The War for the Greater Middle East
Professor Andrew Bacevich

Purpose. The purpose of this course is to invite students to consider an alternative to the conventional grand narrative of twentieth century political history. Rather than centered on Great Power competition for dominance in Eurasia, this alternative emphasizes the interaction between the West and the peoples of the Islamic world. In terms of chronology, the course will recount events since 1914. In terms of scope, it will focus on three specific zones of conflict: the Persian Gulf (emphasizing Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran); Palestine (that is, Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza); and the region that Washington currently refers to as AfPak.

Approach. This is not a lecture course. We will learn collectively. All participants must come to class prepared to discuss the assigned questions. Researching those questions – which will probably increase in number as we go along -- is an individual responsibility: no spoon feeding. If you need help getting started, see the instructor. Keep this in mind: Our interest in the past is informed by our concern for the present and the future. So be alert to the policy implications of the history we are studying.

Course requirements.
- Attendance and class participation (20%);
- Oral presentation (20%) – one per student; twenty minutes in-class addressing a “vignette;” see instructor before beginning preparation;
- Book review (30%) – maximum of 2000 words, book chosen from list below; a review will typically a) identify and “situate” the author; b) summarize the book; c) engage the argument presented in the book.
- Final exam (30%)

Administration. Students will adhere to the Boston University Code of Academic Conduct, which can be found at www.bu.edu/uhc.

Lesson 1. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991

How are we accustomed to “telling the story” of the twentieth century? What truths does that conventional narrative reveal? What gets left out or short-changed? To what degree does this narrative retain relevance in the present age?

Lesson 2. Sykes and Picot make a deal (1916)

Describe Great Britain’s vision of a post-Ottoman Middle East. What role did the Brits allot for Arabs, Jews, and Persians? What mechanisms did the Brits employ to govern the region and to exclude other great powers? Describe the Middle East as it existed in the wake of the “peacemaking” that followed in the wake of World War I. Who won? Who lost?

Lesson 3. Ataturk invents a nation (1923)

Who was Ataturk? What was his vision for Turkey? To what degree did he fulfill that vision? Assess his legacy. Where does the Armenian genocide fit in that legacy? What would Ataturk make of present-day Turkey?
Lesson 4. The Arabs revolt (1936)

Explain the source of conflict between Arabs and Jews in interwar Palestine. Did British policy serve to exacerbate or alleviate this tension?

Lesson 5. Oil changes everything (1938)

Explain the implications of Persian Gulf oil for Great Power politics. What mechanisms were established to facilitate its exploitation and control? Who benefited as a result? How did Persian Gulf oil affect the conduct of World War II? How did the war and its outcome affect the course of events in the Middle East?

Vignette I: FDR entertains the King (1945)

Lesson 6. The Brits throw in their cards (1947-1948)

Describe Great Britain’s departure from India and Mandatory Palestine. Describe the consequences that ensued in each case. Contrast Gandhi’s strategy for gaining Indian independence with the strategy pursued by the Zionists in Palestine.

Vignette II: Terrorists bomb the King David (1946)

Lesson 7. Zionists seize the moment (1948)

What enabled Israel to achieve independence? Who aided the cause? Who or what created the “Palestinian problem”? Assess the challenges facing the state of Israel at its birth. How did Israel respond to those challenges – institutionally, diplomatically, and militarily? How did the creation of Israel affect US policy in the Middle East?

Vignette III: The Deir Yassin massacre (1948)

Lesson 8. Islam finds its ism

Describe the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood. What was the Brotherhood’s complaint? To what did its members aspire? On what means did they rely? How have Arab governments – beginning with Nasser’s Egypt -- responded to Islamism?

Vignette IV: The persecution of Sayyid Qutb

Lesson 9. The CIA makes a coup (1953)

Describe the triangular competition between the U. S. the USSR, and Great Britain to dominate Iran in the wake of World War II. What determined the outcome of that competition? With what consequences for Iran and the Middle East? Chart the course of US-Iranian and Israeli-Iranian relations in the 1950s and 1960s.

Lesson 10. Nasser loses and wins (1956)
Explain the origins of the Suez Crisis of 1956 – from an Egyptian perspective, a British perspective, and an Israeli perspective. What determined the outcome of the crisis? What role did the U. S. play? What legacy did the crisis leave in its wake?

Vignette V: Israeli nuclear policy – origins, capabilities, purpose, and policy

Lesson 11. DeGaulle pulls the plug (1961)

Explain how the FLN won Algerian independence from France. How did the Palestine Liberation Organization, created in 1964, resemble or differ from the FLN?

Vignette VI: the French army and torture

Lesson 12. Israel wins – and chooses (1967)

Describe the origins, conduct, and legacy of the 1967 War. How did the war affect U. S.-Israeli relations? How did it affect Israeli ambitions? What was the U. S. government position on Israeli settlements? How did the Arabs respond to Israel’s victory?

Vignette VII: The attack on the USS Liberty

Lesson 13. OPEC flexes its muscles (1973)

Describe the origins of OPEC and explain its ascendency. Describe the origins, conduct, and implications of the 1973 War. What role did the Soviet Union and United States each play? Explain the strategic vision of Anwar Sadat. Describe the path to and the results of the Camp David accords. How did the outcome affect U. S. relations with Egypt and with Israel?

Vignette VIII: Richard Nixon’s Operation Independence

Lesson 14. Terrorism hits its stride

Describe the pattern of terrorism, foreign and domestic, during the 1970s. Assess the role and evolution of the PLO. Describe the response of nations targeted by terrorist activity.

Vignette IX: The Munich Olympics

Lesson 15. The Shah loses his job (1979)

Explain the origins and outcome of the Iranian Revolution of 1979? Why did the Islamists come out on top? What were the implications for Persian Gulf politics and for Iran’s relations with its neighbors and with the United States?

Vignette X: Desert One

Explain the inspiration for the Carter Doctrine. Describe its evolution and implementation.

Vignette XI: The military history of Diego Garcia

Lesson 17. Saddam starts a war (1980)

Describe the origins, conduct, and impact of the Iran-Iraq War. What role did the United States play and why? Explain the significance of the Israeli attack on Osirak.

Vignette XII: Donald Rumsfeld pays a visit


Describe the origins, evolution, and impact of Israel’s 1982 intervention in Lebanon.

Vignette XIII: Iran-Contra

Lesson 19. The Palestinians rise up (1987)

Describe the origins and aspirations of Hamas and Hezbollah. Why did the Intifada begin? How did Israel respond? With what effect?

Vignette XIV: Iran Air 655

Lesson 20. The Mujahedeen win big

What caused the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan? How did the United States respond to Soviet defeat? What were the implications of the Afghanistan War for regional politics?

Lesson 21. Saddam tries again (1990)

Assess the origins, conduct, and consequences of the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991

Vignette XV: Operation Provide Comfort

Lesson 22. The Norwegians pull a surprise (1993)

Describe the Oslo Accords. What conditions made it possible for Israelis and Palestinians to reach agreement? Why did that agreement not yield real peace?

Vignette XVI: Operation Provide Hope (1993)

Lesson 23. Osama bin Laden declares war (1998)

Describe the origins, aims, and strategy employed by Al Qaeda. Describe the U. S. response prior to 9/11. Characterize U. S. policy toward the Taliban prior to 9/11.
Lesson 24. The West starts over in Afghanistan (2001)

Assess the course of Operation Enduring Freedom, to include its implications for Pakistan.


Describe the pattern of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. Who are the settlers? Describe the relationship between settlers and Israeli authorities. Explain the rationale for partition as pursued by the government of Ariel Sharon.


Assess the Iraq War: how it was justified, what the U. S. intended to accomplish, what it actually accomplished, and what it cost. What were the war’s regional implications?

Lesson 27. Obama misses the off-ramp (2009)

Assess the implications of President Obama’s decision to escalate the Afghanistan War.

Review books – some possibilities:

- Christian Alfonsi, Circle in the Sand
- Warren Bass, Support Any Friend
- Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, The Age of Sacred Terror
- Shareen Blair Brysac and Karl Meyer, Kingmakers
- Douglas Feith, War and Decision
- Roger Ford, Eden to Armageddon
- Lawrence Freedman, A Choice of Enemies
- Steven Freiburger, Dawn Over Suez
- David Fromkin, A Peace to End All Peace
- Lloyd C. Gardner, The Long Road to Baghdad
- Lloyd C. Gardner, Three Kings
- Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, The Generals’ War
- Alistair Horne, A Savage War of Peace
- Robert Kaplan, Imperial Grunts
- Gilles Kepel, Jihad
- Rashid Khalidi, Sowing Crisis
- David Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerrilla
- Stephen Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men
- Bernard Lewis, The Crisis of Islam
- Bernard Lewis, What Went Wrong?
- Douglas Little, American Orientalism
Amy Marcus, Jerusalem 1913
Andrew Mango, Ataturk
Aaron David Miller, The Much Too Promised Land
Benny Morris, Righteous Victims
Benny Morris, 1948
Marc J. O’Reilly, Unexceptional
Michael Oren, Six Days of War
Thomas E. Ricks, Fiasco
Jeremy Salt, The Unmaking of the Middle East
Tom Segev, 1967
Patrick Tyler, A World of Trouble
Robin Wright, The Last Great Revolution
Daniel Yergin, The Prize
Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, Lords of the Land