TEACHING THE MIDDLE EAST:
THE PERSPECTIVES METHOD

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Why the Middle East Now?

"The Perspectives Method" was developed and taught successfully as a semester-long history elective for upper-level students at Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School in Michigan, but it could easily be adapted as a unit in a Global Studies or Modern History course at both the secondary and college levels. Despite the challenges, which we will address here, it is imperative that history departments in American secondary schools and colleges somehow include Middle East studies in their curriculum. Although students today are coming to adulthood during the "Age of Terror," they possess little understanding of the ideas and events involving the Middle East and its relationship with the United States. The questions of national security, culture, religion, and politics emanating from the 9/11 attacks, the longstanding geopolitical relevance of the region in terms of oil and other U.S. interests, and the current conflict in Iraq, all point to the growing significance of this region. Many of our students recall being at school when the hijacked airplanes struck on September 11, 2001, and many might go on to serve in the military or Foreign Service in the region. For this entire generation, which will come of age during what President George W. Bush defined as "a war on terror without end," relations between the Middle East and the West are life defining. As history educators, we must provide the tools with which students can approach the serious problems wrought in the Middle East-West relationship, which significantly impact our students' lives.[1]

The Perspectives Method: A New Approach

To educate this generation of students, we need to move beyond the classic approach to Middle East studies: the facts and figures synopsis concerning "What is Islam?" or an "Introduction to Arab Culture and its People." By using the Perspectives Method, which engages students directly at the nexus of Middle East-U.S. relations and focuses entirely on current conflicts—the War on Terror, the Iraq War, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict—educators can demystify the recent events that shape our world. Since all modern Middle East conflicts are rooted in the post-World War I dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the making of the modern Middle East, a brief introductory lesson outlines the crucial aspects of this early period. Additional background information can be introduced when it pertains to the necessary history of each unit or conflict. Being

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[1]Statistics as to the nature and extent to which Middle East Studies and subjects are taught at the secondary school level have not been reported.

centered in the present, and reaching back for historical context as needed, this approach engages students in "real time" historical study.

There are two key challenges in approaching Middle East subjects: providing students with course materials that accurately reflect the various sides of the conflicts and opening their minds to the complexity of the conflicts, as they recognize their own perspectives and those of others. Although these conflicts are multi-dimensional and complicated, unfortunately students often come to the classroom informed about current events and the history of the Middle East through a "sound bite" styled media. More troubling than the lack of depth in information is the high level of politicization of facts, which is further compromised by a low level of objectivity and scrutiny. With the United States involved in multiple theaters of war in the Middle East, even world-class media such as the *New York Times* have admitted major journalistic blunders.[2] Media coverage of these issues often produces in students a minimal understanding of the regional conflicts based on historically inaccurate information that can be characterized by such phenomena as propaganda, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Arab stereotyping, or ignorance of the complexity of international affairs. For this reason, curriculum on Middle East issues should take into account a variety of worldviews. This is achieved by shifting away from a classic textbook approach and instead combining films, primary historical documents, secondary sources from Arab, Arab-American, Israeli, and Western writers, Arab and American television clips, and current news and magazine articles.

Where Are the Facts? A Question of Perspective

Juxtaposing a variety of views on each historical topic circumvents the necessity to present one set of "textbook-style" historical facts. A student unfamiliar with the region once asked me, "I understand about perspective, but what about the facts? There must be a set of historical truths in black and white!" But particularly in the age of instant news, and with the predominance of modern media "spin," these conflicts are as much about competing information as they are about politics, ideology, or bombs. Underscoring the violence is a war of ideas. When it comes to controversial issues such as the Iraq War or the Arab-Israeli conflict, the "facts" vary depending on the source, even when events are captured on film. This was evidenced in 2004, when coalition forces hit a site in Western Iraq along the Syrian border, killing forty people, including several children. With live footage of the events and the subsequent burials, witnesses claimed that the attack had killed civilians at a wedding party, whereas the U.S. military claimed that the site was a smuggling operation for Arab foreign fighters fueling the

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[2]In a *mea culpa* after a review of hundreds of articles from the pre-Iraq War period, editors at *The Times* apologized for publishing numerous articles with misinformation based on evidence from pro-war advocates in Iraq, which were then corroborated by sources in the U.S. government who shared a pro-war stance. From the Editors, "The Times and Iraq," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2004.

insurgency. Although this was a current event with on-site video footage, still the "facts" were elusive and a matter of debate.

A more famous example of this phenomenon is the captured-on-camera death of the twelve-year old Palestinian boy, Mohamed al-Dura, who was killed in September 2000 in Gaza as he crouched behind his father during a gun battle.[3] This story, as a current event, which was filmed and broadcast around the world, is interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the perspective of the investigative media source, such as:

- Israeli soldiers purposely shot a civilian, Mohamed al-Dura.
- Israeli soldiers, under attack from Palestinian "snipers" or "gunmen" or "terrorists" or "demonstrators," accidentally shot Mohamed al-Dura.
- Palestinian "snipers" or "gunmen" shot Mohamed al-Dura.
- Mohamed al-Dura had taken part in a violent, stone-throwing demonstration, provoking Israeli soldiers prior to his death.
- Mohamed al-Dura had nothing to do with the demonstration and was a completely innocent bystander caught in the crossfire.
- Mohamed al-Dura was never killed, and the pictures and video are a hoax.

Reliable sources on both sides offered conflicting, instantaneous accounts of the event, even though al-Dura's death was captured live on celluloid. The varied reporting of this demonstrates the challenges of teaching Middle East issues, when looking for a single historical account of even recent events, let alone aspects of the conflict from one hundred years ago, of which there are no visual recordings. The solution is to examine a variety of sources representing a number of perspectives and interpretations of the events, through underlying questions that reflect the complexity of these issues. Rather than focusing on the question "What exactly happened?" we examine other relevant questions such as "How does al-Dura's death play out in the Arab media and how does that shape interpretations of the conflict in the Arab World?" or "What is the response by Israelis and how does the event influence world opinion about the conflict?" Shifting the emphasis away from a single, fixed historical narrative and toward a multi-faceted understanding better reflects the reality of these conflicts.

Benefits of the Perspectives Method

By rejecting a classic textbook approach to the subject, and instead incorporating various interpretations of historical events into the curriculum from both the Middle East and the West, teachers and students achieve the ability to

- understand the conflicts as multidimensional and dynamic rather than one-dimensional and static;
- explore together to find good questions, rather than answers, and seek multiple possibilities rather than one sharply defined solution;

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[3]James Fallows, "Who Shot Mohamed al-Dura?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1, 2003), 49.

- recognize personal biases or ideologies that influence perceptions of historical events;
- regard history as an imperfect and human, yet worthy, pursuit of the truth rather than a specific set of fixed facts;
- learn about the conflicts through the conflagration of ideas and interpretations, both within the class and within the sources of course material.

Successful curriculum enables students to acknowledge differences in perspective and develop an understanding that there are a number of ways that Middle East conflicts can be interpreted. As students exercise this ability, they become better equipped to investigate history in general with a far more balanced and informed approach and to interpret world events as they unfold around them.

The Methodology of Perspectives

There are three basic components of the Methodology of Perspectives: 1) student recognition of their own perspective; 2) course materials representing multiple perspectives; and 3) assessments and discussion that emphasize an understanding of various perspectives on the conflicts.

Step One: You and Your Perspective

During the first week of the course, students learn about the experiences that shape their own perspectives. This exercise assists students on two levels: First, students recognize the various prisms through which they and their classmates view Middle East subjects, and, second, students become aware of the various perceptions among the people of the Middle East and the United States concerning these conflicts. Students are provided with the following list of experiences to consider, which psychologist and communications specialist Deborah Flick outlines in her book, *From Debate to Dialogue*. These elements are the building blocks of personal perspective or what she calls "mind models" that actually filter the information, or in this case, historical data people receive:

- all prior experiences, both remembered and forgotten;
- immutable aspects of ourselves such as age, race, sex, and ethnicity;
- religious or spiritual beliefs;
- educational background;
- families, now and when we were growing up;
- images, dreams, and expectations of the future;
- career and job;
- hungers, wants, and desires;
- health conditions;
- socio-economic class, now and when we were growing up;
- sexual orientation;
- familiarity with other cultures;

- travel;
- significant life events, such as having children, losing a job, marriage or divorce, death and other losses, serious illness, winning the lottery, military service, etc.;
- cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values.[4]

Students also learn that these experiences shape perceptions by regulating:
- which input we take into account and input we disregard;
- how we evaluate our experience at any given moment as pleasant, unpleasant, neutral;
- what we choose to believe as fact or take on faith;
- what is important to us or center stage in our awareness;
- what we relegate to the background of our mental picture or consider less important;
- what we omit from our "picture frame" altogether;
- what assumptions or basic truths we hold; and
- what meanings or interpretations we give to our experiences and observations.[5]

Based on this information, students are given surveys as a self-study to evaluate their own biases. Appendix A provides a sampling of questions. After students respond to these questions, the class brainstorms for implications and meaning. From the wide spectrum of responses, students realize how varied their views are, just within the classroom. Through this activity students learn appropriate ways to engage in dialogue "for understanding" on issues in a way that is respectful toward their various outlooks rather than "debating to win."[6] To reinforce this idea, students with opposing views are grouped together and asked to script and act out a model dialogue on a Middle East issue for the class.

Step Two: Perspectives as Curriculum

As mentioned earlier, offering historical sources from a wide range of perspectives is a key to this approach. The use of a reader-style text is ideal for the Perspectives Method because it is by nature a compilation of many articles with

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[4]Deborah Flick, *From Debate to Dialogue: Using the Understanding Process to Transform Conversations* (Boulder, CO: Orchid Publications, 1998), 60.

[5]Ibid., 59.

[6]Ibid., 2–7.

opposing viewpoints.[7] Consulting an "Opposing Viewpoints" library database or news media with various ideological or editorial biases is another way to locate sources representing various perspectives. In this section, we will review two sample units. The first unit covers two lessons on media perspectives and Middle East conflicts through film and through news coverage. The second unit covers an actual Middle East conflict, in this case the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Media Perspectives in Film

Since the curriculum integrates many contemporary media sources, our first unit helps students recognize various patterns in media coverage of Middle East issues. This unit is a collection of television programs, films, websites, books, and articles.

Unit One: Media Perspectives in Films
Lesson #1: Representations of the Arab Middle East and the West through Film
Materials: Jack Shaheen, *Real Bad Arabs*, excerpts.
Film: *Three Kings,* big-budget Hollywood film starring George Clooney about a fictional escapade of U.S. soldiers into Iraq during the first Gulf War.
Assessment #1: Students write a film review of *Three Kings*, assessing the extent to which the stereotypes from the readings are depicted or challenged in the film.

Particularly for young people, the film industry plays a major role in influencing perceptions of the Middle East. For the first lesson, "Representations of the Arab Middle East and West through Film," students read the work of Jack Shaheen, an expert on anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes in Western media. Once acquainted with the prevalent Hollywood images of Arabs, students view *Three Kings*, a film that Shaheen deems as balanced and for which he acted as a consultant. Then students write a film review on *Three Kings*, addressing the extent to which the film depicts stereotypes or offers balanced, realistic views of Arabs and the West, as put forward by Shaheen. It is interesting to see students share their perceptions here, since film is such a subjective medium, and students process the characters and stereotypes through diverse perspectives.

Media Perspectives in the News
Lesson #2: Middle East Conflicts in the News
Materials: News articles from two media sources.
Exercise #1: Students assess the same current event through different media sources.
Materials: Internet access from worldwide media outlets.
Assessment #1: Students prepare journal-type entries on Middle East conflicts through a wide variety of media sources and perspectives.

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[7]See Appendix B for reader-type texts covering each conflict, which are widely published since interest in the Middle East surged post-9/11.

In what is perhaps the most crucial lesson in studying the conflicts, Lesson Two on "Middle East Conflicts in the News" familiarizes students with the methods by which various news media represent the same conflicts in the Middle East and in the West. Students learn to recognize biases here, which is important as news coverage has become increasingly critical to understanding of the conflicts in America and around the world. This significance was acknowledged when the U.S. government sponsored its own television network in the Middle East, "al-Hourra," to rival the influence of the Arab television networks al-Jazeerah and al-Arabiyya. For the 2005 Brookings Institution publication called *Reflections of Hearts and Minds: Media, Opinion and Identity in the Arab World*, political scientist Shibley Telhami has conducted a five-year study in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt on the effects of satellite media, the information revolution, and Arab identity. The polling indicates that U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab-Muslim world is the predominant force in shaping what are increasingly negative attitudes and opinions toward the U.S. Further, in the Arab world the main source of information concerning American foreign policy derives from editorial commentary in the Arab media, with up to sixty percent drawn specifically from the satellite news stations of al-Jazeerah and al-Arabiyyah.[8] Since the War on Terror and the Iraq War involve "winning the hearts and minds" of the Arab public, it is essential that the study of contemporary conflicts involve a careful look at the influence of Arab media.

In the United States the effect of media coverage of these conflicts is also significant. An October 2003 study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) examines the connection between Americans' misconceptions about the Iraq War and their choices in media and information sources. The survey centered on three commonly held misconceptions: 1) The United States found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, 2) there is a solid link between al-Qa'eda and Saddam Hussein's regime, and 3) world opinion supports the U.S.-led war against Iraq. This chart shows the correspondence between the percentage of Americans who believe one or more of these misconceptions and their main source of news:[9]

News Source Percentage of Viewers with 1+ Misconceptions:

FOX	80 percent
CBS	72 percent
ABC	61 percent

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[8]Shibley Telhami in conjunction with the Arab American Institute and Zogby International as reported on C-Span, July 23, 2004.

[9]Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Stefan Subias, Evan Lewis, and Phillip Warf, *Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War*" [reports on-line] (Baltimore: The PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll Program on International Policy Attitudes, October 2, 2003),
http: www.pipa.org/onlinereports/Iraq/Media_10_02_03_ Report.pdf.

NBC or CNN	55 percent
Print Media	47 percent
PBS-NPR	23 percent

The study also indicates that this correlation has real consequences for U.S. policy in the region, since a higher rate of misconceptions directly corresponds with a higher rate in public support for the Iraq War.[10]

To illustrate to students the profound effect of media and bias, students take part in an introductory exercise in which they are split into two groups, with each group given a different news article covering the same event. So, for example, one group will read a Fox News article and the other group an al-Jazeerah article covering the same U.S. military incursion into Baghdad the previous day. The students are asked to describe the circumstances based on the news account. Each group returns with drastically different stories formed out of the different word choices, facts, titles, and emphasis that each news source has used to portray the event. Students are then asked to put on one board the "facts" that both articles agree on and the differences on another board. This exercise can be brainstormed a variety of ways. For example, an interesting question to ask is who takes the blame in the article for the incursion and why.

Following this exercise, students are asked to keep a daily journal on a Middle East conflict, using media sources from around the world. In addition to a brief summary of the news piece, students are also asked to list the place of publication and political position or reputation of the media source. The final component of the journal is where students offer their own analysis about what the information in the news source says about the conflict and their coverage of the conflict. Journals are graded based on the variety of sources, perspectives, and journalistic media included in them and the level of thought put into the analysis of the source material.

While it is impossible to teach students everything about each conflict in a limited time, these exercises provide students the opportunity to interpret news information in a more sophisticated way, so that they will be better equipped to understand the conflicts as they unfold around them. This lesson also raises student awareness that they are actually living history.

The Controversial Conflict

Of the three conflicts covered in the course, perhaps the most controversial is the Arab-Israeli conflict, because of its ethno-religious undertones that sometimes evoke powerful emotions in students. This is our final unit in order that students have had time to establish trust, having practiced helpful classroom dialogue skills while approaching less incendiary topics. While the Arab-Israeli conflict might be the most

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[10]Ibid.

difficult to approach, it is the most significant because it is a recurring theme throughout the examination of the other conflicts. This connection between the conflicts is generally not as pronounced in the West, but as students see and hear reactions from the Arab Middle East, they understand that perceptions about every Middle East-West issue are informed by the Arab-Israeli struggle. The materials for this unit are as follows:

Final Unit: The Arab-Israeli Conflict
Lesson #1: Putting the Pieces Together
Documents (in sequence):
>   *Middle East and Islamic World Reader* (pp. 113–116 and 165–230)
>   Theodor Herzl, *Zionism: The Vision of an Eventual Jewish State* (1986)
>   Rashid Rida, *Pay Attention to Zionist Encroachment* (1898) and *Tiberias Warning of Zionist Colonization* (1910)
>   Sharif Husayn ibn Ali, *Desire for Arab Independence* (1915)
>   Sir Henry McMahon, *Qualifying British Pledges* (1915)
>   *The Sykes-Picot Agreement on Dividing Arab Lands* (1916)
>   Arthur James Balfour, *The Balfour Declaration: A Jewish Home in Palestine* (1917)
>   The General Syrian Congress, *Objections to Zionism and Western Imperialism* (1919)
>   *The Arab Response to the Proposed Partition of Palestine* (1938)
>   *The British Government's White Paper on Palestine* (1939)
>   *The Biltmore Program* (1942)
>   U.N. General Assembly, *The Partition Plan* (1947)
>   U.N. General Assembly, *Palestinian Right of Return Resolution #194* (1948)
>   The Israeli Knesset, *The Law of Return* (1950, 1954, and 1970)
>   Nizar Qabbani, *The Catastrophe of Arab Defeat* (1967)
>   PNC National Council, *The National Charter* (1964, 1968)
>   *UN Resolutions 242* (1967) and *338* (1973)
>   Yasir Arafat, *We Recognize Israel* (2004)
>   Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi, *The Meaning of the Intifada* (2001)
>   *Principles of a Peace Agreement*—Oslo, Norway (1993)
>   Ariel Sharon, *Program for Dealing with the Palestinians* (2000)
>   Marwan Barghouti, *Grassroots Leadership of the Second Intifada* (2001)
>   *The New York Times*, as provided by the U.S. Department of State
>   "*Proposal for the 'Final and Comprehensive Settlement' to the Middle East Conflict*" (5/1/2003)

Assessment #1: Essay-styled test on the reconstruction of the conflict through documents presented in class.

Lesson #2: Perspectives on the Arab-Israeli Conflict
Material: David Shipler, *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*, Chs. 5–8
Film: Justine Shapiro, B.Z. Goldberg, and Carlos Bolado, *Promises*
Assessment #2: Final Paper reviewing the characters' lives and perspectives in *Promises* in terms of the "images" outlined in the book.

Following a general overview of the conflict's history for students, this unit reconstructs the steps of this struggle through primary documents from the inception of the Zionist movement through the U.S.-backed Roadmap to Peace. These documents include primary documents from Arab, Jewish, British, and other international sources. By way of assessment, each student is assigned one of the documents on which to present a brief oral presentation to the class. This exercise gives students the knowledge and awareness of the competing claims to the territory, the rival political movements, and the involvement of the West in the conflict.

In keeping with the Perspectives Method, as a final paper students examine the stereotypes and cultural perceptions that shape the Arab-Israeli conflict. The documentary film *Promises*, shot in Jerusalem, chronicles the lives of seven Israeli and Palestinian children who reside within minutes of each other but live on different sides of the conflict. Ultimately, the film brings some of the youths together across checkpoints where bitterness and cultural barriers briefly give way to sharing and understanding. Students then read Part Two of David Shipler's Pulitzer Prize-winning comprehensive work *Arab and Jew* that examines the "images" underlying the conflict, with chapters entitled "The Violent, Craven Arab," "The Violent, Craven Jew," "The Primitive Exotic Arab," and "The Alien, Superior Jew." The final paper requires that students apply the tropes and themes explored in the book to the narratives of Israeli and Palestinian children in *Promises*.

Step Three: Finding Perspective
With the first two steps of the Perspectives Method, students are trained to recognize the role of perspective in the historical study of these conflicts and given course materials that reflect diverse perspectives on each issue. Again, the key here is not "conflict resolution" or developing a single historical narrative but rather instilling in students the ability to recognize the various prisms through which these events are unfolding, so that they can evaluate the historiography themselves. This is achieved in the end by providing various assessment opportunities that emphasize these skills such as reviews of articles, oral presentations, and position papers. At this stage of their lives, it is important to emphasize to students that they need not agree with a particular author, filmmaker, or group. However, students must demonstrate their ability to interpret those views and reflect this understanding in class discussion and written work for success in the course.

Conclusion

The necessity for educating the current generation of students about the Middle East-West relationship, which profoundly impacts the era in which they are coming of age, is overwhelming. The two great challenges of teaching the Middle East are finding materials that accurately address current conflicts and raising student awareness beyond ideological or conditioned perceptions to look for historical truth. By implementing the Perspectives Method, teachers can approach this history as the complex, multifaceted, and dynamic subject that it is. Including a wide variety of perspectives in the course materials, either as laid out in a reader or database or as assembled by the instructor, reflects the multifaceted nature of the conflicts and alleviates the need for instructors and students to adhere to one fixed historic truth. In basing the course on a methodology of perspectives and delving immediately into the current conflicts, the two greatest challenges in teaching the Middle East are turned to the advantage of the students and the instructor as they explore this complex and significant area of history and the world.

Appendix A: Excerpt from Personal Perspectives Questionnaire

From this list, which aspects of your life shape your perspective on the Middle East?

Liberal parents who encourage questioning things
Having international parents who provide world view
My value system that is anti-imperialist
Parents' views (but not completely)
9/11
How Israel is affected by the Middle East
Living in Lebanon during war with Israel
Being Jewish
Iraqi War parents
Islam first-hand experience visiting overseas
Living in the Middle East and other places
Republican conservative position
Core values
Middle Eastern friends
Ethnic background
Atheism
Futility of religious conflicts
Lack of education on the Middle East
Nazi persecution in family history
Visiting Israel
Family in the IDF
Upbringing in China
Belief in U.S. as country of opportunity/freedom/democracy

What is your main source of information about Middle East-West conflicts?
> Family
> *New York Times*
> National Public radio
> News
> Friends
> School
> Both sides of the news
> Native Country
> *Houston Chronicle*
> CNN
> AP
> *Jerusalem Post*
> Books
> International Relations Summer Conference
> People who claim they know about things which might not necessarily be true

What is the last book/article you read on the subject?
> *New York Times*
> Don't trust either books or articles
> The paper once in awhile
> *Bin Laden*
> Book on Hizb'allah
> *Qur'an*
> *Houston Chronicle* article
> *The Case for Israel*
> *Sword & the Olive Branch*
> UN: Conference transcripts on Palestinian Civil Society
> *Terrorism*

Appendix B - Readers Offering Perspectives

Laquer, Walter, Barry Rubin, and Barry M. Rubin, eds. *The Israeli-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict.* 6th ed. New York: Penguin, 2001.

Sifry, Micah L., and Christopher Serf, eds. *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions.* New York: Touchstone, 2003.

Gettleman, Marion E., and Stuart Schaar, eds. *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader.* New York: Grove Press, 2003.