Cultures and Contexts: Middle Eastern Cities

Course description
The “Islamic city” or the “Middle Eastern city” has long been a subject of Orientalist scholarship “purporting to describe [its] essence” (Janet Abu Lughod). While the attribution of a timeless essence to cities of the Middle East in such scholarship has in turn been critiqued, this course seeks to nuance our understanding of selected urban spaces in the region, conceiving of Middle Eastern cities in the plural.

The case studies of cities the course covers are drawn from the Mashriq (the Eastern part of the Arab world) and the Maghreb (the Western part): Alexandria, Algiers, Beirut and Cairo. We will address them through theoretical, architectural, anthropological, sociological, cinematic and literary texts.

Some of the guiding questions will be: How does the dichotomy of country versus city vary in different contexts? How has the imprint of colonialism manifested differently in a range of urban settings and what factors underlie the difference? How have local actors debated to pre-modern and colonial heritage, and what are the stakes in heritage conservation? What tactics are available to the city-dweller to rewrite the urban text produced by colonialism? In what way has the movement of protest in the Arab world starting 2011 rewritten assumptions about gendered space, and redirected our attention to citizen agency in relation to the everyday? What alternative spaces might rural migrants carve out in a megalopolis, and how does official discourse view them?

As the sessions devoted to individual cities unfold, the course will throw conjoin particular urban spaces with a given area of inquiry: in Cairo, for example, we will address as low-income neighborhoods and rural migration, as well as the space of Tahrir; in Beirut, we will tackle the impact of the Lebanese Civil War on the capital and on gender (specifically masculinities and queerness); in Algiers, the role of women in the anti-colonial struggle; and in Alexandria, contested questions of heritage and conservation.
We launch into the course with a critical review two benchmark scholarly texts on the “Middle Eastern city,” and theoretical texts that will offer broader terms for the course discussions. This will be followed by sessions on the four Arab cities that serve as case studies.

**Goals of the course**
The course aims to explore, from a comparative perspective, a range of Arab cities, each with its own historical and cultural specificities, while introducing a variety of conceptual frameworks that can be applied to other urban orders.

In keeping with the goals of Cultures and Contexts, the course prepares you for life in an increasingly diversified and interconnected world. The course objectives are to acquaint you with societies understood as nationally, geographically, and culturally distinct from the dominant traditions of North America.

**Textbooks:** materials preceded by a single asterisk are to be purchased either at the NYU Bookstore or on Amazon (requesting texts from E-ZBorrow is also an option); materials preceded by two asterisks will be made available through NYU classes or are accessible through the Bobst library website.

**Assignments:** 1-**five papers:** the length and proportion of the grade allocated to these papers is incremental: you will be requested to write longer papers as the course unfolds and the grades will be higher for each. 2-**midterm exam 3-final exam**

**Grade breakdown:** 1-papers (50%); midterm exam (15%); final exam (25%); participation and attendance (10%)

**Deadlines**
Late papers will be penalized. If you have an emergency, please contact your RI before the due date.

**NB:** if changes are made to the syllabus, the updated version will be posted on the course page.

**Academic honesty**
NYU considers plagiarism to be a very serious offense. Plagiarism consists in presenting ideas and words without acknowledging their source and is an offense against academic integrity. Any of the following acts constitutes a crime of plagiarism:

- Using a phrase, sentence, or passage from another person’s work without quotation marks and attribution of the source.
- Paraphrasing words or ideas from another’s work without attribution.
- Reporting as your own research or knowledge any data or facts gathered or reported by another person.
- Submitting in your own name papers or reports completed by another.
- Submitting your own original work toward requirements in more than one class without the prior permission of the instructors.
Plagiarism can be avoided by taking careful notes while reading—whether printed text or online—and scrupulously citing the sources used in developing your paper. If you have any questions about citing sources, please ask your RI.

**Mon., Jan. 28**
Introduction to course topic and requirements

**Wed., Jan. 30**
Scholarship on pre-modern Middle Eastern cities and theoretical questions:

**Mon., Feb. 4**
Theoretical and critical frameworks I:
**Edward Said, Orientalism (extract)**

**Wed., Feb. 6**
Theoretical and critical frameworks II: **Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”; **Raymond Williams, The Country and the City

**Mon., Feb. 11**
Theoretical and critical frameworks III: **Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (extract); **Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project (extract)
NB: paper 1 (3 pages) responding to two of the critical and theoretical texts, due in recitation

**Wed., Feb. 13**
Cairo 1: **Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt (extract)**

**Mon., Feb. 18**
Holiday, Presidents’ Day

**Wed., Feb. 20**
Cairo 2: **Sabry Hafez, “The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Form and Narrative Transformation”; **Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, eds., Cairo Cosmopolitan (extracts)

**Mon., Feb. 25**
Cairo 3: **Naguib Mahfouz, Midaq Alley

**Wed., Feb. 27**
Cairo 4: Mahfouz, Midaq Alley cont. and introduction to *Ibrahim Aslan, The Heron
NB: 1-Students to watch Daoud Abd al-Sayyid’s Kit Kat (film adaptation of The Heron) at Avery Fisher Center 2-paper 2 (3 pages) on Mahfouz’s Midaq Alley in relation to Mitchell’s Colonising Egypt due in recitation

**Mon., Mar. 4**
Cairo 5: Aslan, The Heron, cont. and in-class screening of clips from Abd al-Sayyid’s Kit Kat, with discussion of cinematic adaptation
NB: 1-Students to watch Jehane Noujaim’s film The Square at Avery Fisher Center; film also available through Netflix

**Wed., Mar. 6**
Cairo 6: Screening of clips from Noujaim’s film The Square; **Linda Herrera, Revolution in the Age of Social Media** (extract)
NB: students to watch Giollo Pontecorvo’s film The Battle of Algiers at Avery Fisher Center or via livestreaming at: https://nyu.kanopy.com/welcome/video/battle-algiers-0

**Mon., Mar. 11**
Algiers 1: **Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth** (extract); **Zeynep Celik, Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule** (extract)

**Wed., Mar. 13**
Midterm exam in class

**Mon., March 18 and Wed. 20**
No classes: Spring Break

**Mon., Mar. 25**
Algiers 2: In-class screening and discussion of clips from Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers; and **Assia Djebar, Women of Algiers in their Apartments** (extract)
NB: students to watch of Assia Djebar’s film The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua at Avery Fisher Center

**Wed., Mar. 27**
Algiers 3: In-class screening and discussion of clips from Djebar’s The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua in relation to her Women of Algiers
NB: Visit to the Metropolitan Museum (1000 5th Ave., NY 10028)--free of charge with your NYU ID--to view orientalist paintings, to inform paper 3 (4 pages) on Algerian women as represented in Djebar’s texts, due in recitation

**Mon., Apr. 1**
Algiers 4: **Ranjan Khanna, Algeria Cuts** (extract: pp. 1-28 and pp. 103-169)

**Wed., Apr. 3**

**Mon., Apr. 8**
Alexandria 2: **Lucia Re, “Alexandria Revisited”** and introduction to *Edwar al-Kharrat, Girls of Alexandria*
NB: Students to watch Youssef Chahine's Alexandria... why? at Avery Fisher Center

**Wed., Apr. 10**
Alexandria 3: Al-Kharrat cont. and screening of clips and discussion of Youssef Chahine’s Alexandria... why?

Mon., Apr. 15

Wed., Apr. 17
Alexandria 5: **Beverley Butler, Return to Alexandria (extract)

Mon., Apr. 22
Alexandria 6: **Mohamed Gohar, Description of Alexandria and his TEDx talk, "Preserving our memories through sketches and drawings"; Robin Ostle, “Alexandria: A Mediterranean Cosmopolitan Center of Cultural Production”

NB: paper 4 (5 pages) due in recitation, either on urban sketching and heritage preservation or on some engagement with Arab culture in New York in light of course material (this could be an event attended at the cultural center Alwan for the Arts or visit to the Astoria neighborhood of Queens)

Wed., Apr. 24
Beirut 1: **Ghenwa Hayek, Beirut: Imagining the City (extract); and Ken Seigneurie, Standing by the Ruins (extract)

Mon., Apr. 29
Beirut 2: *Rashid Al-Daif, Dear Mr Kawabata

Wed., May 1
Beirut 3: Al-Daif, Dear Mr Kawabata cont. and **Samira Aghacy, Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967 (extract)

Mon., May 6
Beirut 4: *Hoda Barakat, The Stone of Laughter

NB: paper 5 (5 pages), offering a gendered reading of Al-Daif’s novel, in light of Aghacy’s discussion, due in recitation

Wed., May 8
Beirut 5: **Sofian Merabet, Queer Beirut (extract)

Mon., May 13
Last day of classes: open mic, students welcome to come to the podium and share insights gleaned from the course in relation to their own experiences living in New York or other cities

Final exam: TBA