The Middle East and Democracy

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UOC teaching material

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The assignment and creation of this teaching material have been coordinated by the lecturer: Albert Batlle Rubio (2013)

Introduction

The modern concept of the Middle East was born in the 19th century, in a context marked by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of European colonial ambitions in Africa and Asia. The idea behind this concept was to find a common denomination for those regions that lay between Europe and India and the Far East. This concept gained popularity and it is used in the languages of the region. Seen from the United States, the Middle East often includes the countries of North Africa. In fact, when analysing aspects such as the rise of political Islam, the spread of nationalism or the creation of modern states, it is extremely difficult to separately treat the Middle East and North Africa as separate entities.

The fact that this course focuses on the Middle East (and North Africa) does not mean that it understands the social and political dynamics of this region as exceptional. For far too long, political scientists have avoided the Middle East in their comparative studies. Similarly, area studies have emphasised the peculiarities of this region rather than understand how global and universal trends affect this region. This has been very visible in the studies on democracy.

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly the Arab countries, have traditionally been seen as hostile for democracy. Other regions such as Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe and even parts of Africa experienced transitions to democracy since the 1970s. In contrast, several Arab countries that initiated political reforms in the 70s or the 90s entered a de-liberalisation phase, characterised by increasing repression of all forms of opposition. Until 2011, no Arab country had achieved a democratic transition.

The wave of popular protest and subsequent changes initiated in 2011, commonly referred as Arab Spring or Arab Awakening has shaken the terms of the debate on democracy in the Middle East and some authors argue that the region is entering a new paradigm. Several dictators have fallen; other countries have introduced political reforms and others have reinforced their traditional strategies of social control: a combination of subsidies and repression. External actors are also re-evaluating their policies towards this region and are trying to draw lessons from their past actions (or lack of action). In this critical juncture it is particularly relevant to analyse the domestic and international factors that have a substantial impact on the evolution of Middle Eastern politics.

The goal of this course is to provide students with the opportunity to get a closer look to the political dynamics of the region, to get to know the main political actors and to be introduced to theoretical debates on democracy in the Middle East. It provides students with sufficient skills to move away from

journalistic topics and operate with scientific criteria in their analysis of past and on-going political transformations in the Middle East. Students will have access to relevant information and a selection of reading materials that should allow them to answer questions such as:

- Does democracy face more obstacles in the Middle East than in other regions?

- Can Islamist groups become democratising forces or, at least, integrate themselves (and be integrated by the rest) in a democratic system?

- Is the Arab-Israeli conflict hindering democratisation in the Middle East

- Have external actors contributed to democratisation in this region or, on the contrary, have they legitimised authoritarian rulers?

The course is divided in four thematic modules dealing with authoritarianism, political opposition, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the democratisation policies of external actors.

The first module focuses on the factors that have hindered democracy and those that have favoured authoritarianism in the Arab countries. Among those factors, it pays attention to rentierism as a decisive factor in the configuration of modern Middle-Eastern states. It also analyses the scope of political liberalisation reforms undertaken since the 1970s, the role of political parties and elections in semi-authoritarian contexts, discusses whether there are different degrees of authoritarianism and how the concept of liberalised autocracies has been applied to describe the nature of some political systems in the Middle East.

The second module analyses traditional opposition forces, putting a special emphasis on Islamist parties and social movements. It highlights that, since 1970s, Islamist groups became the forerunners of political opposition in almost all Arab countries, thus replacing communist and left wing parties as the alternative to the incumbent regimes. The module will allow the student to understand the diversity and complexity of groups that are traditionally labelled as Islamists and how some of them have evolved towards a new position that some call post-Islamism or Muslim democracy. Students will also learn about the emergence of social and labour movements since 2005 as a new form of political contestation. The appearance and strengthening of those movements is particularly relevant to understand the origins and the evolution of both political Islam and social protest movements.

The third module moves to the analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict and provides students with basic information on the evolution of this long-lasting conflict, the attempts to reach a negotiated peace and the implications of this conflict for the configuration of Palestinian and Israeli political systems. This

module analyses how nationalism became a dominant ideology in the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of modern Zionism and Palestinian nationalism. It also analyses how the conflict has affected the evolution of Israel's political system and introduces a debate on whether it is compatible to define Israel as a democracy as well as a Jewish State.

The fourth module deals with the role of external actors, looking at the strategies of three actors: the European Union, the United States and Turkey. This module presents their policies of democracy promotion and their programmes of democracy assistance as part of their Middle East policies. Thus, common to the three actors is that democratisation support is understood as a foreign policy instrument. Yet, there are significant differences among them: the EU presents itself as a normative power; the US democratisation agenda has been contaminated by the intervention in Iraq; and Turkey tries to take advantage from the fact that it is perceived as a model or a source for inspiration in many Middle Eastern countries.

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