



The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Syllabus

Little Ice Ages and Mighty Microbes: Environmental History and the Middle East - 38824

Last update 04-02-2025

HU Credits: 2

Degree/Cycle: 2nd degree (Master)

Responsible Department: Islamic & Middle East Stud.

Academic year: 0

Semester: 2nd Semester

Teaching Languages: English

Campus: Mt. Scopus

Course/Module Coordinator: Simon Wolfgang Fuchs

Coordinator Email: simonw.fuchs@mail.huji.ac.il

Coordinator Office Hours: Tuesday, 14:30-16:00

Teaching Staff:

Prof. Simon Fuchs

Course/Module description:

This course explores the recent environmental turn in the study of the Middle East and will highlight non-human actors as well as the role of water, plagues, and climatic shifts.

Course/Module aims:

Learn how to integrate Environmental History into the study of the Middle East and how it can complement/challenge more established approaches of intellectual/social/political history.

Learning outcomes - On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

- *Evaluate recent approaches to environmental history in the Middle East*
- *Reflect on the historical agency of non-human actors*
- *Show how the study of religious and political phenomena might be enriched by integrating the consideration of water, oil, and animals*
- *Trace long-term phenomena in the region*
- *Explain the unique (?) environmental setting of the Middle East*
- *Familiarize yourself with the necessary rethinking of approaches toward sources and archives in the context of environmental history*

Attendance requirements(%):

100

Teaching arrangement and method of instruction: Discussions, student-led presentations, group work and analysis of primary sources

Course/Module Content:

The inhabitants of premodern Egypt were far more closely connected to Iceland than they had ever imagined. The eruption of the Laki crater range in 1783 and 1784 had dramatic consequences for the Middle East. The level of the Nile fell noticeably, a subsequent severe drought lasted for the next twenty years. This development shows that environmental phenomena can easily take on global significance and have never stopped at national borders. Surprisingly, however, environmental history has so far been neglected in the study of the Middle East.

Most of the existing literature deals primarily with geography or biological “hard facts”. Only recently have historians begun to explore in depth the interaction between humans and the environment. From a historical point of view, certain climatic conditions frequently imposed specific limitations on local populations, but inhabitants of steppes, cities, deserts, and shorelines also had a decisive impact on their environment. In this seminar, we want to reflect on the extent to which we can understand animals, the wind, mud, or viruses as actors in history. What can we learn from such an approach about forms of political rule or military conflicts? What (religious) ideas did Middle Eastern societies develop while interacting with plants and the environment? What do we gain from dealing more intensively with dams, oil, and agricultural products? The focus of the selected literature in the seminar is on Middle Eastern societies from 1500 to the present day.

Required Reading:

- Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt. An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Alan Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree. The Ottoman Empire, Egypt & Environmental History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017)
- Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Nükhet Varlik, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World. The Ottoman Experience, 1347-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Toby Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)
- Richard Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)
- Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023)
- Faisal H. Husain, *Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021)
- Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019)
- Diane K. Davis and Edmund Burke, *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011)
- Jennifer L. Derr, *The Lived Nile Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019)
- Emily McKee, *Dwelling in conflict: Negev Landscapes and the Boundaries of Belonging* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019)

Additional Reading Material:

A more detailed syllabus with required and additional readings will be provided in class and will also be made available on Moodle.

Grading Scheme:

Written Exam % 60

Presentation / Poster Presentation / Lecture/ Seminar / Pro-seminar / Research proposal 20 %

Active Participation / Team Assignment 20 %

Additional information:

Please note that regular attendance is mandatory. Absences will result in a deduction from your grade. If a student accumulates more than three absences (excluding reserve duty and exceptional circumstances supported by documentation), they will be required to discontinue the course. Students are expected to come to the sessions prepared for discussion, having read the assigned material at home. Preparedness for the sessions is accompanied by uploading 2-3 discussion questions each week on the mandatory readings before class. The course cannot be completed without submitting these assignments on time.