POLI 359 (Spring 2020): Topics in International Politics
Interstate Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 11:35 - 12:55 in SADB 2/36

DRAFT – information in this syllabus are subject to change
final version of the syllabus will be posted on myCourses by drop and add time

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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:30 – 11:00 & 13:00 – 13:30; and by appointment.
  • You are encouraged to come to office hours. Coming to office hours does not need an
    appointment. If you need to meet at other times, please book an appointment; it is best to
    talk to me at the end of the lecture.
Office: Leacock 330

Course Description and Objectives

This is an advanced undergraduate course which studies the causes and consequences of regional
rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Rivalries are a special breed of interstate
conflict which involve a small number of states, but are responsible for a significant number of
wars, crises, and violent, often militarized, interactions. A rivalry is started and maintained when
governments see others as a source of threat, and designate them as such. Incompatible goals that
place states on the road to rivalry include spatial issues (such as natural resources or border
claims), or positional issues (such as regional dominance or status). Therefore, states might
compete over territory or a tangible resource, as well as over non-material factors; this
competition might be very intense, whereby states see rivals as principal threats (i.e. the primary
source of threat). Moreover, while it might be common to observe rivalries among neighbors, or
others sharing borders and resources, non-contiguous states can be rivals and engage in fierce
competition that is violent and sometimes militarized. The fact that rivals compete over extended
time frames makes sources of threat and issues of contention interconnected and difficult to
disentangle; this means that rivalry is often destructive and defiant of a resolution/termination.
Finally, rivalries impact the domestic political economy given that they consume national
resources. Moreover, rivalries also impact regional orders by augmenting levels of insecurity in
the neighbourhood, and consequently become critical in shaping the foreign policy strategies of
rivals and non-rivals alike.

In studying MENA rivalries, this course seeks to achieve three goals of equal weight. The first is
to contribute to our understanding of the causes and effects of MENA interstate rivalries, with
attention to a select number of rivalries. We will study how various factors can help explain the
onset of rivalries (why governments designate others as threats), factors that explain their
persistence (why governments continue to dedicate resources to counter their rivals), factors that
explain choices of strategy to counter the other (how rivals compete, and what foreign policy
strategies are pursued) and factors that explain the termination of rivalries (why they end). The
second goal is to develop students’ research skills, and especially how to read, document, and draw inferences from various sources of information. You shall invest considerable energies in studying newspaper articles, decision-makers’ speeches, government issued documents, among others. As such, this will be a research-intensive course. The third goal of the course is to familiarize students with contemporary MENA politics. You are not expected to come to this class with a deep knowledge of MENA politics, but since this is an advanced course, you are expected to have enough interest to dedicate energy to familiarize yourself with it.

Moreover, two empirically-driven considerations will influence what we study in the course. First, rivalries are at their essence the outcome of foreign policies interacting. Therefore, an important part of the course will be analyzing foreign policy strategies. Second, the MENA has seen a considerable number of actors that have been rivals to governments ruling over Westphalian states, yet the phenomenon remains understudied; thus, the course will try and understand the dynamics of rivalries involving non-state actors.

This course has a basic pre-requisite from the Department, such as POLI 243 or POLI 244. Do note that other courses are offered in the Department on conflict and international relations in the MENA, and this course will largely address materials not offered elsewhere.

Realizing objectives

Lecture materials and readings are complementary not substitute sources of class information. Throughout the course, two methods will help me integrate readings and lectures. First, I will be posting “questions to consider” on the lecture slides uploaded to myCourses: these questions will be guidelines to help you do the readings. Try to answer the posted questions and reflect upon slide contents, even when we shall attend to both in detail during class lectures. This method is aimed to encourage a “self-examination” process (without grading) and see if you are on track with the course materials; you are highly encouraged to share yours findings/answers with me during office hours or in class. Questions on exams will resemble, but not be identical to, these “questions to consider.” The second method is for me to occasionally read segments of selected readings in class. This method will help highlight indicators on the main points of the reading, and connect readings to lecture material.

As this class champions critical thinking, we shall aim to unearth assumptions that underlie scholarship on MENA rivalries, as well literature on the political history of the region. We shall also try to make explicit what factors are driving (or have driven terminated) rivalries and explain their effects. Doing the readings on a regular basis and commenting/asking about them helps to make this task more effective. To further consolidate a critical approach, students are encouraged to argue how the material they read is connected or – perhaps as importantly – disconnected.

You are part of this class. Thus, you are encouraged to share with us materials that you have read and find interesting and pertinent to our subject matter. I will do my best to attend to them in lectures, and have us engage them as a group.