

Revolutions from Above and Below

Turkey, Iran, and Egypt in Comparative Perspective with References to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

This six-week course examines the comparative dynamics of revolutionary transformation in three pivotal Middle Eastern states—Turkey, Iran, and Egypt—and uses the post-1945 experiences of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary to illuminate the conditions under which mass uprisings succeed or fail. Spanning the early twentieth century to the present, the course explores how revolutionary change has been driven sometimes by state elites attempting to remake society from above (Atatürk’s Turkey, Reza Shah’s Iran, Nasser’s Egypt) and sometimes by mass movements rising from below (the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, the Egyptian uprising of 2011, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, Poland’s Solidarity movement of 1980–81, and the revolutions of 1989).

The final two weeks turn from the classic cases to a comparative analysis of recent failed uprisings. Why did Iran’s Green Movement of 2009, its 2017–18 and 2019 protests, the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, and the 2026 uprising fail to topple the Islamic Republic? Why did Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout uprising during the Arab Spring fail, while Tunisia’s and Egypt’s, at least initially, did not? And what can these failures be understood to share with the suppressed Eastern European uprisings of 1956, 1968, and 1981—and how do those Cold War cases nonetheless illuminate the longer arc that culminated in the largely peaceful revolutions of 1989?

Working comparatively throughout, the course probes a set of fundamental questions: Why do some revolutions succeed where others fail? Under what conditions can authoritarian modernizers carry out durable change without provoking the very revolts they fear? Why have so many revolutions from above eventually produced revolutions from below—and what determines the character of those subsequent upheavals? How do international forces, military loyalty, elite cohesion, ideology, and economic structures shape revolutionary trajectories? Drawing on the work of Theda Skocpol, Crane Brinton, Charles Tilly, Jack Goldstone, Asef Bayat, Timothy Garton Ash, and others, we will develop a comparative analytical framework and apply it across the cases.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, participants will be able to:

- Identify and analyze the structural and contingent causes of revolutions from above and from below
- Compare the revolutionary trajectories of Turkey, Iran, and Egypt across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries
- Explain why Iran's recent uprisings—including the 2026 uprising—and Bahrain's 2011 uprising failed, drawing on the comparative lessons of Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, and Poland 1981
- Assess the long-term outcomes of revolutionary transformation, including democratization, authoritarian consolidation, and the rise of new forms of contention
- Develop an interdisciplinary framework for thinking about the conditions under which mass mobilization for fundamental political change can—and cannot—succeed

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

Week 1 — Conceptualizing Revolutions: From Above, From Below, and In Between

Definitions and typologies; classic and contemporary theories of revolution (Brinton, Skocpol, Tilly, Goldstone, Wolf); the place of elites, peasantries, urban classes, militaries, and the state; the analytical distinction between “revolution from above” and “revolution from below”; what makes a revolution “social,” “political,” or “merely” a coup.

Readings:

- “Revolution,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy — <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/revolution/>
- “Revolution,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/topic/revolution-politics>
- “Theories of revolution,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theories_of_revolution
- “Revolution from above,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolution_from_above
- “Social revolution,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_revolution
- Jack A. Goldstone, “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011,” Foreign Affairs — <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-04-14/understanding-revolutions-2011>
- Video: “Why Do Revolutions Happen?” Crash Course World History (YouTube)
- Video: “What Is a Revolution? Three Theories Compared” (TED-Ed, YouTube)
- Video: “Theda Skocpol on States and Social Revolutions” (lecture/interview, YouTube)

Week 2 — Turkey: Atatürk's Revolution from Above (1923–1938) and Its Long Shadow

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the War of Independence; Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the founding of the Republic; secularization, alphabet and dress reform, women's rights, education, and the

Kemalist project; the military as guardian of the revolution; the post-1980 unraveling of Kemalism and the rise of the AKP under Erdoğan; the limits and legacies of authoritarian modernization.

Readings:

- “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kemal-Ataturk>
- “Atatürk’s Reforms,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atat%C3%BCrk%27s_reforms
- “Kemalism,” Wikipedia — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kemalism>
- “History of the Republic of Türkiye,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Republic_of_T%C3%BCrkiye
- “Turkey’s century-long struggle between secularism and Islam,” The Conversation — <https://theconversation.com/topics/turkey>
- Soner Çağaptay, “The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey,” Washington Institute — <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>
- “Turkey at 100: A Century of Modernization,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder — <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder>
- Video: “End of Empire: Turkey,” Granada Television documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “Atatürk: Founder of Modern Turkey,” TRT World documentary (YouTube)

Week 3 — Iran: Pahlavi Modernization from Above (1925–1979) and the Islamic Revolution from Below (1978–79)

Reza Shah’s emulation of Atatürk and the building of the modern Iranian state; Mohammad Reza Shah’s White Revolution; the security state and the role of SAVAK; the political economy of oil; the rise of clerical, leftist, and Mosaddeqist opposition; the ideological currents of Khomeini and Shariati; the unraveling of the Pahlavi state and the founding of the Islamic Republic.

Readings:

- “Pahlavi Dynasty,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pahlavi-dynasty>
- “Reza Shah Pahlavi,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Reza-Shah-Pahlavi>
- “White Revolution,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Revolution
- “Iranian Revolution,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Revolution
- “Background and causes of the Iranian Revolution,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Background_and_causes_of_the_Iranian_Revolution
- “Ruhollah Khomeini,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini>
- “World Politics Explainer: the Iranian Revolution,” The Conversation — <https://theconversation.com/world-politics-explainer-the-iranian-revolution-100453>
- “Ideology and Iran’s Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World,” Tony Blair Institute — <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/ideology-and-irans-revolution-how-1979-changed-world>

- “1979: Iran and America,” Brookings Institution — <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/1979-iran-and-america/>
- Video: “End of Empire: Iran” — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhCgJElpQEQ>
- Video: “Iran and the West, Part 1: The Man Who Changed the World,” BBC — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfkqf_wWEsM

Week 4 — Egypt: Nasser’s Revolution from Above (1952) and the Arab Spring from Below (2011)

The Free Officers’ coup of 1952; land reform, Arab socialism, and the politics of pan-Arabism; Suez and the consolidation of Nasserism; Sadat’s reorientation toward the United States and the peace with Israel; Mubarak and the deep state; Tahrir Square and the eighteen days that toppled a regime; the brief Muslim Brotherhood presidency; the Sisi restoration and the return of authoritarian order.

Readings:

- “Gamal Abdel Nasser,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gamal-Abdel-Nasser>
- “Egyptian Revolution of 1952,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_revolution_of_1952
- “Free Officers Movement (Egypt),” Wikipedia — [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Officers_Movement_\(Egypt\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Officers_Movement_(Egypt))
- “Egyptian Revolution of 2011,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_revolution_of_2011
- “Tahrir Square,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tahrir-Square>
- “The Rise and Fall of Egypt’s Revolution,” Carnegie Endowment — <https://carnegieendowment.org>
- “Egypt Ten Years After the Uprising,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder — <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/egypts-arab-spring-uprising-and-aftermath>
- “Nasserism,” Wikipedia — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasserism>
- Video: “Nasser: The Last Arab,” Al Jazeera documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “Egypt: 10 Years After the Revolution,” Al Jazeera (YouTube)
- Video: “The Square” (2013, dir. Jehane Noujaim) — excerpts on YouTube

Week 5 — Why Uprisings Fail (and Sometimes Eventually Succeed): The Cold War Eastern European Cases

Building the comparative framework that the final week will apply to the recent Middle Eastern cases. We examine three suppressed Cold War uprisings—the Hungarian Revolution of October–November 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, and Poland’s Solidarity movement of 1980–81, crushed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s declaration of martial law in December 1981—and ask what they had in common: a regime willing to use overwhelming force, a hegemonic external patron prepared to intervene, an unbridgeable gap between reformist elites and street mobilization, and the absence of credible institutional alternatives. We then turn to the long road from these failures to the largely peaceful revolutions of 1989, asking what eventually changed: Gorbachev’s renunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, the erosion of regime self-confidence, the cumulative growth of civil society (Solidarity, the

Helsinki movement, the churches), and elite defection. The session ends with the analytical framework we will deploy in Week 6.

Readings:

- “Martial law in Poland,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martial_law_in_Poland
- “Wojciech Jaruzelski,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wojciech-Jaruzelski>
- “Hungarian Revolution of 1956,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Revolution_of_1956
- “Hungarian Revolution of 1956,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hungarian-Revolution-1956>
- “Prague Spring,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Spring
- “Prague Spring,” Encyclopedia Britannica — <https://www.britannica.com/event/Prague-Spring>
- “Revolutions of 1989,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutions_of_1989
- “Solidarity (Polish trade union),” Wikipedia — [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_\(Polish_trade_union\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_(Polish_trade_union))
- “Brezhnev Doctrine,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brezhnev_Doctrine
- “Solidarity at 40: Lessons from Poland’s peaceful revolution,” Wilson Center / Atlantic Council essay — <https://www.wilsoncenter.org>
- “1956: The Hungarian Revolution,” BBC History explainer — <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe>
- “What Hungary 1956 and Prague 1968 tell us about today,” The Conversation — <https://theconversation.com>
- Video: “The Lost World of Communism,” BBC three-part documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “Hungary 1956: The Uprising,” BBC / RFE-RL documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “Prague Spring 1968: When Hope Was Crushed,” DW Documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “1989: The Year That Changed the World,” PBS / BBC documentary (YouTube)

Week 6 — Applying the Framework: Why Iran’s Recent Uprisings (Including 2026) and Bahrain’s 2011 Uprising Failed

We apply last week’s comparative framework to the most consequential failed uprisings in the contemporary Middle East. On the Iranian side: the 2009 Green Movement protesting Ahmadinejad’s re-election; the late 2017–early 2018 economic protests that spread to small cities and provincial towns; the November 2019 “Bloody November” fuel-price protests; the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising sparked by the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini; and, most recently, the 2026 uprising and its suppression. On the Gulf side: Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout uprising of February–March 2011 and the Saudi-led intervention that crushed it. Why did none of these movements topple their regimes, even as comparable mobilizations in Tunisia and (initially) Egypt did? We test the East European lessons: the role of regime cohesion and the loyalty of the coercive apparatus (the IRGC, the Bahraini National Guard); the presence or absence of credible elite defections; the protection or abandonment provided by external patrons (the U.S. tilt away from Mubarak versus its acquiescence in Bahrain; Russia and China’s

support for Tehran); the depth and density of independent civil society; and the contingent role of leadership and tactics. We close by asking what the East European trajectory from 1956/68/81 to 1989 suggests about whether—and under what conditions—the Iranian and Bahraini cases could yet break differently.

Readings:

- “2009 Iranian presidential election protests” (Green Movement), Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Iranian_presidential_election_protests
- “Iranian Green Movement,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Green_Movement
- “2017–18 Iranian protests,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017%E2%80%9318_Iranian_protests
- “2019 Iranian protests” (Bloody November), Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%9320_Iranian_protests
- “Mahsa Amini protests” / “Woman, Life, Freedom,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahsa_Amini_protests
- “2026 Iranian protests” / uprising, Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iranian_protests [verify exact article title]
- “The 2026 Iranian Uprising and Its Suppression,” Council on Foreign Relations / Brookings explainer — <https://www.cfr.org/> / <https://www.brookings.edu> [substitute precise article URL]
- “What the 2026 Iran Uprising Tells Us About the Islamic Republic,” The Conversation — <https://theconversation.com> [substitute precise article URL]
- “Bahraini uprising of 2011,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahraini_uprising_of_2011
- “Pearl Roundabout,” Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearl_Roundabout
- “Why Iran’s Protests Have Failed—So Far,” Council on Foreign Relations — <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief>
- “The Anatomy of Iran’s 2022 Uprising,” United States Institute of Peace — <https://www.usip.org>
- “Bahrain: Five Years After the Uprising,” Human Rights Watch — <https://www.hrw.org/world-report>
- “The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Report (Bassiouni Report) — Summary” — <https://www.bici.org.bh/>
- “Why some Arab Spring uprisings succeeded, and others failed,” The Conversation — <https://theconversation.com>
- “Authoritarian Resilience: What the Middle East Can Learn from Eastern Europe (and Vice Versa),” Carnegie Endowment / Wilson Center — <https://carnegieendowment.org>
- Video: “Iran’s Green Movement: 10 Years Later,” PBS / BBC retrospective (YouTube)
- Video: “Iran’s Woman, Life, Freedom Movement Explained,” Vox / BBC News (YouTube)
- Video: “Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark,” Al Jazeera English documentary (YouTube)
- Video: “Iran 2026: Inside the Uprising,” BBC / Al Jazeera coverage (YouTube) [substitute preferred clip]