



UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI  
**L'ORIENTALE**

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

# **Explaining crisis beyond Chaos: the Middle East and North Africa in Global Change**

**XV Conference of the Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO)**

Naples, 22-24 June 2022

Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies, University of Naples  
'L'Orientale'

## **Call for Panels**

The contemporary Middle East and North Africa is often portrayed by the media and by academic literature as a region of disconcerting chaos. The idea of chaos is associated with the region's prolonged and seemingly unsolvable violent conflicts, but also with an assumed permanent state of anarchy, lack of uniformity, traumatic imbalances and instability, which apparently escape rational explanations and render the region exceptional in comparison to other areas of the world. Also, and somehow paradoxically, the idea of chaos fits well with a-historical and essentialist visions of the region's immutability. It is a widespread notion, for instance, that conflicts in the Middle East 'date back millennia' or are the product of 'ancient hatreds'. Current interpretations echo visions of the past, which can be well summarised by the notorious Latin adage *hic sunt leones*.

Unquestionable are, of course, the multiple and interrelated crises that marked the region's modern history and that have seemingly further escalated in the last decades. The Middle East and North Africa is arguably the epicentre of world emergencies and chronically war-prone. It is also one of the world regions with the highest unemployment rates, a land of growing inequalities and contested, but resilient authoritarianism. More recently, yet other dimensions of crisis have come to the fore, such as food and water scarcity, environmental disasters, migration and refugees' waves, pandemic and so forth.

However, with all its troubles (or for this very reason), the region is far from being immutable and does not follow a solitary path. On the contrary, yesterday as today, it contributes with its specificities to the twists and turns of world history, often as a forerunner of global dynamics.

Our assumption, as the Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO), is that social sciences and humanities can provide the tools to effectively explain the Middle East and North Africa in its complex crises, ensuing transformations and global connections, beyond a-historical and essentialist visions of inexplicable and inherent chaos. Moreover, the macro transformations of the region could not be fully appreciated without considering the role of social actors and without a full acknowledgement of the rich and often understudied bottom-up processes of change and popular creative contributions in terms of contention, negotiation and conflict.

Starting from these arguments and urging different theoretical approaches and scientific-disciplinary perspectives, the XV Conference of SeSaMO intends to reflect on the several dimensions and interrelations of the crises of the modern and contemporary Middle East and North Africa, involving both collective and individual aspects, as well as all spheres of life, be they political, social, economic, cultural or environmental.

The panels will be particularly encouraged to:

- Stimulate reflection on the idea of chaos vs. crisis from a theoretical point of view by focusing on the different analytical lenses used over the years to study the region's transformations. This could be done, for example, by discussing the different normative paradigms in the study of change (e.g. modernization, democratization, etc.) as they have been applied to the region and their effects; or by questioning and problematizing the understanding and framing of "crises" from within or from outside the region.

- Analyse and explain single or multiple dimensions of crisis affecting the region from different disciplinary perspectives (e.g. linguistic, literary, historical, sociological, juridical, anthropological, political, religious and area studies) and offer, where possible, a comparative view with other world regions. This could be achieved at the individual, collective, national or regional levels by focusing on one or more fields of inquiry. Analysis of the interrelations between different dimensions of crisis are encouraged. Examples could be, but are not limited to:

Growing inequalities, unemployment, fiscal crisis, corruption, etc.

Health /access to public health and social services

Environmental crisis, food & water scarcity, etc.

Social control, censorship and repression

Violence (state violence, armed conflicts, etc.)

Political representation, participation, regimes' legitimacy crisis

Identity politics, sectarianization

Migration, borders and mobility

- Analyse social actors and bottom-up processes of change. Protest movements in their various articulations had an important role in the contemporary history of the region and are today at the forefront in promoting instances of change at the local, national, regional or global level.

- Analyse how crisis and change are reflected in cultural and artistic production coming from the region. Cinema, comics, theatre, literature, etc., are just a few examples of the many fields of expression that artists, but also activists, circulate across the region often with a transnational perspective.

- Explore the complexity of the methodologies (empirical and theoretical) used over the years to investigate crisis and change by, for instance, discussing research in difficult contexts, research ethics, research funding, etc.

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**The deadline for panels' submissions is 23 December 2021.**

**Please submit panel proposals of no more than 1500 words including references using the FORMAT provided.**

**The call for papers for accepted panels will be issued in January 2022.**

**Main working languages of the conference are Italian, English and French**

**Submissions should be sent to: [sesamoconferenza@gmail.com](mailto:sesamoconferenza@gmail.com)**