Objectives

I have designed this course primarily to deepen students’ skills in critical analysis. Martha Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) defines critical thinking as "the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment." I would add the capacity "to write with precision" to her definition. The best way I know to develop these skills is within a workshop (or studio or seminar) setting, where members take charge of their learning, engaging with each other and the instructors in a process of knowledge creation through practice, inquiry, deliberation, criticism, and problem solving. The chief difficulty we run up against is the institutional constraint of the introductory, 100 and 200-level lecture course format. This format traditionally means large enrollments filling two, fifty minute-long meetings in a room with fixed seating, and a smaller, fifty minute-recitation section each week. “Learning” in this latter format means the expert talks and the novice listens and poses brief questions. We will need to remain conscious of this real but not absolute constraint and try to work around it. It can be done.

While we will concentrate on two analytical skills—reading complicated texts and writing persuasively—developing them does not depend on studying any particular area, whether North America or South Asia, politics or history. Rather, the turn to unfamiliar subjects and genres, arguably, complicates the objective of doing increasingly more sophisticated and rigorous analysis. So, why focus on the Middle East?

The answer is that it is a trade off. There are two additional, important educational objectives discussed by Nussbaum that underpin the course. One is to develop a sense of how places and people differ and, at the same time, share common needs. A knowledge base is an inescapable part of such an undertaking. Critical comparison and judgment depends on more than factual knowledge, however. The other main objective is to encourage your imagination "to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story." Studying politics in Egypt, Israel, Yemen, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia is a way to develop these expansive and creative facets of critical thinking.

You will work on producing four finished pieces of analytical writing in the form of book reviews, leading up to a comparative review essay, as found in the *New York Review of Books* (http://nybooks.com/nyrev/) and in other general publications devoted to politics and the arts such as the *Boston Review*. This kind of essay is also ubiquitous in newspapers, journals of opinion and international affairs, and in the professional publications of various fields and disciplines, such as the *American Historical Review*, the *American Political Science Review*, *World Politics*, in law journals, and the like. The point is to familiarize you with this form of intellectual production and to let you practice this art yourselves. Why practice it? Writing reviews will, arguably, make you better readers of them. The skills involved are also ones that you will use often in the future. Most of you will go on to graduate and professional schools or take positions in organizations where you will have to read and synthesize complex arguments and information for yourselves and others.

Truth in Advertising

This version of PSCI 211 is a harder course than most lecture-size PSCI classes. It demands more than a typical introductory lecture class in the humanistic sciences. We
would prefer you to attend all meetings, having done the reading and ready to discuss it intelligently. The organization of this class depends on you taking increasing responsibility for your development as engaged and critical thinkers, readers, and writers. To do so means having to do on your own some or all of what you may have thought the class was to do for you, for instance, in learning facts and terms or in deciphering the newspaper headlines. Students who work best in the conventional lecture and exam setting or who put a premium on road-tested and smooth-running classroom experiences may want to consider taking another class.

**What makes this a class in Political Science?** Students who have taken lots of political science courses may be struck by the differences between this one and others taught at Penn or the versions of Politics of the Middle East that are taught by other faculty. Specifically, no attempt is made to survey the range of topics, the literature in leading journals in the field, and theoretical debates that occupy professional political scientists in the United States (myself included) who specialize in comparative politics. It is also not a course that views the Middle East through the lens of American foreign policy priorities. Finally, it does not attempt the impossible task of teaching the history and background of two dozen countries, a half-dozen wars, the "roots" of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the seven hundred year old Islamic religious tradition(s), the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, or the diversity of political institutions and economic arrangements across the Arabic-speaking states of North Africa, Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Peninsula, together with those non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran and Israel, which some believe are necessary before one can think critically about the lives of people in these places.

**Grades** Your grades will be based on the quality of your written analytical work. The later assignments count more than the earlier ones. The weighting assumes that your work will improve across the course of the semester, that is, with practice. It also attempts to compensate for the size of the class and so the inability to read drafts or grade rewrites. Keep in mind, however, that an evaluation of written work is not science, it is an art, and there is no getting around that it is somewhat subjective. What we have going for us is that we have been doing it for a few dozen years. Review 1 (15%), 2 (20%), and 3 (25%). These are short, 1000-word assignments that may be incorporated in part in the final 3000-4000-word comparative review 4 (40%). We’d like you to attend all classes because we don’t think of ourselves as wasting your time, but experience also shows that those who choose not to come to class or not to engage very much when they show up do worse than the average. Thus there isn’t much reason to build a participation component into the model.

As noted, given the size of the class and number of assignments, we are unable is able to devote much time to editing your work. We therefore encourage you to read and critique each other's paper drafts prior to handing them in for a grade. We would also encourage you to study the style of writers you admire and to get hold of a copy of a writing guide, for example, Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

All reviews should be double-spaced (24 points) using a 12-point font. Don’t forget to title your reviews in a way that signals something important to the reader. Please also make sure that a page number appears on each page, and that you please include a word count at the end of the text (Word will calculate this for you.). The due dates for all written assignments are specified in the syllabus. Please consult with M Idris about preferred format and delivery method.

Save all written work on disk! You will continue to develop these texts throughout the semester. It is important that all citations and references in your written work be complete, and that you follow a consistent style. Many examples of full text citations are found in the syllabus and in the texts and notes of all the books we are reading this semester. If you are unclear about how and why to cite a work fully, please see one of the instructors.

Web Sites: We encourage you to regularly read newspapers, periodicals, and other materials produced in Middle Eastern countries, which are now available in translation. A good place to begin to locate these sources is the website at the Middle East Center at the University of Texas at Austin, http://inic.utexas.edu/menic/

Preliminary Schedule of Sessions, Topics and Assignments

I

INTRODUCTION

1/14 The Argument and Organization of the Class

Note: The first book we will read is Asef Bayat’s *Life as Politics* (week of 1/26). Begin it now.

1/19 and 1/21 On Boys, Girls and the Veil (subyan wa banat, Y. Nasrallah, dir., 1995)

Please take notes during the screening and write up your initial impressions of this film soon after today’s class. Among other points, consider: what is the director’s objective? What elements of the film work? What parts seem less compelling? Why?

Note: The Brookings Institution has a new program, “Middle East Youth Initiative.” Check it out at http://www.shababinclusion.org/

II

DAY TO DAY POLITICS IN (PARTS OF) THE ARAB WORLD (AND BEYOND)

1/26 and 1/28 Is there a Politics of Fun?

Read through chapter 7 of Bayat’s *Life as Politics*

Come to class having done a little detective work. We need a dossier on Asef Bayat. Who is he? What does he work on? What did he train as? How has his earlier work been received? This is a key part of understanding a book. Do the same thing for all the authors we read this semester.

2/02 and 2/04 The Street

Finish Bayat, *Life as Politics*

Assignment: Write a 1000-word review of *Life as Politics*. Your review should include the following. 1. A title that captures the essence of your argument and critique. 2. An introductory “hook” that leads to a summary of your main point about Bayat. 3. A succinct account of what the book is about. 4. An assessment of its strengths. 5. The critique elaborated. 6. A concluding statement. Due by Sunday February 7

2/09, 2/11 and 2/16 We Are Not in Tanta Anymore

Read Al Aswany, *Chicago*
III
MEDIA AND MODERNITY

2/18, 2/23, 2/25, and 3/02 The Real World
Read Kraidy, *Reality Television*. Professor Kraidy will be in class on 2/25, and you all have to kill the book, seriously.

3/04 No Class

Assignment: Write a 1000-1200 word comparative book review of *Reality Television* and either *Life as Politics* or *Chicago*. You should use the essay form to advance an argument that develops from the pairing of the two books. You still need to review both, succinctly, and let the reader know what is most important about each, but you should draw out the significance or value added when the two are read side-by-side. Due by Thursday March 4

3/19 and 3/11 SPRING BREAK

IV
IDENTITY

3/16 and 3/18 The Complexities of Contemporary Israeli Identity Making
Read the first half of Ram, *Iranophobia*

3/23 and 3/25 The Case of Iranian Jews
Finish Ram, *Iranophobia*

3/30 and 4/01 Performance Politics
Read the first half of Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*

4/06 and 4/08 Everyday Nation Making
Finish Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*

Assignment: Write a 750-1000 word review of *Iranophobia* or *Peripheral Visions* or write a comparative review of both. Due by Sunday 4/1

V
A POST BIN LADEN MIDDLE EAST

4/13 and 4/15 The Clash of Grand Narratives
Read the first half of Kepel, *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom*

4/20 and 4/22 Endless War?
Finish Kepel, *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom*

4/27 Last Class - where we try to bring it all together

Your Final: Bring the class together for yourself through a review essay that includes Kepel’s *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom* together with other books this semester. You are encouraged to build on your earlier reviews in composing a final text. Remember to write it not to Idris but to a general audience. Due by Sunday May 2.

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