
This seminar explores the major issues and debates in Saudi historiography as well as in studies on so-called “Wahhabi Islam.” We will read the works of historians of (Saudi) Arabian history from the past two centuries as well as working with primary sources which range from translated correspondence and epistles, British intelligence reports and Europeans' travelogues.

Much of our time with this material will be spent trying to identify the key aspects of the rise of the Al Saud (House of Saud), their relations with surrounding powers, such as the Ottoman Empire and British Empire, and the nature of their struggles with political rivals such as the Al Rashid and Hashemites. To give as much context as possible to these above discussions, the seminar will give a good deal of attention to the social and cultural history of Arabia from the 1700s-present, dealing with topics that include tribes, nomadism, rural-urban relations, and the importance of trade and pilgrimage.

An equally important component of the seminar will be the study of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the reform movement he inspired. We will read both primary and secondary sources on the biography, doctrines and activities of ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his later followers. We will explore the nature of the relationship between the Al Saud and this socioreligious movement.

The last part of the seminar will be devoted to an examination of key issues and problems in contemporary Saudi Arabia, such as the maintenance of the state, the rise of the petroleum age, and challenges to Saudi authority and legitimacy. We conclude this section by looking at the arguments and activities of ideologues, such as Juhayman al-Utaybi, Usama bin Laden, and al-Qaeda, who have presented major challenges to the sociopolitical order in Saudi Arabia.