Middle East Studies (MES) at Brown University promotes knowledge, understanding, and informed discussion about the Middle East, Islam, and Muslim societies through research, teaching, and public engagement.

MES focuses the passions and quest for knowledge of faculty and students interested in this region by building a cutting-edge research community, producing innovative programming, and offering an exciting array of courses and opportunities for undergraduate concentrators. Its goal is to integrate the Middle East into the DNA of Brown University through thematically-driven collaborative initiatives that tap into Brown's tradition of critical and engaged scholarship.

"Middle East Studies is as much a family as a department — the concentration lets you learn about the region's vast vibrant cultures, languages, histories, politics, art, and much more! Coming to Brown, I wasn't sure exactly what to study and MES truly allowed me to explore and find a passion. Now, trying to finish my senior thesis, I can't imagine not being a part of MES!"

-Alex Abuaita `18
about the concentration

Middle East Studies is an interdisciplinary concentration that draws upon courses offered by a distinguished core faculty in the humanities and the social sciences. Regardless of one’s passions – whether for history, religion, politics, culture, literature, modern media, philosophy or practices of everyday life – the Middle East is an ideal space for considering the diversity and complexity of the human experience.

The concentration requirements are designed to provide a broad knowledge of the region and comparative understanding of Middle Eastern cultures, societies, states, and economies.

1x middle east studies seminar: HiST 1968 approaches to the middle east

This seminar introduces students to the interdisciplinary field of Middle East Studies in the broader context of the history of area studies in the humanities and social sciences. This reading seminar will be offered every year by the Middle East Studies faculty. It is designed to create an intellectual community of Middle East concentrators and potential concentrators by introducing them to the core texts and debates in the field as well as to new research trajectories.

2x foundational courses

Students are required to take two foundational courses chosen from the courses listed below. Foundational courses are subject to change every year and students are required to consult the MES website for the most up-to-date listings.

MES  Cultures of the Contemporary Middle East
HiST  History of the Modern Middle East since 1918
HiST  Civilization, Empire, Nation: Competing Histories of the Middle East
RELS  The Imaginary Lives of Muslims
MES  Middle East Politics

2x electives

These are chosen from the list of courses that are cross-listed by Middle East Studies and approved by the concentration advisor. Students should acquire a good balance of courses in the humanities and social sciences, and between pre-modern (ancient and medieval) and modern and contemporary Middle East subject matters.
6x intermediate to advanced language seminars

Proficiency in at least one of the modern Middle Eastern languages is required and may be acquired at Brown and/or through study abroad. This entails competence in at least six semesters of Brown language coursework in one of the modern Middle Eastern languages such as Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Turkish, etc. Students will be required to have at least six semesters of studying a single language, two semesters of which may be counted towards the elective requirement.

Students who successfully test out of the language requirements are required to take an equivalent of six semesters of MES or MES cross-listed courses. These can include advanced reading and writing courses in their heritage language, courses in a different Middle Eastern language, or courses in a non-Middle Eastern language that they can use in a Capstone or Thesis project. Spanish for studies of Andalucía, or French for studying North Africa, for example.

1x capstone project

The Capstone can take one of two forms:
1. a paper of approximately 30 pages for an existing concentration-eligible (MES-coded or X-Listed) WRIT and Capstone designated course, undertaken with the permission of the instructor
2. OR an independent study or project (artistic, research, or otherwise) supervised by at least one faculty member for at least one semester under the MES 1970 designation.

honors requirements in middle east studies

As above, with the following differences:

a grades
To be eligible for Honors, students will have earned an ‘A’ in the majority of courses for the concentration.

1x honors thesis
Honors students will be required to take two semesters of independent study towards the Honors Thesis (MES 1970) with the thesis advisor(s). This is typically done during senior year, and will raise the total number of courses to 13.
HIST 1969C
Debates in Modern Middle East History
This seminar investigates some of the major problems and debates that have dominated contemporary discussions on the political, economic, and social history of the Middle East in the 19th and 20th centuries – including debates on colonialism and its legacies; problems associated with the postcolonial Middle Eastern states (authoritarianism and the role of the army; the position of minorities; directions of economic development; political Islam); and debates as to the causes and consequences of major events in modern Middle Eastern history, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Iranian Revolution; 9/11 and the Iraq invasion; and the Arab Spring.

MES 1993
Middle East Politics
This course offers an introduction to the historic and contemporary dynamics that have shaped domestic, regional, and international politics of the MENA region. Students will develop a deeper understanding of how and why issues relating to: colonialism and state formation, institutional configuration, authoritarianism and regime typologies, the politics of oil, social and economic development, external intervention, ethnic and sectarian strife, gender and women’s mobilization, political Islam, civic activism, and social movements such as the Arab uprisings, have drastically altered governance trajectories across the region since 2011. Students are expected to engage critically with weekly readings while also staying informed about current developments in the region.
undergraduate research travel awards
Grants are available to students concentrating in Middle East Studies to defray the costs of transportation for undergraduate research projects that focus on Middle East-related topics. Recent awards have supported student research into Palestinian Hebrew language acquisition via jail cell interactions and exposés of Yemeni life under drone warfare.

mes undergraduate fellowship
MES offers two competitive Undergraduate Fellowship awards of $1,000 each to rising seniors writing an Honors Thesis and concentrating in Middle East Studies. The fellows are expected to play an active role in MES life and assist with outreach efforts to current undergraduates and alumni.

undergraduate dug
The Middle East Studies Departmental Undergraduate Group (DUG) is run by MES concentrators to host events, plan activities, advise their peers, and build community both inside and outside of MES. The DUG Undergraduate Paper Series provides opportunities for MES concentrators to showcase their work with the Brown community. All students are welcome to attend and participate in the DUG regardless of concentration.

“I have been fortunate to find in Middle East Studies a rare combination of challenging academics and a remarkably warm and supportive community. MES has not just provided me with an excellent education, but also given me opportunities to meet incredible students and faculty who have become some of my closest friends and mentors.”

-Oona Cahill '18
highlighted events

Middle East Studies hosts a range of events featuring leading scholars, policymakers, and practitioners speaking on important issues in the study of Middle East and on developments in current events.

Recent highlights include a teach-in on the future of democracy in Turkey that drew wide audiences of students, faculty, and community members; critically acclaimed films from across the Middle East and North Africa; engaging luncheons and lectures on evolving geographies; scholarly symposiums such as the Mellon Sawyer Seminar series on Displacement as well as a Digital Humanities Project workshop on Digitizing Early Arabic Books.

The Coup, the Purge, and the Future of Democracy in Turkey: A Teach In
Sept. 15, 2016

Digitizing Early Arabic Printed Books: A Workshop
Oct. 21, 2016