

Getting Perspectives

What Teaching the Middle East Taught Me About Global Education

BY HOLLY ARIDA

When students ask me about what life was like when I lived in Saudi Arabia with my family during middle school, I avoid sharing anecdotes about local culture that can collapse the Arab World into a single story that forever shapes their conception of the Middle East. Instead, I like to tell them about an incident that is very much connected to why I am in the classroom teaching them about the Middle East in the first place.

I had just arrived in Saudi at 13, and, since my mother was in the States, I accompanied my father to a dinner party where a cosmopolitan, savvy gathering of American ex-pats, Europeans, and Arabs from surrounding countries were discussing politics over Lebanese food. The backdrop was 1983, two years after the Hostage Crisis in Iran, which had been daily news on American television, and during the nearby Lebanese civil war, in which U.S. Marine barracks had been bombed and Americans abducted in Beirut.

During dinner, the conversation turned to American involvement in the region, and I, feeling fully informed by American news coverage of these traumatic events, decided to interject my opinion boldly into the conversation with a diatribe that I quickly learned was one-sided and ignorant. My tirade did not reflect knowledge

about the terror and oppression that Iranis experienced at the hands of the American-trained Spivak, the Shah's secret police, or the ineptitude of the American-backed Shah, which accounted in large part for the revolution and hostility toward America. In fact, I did not know anything about the Iranis except for the crowds of angry and hysterical revolutionaries burning effigies of President Carter and the American flag that I had seen on television. For that matter, I was completely unaware of the complexities of the Lebanese civil war and, apparently, so were the U.S. Marines whose role as peacekeepers had been locally interpreted as siding with a particular Lebanese faction and militia. I knew something was awry when as I proclaimed to the dinner crowd the good intentions and innocence of Americans in the Middle East, and went on about fanatics and despots in the region, the room stopped and everyone just stared at me. A family friend explained that there was more to the story, which everyone in the room knew but me.

Why do I teach the Middle East? I don't want one of my students to be the only person in the room that doesn't know the other side of the story. I knew that I never wanted to be caught so unaware of the complexities of the world around me again, and I don't want my students to be either.

There is more to the story, and with

our students growing up in what columnist Thomas Friedman describes as a "flatter" world in which global understanding is no longer a choice but a necessity, building an understanding of the relationship between the Middle East and the West offers larger lessons for all of us who educate students in independent schools to become, in the words of Bruce Shaw, head of Shady Hill School (Massachusetts) and former NAIS board chair, "compassionate, informed citizens of the world." It is no longer a question of *whether*, but a question of *how* we provide students with the awareness that there is more to the story. In the broader sense, global vision is a growing imperative for the sustainability of our schools, but is also a great necessity to our students, for whom the ability to navigate the future with a more complex understanding of the world may be their greatest asset.

I have learned a lot about global education from my experiences developing a system called the Perspectives Method to teach a junior- and senior-level elective course entitled "Middle East Meets West: Politics, Policies, and Perspectives" at Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School (Michigan). Teaching students in the post-9/11 era about the politics and policies in the relationship between the Middle East and the West provides several lessons for the broader agenda of preparing students for an in-

creasingly global world. Through my curriculum, I have devised a way to create an opening for students to take a balanced approach to learning about the conflicts that so impact their lives: the War on Terror, the Iraq War, and the Arab–Israeli Conflict. For students growing up during what I call “The Age of Terror,” this is not an easy sell. With students who come to the classroom with fixed opinions and ideologies, but without much knowledge, I often have to “unteach” as much as I have to teach. For apathetic students, there is a different challenge: I have to draw their interest to a seemingly far away region through a wall of disinterest or disconnection. As difficult as this can be, I’ve recognized a few important trends among our students:

- Young people feel helpless in trying to understand global issues, but are generally eager to open their minds.
- In the Information Age, students have access to an overwhelming number of resources, and require our guidance to process this material.
- Bringing the world — even a difficult region like the Middle East — through the classroom door can be done, but it requires winning students’ hearts and minds.

Many independent school students are sophisticated thinkers and well traveled; however, after taking my course, students often remark that they feel empowered for the first time by their ability to question and analyze a variety of points of view before they draw conclusions. I don’t say this to brag, but to highlight an important point: that students who have learned to value diversity of opinion understand the complexity of human life better and feel confident to engage in the questions of their time.

Winning the Hearts

At a think-tank conference I attended in 2003, Eric Davis, the director of Rutgers Center for Middle Eastern Studies, asserted, “The most necessary

ingredient to successfully understanding regional studies, particularly with regard to the Arab–Muslim World, is... empathy.” But how, in post-9/11 America, do you engender in students the capacity to vicariously experience the thoughts, feelings, and impulses of an Arab Muslim? In order to teach my students about this “other” world, I have to humanize the people of the Middle East first. To do this, I surround students with voices from all sides of the issues and ask them to make sense of these various perspectives.

Winning students’ hearts requires that students recognize their own perspective on Middle East issues first, which involves a process of teaching and “unteaching.” Before we ever look at the substance of the conflicts, I raise awareness in students about the forces that shape their own perspective. This means, as a first step, breaking down the stereotypes and prejudices that we all have.

Hearing young Arabs in a documentary talk about how they feel when they see Arabs portrayed as “camel jockey terrorists” in American cinema has a profound effect on my students, who for the first time consider the insidious and negative depiction of Arabs in American pop culture. It’s eye opening for many students to learn about the lack of “Real Arabs” in American television and film, as noted in Jack Shaheen’s seminal work, *Reel Bad Arabs*, and then analyze popular films for the use of stereotypes. Similarly, we study the anti-Semitic cartoons in the Arab Press as well as look at the way Arabs sometimes view the West through images that Hollywood projects of American culture to the rest of the world. For many students, this is an epiphany; they realize how the barrage of images that they have seen since Disney has shaped their perceptions of the Middle East, and how people, on the other side of the world, might view Americans based on similar misperceptions. In this way, students recognize their own perspectives and those of others.

The next phase to winning students’ hearts through empathy requires pro-

viding students with course materials that accurately reflect the various sides of the conflicts. Students cannot fully penetrate the world of “the other” without hearing the voices of “the other.” Although these conflicts are multi-dimensional and complicated, students often come to the classroom informed about current events and the history of the Middle East through the sound-byte obsessed 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.¹ The 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, curricula on Middle East issues must take into account a variety of worldviews. This is achieved by shifting away from a classical 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.

Winning the hearts by exposing students to a world of voices humanizes the conflicts and brings empathy and understanding to the classroom.

Winning the Minds

The “Perspectives Method” for teaching the relationship between the Middle East and West, has three basic components: (1) student recognition of the role of perspective; (2) course materials representing multiple perspectives; and (3) assessments and discussion that emphasize an understanding of various perspectives on the conflicts. This method could, in fact, provide teachers with an effective means to

explore any number of global issues with their students. The Perspectives Method results in a balanced and comprehensive approach to the conflicts and a sense of ownership and connection on the part of students to global issues. Winning the minds is not about putting forward my own analysis or a single view, but rather about empowering students to seek out answers from various sources themselves.

During the first week of the course, students learn about the experiences that shape their own perspectives and the way they think about Middle East issues. Students recognize the various prisms through which they and their classmates view Middle East subjects. I provide students with a list of experiences outlined by psychologist and communications specialist Deborah Flick in her book, *From Debate to Dialogue*. These elements, including things like age, race, sex, ethnicity, religion, education, and income level, as well as exposure to other countries, ways of life, and modes of thinking are the building blocks of personal perspective or what she calls “mind models.”² These “mind models” affect the way information is processed in the brain as it comes to us. What do we accept on faith and what does our mind block out because the information does not correspond with what we already know?³ As students realize how their own perceptions are influenced by their life experiences, they also understand that the information and sources provided to them are also shaped by the perspectives of the authors and publishers, as well as by the country or culture in which the information is being published. Interestingly, I recently learned from a teacher at a small international boarding school in Lebanon that her students’ political views have actually been shaped by the predominance of American culture all over the world.

The next step of the perspectives method incorporates multiple sources of information because opening minds means moving away from the “fixed

knowledge” model and preparing students to become media savvy and capable of navigating world news and discerning information. Juxtaposing a variety of views on each historical topic circumvents the need 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!” Before students examine the conflicts, I provide them with some basic knowledge of the making of the modern Middle East, using articles that deal with the World War I and post-Ottoman period, when France and Britain carved out boundaries and spheres of influence. We watch excerpts from *Lawrence of Arabia*, which convey to students the *zeitgeist*, as well as the stereotypical Western depictions of the Arab World. Students learn that, as British and French influence in the region waned and the U.S. acceded as a world power, America took a wider political and military role in the Middle East. However, it should be noted that even this “factual” background information is subject to the Perspective Method, since historians, like journalists, offer disputed accounts.

As we delve directly into each of the three current conflicts, we apply earlier history as needed. But for each unit, the historical background remains in dispute. In looking to the War on Terror, for example, basic Cold War history is needed to understand how Afghanistan moves from a Soviet satellite to a training camp for bin Laden’s al-Qa’eda. Some accounts blame the CIA while others blame an overall “Islamic discontent” with being left behind modernity, better known as the “clash of civilizations” view. Similarly, it is nearly impossible to find an account of the formation of Israel that is considered “factual” by all sides of the conflict. For background on the Arab–Israeli conflict, students read the *Wikipedia* online historical overview that actually lists a caption declaring the account “disputed” and then, the students come up with their

own questions to do oral presentations, for which they need to use both Palestinian and Israeli sources. So, for example, a student will interpret the 1948 War, which for Jews is a glorious moment of Israeli Independence, but for Palestinians is known as al-Naqba or “the catastrophe.” Here, again, the same point in history can have starkly different interpretations. Where are the facts? I am not able to offer students a single account or set of truths about Middle East history — only the knowledge that there are multiple stories here and the ability to find and assess them.

Although ample news and information from around the world are available to students via the Internet, students need to be trained in how to synthesize and discern this information. Particularly in the age of instant news, and with the predominance of modern media “spin,” conflicts are as much about competing information as they are about politics, ideology, or weaponry. 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 the events are captured on film. A famous example of this phenomenon is the captured-on-camera death of the 12-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.⁴ 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. Among the interpretations are the following:

- 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 dem-

onstration, 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.

Seemingly reliable sources on all sides offered conflicting accounts of this event, even though al-Dura's death was captured live on celluloid. This varied reporting demonstrates the challenges of teaching Middle East issues, when looking for a single historical account of even recent events, let alone aspects of the conflicts from one hundred years ago, for 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, with 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 multifaceted understanding better reflects the reality of these conflicts.

A recent controversy involving the West and the Arab World illustrates how curriculum is built to incorporate all three elements of this approach, including the final step of the Perspectives Method, which involves assessing students on their ability to process various perspectives on the conflicts. During February 2006, the world was riveted by the story of angry and violent reactions on the part of some Muslims to cartoons caricaturing the Prophet Muhammad that had been printed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* during September 2005. The underlying question that surfaced in the media is whether this incident

was an overreaction on the part of a small minority of Muslims to a deliberate defaming of a revered religious figure, or rather, a demonstration of stereotypic Muslim intolerance of the cartoonists' legitimate expression of free speech, which called attention to self-censorship in the West in the face of Muslim intimidation. The goal of the curriculum here is not to offer students a definitive answer to this question, but rather to guide them to understand these two juxtaposed interpretations and where their own views fall along the spectrum of opinion. To accomplish this, students must realize the role of perspective.

In reviewing over 100 articles on this topic, I found that there was a myriad of explanations, making it quite easy to select articles with opposing views. I split the class into three groups and introduced the lesson by giving each group a different version of the story: an American liberal paper denouncing the "overreaction" to the cartoons as evidence of intolerance toward secular values, an Arab daily referring to the denunciation of the Prophet as evidence of rejection and provocation by the West, and an online interview from an Arab-European scholar who calls for the moderates on both sides to turn up the volume over extremists. Each student group had to analyze its article by attending to language, perspective, and very specifically the question of "who is to blame for the crisis?"

When we later brainstormed as a class, students realized that each group gave an entirely different version of the story based on the perspective of its media source. I also assigned students to create a daily journal on the Danish cartoon crisis, in which they needed to analyze five sources from around the world and identify the perspective of each source. Then students presented their findings and provided discussion questions for the class. While the Internet has seemingly opened up a world of information to our students, journaling trains them to question the validity and political position of the source, produce a summary of each

article and, finally, analyze the piece within the broader context of the crisis. This is a useful lesson about the power of perspective on information and perception. This model first engenders student awareness of perspectives and fosters opportunities for the students to conduct their own research and seek out and identify various perspectives on their own. Finally, students lead class discussion, so that this story, in a very real sense, becomes their story.

This Is Your Story

To win the hearts and minds of students means to have them make a personal connection to global issues. Ultimately, for students to engage with these issues for a lesson, a semester, or a lifetime, they need to own their learning experience. This is why instructors do not need to be experts to teach global issues; they just need to be engaged in questioning the events unfolding around them. I refuse to be the "sage on the stage," because the goal here is for students to see themselves as part of this story, which they actually are. I call on them to gather, process, and present various perspectives on Middle East–West issues because, as global citizens, they are going to be called upon to answer the questions of tomorrow. By integrating various interpretations of historical events into the curriculum from both the Middle East and the West, 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;
- 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, from the course ma-

terial, their peers, and the sources they find on their own.

Most importantly, by gaining the confidence and skills to navigate Middle East conflicts, students realize their role in the story as they acquire the tools for future engagement with global issues. This region is very prominent in the foreign and domestic affairs of this country, yet students know so little about it. Educating students about the Middle East through the perspectives method trains students to think outside of themselves and exposes them to a world-view about the most difficult of places. If independent schools can educate students to make sense of the Middle East, students can use the skills and savvy to make sense of other global issues through a far more balanced and informed approach.

Providing global vision to our students is among the greatest gifts of an independent school education; a global vision will sustain our students and sustain our schools. Serious political and economic matters such as diminishing oil resources, nuclear proliferation, and the rise of the global economy, combined with unprecedented media access, require that students be more capable of processing information in order to look at these issues carefully and collaborate with others around the world to solve these problems.

Holly Arida teaches history at Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School (Michigan).

1 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." *New York Times*. 26 May 2004.

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

3 Ibid., 59.

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