

**Article: “Byzantine Politics: Using Simulations to Make Sense of the Middle East”**

**Author: Beth K. Dougherty**

**Issue: Apr. 2003**

**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***



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# Byzantine Politics: Using Simulations to Make Sense of the Middle East

Beth K. Dougherty, *Beloit College*

In a recent session of my introductory International Politics course, I used several political cartoons depicting the late Ayatollah Khomeini. I casually asked if anyone knew who the cartoons depicted, assuming *everyone* would recognize the Ayatollah. I was shocked and dismayed to discover that of 32 students, only three had even the vaguest idea of who the Ayatollah was! The Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, crowds chanting “Death to America”—none of these things resonated with my students, most of whom were born after the hostages were freed.

This incident highlights some of the lessons I have learned while teaching Middle East politics over the past eight years. Students lack a sense of urgency about the region, and are put off by the seemingly incomprehensible jumble of people, wars, and acronyms. Such attitudes are not (sadly) merely limited to the Middle East. Recent survey data have shown that political interest among entering college students reached a record low in 1998 (Mann 1999). Very few freshman (26%) believed “keeping up to date with political affairs” is a very important life goal, and even fewer (14%) reported discussing politics in the past year.

In an effort to combat student apathy and lack of knowledge about the Middle East, I designed two courses (“Politics of West Asia” and “The Arab-Israeli Conflict”) around participation-intensive, interactive exercises. I now also use this format in courses on the United Nations, human rights, and African international relations. I employ three different types of assignments: structured debates, role-play simulations, and discussions of novels and films/documentaries.

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**Beth K. Dougherty** is associate professor of political science and Manger Professor of International Relations at Beloit College, where she received the 1999 Underkoffler Excellence in Teaching Award. She is also the recipient of the 2001 Rowman and Littlefield Award for Innovative Teaching in Political Science. The chair of the interdisciplinary International Relations major, she teaches courses on the Middle East, Africa, nationalism and ethnic conflict, human rights, and the United Nations. Her email is [doughert@beloit.edu](mailto:doughert@beloit.edu).

## The Exercises

“Politics of West Asia,” which covers the region from Turkey to Afghanistan with an emphasis on the Persian Gulf, requires five assignments. Each exercise is scheduled for one or two 50-minute blocs. I conduct three simulations from among the following: a meeting of concerned states and organizations to discuss the route of a Caspian Sea oil pipeline; a recreation of the 1988 Geneva Negotiations between Iran and Iraq; a fictitious meeting in August 1990 to decide how to deal with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait; and an international conference on the future status of Iraqi Kurdistan. I also supervise two structured debates around relevant questions such as: Should sanctions be lifted against Iraq? Should the US and Iran seek a rapprochement? Should Turkey join the European Union? How should the various actors deal with Iran and Iraq? For the simulations students write six-eight page briefing papers and for the debates they write five-page editorials.

“The Arab-Israeli Conflict Course” requires five assignments. The heart of the course is a scheduled week-long simulation of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The class divides into two delegations, with each student responsible for writing a 12-page research paper on the position of their delegation on one of the five final status issues: statehood/borders, Jerusalem, water, settlements, and refugees. In the days prior to the simulation, I lecture on each of these issues in turn. The remaining assignments require students to write five-page papers in preparation for that day’s activity: a PLO meeting, circa 1972, where teams represent various Palestinian factions and discuss ideology, strategy and tactics; a conference to assess the Camp David Accord 20 years on and another to discuss the Oslo Accord; and a meeting of Israeli foreign policy advisors to discuss Israel’s current relations with its neighbor states.

At least two weeks prior to each simulation exercise, I present students with a list of the potential players and distribute a short agenda. Students choose their roles and I field any questions the students have about the simulations. After each exercise I hand out an

assessment form, which students complete on a voluntary basis; these assessments and the course evaluation forms provide the data for this paper.

Grades are divided into two parts: the papers each receive a grade, and the performance in the role plays and structured discussions make up the bulk of the participation grade. I chose to have two separate grades for several reasons. Writing papers would keep students honest about preparing for the in-class sessions; I did not want students to get the impression that they could bluff their way through the exercises. The papers would help students develop coherent and organized positions *before* the simulations took place. Furthermore, I hoped that having a written set of notes available during the exercises would give shy or novice students more confidence in actively taking part. Finally, I expected that handling the same information in a variety of ways—researching, writing, verbalizing—would increase students’ retention.

There were no logistical difficulties in staging the simulations: the West Asia course averages 10–12 students, and the Arab-Israeli course averages 18–22. The format can easily be adapted for larger groups. In negotiations with only two parties, students can be divided into delegations of between two-four members, and several simulations can be run at once. When students played as a team, each student wrote a paper for a grade but received the same participation score. In negotiations with multiple parties, two students can be assigned to each delegation and one simulation conducted, or multiple simulations can be run with one-person delegations. In multi-party talks, develop a list of the essential players who must be represented as well as second string players who can be introduced to fit the number of students. After a role play simulation, schedule class time for a debriefing session, especially if multiple groups role-played simultaneously. Debates can be arranged along similar lines; small classes can stay in a committee of the whole, while larger groups can break into units of at least six people. Regardless of the format, each student should give an opening statement summarizing their position before open debate commences.

## Goals

Simulations and debates are often viewed as “just playing games” by those unfamiliar with such techniques. Although often fun, interactive exercises are not frivolous. Especially when covering unfamiliar and/or controversial material, active learning is both effective and necessary (Merryfield and Remy 1995). In designing an interactive course, I had a number of broad practical and pedagogical goals.

### *1. To develop and enhance practical skills in public speaking, writing, and group cooperation*

#### *\*public speaking*

Students often claim to want more discussion in class, yet I have consistently found it difficult to generate genuine debate on current international issues. Even when faced with a direct question—What should U.S. policy be towards China?—students shy away from taking strong stands and are even less comfortable challenging those whose views differ from their own. Conversations with several of my classes produced two main explanations for the reticence to engage in active exchanges. First, many students cited a lack of knowledge; they did not feel as if they knew enough to make a judgment. Second, students did not feel comfortable challenging others because “all opinions are equally valid” or because they wished to avoid “choosing sides.” Another likely contributing factor is students’ declining interest in politics in general and their limited experience in discussing politics in high school.

Simulations and structured class debates meet these problems head-on. Students are given a situation or question *in advance* of class discussions and asked to research it. This equips them with a knowledge base which should increase their confidence in presenting their position. By assigning them a player or forcing them to choose a side, students learn to construct strong arguments, and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of opposing positions in the heat of debate. As they listen and respond to their peers, they learn that discussing politics isn’t necessarily about arguing with one another, but can be an instructive exchange of differing and deeply held perspectives.

#### *\*writing skills*

Simulations and debates offer opportunities to sharpen writing skills. In

particular, I hoped the short page limits and different formats would teach students to construct coherent, tightly organized, and concisely argued positions. In today’s job market (an all too frequent preoccupation of students), writing cogent memos and papers is a valuable skill. In the process of writing short, persuasive pieces and debating them, students discover the difference between compelling arguments and weak arguments, learn to focus their ideas and support them with the strongest evidence available, and to develop a hierarchy of criteria by which to judge competing positions.

#### *\*group skills*

Finally, interactive techniques by their very nature help build group skills. For the simulations to go well, students must learn to effectively coordinate, cooperate, and communicate in a group setting. For some, this is a first-hand lesson in the creation of public goods and the free-rider problem. They learn *from one another* during the exercise; each student knows a specific aspect of the situation and must rely on others to get additional information and alternative perspectives. In the give-and-take of the discussions, students can only advance the agenda by listening to what others say and then responding to those points. Simulations and debates give students opportunities to get to know one another and to develop a spirit of camaraderie which can otherwise be absent, especially in larger classes.

### *2. To develop critical thinking skills, increase understanding of the mechanisms of international politics, examine multiple perspectives, and generate enthusiasm*

#### *\*critical thinking*

Simulations and debates allow students to “learn by doing.” Such active learning approaches “help students retain information for longer periods of time” (Smith and Boyer 1996). Instead of a one-way flow of information from professor to passive, note-taking student, students become active participants. This two-way flow of information allows stu-

dents to put course concepts and material into their own words. Memorization might get a student through an opening statement, but it will not suffice for the rigors of an open-ended debate, where “students must make decisions, solve problems, and react to the results of their decisions” (McKeachie 1986). This pushes students *to think*, critically, creatively, and synthetically. Moreover,

a recent study of political science majors at private liberal arts colleges found that one-third of female students preferred a learning style that emphasized “hands-on” experiences such as simulations and case studies (Fox and Ronkowski 1997). Given that many schools have markedly more women than men in the student body, it makes sense to introduce techniques more likely to meet their learning needs.

#### *\*increase understanding*

An interactive exercise gives students first-hand insights into the complexities and nuances of international politics. Simulations and debates allow students to wrestle with the key concepts/activities in international politics: foreign-policy decision-making; definitions and hierarchies of interests and objectives; negotiating and diplomacy; managing power differentials; assessing the interests, motivations, and power of other actors; maneuvering within environmental constraints, including but not limited to the reality of limited resources; and choosing the appropriate tools to meet your interests and objectives. Simulations make the real world relevant by allowing students to recreate through their own experiences the multiple and often countervailing interests, pressures, and constraints which international actors find themselves subject to everyday. This offers students “the best understanding of political processes short of actually being involved in them” (Smith and Boyer 1996).

#### *\*examine multiple perspectives*

Particularly when teaching courses on Middle East politics, it is critical to expose students to under-represented or misrepresented perspectives. The bias of American sources on the Middle East is well-documented (Ghareeb 1983; Said

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1981). A quick exercise done anonymously at the beginning of the course is useful in helping students to confront their own preconceptions. Ask students to write down the first words that come to their minds when they hear certain words: Muslim, Palestinian, Israeli, Islam, fundamentalism, democratic, Rabin, Saddam Husayn, etc. Then, collect the lists and write the words on the board for each term. The results are generally predictable—students associate Palestinians with terrorism, fundamentalists with (fanatical) Muslims, and democracy with Israel; they have favorable opinions of Israel and most Israeli leaders and of the late King Hussein of Jordan, and very unflattering opinions of Arab leaders and Arabs and Muslims in general. This can open the door to a discussion about bias in both popular and academic sources; the meanings of terms like fundamentalism and terrorism; and competing historical narratives (*al-Nakba*, The Catastrophe vs. The War of Israeli Independence). It is important to push students to learn about the interests and perspectives of all the various actors, including those of “the other.”

*\*generate enthusiasm*

Interactive exercises generate enthusiasm and a sense of control over one’s learning. Playing a role may also increase a student’s connectedness to an international problem by giving them a stake (even if only a fictional one) in its resolution. Several studies have confirmed that “experiential learning . . . can generate real personal interest in a particular subject” (Karbo and Lantis 1997).

**Cautionary Tales**

Before embarking on a role-play intensive course, it is wise to recognize and plan for potential pitfalls. My experience identified three difficulties, none of them serious.

*\*These activities depend overwhelmingly on student willingness to role play*

If students are only half-heartedly involved or uncomfortable, the exercises may not go smoothly. One student repeatedly expressed a dislike for role playing in the assessment: “I feel for this kind of exercise you have to be a good actor and I’m not,” “I just hate this whole acting out thing,” and “I felt like I was one of the weaknesses” of the exercise. Fears about public speaking are often the root of such com-



**Who Am I?** As part of Beth Dougherty’s intro class she conducts a section on “The Individual” to illustrate the personalization of politics. Students are asked to describe people in a series of pictures (such as the image of the Ayatollah Khomeini above) and later discuss how one person’s traits can come to stand in for a whole country. Discussion then moves on to the dangers of personalizing foreign policy. Cartoon: CartoonNews International.

plaints. Some students’ willingness and ability to speak clearly improved over the course of the term, but others could not overcome their reluctance to speak before a group. Such reticence can leave a player marginalized and frustrated. The above-mentioned student wrote after the third simulation: “I’m still having trouble with the public speaking aspect of these simulations. I just don’t feel I have enough info to speak clearly or make a stand.” Other students consistently identified the lack of full participation by all players as a weakness of the exercises. One method of ameliorating the discomfort some students experience in role playing or

public speaking is to assign separate grades for writing and participation, thus ensuring that if a student does the research and comes prepared their efforts are recognized and rewarded. Explaining to students the pedagogy behind your choice of technique can also soften resistance to an unfamiliar classroom experience.

Another pitfall is the overenthusiastic egoist, or the student who tries to monopolize the simulation. This can discourage and/or annoy other players who cannot get a word in edgewise, or it can mire the simulation in a single issue which the domineering player refuses to relinquish. In the Gulf War

simulation, the Saudi player took a hard line against military action that not only prevented the coalition partners from discussing other agenda items but also distorted the actual (factual) course of events. I heard many complaints the following week against this student. In a later debate, the same individual stubbornly refused to move off a historical analogy that the other players rejected as not applicable. Wrote one frustrated student: "It was like he was trying to show off how much he knew and it was really aggravating. I wanted to run screaming from the room." If allowed to fester, such hard feelings can wreck the essential spirit of cooperation necessary for subsequent role play activities. In this situation it is up to the instructor to manage the class. As moderator, you can intervene and suggest that the item under discussion be tabled so that the rest of the agenda can be discussed or pass a note to the offending player pointing out their deviation from their role. After the session, it is a good idea to pull the player aside for a individual debriefing where you can help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their performance.

The presence of an ill- or unprepared student can also throw off the whole simulation, especially if that person represents a key player. A poorly prepared player has an adverse affect on the ability of other students to learn from the exercise and can sour them on simulations as valuable learning experiences. One can minimize the chances of underprepared students with a carrot-and-stick method. The carrot is explaining to students in advance that their learning *and that of their classmates* depends upon everyone's contributions—it is a collaborative effort. One rusty cog and the machine may grind to a halt. The stick is the grade penalty—students who turn up without papers on the day of the exercise receive a zero.

### ***\*Designing a simulation is hard work***

Coming up with the rules, players, and situations can be both difficult and time-consuming, especially if you are constructing a game without a historical counterpart. Politics in the Kurdish enclave is extremely complicated, and I wanted to avoid too detailed of a game which would overwhelm my students. At the same time, I wanted them to get a sense of the many conundrums besetting the Kurds. Most of the scenarios I attempted to develop either required too much knowledge of novices or addressed too narrow a range of issues. In

the end, I opted for a conference addressing the future of Iraqi Kurdistan where players represented Kurdish factions and interested external parties.

Even if you are working with a factual situation designing a workable game can be tough. In the Gulf War simulation I left the date ambiguous—early August—so that players could have maximum flexibility in presenting their demands/arguments/positions. Some players though found it difficult to divorce themselves from the "real" chronology. I was forced to intervene on more than one occasion to remind the players that it wasn't the chronology that mattered (after all the meeting itself was fictitious), but rather their country's position on the issues at hand. Several students identified the lack of a specific date as the main weakness of the exercise. Too many rules make the game hard to play; too few leave students floundering for a framework.

The key to designing a successful role play is clearly identifying the knowledge you want the students to gain from the exercise and planning accordingly. Providing students with an agenda is one way to ensure they look for the information you want them to find. The lectures immediately preceding the exercise should be aimed at providing students with a basic understanding of the framework of the situation they will step into. If creating an imaginary game, be certain that the desired outcome is possible. Unless the point is to *not* reach agreement, be sure that reaching a satisfactory conclusion does not require the presence of a Metternich.

### ***\*Time is short and simulations are long***

Except for the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference, each exercise was scheduled for 50 minutes. In nearly every case the students wanted more time to continue their debates; this was especially true of the Geneva and Gulf War meetings. However, extending an exercise raises two issues. I gave up multiple class periods to these activities, which limited the amount of material I could present in lectures. Losing additional classes begins to raise serious issues about the amount of material I can realistically hope to cover. Secondly, adjourning the meeting until the next class could kill whatever momentum has been established. Moreover, there may not be another 50-minutes worth of debate. The ideal solution is to teach a role play intensive course in a longer time block, preferably 75–110

minutes. Limiting the agenda can help with time management. Another possibility is continuing the debate for a second day if need be. This requires some flexibility with the syllabus. If an exercise spills into a second day but then cannot fill the entire period, the instructor can hold a debriefing session where students identify what they have learned and assess the exercise. One final thought about scheduling—never schedule a simulation after a break, when students are likely to be out-of-sync and to have been away from the library.

## **Benefits**

Despite the potential difficulties inherent in using role-play simulations and structured class debates, they are well worth the effort. Both my assessment forms and my teaching evaluations for these courses are overwhelmingly positive.

### ***\*Students reported learning more from the exercises than from traditional techniques***

Based on the responses where a preference was clearly stated, students claim to have learned more from a given exercise compared to a traditional paper or exam by a two-to-one margin. Broken down, students learned more from the exercise than from a traditional paper by a three-two margin. Among those who reported learning more from a paper, the most frequent explanations were preference for a greater number of pages, and doing research on a broader topic. Students learned more from the exercise than an exam by a 3.6-to-one margin. Among those who favored a test, they explained they would be more likely to memorize the information.

Students report learning to troubleshoot and to think more broadly about outcomes; rather than viewing events as fixed and closed, they come to see them as the product of myriad interactions and decisions. This perspective contributes to a more complete understanding of the material, which in turn helps facilitate long-term absorption. As one student put it, "I actually remember what I learned."

### ***\*Interactive techniques help develop critical thinking skills***

Students gave all five exercises high marks as useful learning experiences. As I hoped, the students found the exer-

cises “very informative” and “very helpful” in training them to develop, present, and defend persuasive positions. Other responses noted the debates in particular were valuable in pushing them to clearly state what they think and why they hold that position. Surprisingly, given the general reticence to express an opinion among my students, this group reported enjoying the opportunity to engage in debate and dialogue. In a typical comment, one student wrote that the exercise “allowed us to get inside the issue ourselves, and then hash out things we missed by arguing with other people . . . This form allowed us to experience the process of reworking our argument by collaborating with others.”

### *\*Students gain first-hand experience of the complexities of international politics*

Students gained a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of the multiple and countervailing interests and pressures under which states act in the international arena. They discovered the frustrations of trying to accomplish their goals in the face of the opposition of other actors, the delicate art of compromise and bargaining, and the hard reality of the limits of power. As one student put it “the exercises illustrate the complicated procedures of international political policy-making. It is difficult to reach common ground, but it is still possible. Also, because each person has a specific position/topic we learn a lot about the politics of different groups and how they conduct international diplomacy/policy-making.”

The Arab-Israeli peace conference was especially fruitful in this regard. After three days of sometimes bitter arguments and very halting progress, the subcommittee on water reached a tentative agreement. With one breakthrough accomplished, the talks gained momentum on day four. Some compromises were worked out on the other final status issues, but in each case there was one major sticking point preventing agreement. On day five, originally scheduled as a semester wrap-up, the delegations met again, and began bargaining in earnest. Eschewing the compartmentalization strategy they had been utilizing

to that point, the delegations traded concessions across issues—compromise on Jerusalem by one party was met by a

**“We had to think as if we were part of the final status negotiations delegation, so I thought like I was an insider. That made me consider the issue more deeply.”**

compromise on refugees by the other. Five minutes past the end of the final class of the semester, the two sides initialed a draft agreement. When we gathered an extra time to debrief, the students were quite pleased with the conference and more than a little sheepish. As several people noted, their experience mirrored real-life talks: the momentum gained from a single breakthrough, the urgent pressure of a deadline, the desire to reach a final agreement once a framework was in sight, the forced examination of priorities as hard compromises were hammered out, the intra-delegation tensions between the hard-liners and the moderates, the last-minute initialing of a draft agreement. The exercise gave students a taste of the “real flavor” and “real stress” of the process of negotiations. Commented one student, “We had to think as if we were part of the final status negotiations delegation, so I thought like I was an insider. That made me consider the issue more deeply.”

### *\*Active learning exposes students to multiple perspectives*

The exercises gave students a “greater understanding of various viewpoints.” In the Arab-Israeli course, the majority of students considered themselves sympathetic to Israel when the course began, and most reported having never seriously considered the Palestinian view of the Arab-Israeli conflict before. But the role plays pushed students to familiarize themselves with different sides of the

issues: “Before this, I had never had to negotiate world problems from within an opposing viewpoint.” Most students played multiple roles over the course of the term, switching back and forth between the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives, or representing Iraq for one simulation and Turkey in another. Such variation broadens students’ perspectives and places them at least temporarily within a non-American frame of reference. Moreover, the role-playing nature of the exercise freed students to voice positions they may never have heard in a regular class discussion, and provided ample material for critical analysis in the debriefing.

### *\*Simulations generate enthusiasm*

Not only did students overwhelmingly report enjoying the interactive exercises, the word “fun” appeared again and again on the assessment forms. Students especially liked interacting with their peers. Many found the exercises empowering—we “get to a point where we have to make tough policy decisions that we read about.” More importantly, students discovered that the format motivated them to learn: “I want to learn more about the issue so I can be clear on what I’m saying I support,” or “[when the situation is] something I don’t know much about it makes me want to learn more about it so I can make an informed decision.” Even more gratifying for me as a teacher, I discovered that many of the students were talking about Middle East issues outside of class.

## **Conclusion**

Active learning exercises are an effective and rewarding pedagogical technique. They help build practical skills, especially in public speaking, and enhance critical thinking skills. Students gain first-hand experiences through simulations, which not only deepen their understanding of the complex processes of international politics, but broaden their perspectives to include views with which they are unfamiliar. By putting students in control of their own learning, interactive exercises can make the real world both relevant and intellectually exciting.

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