The Middle East: Challenges, Threats and Opportunities

The Middle East has always been contested geographic space, known for its deep-rooted conflicts. In this series of lectures, the lecturer will introduce the political, ideological, and economic dynamics of contemporary Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, the emphasis will be placed on the dynamics of state-society contention, the state formation, ideological trends such as political Islam (i.e., Salafism, Shiism, Wahhabism), the issue of terrorism, Arab nationalism, and the challenges of economic development, arms race, and finally, the Kurdish question.

Session 1: Arab-Israeli Conflict

No global confrontation is more controversial than the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this session, the lecturer would argue that the conflict between the Arabs and Israelis is not only racial, but cultural and geopolitical as well. During the lecture, the emphasis will be placed on the key issues which have resulted in four major wars since 1948 between Arab states and Israel. The lecturer would further argue that why a durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians is unlikely, at least in the near future. Moreover, the lecturer would discuss the ignored aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict that need to be addressed in any process of reconciliation.

Session 2: Reform and Democratization in the Middle East

This lecturer will examine issues such as the compatibility of Islam with democracy and the interaction of Islam and globalization in the Middle East. The lecturer will discuss the setbacks for political participation and social renovation in the Arabic-Islamic world, among them the absence of popular forums for collaboration with democrats in the region, and lack of a stable environment (resulted from the policies of global powers) that is needed for democratization. Moreover, the lecturer would discuss the factors that help authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to successfully alleviate the domestic pressure for democratization.

Session 3: Terrorism and Turmoil in the Middle East

In this session, we will discuss turmoil and terrorism in the Middle East. Terrorism, also known as Jihadism or Islamism, is the most prominent and persistent threat to global security. Terrorism has always been one of the key challenges for global peace and security since 1970, but terror incidents have dramatically increased since September 11, 2001. As the Global Terrorism Database indicates, from 2001 to 2015, more than 85,000 incidents of terrorism worldwide have been recorded, with more than 200,000 fatalities. The emphasize will be placed on terror groups (such as Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al Shabab, Boko Haram, Hayat al-Tahrir al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam), who they are and what they want, and how existential their threat is to the global peace and stability.
Session 4: The Rise of ISIS
In this session, the lecturer would discuss the series of events (i.e. the brutal anti-Sunni campaign by the Iraqi Shiite government) following the demise of Saddam Hossein that caused the rise of the terror group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as Daesh. Emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq on April 8, 2013, the terror group expanded into a network of affiliates in eight other countries. The self-declared Islamic caliphate established by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was able to carry out attacks beyond the borders of its so-called caliphate. The lecturer would discuss why, despite the announcement by the coalition forces that ISIS is defeated, and its leader is dead, the terror group remains a battle-hardened force whose enduring defeat is not assured.

Session 5: Arms Race and Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East
The Middle East is engaged in a long and bloody arms race, to the extent that the region has become a focal point of the world arms buildup. Each year, the arsenal of the regional countries grows, as the global powers spur billions of dollars’ worth of weapons to these countries. More worrisome, these countries showed interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. At the current time, Israel is the only country in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons. However, there are indications that other Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, want to obtain either nuclear weapons or the ability to build an atomic bomb. In this session, the lecturer would discuss the real motivations behind the arms race among the Middle Eastern countries, and the motivation of these states' to obtain nuclear weapons. Moreover, the lecturer will discuss the likelihood of the success of these new nuclear contenders to enter the “Nuclear Club,” and how they can be dissuaded from the nuclear path.

Session 6: The Kurdish Question
Little is known about the Kurds and Kurdistan, the Kurdish homeland. Despite a long history of struggling for independence, the Kurds are still far from having a state of their own. In this session, the lecturer would discuss the political realities that confront the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, and the setbacks for their state-building. The emphasize will also be placed on familiarizing participants with the Kurds’ glorious history, religion, culture, language, and politics, as well as their modern nationalist movement. The lecture will also cover the Kurdish awakening, Kurdish alliance with the United States and suffering the inevitable consequences, and their future in the Middle East.