

AMES 3xxx The Arab Renaissance: Narrating Modernity

Course Description

The *Nahḍa*, a word meaning renaissance, awakening, or simply the act of standing up, is the name Arab writers and intellectuals of the 19th c. gave their own historical period. What does it mean to view oneself as living through a revival? What does this view shape the contours of the past, or of the future? This class will address these questions through a survey of the political, intellectual, social, and cultural aspects of Arab modernity. We will examine how Arab thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th century produced new genres, identities, and communal affiliations to narrate their experience of modernity, which they often coded as “the encounter with the West.” Our readings, all in English translation, will cover the first confrontations (and love affairs) with European powers, the self-professed urgency of projects of reforming language, literature, and cultural institutions, the growing schism between religious and secular thought, and the attempts to articulate indigenous alternatives to Western-style modernity.

Liberal education requirements:

Gaining critical literacy in diverse cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education. This course gives students a comprehensive overview of Arab intellectual debates and creative production at the moment of the Middle East’s encounter with Western imperialism and its integration into global capitalist modernity. These debates – including the shifting boundaries between religion and secularity, the role of the nation and the state in shaping cultural production, and the overarching relationship between Western powers and Islamic people, cultures, and lands – continue to resonate today in the sphere of global politics.

The course meets the following SLOs:

Have mastered a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry:

By the end of the semester, the students will be familiar with the key writers, texts, and concerns of the *Nahḍa* (the Arab renaissance movement). Using both historiographical and literary methodologies, they will be able to contextualize the most influential intellectual and cultural debates of Arab modernity against the broad history of the Middle East in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as identify their legacies today.

Understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies:

By the end of the semester, the students will be able to identify, analyze and contextualize some of the key debates that emerged in the late 19th century and persist in the Middle East to this day: Islamic reform and the place of women in Islam, the political and cultural schism between secularism and religion, the legacies of Medieval Arab culture in modernity, and the productive negotiations between indigenous cultures and cultural imperialism.

SLO Assessment:

The class assignments are designed to develop as well as assess the above mentioned skills. The students will submit 6 reading responses over the course of the semester, commenting on the readings and developing links between them. Throughout the course of the semester, students are required to follow media coverage of the Middle East in order to identify how the questions of the early 20th c. continue to be influential today. In the last week of class, each one of the student will introduce a recent article or news item and explain how it relates to one of the topics of the class. Finally, a take-home final exam will assess the students' ability to forge connections between different texts and contextualize them historically.

This 3 credit course will be offered every other year. There are no pre-requisites, and all texts are read in English.

Meeting Humanities Studies Core Criteria:

In this course the students engage with diverse cultural products, with a strong emphasis on primary sources: novels (Zaydan, al-Muwaylihi), poetry (al-Malaika, Adonis), films (Chahine), histories (al-Jabarti, Mishāqah), philosophical and theological writing (al-Afghani, Abduh), and cultural criticism (Ziyada, Jibran). The course has two emphasis: First, trace the emergence of new genres and modes of writing in Arabic around the turn of the century, answering to a host of new social-cultural needs. Second, learn the manner in which these writings emerge from, as well as interfere in, their social and political context, whether they advocate for education for women, argue for the compatibility of Islam with modern science, or narrate a mythical history of an Arab golden age. The students engage directly with primary sources alongside selected critical essays in order to place the materials in their cultural-historical context. They evaluate their modes of intervention and argumentation in a range of contexts (for example, binding women's emancipation with nationalism in Amin's treatise vs. Halabi's, or assessing the effects of Orientalist stereotypes on the writing of both Muslim and Jewish reformers.) Finally, the students will consider how cultural debates that emerged during the Nahda continue to shape Middle Eastern public and cultural spheres today.

Global Perspectives Theme Requirements:

(1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world:

Our primary sources will reflect on the radical changes facing Middle Eastern societies around the turn of the 20th century from a range of ethical standpoints. Women's rights, the boundaries of nationalism, the place of religion in modern politics, modes of resistance to foreign interventions: All of these questions remain pertinent today, not only in the Middle East but also in shaping American foreign policy. Course materials cover the origins of these modern debates, while class discussions will touch upon how they have developed over past decades and the ethical challenges they continue to posit today.

(2) Reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community:

The general historical framework of the course is the fragmentation of the Ottoman empire into distinct nation states and the colonial encounter with European rule and culture. Against both these contexts, we will examine how writers and intellectuals defined new communities and identities, based on shared experiences of colonial subjugation and on imagined communal pasts. We will examine the political imperatives for forming new communal bonds and the means of doing so: through creative exploration of new genres, projects of linguistic innovation, and a variety of frameworks for pursuing social justice – religious, rights-based, or revolutionary.

(3) Connecting knowledge and practice:

One of the focuses of the class is the development of new genres of writing in order to respond to the demands of modernity, and to shape its contours. Throughout the semester, we highlight the material and lasting influences of these early intellectual debates, demonstrating the inability to separate theory from both praxis and history. Furthermore, the course encourages students to put the materials in conversation with contemporary urgent debates in the US: international intervention (in the Middle East and more broadly), colonial aftermaths, cultural authenticity and appropriation, religious identity and religious political movements, transnational feminism, and growing islamophobia.

(4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

The course materials regularly highlight the role of creativity and invention in coding, comprehending, and intervening in history. While the geopolitical context of the texts might not be familiar to many of the students, understanding how writers and thinkers have positioned their work as ethical interventions against racism, sexism, or economic inequalities makes the students aware of their own position within racialized histories, and of their ability to envision and articulate alternatives. Furthermore, the course's attention to translation, transmission, and the entanglements of global histories encourages the students to consider their own positions, modes of agency, and access to knowledge.