NEST-GA 3002 Topics In Anthropology: War, Violence and Humanitarianism

The twentieth century was marked by violence that was unprecedented in form and scale and its legacies continue to affect the world we live in today. In this century we are in the midst of the war on terror, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the occupation of Palestine, the civil war in and Partition of Sudan, civil war and genocide in Congo, civil war in Syria, and we have witnessed Israel’s war against Lebanon and Gaza. The ubiquity of violence has also elicited demands that powerful states have a responsibility to protect innocent civilians, by force if necessary. However, do we know what war and violence are? How are sectarian conflicts and civil wars organized and produced? Are wars and violent conflicts symptomatic of primordial hatreds? How do armed combatants and unarmed civilians (often victims) experience war and violence? What is the relationship between state formation and violence? What is the relationship between history and violence? What is the relationship between modernity and violence? And, what relationship does violence have to modern conceptions of the human? Who or what is the “human” that is the target of humanitarian intervention? How do humanitarian practices such as the care of refugee populations shape our understanding of violence? In this seminar, we will explore these and other questions through a range of anthropological and historical studies on violence and humanitarianism that focus primarily, although not exclusively, on the Middle East.