

## POL4, option A:

### The Middle East: Syria and Iraq – State and Nation

*Lecturer & option organiser: Dr Glen Rangwala*

#### The course

In this option, we will look at two countries that have always been central to Middle Eastern politics – Syria and Iraq. They are our focus for two main reasons. The first reason is because of their political significance: both countries have been enormously influential across the region, and yet the recent conflicts in each country serve as devastating examples of the scope and consequences of contemporary warfare. The second reason is because the explanations commonly given for key features in the politics of both countries – for conflict, authoritarianism and the high levels of popular discontent – are often similar. This should enable some measure of comparative analysis that both takes in the similar political processes over modern history but is also alert to how differences have developed between them.

The explanations that form the central material for this option are usefully grouped around categories of **‘state’** and **‘nation’**. Both countries contain some of the world’s longest-lasting political communities, but the category of the ‘nation’ – what it consists of and who speaks for it – has over the past 100 years served as a frequent focus for redefinition, contestation and conflict in both contexts. Both countries have what appeared to be powerful state apparatuses, but these were apparatuses that seemed to crumble in the face of conflict, if only to reappear in different forms. The two concepts serve as our hooks into the complex politics of the two countries, and it is through them that the comparisons will be developed.

The political histories are complex, and there is no expectation that students taking this option will be able to develop over the course of six lectures and two supervisions a well-rounded knowledge of all the twists and turns of these countries since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. So instead, we will be focusing on three relatively short episodes, paralleled across both countries, and inviting the focus on categories of state and nation. These episodes are the **period of colonial rule** (for Syria, the early colonial period) and the anti-imperial revolt; the **revolutionary takeovers** and the immediate period of consolidation; and the outbreak of **mass violence** in the wake of invasion (Iraq) or mass protest (Syria). The specific eras are, for Iraq:

- 1917-1922, which takes in the British conquest, the ‘Great Iraqi Revolution’ of 1920 and the creation of the Kingdom of Iraq, up to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922;
- 1958-1968, from the ‘14 July’ (1958) Revolution, through the cycle of internal coups, up to the ‘17 July’ (1968) Revolution, which brought the Ba’th Party firmly into power;
- 2003-2006, from the US-led invasion through to the heightened inter-communal violence that followed the bombing of al-Askari shrine in Samarra’.

And for Syria, they are:

- 1918-1925, from the joint French-British rule of Syria through the creation of the 'Arab Kingdom of Syria', on to the French reinvasion, and culminating in the 'Great Syrian Revolt';
- 1963-1970, which includes the Ba'ath Party coups (1963, 1966), the 1967 war and the 'Corrective movement' that established Hafez al-Asad's rule;
- 2011-2014, the early stages of the Syrian war as what started as a mass protest movement morphed into a series of highly militarised conflicts across the country, with the self-styled 'Islamic State' controlling areas of both eastern Syria and western Iraq.

In both countries, we will reflect on how these episodes matter for contemporary politics, so in effect there is fourth episode for both countries that we will be looking at, which is the present day.

Students should come away from this option with a good sense of the key debates about the two countries: on state-formation (and 'state-building') and its legacy; the place of national and religious identity, and how these may serve as in explanations of both unity and division; and the role of international actors in shaping the politics of the region. Students should also develop a sense of the value of comparative analysis, and be able to reflect on how studying these two countries alongside one another provides useful insights into how to explain political processes.

In addition to the lectures, there will be a revision class and/or drop-in session in Easter term. Details will be announced nearer to the time.

## **The lectures**

The lectures are thematically driven, but there is broadly a chronological pattern to them too, with the first two concentrating on the period of colonial rule; the second two on revolutionism; and the third two on mass violence. In each pairing, the second of the two lectures (ie, lectures 2, 4 and 6) is oriented more towards thinking about the longer-term legacies of the particular episode. They take place in the Alison Richard Building, Room SG1.

### **Lecture 1: Introduction and colonial state-formation**

**(Michaelmas week 1: Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1pm, Room SG1)**

After setting up the themes of the course, the first lecture sets up the international history of the creation of the modern states of Syria and Iraq after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the different tactics used by the British and French governments to establish their rule, and the diverse forms of resistance they encountered. It considers principally how we are to understand the state-formation processes in both countries as attempts to establish forms of domination, both internationally and internally, in the context of regional competition and disorder.

**Lecture 2: Anti-imperialism and national identity**

**(Michaelmas week 2: Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1pm, Room SG1)**

In both Iraq and Syria, concerted political movements emerged quickly to challenge European rule, but many of them were also drawn into the orbit of the colonial state structures. The lecture looks to the legacies of this process of interaction with the colonial state from two main perspectives: the lasting socio-economic changes that accompanied the creation of the new state apparatuses, and the imaginative legacies of the anti-colonial struggle that continue to form an important constituent of national identity.

**Lecture 3: Multiple nationalisms, ideological movements and political parties**

**(Michaelmas week 3: Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1pm, Room SG1)**

The lecture turns to the creation of new forms of popular politics in both countries in the late 1950s/early 1960s. The appeal to nationalism was often foregrounded in popular politics, but there were different ideas of what nationalism meant that were held by political groups. The lecture looks to how a combination of coercive state apparatuses and highly mobilised political parties led to a period of prolonged political instability, but also the expression of new forms of political thinking and a wider sense of political empowerment.

**Lecture 4: Consolidation, authoritarianism and the rise of Statism**

**(Michaelmas week 4: Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1pm, Room SG1)**

We start here with the consolidation of governments that came to power with revolutionary claims, about economic redistribution, social justice and national liberation, and then look to their transformation into long-lasting and seemingly all-powerful authoritarian apparatuses. The specific analysis is of how the resilient form of authoritarian came into being in 1968 for Iraq and 1970 in Syria, but necessarily we will need to look ahead to how these governments defeated their challengers – using the examples of the 1979-1982 uprising in Syria and the 1991 uprising in Iraq.

**Lecture 5: Man, the State and War**

**(Michaelmas week 5: Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1pm, Room SG1)**

The long standing and highly personalised system of rule that was created under Hafez al-Asad in Syria and the Saddam Hussein government in Iraq led many to characterise them as creating 'strong states' which in both cases engaged in making war outside their borders (Syria's presence in Lebanon 1976-2005, Iraq's war against Iran 1980-1988). In both cases, however, the institutions of the state seemed to disintegrate when challenged – by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and in the face of popular protest in Syria in 2011. The lecture looks to what these episodes show about the form of the state, but also how the notion of state fragility may also be misleading, as similar institutional forms have reappeared since in the context of mass conflict. *With apologies to Kenneth Waltz for the lecture title.*

**Lecture 6: Sectarianisation, discontent, and conclusion**  
**(Michaelmas week 6: Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1pm, Room SG1)**

The final lecture looks at how to understand the inter-communal violence witnessed within the recent conflicts in both countries: is this a failure of the state, or a failure of national identity? The lecture looks to competing explanations, and to the ways and extent to which sectarian issues continue to colour contemporary politics. The lecture will conclude by looking to the resilience of nationalism in both countries, and trace out what a comparative approach to state formation has to show us about these two countries.

**The supervision essay questions and reading lists**

The reading is organised by essay, but inevitably there is a high degree of overlap between the subject matter on the two lists. You will probably find yourself doing considerably more reading for the first essay, particularly in familiarising yourself with the modern history of both countries. Make sure that you are also alert when reading for that first essay to what may turn out to be useful from the same reading when it comes to writing the second essay.

All essay and exam questions for this option will ask general questions asking you to compare the politics of Iraq and Syria; they will not exclusively be about specific eras, but you will be expected to demonstrate knowledge across the three main episodes under study (though of course the extent of your focus may vary, depending on the question).

The reading is necessarily broken down by country. Although there are a few texts that discuss both Iraq and Syria, you are likely to find the more useful literature to be country-specific, and it is up to you in your essays to find themes that enable you make the comparisons. Key reading is indicated with a star (\*).

**Background reading**

It would be helpful just to start with a modern history of each country, to familiarise oneself with the overall sweep of events over the past 105 or so years. On Iraq, Tripp is a thorough, engaging account – for obvious reasons, please use the most recent edition. Marr is a more recently updated history. On Syria, Lesch is written at a more basic level, but serves the purpose of an introduction for those who don't have a prior historical understanding of the country. Reilly is more developed (and you have online access), though its framing ('fragile nation') is somewhat contentious.

\* Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2007)

Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (London: Routledge, 4<sup>th</sup> edition with Ibrahim al-Marashi, 2017)

David W. Lesch, *Syria: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019)

- \* James A. Reilly, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land: The Modern History of Syria* (London: IB Tauris, 2018), chapters 4-10

**Essay question 1: To what extent should the repeated coups and civil wars in Iraq and Syria be explained by reference to the legacy of European colonial rule?**

Colonial rule

- \* Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 2
- Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), chapter 5
- \* Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), chapters 1, 2 and 7
- Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), chapters 3 and 5

Revolutionary takeovers

- Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2015)
- Volker Perthes, 'Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change', *Adelphi Papers*, issue 366 (2004)
- \* Isam al-Khafaji, 'War as a vehicle for the rise and demise of a state-controlled society: the case of Ba'thist Iraq', in Steven Heydemann, *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chapter 9 (accessed via: <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6c6006x6;brand=ucpress>)
- Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially chapters 1,4 and 6

Mass violence

- Zaid al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism have Undermined Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)
- Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006)
- 'The State of Iraq – 20 years after the invasion', *Middle East Report* (Spring 2023), particularly the articles by Fanar Haddad, Zeinab Shuker, Hazmeh Hadad and Renad Mansour, via <https://merip.org/magazine/306/>

Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading" to revolution?', *International Affairs*, vol.88/1 (2012), pp.95-113

Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto, 2016)

\* Joseph Daher, *Syria after the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), chapters 3, 6 and especially 7

**Essay question 2: Has national identity been a powerful force in the politics of modern Syria and Iraq, and with what result?**

On Syria

\* James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005)

\* Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, 'The struggle for Syria's regions', *Middle East Report*, vol.269 (2013)

Christopher Phillips, 'Sectarianism and conflict in Syria', *Third World Quarterly*, vol.36/2 (2015), pp.357-376

Dawn Chatty, *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Rustum Mahmoud and Stephan Rosiny, 'Opposition visions for preserving Syria's ethnic-sectarian mosaic', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.45/2 (2016), pp.231-250

Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapter 6

Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapters 3 and 4

Eyal Zisser, 'Rethinking Syrian nationalism: national identity and state in Syria, from the 'struggle for Syria' to the Syrian civil war', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 58/3 (2022), pp.421-434

On Iraq

Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)

\* Sami Zubaida, 'The fragments imagine the nation: the case of Iraq', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 34 (2002), pp.205-15

\* Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), chapters 6-7

Eli Amariyo 'History, memory and commemoration: the Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the process of nation building in Iraq', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 51/1 (2015), pp.72-92

Fanar Haddad, 'The terrorists of today are the heroes of tomorrow: the anti-British and anti-American insurgencies in Iraqi history', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19/4 (2008), pp.451-483

Bahar Baser, 'Homeland Calling: Kurdish Diaspora and State-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the Post-Saddam Era', *Middle East Critique*, vol.27/1 (2018), pp.77-94

### **Mock exam questions**

1. Is the state in Iraq and Syria to be understood primarily in terms of its coercive institutions?
2. Do Syrian and Iraqi national identities mean anything other than what the governments say they should mean?