



The Modern Middle East

Welcome to *The Modern Middle East*, a single semester social studies elective that earns one-half credit. This 18-lesson course is an in-depth introduction to the intriguing history, religious life, and politics of the Middle East.

Most historians date the beginning of the modern period of Middle East history from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. Not only did Napoleon take an army of soldiers along with him to Egypt, he also took an army of a different kind: an army of experts and scholars composed of archaeologists, linguists, historians, botanists, and artists. The invasion wasn't to be a political takeover alone. Napoleon's larger aim was to lay claim to an entire civilization in the name of the common global heritage. Wholesale looting of Egypt's monuments and artifacts ensued. Entire monuments, including temples and obelisks, were transferred to museums and public places in France, Great Britain, Germany, and even America. Although the French were quickly displaced by the British, both of these colonial powers did everything they could to keep the region weak and compliant. In the process, the more secular modern ways the West were brought into the region, further disrupting the highly religious and traditional ways that governed the region for millennia before Napoleon set foot on Egyptian soil.

Focusing on the region's confrontation with the West since Napoleon's invasion in 1798, students will learn how European colonialism introduced modern and secular ideas into the Middle East, creating tensions with traditional patterns of belief and culture. Students will explore how the actions of Western colonizers encouraged the region's political affairs to become weak and unstable. The course also examines the conflicts between Israel and its regional neighbors, the role of Islamic revivalist movements, and the impact of oil.

The following books are used in this course:

The Modern Middle East syllabus (Oak Meadow, 2012)

The Middle East Today (Routledge, 2009)

Midaq Alley (Anchor Books, 1995)

Prerequisites: World History

Please note: There is no teacher manual available for this course.

The Modern Middle East Course Overview

Introduction	Overview, Text, Study Aids and Strategies, Blogging, Requirements
Lesson 1:	The Middle East and North Africa: Between Image and Reality
Lesson 2:	The Geography of the Middle East and North Africa
Lesson 3:	The Contemporary State Systems
Lesson 4:	Historical Foundations
Lesson 5:	The Making of the Modern Middle East
Lesson 6:	The Emergence of Independent States and Geopolitics
Lesson 7:	Contemporary Islamist Thought
Lesson 8:	Midterm Paper
Lesson 9:	Economic Challenges
Lesson 10:	The Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Conflict Resolution Perspective
Lesson 11:	Civil Society, Media, and Democratic Reform
Lesson 12:	The Coming Challenges: Key Issues to Watch
Lesson 13:	Writing a Paper on the Challenges Facing the Modern Middle East
Lesson 14 & 15:	The Literature of the Middle East
Lesson 16:	Writing a Book Review of <i>Midaq Alley</i>
Lesson 17 & 18:	Final Research Project and Paper

The Modern Middle East

Oak Meadow Sample Lesson

Oak Meadow, Inc.
Post Office Box 1346
Brattleboro, Vermont 05302-1346
oakmeadow.com

Lesson



Contemporary Islamist Thought

Chapter 7

Introduction

The term *Islamist* is relatively new and subject to confusion. It is not a synonym for “Islam,” which is a world religion. *Islamist* means “political Islam,” which is the literal translation of the term as it used in Arabic: *al-Islam al-siyasi*. Islamists are Muslims who believe that Islam, in addition to being a religion, is also a system of governance. The specific laws and other regulations that make up this system originate in Islam’s holy book, *The Qur’an*, and in the sayings of Islam’s chief prophet, Muhammad, sayings which are recorded in a collection called *The Hadith*. These laws and regulations over time were codified and classified as *Sharia*, a complex word that is usually translated simply as “Islamic Law.”

This lesson introduces you to political Islam as it emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are multiple sources of Islamist activity. The three main ones are:

1. A reaction against European imperialism and colonialism in the Middle East (especially as it occurred in Egypt).
2. A reaction against European imperialism and colonialism in the Far East (India).
3. Reform movements led by Muslim puritans (Wahhabis and Salafists).

Islamists can be found across the whole spectrum of Islam: Sunni, Shia, and Sufi. A common rallying point for many of them is a yearning to return Muslim societies to the way things were when Muhammad ruled Medina in the seventh century. They see seventh-century Medina as the “golden age,” the model of the perfect Muslim community. Their method is *jihad*, not only the greater jihad (war against evil in the individual soul), but the lesser jihad, too: war against one’s political enemies. Islamists

A common rallying point for many Islamists is a yearning to return Muslim societies to the way things were when Muhammad ruled Medina in the seventh century.

Chapter 7

(continued)

think jihad is to be waged not only in self-defense (which is what the religion of Islam teaches) but also to spread and impose Islam by force.

Many Islamists practice a form of what theologians call “supersessionism,” from the verb “to supersede.” They believe that Islam has superseded all other religions and represents God’s final revelation and commandment to all humankind. As such, supersessionist Muslims have placed themselves on a collision course with supersessionists in other religions who believe that theirs represents absolute divine will for all people in all times. Christianity, with its belief in the universality of Christ’s saving grace, is Islam’s chief competitor in this regard, and history is full of ideological clashes between representatives of these faiths in addition to clashes on the field of battle. Theologians and historians point to the Crusades in the Middle Ages as an early example of hostile supersessionist activity, but you can find other examples as early as the ninth century in the writings of John of Damascus, an Arab Christian who attacked Islam as heresy.

Some Islamist groups—Hezbollah in Lebanon, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban—have grown powerful enough to earn the title “non-state actors.” One of them, the Taliban, actually did take over a country—Afghanistan—thus becoming (briefly) a “state actor.” Non-state actors pose a significant challenge to the international community because they operate outside the bounds of international law and international institutions like the United Nations, and because they are not as readily accessible through normal diplomatic channels (embassies, ambassadors, consulates, etc.).

Above all, you should leave this lesson understanding that what happened on 9/11 was not the work of fanatics, but the product of calculated patterns of thought and action on how to respond to attacks by enemies of Islam, real and imaginary. These patterns stretch back centuries, and include not only European imperialism and colonialism but go back in history at least as far as the Crusades and the Mongol invasions of the Middle East.

Reading

Read Chapter 7, pages 126-139. Practice Active Reading (review the method as outlined in the introduction to the course). Before you begin, look over the “Summary of Main Points” and “Questions for Discussion” at the end of the chapter. Look over the “Study Questions” below, which you will be required to answer.

Along the Way

1. Pages 127-128—Read carefully Box 7.1 and become completely familiar with the Arabic concepts in Islamist thought and their definitions. Apply these concepts to your written work throughout the lesson and in lessons to come. As Stewart pointed out early in the book (page 13—please review this page), it is wise to be careful with some labels and concepts.
2. Page 129—Note that Osama bin Laden came out of the Wahhabi tradition.
3. Page 129—Note Al-Afghani’s explanation for why the West was able to dominate the Muslim world.
4. Pages 130-131—Read carefully the material on the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan al-Banna. Many other more extreme Sunni movements active in the twenty-first century (such as Islamic Jihad, HAMAS, and Al-Qaeda) are radical offshoots of this parent organization which is still active itself, especially in Egypt and Jordan.
5. Pages 131-132—Read carefully the material on Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was hanged by Egypt’s President Nasser in 1966. His writings have inspired the current generation of Islamist extremists, including Osama bin Laden.
6. Pages 132-133—With the discussion of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution we take a look inside the world of a Shiite Islamist movement. Shiite Islamist ideas also inspired the Shiite *Hezbollah* (“Party of God”) in Lebanon, which is discussed ahead on pages 137 and 138.
7. Pages 133-137—These pages describe Islamist activity in Afghanistan led chiefly by the Taliban and their allies Al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden. The Taliban (from an Arabic word meaning “student,” that is to say a student in a Muslim *madressa*, or school) grew out of the larger Deobandi movement, named after a town in India. The Deobandis rose up to resist British colonial rule in India following the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, a rebellion by Indian Hindu and Muslim soldiers under the command of British officers. The Sepoys complained that British Christian missionaries were aggressively trying to convert them to Christianity. Deobandi ideology, therefore, has been fiercely anti-Western from the beginning. As such, it was a good fit with the Wahhabi foundation of Osama bin Laden’s anti-American rhetoric. Bin Laden and his followers were horrified at the presence of American “infidel” troops on sacred Saudi soil in 1991, even if the Americans were there at the invitation of the Saudi king to protect Saudi Arabia from invasion by Saddam Hussein, who had occupied Kuwait next door. This set the stage for 9/11, which was aimed at driving a wedge in the oil-based Saudi-American alliance, and the clash that took place following 9/11 in Afghanistan.

Chapter 7

(continued)



Lesson Questions

Write out each question and answer it. When referring to the text, include page numbers. **Enrolled Students:** Send your work to your teacher.

1. What are the similarities between the rhetoric of the Islamists and that of secular nationalists we have studied (such as Nasser and the Ba'athists—see previous lesson)?
2. Explain how Islamists have adapted the classical Muslim teaching on *jihad* to serve their own ends.
3. Summarize the ideas and recommendations of Sayyid Qutb. Why have they become so influential, in your view?
4. Describe the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.
5. Summarize the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden from the examples given in the book. What do you think of his claims and recommendations? Be sure to give reasons for your views.
6. What are the challenges posed by “non-state actors” like Hezbollah, the Taliban, and Al-Qaeda?
7. Create a political or editorial cartoon for a newspaper or Web site that stems from a topic or issue covered in this lesson.

Choose One of the Following Projects:

Unless otherwise noted, write a one-to-two-page paper on your selected topic. Cite the source or sources you used as directed in the course introduction.

1. See “Suggestions for Further Reading” at the end of the chapter. Choose one resource to explore (be mindful that one or more of these supplemental resources could inspire your choice of a final project in the course). **Enrolled Students:** Write an email or a blog post to your teacher in which you report on what you learned and what you think about it. Gilles Kepel’s book *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* is especially recommended.
2. Research Sayyid Qutb further and show how his thought inspired the current generation of Muslim radicals including Osama bin Laden.

Qutb's most influential work is *Milestones*, which has been available on the Web in its entirety. An earlier work, *Social Justice in Islam* is also recommended. In addition, Lawrence Wright's book *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) is an excellent resource on Qutb, Bin Laden, and many other important players in the field of political Islam.

Chapter 7

(continued)

3. A superb sourcebook on a variety of Islamist thinkers is by Ali Rahnama ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Zed Books, 1994. Pick one personality to profile in a one-page report. Suggested examples are Al-Afghani, Abduh, Mawdudi, Hassan al-Banna, and the Ayatollah Khomeini. There is a good chapter on Qutb as well.
4. Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, is a controversial contemporary Islamist thinker. Look him up in a newspaper database and write a one-page report on his ideas. Do you find him persuasive? Why or why not?
5. Research the Sepoy Mutiny and the South Asian Muslim reaction to it known as the Deobandi movement.
6. Research the Islamist thinker Abu Ala Mawdudi (also spelled Maududi) and his work in India and (later) Pakistan. Compare his thought to that of Sayyid Qutb.
7. Find a news article that pertains to any of the topics covered in this lesson and write a two-paragraph review. The first paragraph should be a summary of the main points followed by a second paragraph in which you weigh, analyze, or otherwise evaluate your topic. What is significant about it? What changes occurred because of the events or personalities you chose to write about? What is the connection between the news and points covered in the lesson? Don't forget to cite the source of the article.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

Blog Work

If an online blog accompanies the course when you are taking it, you may be invited to contribute material on an extra-credit basis. Your teacher will be in touch about this if it applies to you.