83-85%), B- (80 to 82%), C+ (76 to 79%), C (73 to 75%), C- (70 to 72%), D+ (66 to 69%), D (63 to 65%), D- (60 to 62%), and F (below 60%). All assignments in this course (except blogs) MUST be completed and submitted to avoid a grade penalty equal to the grade(s) of the missing assignment(s).

Course Standards and Policies: Students are responsible for all announcements on Blackboard or by email. Make-up exams or late essays or homework assignments will be accepted at my discretion and will normally require a written doctor's excuse, a written notice to appear in court or to serve on jury duty, or a written excuse presented to me and considered valid. Academic dishonesty is the cardinal sin in academia and includes plagiarism, cheating, fraud, using another person's material as one’s own, knowingly allowing another person to use one’s work as his/her own (see Code of Student Conduct at: http://www1.indstate.edu/sjp/docs/code.pdf). Academic dishonesty will subject its author(s) to failure in the course and could lead to further disciplinary action. University policies regarding academic freedom, documented disabilities, expected personal responsibilities, and other matters apply to this course and may be found on the Foundational Studies website at: http://www.indstate.edu/gened/docs/Foundational%20Studies/Info%20on%20Sycamore%20Standard%20and%20ADA%20and%20Laptops%20and%20Academic%20Freedom.pdf

Course Readings: Online short text/map readings will be selected from:
The 9/11 Commission Report (2004);
Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication (2004);
The Palestine-Israel Conflict and the United States (2009);
Energy Security for America (2003);
The Quran (610-632 AD);
The Hadith (610-632 AD);
The Bible (1300s? BC-100? AD);
Map of UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East]’s Area of Operations (2005);
Hasbara Handbook: Promoting Israel on Campus (2002);
If Americans Knew (2009);
Jerusalem Poems/Songs (1967);
The Iraq Study Group Report (2006);
Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq (2008);
Maps of USUCP, USCENTCOM, USAFRICOM, and USEUCOM (2008);
[Obama’s Cairo Speech] Remarks by the President on a New Beginning (2009);
Libyan Leader & African Union Chairman Qadhafi’s speech to the UN General Assembly (2009).

Blackboard Course Documents (required readings, PowerPoint slides, videos or video synopses, study guides, assignment instructions, and due dates) are available at:  http://blackboard.indstate.edu

Recommended (NOT required) Readings:
GUIDELINES AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING ESSAYS [example: Essay 1 on Topic 1]:

Based on the readings, PowerPoint slides, and videos of Topic 1 ("Global Geopolitics of the Middle East"), write a one-page/four-paragraph essay entitled "The Global Significance of the Middle East." In Paragraph One, you observe and articulate in your own words the global significance of the region. In Paragraph Two, you describe the global significance of the region by giving specific examples. In Paragraph Three, you explain the causes/root of the global significance of the region. In Paragraph Four, you indicate the implications & consequences of the global significance of the region & make a critique (positive or negative) from your own perspective. Follow carefully the format and content guidelines and instructions below:

The one-page essay is worth 4 points [4 percent of your final grade; the 5th essay is 3 pages and is worth 9 points]. It is designed to (1) stimulate your own independent thought and (2) encourage your own critical thinking and synthesis. It should also help you reflect upon and critically evaluate your own cultural background and worldview through the study of "other" cultures, regions, and issues. The essay should be persuasive and well written. It should consist of one single-spaced page [except essay 5, which should be 3 single-spaced-pages]. It should have around 500 words and four paragraphs. It should be carefully formatted in accordance with the following detailed instructions, which will ultimately help you learn basic and useful word processing skills from Microsoft Word (if you don’t know them).

You need a USB (Universal Serial Bus) on which you save your formatted essay as you work on it. Each page should have top/bottom margins of 1”/1” and right/left margins of 1.5”/1.5” as well as full justification. It should be single-spaced and should have Times New Roman as the base font. The page should have your name and Indiana State University as left headers and the course title and academic term as right headers. The point size of the headers should be 11. The title should be centered and should have bold appearance and a point size of 14. The rest of the text should have a point size of 12. There should be one space between paragraphs and no indentation. The standardized format is designed to help the grader and/or peer reviewer focus more on the content of the essay and not be distracted by the format (since it will be the same in all essays). For your reference citations for Essay 5, use The Chicago Manuel of Style Online at: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

The grade of the essay will be based on (a) drawing meaningful conclusions from what you have learned under a given topic, (b) turning the essay by the specified deadline, (c) following all the instructions concerning the format and content, (d) demonstrating your ability to think critically, reason clearly, and communicate effectively through writing. You find below some basic universal intellectual standards that will help you think critically and check the quality of your thinking and reasoning about a problem, issue, or situation:

UNIVERSAL INTELLECTUAL STANDARDS:

Universal intellectual standards are standards which must be applied to thinking whenever one is interested in checking the quality of reasoning about a problem, issue, or situation. To think critically entails having command of these standards. To help students learn them, teachers should pose questions which probe student thinking, questions which hold students accountable for their thinking, questions which, through consistent use by the teacher in the classroom, become internalized by students as questions they need to ask themselves. The ultimate goal, then, is for these questions to become infused in the thinking of students, forming part of their inner voice, which then guides them to better and better reasoning. While there are a number of universal standards, the following are the most significant:

CLARITY: Could you elaborate further on that point? Could you express that point in another way? Could you give me an illustration? Could you give me an example? Clarity is the gateway standard. If a statement is unclear, we cannot determine whether it is accurate or relevant. In fact, we cannot tell anything about it because we don't yet know what it is saying. For example, the question, "What can be done about the education system in America?" is unclear. In order to address the question adequately, we would need to have a clearer understanding of what the person asking the question is considering the "problem" to be. A clearer question might be "What can educators do to ensure that students learn the skills and abilities which help them function successfully on the job and in their daily decision-making?"

ACCURACY: Is that really true? How could we check that? How could we find out if that is true? A statement can be clear but not accurate, as in "Most dogs are over 300 pounds in weight."

PRECISION: Could you give more details? Could you be more specific? A statement can be both clear and accurate, but not precise, as in "Jack is overweight." (We don't know how overweight Jack is, one pound or 500 pounds.)

RELEVANCE: How is that connected to the question? How does that bear on the issue? A statement can be clear, accurate, and precise, but not relevant to the question at issue. For example, students often think that the amount of effort they put into a course should be used in raising their grade in a course. Often, however, the "effort" does not measure the quality of student learning, and when this is so, effort is irrelevant to their appropriate grade.

DEPTH: How does your answer address the complexities in the question? How are you taking into account the problems in the question? Is that dealing with the most significant factors? A statement can be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant, but superficial (that is, lack depth). For example, the statement "Just say No" which is often used to discourage children and teens from using drugs, is clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. Nevertheless, it lacks depth because it treats an extremely complex issue, the pervasive problem of drug use among young people, superficially. It fails to deal with the complexities of the issue.

BREADTH: Do we need to consider another point of view? Is there another way to look at this question? What would this look like from a conservative standpoint? What would this look like from the point of view of...? A line of reasoning may be clear accurate, precise, relevant, and deep, but lack breadth (as in an argument from either the conservative or liberal standpoint which gets deeply into an issue, but only recognizes the insights of one side of the question.)

LOGIC: Does this really make sense? Does that follow from what you said? How does that follow? But before you implied this and now you are saying that; how can both be true? When we think, we bring a variety of thoughts together into some order. When the combination of thoughts are mutually supporting and make sense in combination, the thinking is "logical." When the combination is not mutually supporting, is contradictory in some sense, or does not "make sense," the combination is not logical. Source: R. Paul and L. Elder, Foundation For Critical Thinking, June 1996, http://www.criticalthinking.org/documents/standards_relevance.html

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Mission of the Foundational Studies Program at Indiana State University

“Indiana State University is committed to providing students with a high quality education that will develop their intellectual abilities while providing them with the skills and knowledge base they will need to successfully navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century. A robust General Education is the cornerstone of this goal. While your major prepares you to meet specific professional goals, the General Education curriculum prepares you to be an effective communicator, critical thinker, and an informed decision maker: abilities that are important in your role as a professional, consumer, and citizen. The Foundational Studies curriculum also exposes you to a diverse range of subjects that will help you to develop an appreciation of the fine and performing arts, enrich your life, and cultivate an awareness of historical and contemporary social, economic, and political realities.” [Emphasis added]

Foundational Studies courses
- A gymnasium of the mind
- Knowledge beyond one’s specially
- Writing and thinking across disciplines
- Working in collaboration with others
- Thinking critically & reasoning logically
- Developing some computer skills
- Sensitivity to other cultures & problems

Geography of the Middle East
- Naming and defining the Middle East region
- Observing environmental and cultural patterns
- Identifying a number of critical problems/issues
- Describing manifestations/expressions of those problems/issues
- Explaining roots/causes of those problems/issues
- Searching for solutions/resolutions of those problems/issues

Critical thinking tips
- Thinking about thinking
- Thinking sometimes outside the box
- Learning to unlearn
- Resisting appeal to prejudice
- Synthesis versus analysis
- Academia versus the media
- Facts versus audiences
- Reality versus image
- The ‘what?’ versus the ‘who?’

Don’t believe everything you think!

In a book entitled Don’t believe everything you think: the 6 basic mistakes we make in thinking (2006), Professor Thomas Kida identifies “the six-pack of problems” that leads many of us unconsciously to accept false ideas: (1) We prefer stories to statistics; (2) We seek to confirm, not to question, our ideas; (3) We rarely appreciate the role of chance and coincidence in shaping events; (4) We sometimes misperceive the world around us; (5) We tend to oversimplify our thinking; and (6) Our memories are often inaccurate. Amazon.com

Think sometimes outside the box!