

# Geography of the Middle East

ENVI 423-301 (CR: 50780), Distance Blackboard course, fall, August 21 – December 14, 2018  
Foundational Studies (Integrative and Upper Division Electives, 3 Credit hours)

**Course Instructor:** Dr. Mohamed Elyassini, Department of Earth and Environmental Systems; Email: [mohamed.elyassini@indstate.edu](mailto:mohamed.elyassini@indstate.edu); Website: <http://faculty.indstate.edu/melyassini>

**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. *Prerequisite: Upper Division Electives require 45 earned credit hours or more at time of registration.*

**Course Purpose and Organization:** *Geography* is an interdisciplinary field of study straddling nature and culture. It integrates a range of academic disciplines and intellectual approaches designed to acquire and create knowledge. *Geography of the Middle East* is focused on training students to interpret selected environmental and cultural Middle East Geography patterns and current issues that significantly affect the region, the United States, and the world.<sup>1</sup> **First**, the course emphasizes the region's strategic location, significance in world history, Islamic culture, water & energy resources, evolving geopolitics & conflicts, and relations with the United States. **Second**, course topics, learning objectives, assigned materials, and assignments integrate multiple perspectives and ways of learning (e.g., *scientific, historical, artistic, literary, ethical, social behavioral*). **Third**, the course is grounded in a critical thinking approach designed to identify, describe, and explain some of the pressing Middle East problems ranging from the environmental impact of the extraordinary diversion of the Jordan River away from its 20-million-year old natural course to the ever-escalating Palestine-Israel conflict and its ever-expanding spillover proxy wars in which millions of Middle Eastern people were killed or displaced in recent decades. The Critical Thinking Community defines critical thinking as "*the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.*" Critical thinking is becoming indispensable in a digital age marked by *hacking, leaking, and faking*<sup>2</sup> information. Critical thinking often involves reasoning well, questioning accepted notions of truth and authority, recognizing unstated assumptions and values, and using language with accuracy. Without critical thinking, much of our thinking could be "biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced." The thematic-regional focus, interdisciplinary perspective, and critical thinking approach are designed to engage the student and ensure that he/she will be able to (1) analyze problems, (2) think critically and creatively, (3) integrate a variety of approaches to gain knowledge, (4) recognize the ethical, social, and cultural implications of issues, and (5) communicate professionally, persuasively, and effectively. While course material is purposely VAST, DIVERSE, BALANCED, CURRENT, and WELL DOCUMENTED, you should NOT feel "OVERWHELMED" by course material or the number of PowerPoint slides or video clips BECAUSE the ASSIGNED material for GRADED assignments is very LIMITED and very SPECIFIC (see, for example, how specific is the study guide for each short exam, and how specific is the assigned material for each short essay and for the critical thinking project/paper). The course fulfills the Foundational Studies (Upper Division Integrative Electives) course requirements at Indiana State University. The course is organized around the following FOUR geographic topics (*each*

---

<sup>1</sup> US National Defense Strategy 2018 proclaims: "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security... **Iran** continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability," US National Defense Strategy 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

\* **Israel** Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman proclaims: "The three main problems with which we have to deal are **Iran, Iran, Iran.**" Israel National News, 2/17/2017, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/225191>

\* US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issues threatening demands that Iran (<http://www.leader.ir>) must end support for all its anti-Israel allies in the Middle East, including the **Syrian government** (<https://sana.sy/en>), **Lebanese Hezbollah** (<https://www.moqawama.org>), **Palestinian Hamas** (<http://hamas.ps/ar>), **Palestinian Islamic Jihad** (<https://saraya.ps>), **Yemeni Ansarullah** (<http://www.ansarollah.com>), and the **IRG Quds Force** within the Iranian Armed Forces (<http://aja.ir/Portal/Home>), "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," The Heritage Foundation, 5/21/2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy>

\* Iranian President Hassan Rohani in response to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech on Iran: "Who are you to decide for Iran and the world?" Radio Free Europe, 5/21/2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-us-pompeo-to-outline-strategy-after-u-s-withdrawal-from-nuclear-deal/29239822.html>

\* In 1979 Iran ended its alliance with Israel, severed all diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel, expelled the Israelis from Iran, declared that Israel is an illegitimate state, and began its concrete support for the Palestinians by **designating the annual International Day of Al-Quds/Jerusalem, turning the Israeli embassy in Iran into the Embassy of Palestine in Iran, and enacting a new constitution which stipulates (in Article 16) that the Arabic Language must be taught "in all classes of secondary school and in all areas of study" and stipulates (in Article 146) that "the establishment of any kind of foreign military base in Iran, even for peaceful purposes, is forbidden.**" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65xpvmCsm-c> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArW8BGv1RyM> ; <https://www.ipost.com/Middle-East/Iran-News/Rouhani-to-Swiss-president-Israel-is-illegitimate-561443> ; [http://en.mfa.ir/uploads/Constitution\\_8032.pdf](http://en.mfa.ir/uploads/Constitution_8032.pdf)

\* US General Wesley Clark: The US will attack 7 countries (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and **Iran**) in 5 years, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUCwCgthp\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUCwCgthp_E)

<sup>2</sup> Brazilian kids being schooled to fight fake news, The Straits Times, 7/14/2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/americas/brazilian-kids-being-schooled-to-fight-fake-news>

topic should be covered in about **3 to 4 weeks** during which you review **learning objectives**, read **assignment instructions**, review **assigned materials**, write a **short essay**, and complete a **short exam**).

**Topic 1: Global Geopolitics of the Middle East.** Topic 1 introduces students to the region and its global connections & geopolitics (*geopolitics is a subfield of geography focused on the dynamics and synergy that drive states to join or form coalitions or alliances or axes with other states in order to achieve common or individual goals within a specific international geopolitical space*). Topic 1 examines the nomenclature and delimitation of the Middle East region, its distinctive tri-continental junction, its six major strategic waterways, its cultural significance (as the birthplace of monotheism and the cradle of civilization), its petroleum and natural gas resources (with some 76% of world proven crude oil reserves in 2016), and its relations with the United States (the region falls within the GEOGRAPHIC 'Area of Responsibility' of three US unified combatant commands: USCENTCOM, USEUCOM, and USAFRICOM, <https://www.defense.gov/About/Military-Departments/Unified-Combatant-Commands>). Since the region is engulfed by conflicts, wars, and proxy wars (indirect engagement between states in a conflict), Topic 1 pinpoints the war **belligerents**, their **means**, and their **goals** through a closer look at the dynamics of rivalries and confrontations between TWO loose coalitions or alliances of states or geopolitical axes operating in the region (defined in this course as **Axis 1 and Axis 2**). The current **LEADING** members of Axis 1 include the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the State of Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The current **LEADING** members of Axis 2 include Russia, China, Iran, and Syria. The current **FOUR MAIN** adversaries within the TWO axes are the **United States & Israel** against **Iran & Syria** (because Iran & Syria support Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah in their armed resistance against the US-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine). Other leading states (including Russia and China) come and go according to their strategic/national goals. For example, Russia supports the Syrian government but has also normal relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which all support the Israeli-inspired US goal to overthrow the Syrian government. US support for overthrowing the pro-Russian government in Ukraine<sup>3</sup> in 2014 and the rise of media-inspired Russophobes in the US are all targeting specifically Russian relations with Syria and Iran, the two **MAIN** adversaries of the US and Israel in the Middle East. Similarly, China has normal relations with Axis 1 countries, but China has repeatedly used the veto power at the UN Security Council to deflect repeated actions against Syria while the US has repeatedly challenged China's claims in the regional disputes over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in South China Sea. Even US hostility toward Venezuela and North Korea has links to US relations with Israel.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the global geopolitics and dynamics of the Axis1-Axis2 rivalries and confrontations will provide answers to puzzling questions such as why did the United States, Israel, ISIS, and Al-Qaida fight on the same side (<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/are-al-qaeda-affiliates-fighting-alongside-u-s-rebels-in-syrias-south/>) for years and share the same geopolitical goal to overthrow the Syrian government? Why did the United States have to spend \$6 trillion (according to President Trump, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYLUi7Aefo>) on pro-Israel Middle East proxy wars in recent years (especially in Iraq) instead of spending the money to assist some 43 million [US Census Bureau, Poverty in 2015] Americans in poverty and rebuild America's crumbling infrastructure? Why did President Obama organize a series of international coalitions to overthrow governments in Libya, Syria, & Yemen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSBRk10E5R8> for some undeclared goals, which were later found buried inside the over 30,000 emails & email attachments in the Hillary Clinton Email Archive [https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/Clinton Email November Release/C05794498.pdf](https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/Clinton%20Email%20November%20Release/C05794498.pdf) leaked by WikiLeaks on the eve of the US 2016 election? **See Course Calendar (below) and Course Topics link on Blackboard for assignments & deadlines, which are part of this syllabus.**

**Topic 2: Geography of water and energy resources.** Topic 2 examines (1) Environmental patterns (mountain ranges, desert environments, major river systems), (2) Cultural patterns (ethno-linguistic groups, languages, religions, historical geography of major Middle East Muslim dynasties and states before the First World War, and the ramifications of three British 'promises' during the First World War: the Hussein-McMahon secret correspondence of 1915-1916, the Sykes-Picot secret agreement of 1916, and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promising Palestine to world Jewry), (3) Water resources and water conflicts, (4) OPEC and its oil reserves, production, competitive production cost, geopolitics and prices, (5) U.S. shale oil boom and dependence on petroleum imports, and (6) the critical question of "Who gets what from a liter of pump fuel sold to consumers in the G7 countries?" **See Course Calendar (below) and Course Topics link on Blackboard for assignments & deadlines, which are part of this syllabus.**

**Topic 3: Geography of Islam's Cultural Unity and Political Diversity.** Topic 3 presents a brief introduction to (1) Monotheism, (2) the Quran, (3) Prophet Muhammad, (4) the Five Pillars of Islam, (5) the guiding principle of bringing benefits and warding off harms under Islamic law, (6) Sufism, (7) the emphasis on human brotherhood and the virtue of good action in Islamic ethics, (8) the origins

---

<sup>3</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Israel against supplying weapons to the Ukrainian government, which is battling a Russian-backed insurgency in its eastern province, The Jerusalem Post, 4/18/2015, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Putin-warns-Israel-against-selling-arms-to-Ukraine-398497>

\*Netanyahu May Offer Putin: Remove Iran From Syria for Lifting of U.S. Sanctions on Russia, Haaretz, 7/10/2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-may-offer-putin-iran-out-of-syria-u-s-lifts-sanctions-1.6265530>

<sup>4</sup> Israel said the [Syrian nuclear] reactor [Israel claims to have destroyed in 2007] was being built with help from North Korea, Haaretz, 3/21/2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/israel-admits-bombing-syria-nuclear-reactor-warn-iran-2018-3> ; <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/report-n-korea-asked-israel-for-1-billion-to-stop-missile-sale-1.6249205>

\*North Korea Reportedly Asked Israel for \$1 Billion in Cash to Halt Missile Sale to Iran, Haaretz, 7/10/2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/report-n-korea-asked-israel-for-1-billion-to-stop-missile-sale-1.6249205>

\*Venezuela ordered the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador and some embassy staff on Tuesday to protest Israel's military offensive in the Gaza Strip, CBS News, 1/6/2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuela-expels-israeli-ambassador/>

and ramifications of 'jihad' and 'terrorism' in Afghanistan since 1979 and in Syria since 2011, and (9) how religion per se—as opposed to government use of religion in geopolitics—is not really the *problem*. See [Course Calendar \(below\)](#) and [Course Topics link on Blackboard for assignments & deadlines, which are part of this syllabus](#).

**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) know its manifestations and consequences; (3) explain its root/cause and articulate its central problem; (4) examine how and why the small country of Israel dominates US Middle East policy and US public opinion while being so successful at securing US support, at extracting US financial/military/political resources, and at having the US treat/rate other countries/institutions based on their treatment/rating of Israel [recently Israel has successfully pressured America to withdraw from the UN Scientific, Educational, and Cultural Organization; to withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council; to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; and to ignore/disregard the UN General Assembly's overwhelmingly vote, 128-9, which declared US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel "null and void" and **must be cancelled**]; and (5) identify/discuss some prospects and solutions to the conflict. See [Course Calendar \(below\)](#) and [Course Topics link on Blackboard for assignments & deadlines, which are part of this syllabus](#).

**Course Assignments and Grading:** Course assignments are designed to test your **quantitative learning** (mere acquisition and retention of information) and your **qualitative thinking** (critical thinking that goes beyond the mere acquisition and retention of information towards the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis or integration of information and facts to create new knowledge, to answer important questions, to solve complex problems, and to write meaningful essays). Assignments are short and *evenly distributed* throughout the term. They include: **four short multiple choice exams** (worth 52 points, 13 points each), **three short homework essays** (worth 30 points, 10 points each), and **one critical thinking paper** (worth 13 points) whose preparation includes participation and interaction in a **formative assessment discussion board** (worth 5 points). Each short exam consists of 26 multiple choice questions (each worth 0.5 points) drawn randomly from a pool of questions created from the **study guide**. Each homework essay consists of a 300-400 word essay designed to encourage you (1) to learn and think about major current Middle East issues and (2) to learn and think about how to ground your perspective and judgment into verifiable facts, especially in a digital age marked by hacking, leaking, and faking information. **The critical thinking paper should be 1400-1600 words (see instructions on Blackboard)**. See Math & Writing Center for help, <http://libguides.indstate.edu/mathandwriting>. Each homework essay must be formatted as a Microsoft Word file and uploaded through the TurnItIn link, which generates Similarity Reports to check the ORIGINALTY (absence of PLAGIARISM) of the essay, [https://guides.turnitin.com/01\\_Manuals\\_and\\_Guides/Student\\_Guides/Turnitin\\_Classic\\_for\\_Students/17\\_The\\_Similarity\\_Report](https://guides.turnitin.com/01_Manuals_and_Guides/Student_Guides/Turnitin_Classic_for_Students/17_The_Similarity_Report).

Write your name, NOT the instructor's name, on your homework essays. Sources for each homework essay must be based EXCLUSIVELY on the *assigned* materials and must be cited briefly and ONLY between parentheses in the body of the homework essay [for example: Clinton, slide 101, Topic 1; OR: The Washington Post, March 23, 2002, slide 101]. This is necessary so that the grader can quickly locate, access, verify, and evaluate the sources while grading the assignment and writing feedback. **All assignments MUST be completed & submitted according to the instructions and guidelines and by the specified deadlines. There will be no late submission or make-up assignments or exams because of the following GOOD reasons:** (1) you have many short assignments (9 assignments, each worth no more than 5 to 13 percent of the final grade), (2) the assignments have very specific assigned materials and are submitted online with open books, (3) some students can claim to have encountered computer or internet or other technical or non-technical problems or reasons which instructors cannot verify in an accurate and timely manner, (4) make-up assignments or exams may not provide equal opportunity for students, and (5) you are given the opportunity to earn up to 10% extra credit points (10% of your final grade) to offset the possible loss of points because of missing assignments due to technical or non-technical problems or health reasons or emergencies you may encounter during the term. Each exam will include ONE or more extra credit questions (worth 1.5 points) drawn from any assigned course materials (study guide, PowerPoint slides, videos, current-issues-in-the-news stories posted as announcements on Blackboard, etc.). Another 4 extra credit points could be earned by participating in one introductory discussion board and completing course evaluation. Take care of your health, time management, and Information Technology equipment and skill. **The course requires a GOOD computer and an EXCELLENT internet connection to submit assignments online by the DEADLINES. Final grades** are assigned according to the following scale: A+ (100% and above), A (96 to 99%), A- (90 to 95%), 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%). **At least the 10% extra credits should help offset some loss of points when missing assignments, and at best they should make all grades in this course jump up one full grade letter.**

**Course Standards:** Students are responsible for announcements on Blackboard and via email. **Students must be wary of PLAGIARISM.** 'In the academic community the high value of honesty mandates a corresponding intolerance of dishonesty', which includes cheating, plagiarism, falsification, forgery, obstruction, multiple submission, facilitating academic dishonesty, misconduct in research and creative endeavors, misuse of academic resources, misuse of intellectual property, and violation of ethical and professional standards (See the Code Of Student Conduct at: <https://www.indstate.edu/code-of-student-conduct/academic-policies/defining-misconduct>). Homework essays must be uploaded (by the deadline) through the TurnItIn link, which can help detect plagiarism (no other forms of submission will be accepted and no late submission will be possible). Academic dishonesty will subject its author(s) to **0 points on the given assignment or failure in the course, and could be reported as an academic misconduct for further disciplinary actions.**



**University policies:** University policies regarding documented disabilities, academic freedom, expected personal responsibilities, student disclosures of sexual misconduct, it's on blue online education program, and other matters apply to this course and are available at the following links: <https://www.indstate.edu/services/student-success/cfss/student-support-services/disability-student-services>; <https://www.indstate.edu/student-conduct/code-of-student-conduct/standards>; <https://www.indstate.edu/administration/ogc/policy-index/921>; <http://faculty.indstate.edu/melyassini/recommended%20syllabus%20statement.pdf>

**Communication policies:** Positive tone, civility, sensitivity, and professionalism are always expected when communicating with fellow students and the instructor, whether the communication is by electronic means or by telephone or face-to-face: "Students are expected to be a positive contributor to/member of the community, represent Indiana State University as a positive place of learning and constructive dialog, and to fully participate in their own learning and positive social experiences. As you will notice, 'positive' is a key factor in the responsibilities of all students." ISU Handbook, Rights & Responsibilities, <https://www.indstate.edu/student-conduct/code-of-student-conduct/rights-responsibilities>. In general, students should (1) receive instructor responses to emails within 24 to 48 hours, (2) receive exam scores immediately after submitting an exam, and (3) receive feedback on writing assignments within two weeks (or an explanation for assignments requiring more than two weeks for grading).

**No textbook is required for this course!**

**Recommended books:** (1) Colbert Held & John Cummings, *Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics*, 6th Edition (ISBN: 9780813348773, Westview Press, 2013); (2) Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: a prophet for our time* (ISBN: 9780060598976, HarperCollins, 2006); (3) John Mearsheimer & Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U. S. Foreign Policy* (ISBN: 9780374177720, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007); (4) Scott Anderson, *Lawrence In Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Middle East* (ISBN: 9780307476418, Anchor Books, 2013), and (5) Tim Anderson, *The Dirty War On Syria—Washington, Regime Change and Resistance* (ISBN: 9780973714784), Global Research, 2016. We encourage you to obtain these recommended books (available at ISU Bookstore) and read as much as you can at your own pace even though **you do NOT need these books for the GRADED assignments** since the relevant matters have been incorporated into the PowerPoint slides and/or other assigned materials.

**Blackboard Course Documents:** Course announcements, course syllabus, course contact, and course topics 1-4 (*learning objectives, homework essay instructions and due dates, exam instructions and due dates, study guides for exams, PowerPoint slides, videos, readings*) are available on Blackboard at: <http://blackboard.indstate.edu>. **You MUST check your Blackboard course website & email regularly** for announcements, assignment instructions and deadlines, and other details NOT included in **this part** of the syllabus. For Help click on Blackboard Tech Support or visit Indiana State Online Student and Academic Support Services, <http://www.indstate.edu/online/resources.pdf>

**Course Calendar (details about assignments and deadlines are posted on Blackboard, ONE topic at a time):**

### **Topic 1: Global Geopolitics of the Middle East**

Week 1 (8/21-23): Course description and syllabus

Week 2 (8/28-30): The region's strategic location and global connections, [Self-introduction/comment discussion board](#), due 8/30

Week 3 (9/4-6): Geopolitics and culture: US-sponsorship of 'Jihadism' in Afghanistan (1979) and Syria (2011), [Homework1](#), due 9/6

Week 4 (9/11-13): The Region's FOUR main adversaries and TWO geopolitical axes, [Exam1](#), due 9/13, [3-week attendance reporting](#)

### **Topic 2: Geography of water and energy resources**

Week 5 (9/18-20): The region's salient environmental and cultural patterns

Week 6 (9/25-27): Who gets what from Middle East oil? [Homework2](#), due 9/27, [interim grading](#)

Week 7 (10/2-4): Water resources and conflicts (Jordan, Nile, Tigris, Euphrates), [Exam2](#), due 10/4

### **Topic 3: Geography of Islam's Cultural Unity and Political Diversity**

Week 8 (10/9-11): Major world religions, Monotheism, and Islam

Week 9 (10/16-18): The Quran, Prophet Muhammad, the Five Pillars of Islam, Islamic law, Sufism, and Islamic ethics

Week 10 (10/23-25): 7) Timeline of the Life of Prophet Muhammad, [Homework 3](#), due 10/25

Week 11 (10/30-11/1): Monotheistic religions as Western assets in "Annex to National Security Council 129," [Exam3](#), due 11/1

### **Topic 4: Geography of the Palestine-Israel Conflict & the United States**

Week 12 (11/6-8): In 1917 Britain promised Palestine to world Jewry and occupied Palestine for 30 years to fulfill the promise

Week 13 (11/13-15): The local/regional/global scope of the conflict, [formative assessment discussion board](#), due 11/15

[Thanksgiving Break, 11/20-22, No classes](#)

Week 14 (11/27-29): Why does America support the Israelis who don't believe in Jesus against the Palestinians who do?

Week 15 (12/4-6): What are the main problems and solutions suggested or implied for this conflict? [Paper](#), due 12/6

Week 16 (12/11-13): [Exam4 will be deployed online on Blackboard between 12/12/18 at 11:59 pm and 12/13/18 at 11:59 pm](#)