

Teaching Islamic and Middle East Politics: The Model Arab League as a Learning Venue*

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Since September 11, 2001, it is imperative that students understand Islam, its multifarious religious and political manifestations, and the various perspectives on Middle East issues. The Model League of Arab States program provides the most valuable cooperative and collaborative student-active learning opportunity that I have found available for our students. The article discusses our experience with this program and its contributions to our students' academic development.

September 11 and its aftermath brought Islam to the attention of most Americans. Although militant Islam has been a major factor in world politics since at least the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and despite the fact that Islam is the fastest growing religious expression in the United States, only a small percentage of Americans know anything about this faith of an estimated 1.2 billion people worldwide. This situation is more than unfortunate; it is detrimental to our participation in the world community. For both moral and practical policy reasons, Americans must overcome their ignorance, stereotypes, and prejudices. Islam is by no means monolithic, and in its multiple and varied political manifestations, it will be a significant factor in international relations for the foreseeable future. For most Americans, the Middle East arena is as inexplicable as understanding radical Muslims. The seemingly intractable Israel-Palestinian conflict, internecine Arab conflict, atavistic political demagogues, political and economic ineptitude and instability, outmoded gender roles, and so much more, dominate our perspectives in this region. In the search for explanations explicable to the Western mind, we often oversimplify the realities of existence in a tough neighborhood of the globe.

For thirty years, my teaching has addressed social and political cultures in various areas of the world in an effort to understand international events. For the last two decades, the Middle East and the larger Islamic community have played an ever-increasing role in that quest to understand and interpret. As a teacher, I have employed many varying classroom strategies and tactics. Some have worked much better than others. Unquestionably, the most successful teaching endeavor in which I have engaged is participation, since 1988, in the Model Arab League program. Its virtues are more relevant and important today than at any previous time.

The National Model Arab League began in 1982 at Howard University as a spin-off of the successful Model Organization of African States program. The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations assumed responsibility for the Model Arab league in 1985, and it has grown to a National Model, held in Washington, D.C., eleven regional college models, and six high school models across the country in 2002. Each participating institution represents one of the 22 members of the League of Arab States. Most of the Model activity occurs in the seven committees (expanded from five for the first time in 2002) where delegates are evaluated on their ability to articulate accurately the perspectives and interests of their respective countries and on their performance in debate, negotiation, lobbying, and the submission and passage of resolutions. Proper parliamentary procedure and diplomatic decorum are imperative.

I prefer the smaller, more focused Model Arab League to the larger, more general Model United Nations programs. Concentrating on the mechanics of international diplomacy, Model UN students spend more time as observers with fewer opportunities to talk and directly engage. Many countries are marginal participants on particular issues under discussion. However, the regional issues in the Model Arab League are pertinent to every country in the simulation, and delegates engage in debate and negotiation on a constant basis. Model Leaguers develop a deeper level of expertise on the issues and about their country's positions. As they view

events and actions from a quite different perspective than most participants have ever contemplated before, they absorb themselves in a culture and learn to appreciate the people and the religion of that culture.

Although I could write about many aspects of the Model League, I will focus on the value of the activity as a unique laboratory for cooperative and collaborative student-active learning. Model League emphasizes common team objectives rather than individual classroom competition, and it redefines the relationships between teacher and student. Faculty member and students collaborate while independent evaluators provide assessment. This frees the faculty member from the onerous and often counterproductive role as judge and jury and provides a superior learning environment.

The most important element is that students collectively assume responsibility for their own learning. They are accountable for the library research, organization of material, policy positions and resolutions, and the requisite forensic skills necessary for success in the Model League competition. They do not work alone, but as part of a team with a common objective. An individual's personal achievements take on meaning only as they enhance the team's collective success. Professional schools in engineering, business, law, management and administration, and other areas increasingly have adopted the team project approach to prepare individuals for the work environment they will enter.

In terms of skill development, I am particularly impressed that the delegation's technological prowess grows exponentially every year and that experienced delegates bring their less experienced peers 'up to speed' on the available sites and resources. The number of laptops and modems and the Model League competition grows annually bringing the resources of the Internet directly into the committee room. The message is clear that participants must be conversant with the most current global resources as they think and speak on their feet in spirited debate. Knowledge is power, information is essential, and preparation empowers.

Of course the skills above can be nurtured in traditional courses. However, the competition against top-notch talent from across the nation intensifies the learning process by drawing on the best aspects of competitive and collaborative efforts. Students gain both from their own teammates and their peer rivals. One of the best aspects of Model League is the interaction and the bonding process among students engaged in a common enterprise. Through both the formal simulation and the allied social elements, good-natured rivalries and long-term friendships flower. Indeed, three of our past delegates married Model League competitors whom they met in Washington. Many foreign national students participate in Model League which engenders intellectual respect across national and cultural backgrounds.

My teaching role with the Model League delegation is different than in the normal classroom setting. I conceive myself as coach of an athletic team. Like any good coach, my job is to develop and employ the talent at my disposal to its highest potential. As the 'players' distinguish themselves, individually and collectively, their success is my success. We enjoy winning, and we have excelled. But more importantly, our performance is a reflection that the educational objectives and goals of the learning environment are being achieved.

The keys to successful coaching are organization and preparation. The coach's primary responsibility is to design a system, a set of procedures, practices, mores, and traditions that maximize the opportunities for accomplishment. Beyond that, good coaching (and good teaching) is a matter of motivation, the proper calculus of encouragement and critique. I claim some credit for the system; and during the actual Model League competition, I serve as the chief cheerleader as I float from committee to committee observing, encouraging, occasionally admonishing, and trying unsuccessfully to be in all places at the same time. Like a good coach, I enjoy watching individuals perform as part of a well-disciplined team with a clear conception of what they are striving to achieve. However, I play little role in the delegation's actual preparation.

The Model League simulation is student-run, and the two principles that undergird our delegation's preparation are student leadership and peer-model mentoring. The role of our Head Delegate is crucial. Assisted by senior delegates, she is responsible for training and leading the delegation. Selected by group consensus, this veteran participant has distinguished herself by her past performances and team leadership. The Head Delegate establishes a schedule for preparation, convenes regular meetings, organizes practice sessions,

teaches parliamentary procedure, collects and disseminates materials, ensures that the deadlines are met, and oversees the development of the briefing books that serve as one of our major sources of information. The position has high prestige on our campus, and we have been blessed with a long line of exceptional leaders whose achievements with the delegation were the beginnings of illustrious postgraduate careers. One of my personal joys is witnessing the qualities in a first-year delegate that I can already tell will eventually propel her into a future Head Delegate candidate.

Preparation work centers on teams with new delegates paired to an experienced mentor. The mentors serve as peer-models to train their partners in how to conduct research, develop and employ their portion of the briefing books, and write resolutions. They also pass along the 'tricks of the trade,' of effective debate and negotiations. The mentors take great pride in their role. Often they derive as much pleasure from the performance of their junior partner as from their own achievements. By the end of the year, younger students look forward to assuming the mentor role in the future. A few years ago, a freshman speaking about her senior mentor proclaimed that 'All I want in my college career is to become like her.' Three years later, another freshman made the exact same remark about the young woman who was by then a senior mentor. That tradition has been the single most important element of our success.

The delegation meets weekly. Early in the year they concentrate on learning about the country that they represent and training new delegates in parliamentary procedure. As the year progresses, the teams submit their proposed resolutions for collective delegation critique and they assess each other in practice debate. For the practice debates, the students must represent the other countries of the Arab League, so they cross train by preparing for at least two or three other countries. By the time of the competition, our delegates know the positions of every country in the League, and veterans have actually formally represented a number of them over the years. This breadth of preparation has served us well.

The preparation activity is totally a student collaborative effort. I seldom attend these sessions. The student's motivation for their hard work is pride in performance and the respect of their peers. One could ask little more in a learning environment. Peer modeling, however, is more than just a tool for preparation. It also includes veteran delegates assuming leadership roles at the Model. The effectiveness of every committee depends on the quality of the chair, who manages time, distributes speaking opportunities, keeps the debate focused, rules on parliamentary procedure and exhibit fairness, decisiveness, and good common sense. Our delegates seek this higher level of responsibility, and we have a training program for prospective chair candidates. We have enjoyed success since in the last three years we held fourteen of a possible fifteen chair positions at the National Model and won the 'best chair' award for seven consecutive years. We also have held the Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General positions several times in recent years.

Our Model League delegates annually respond that the activity was the most important thing that they did in college, and our Model League alumnae have compiled an enviable record of achievement in their careers. Individual lives have been changed, and the program has impacted the entire college. Over the years, virtually every major on campus has been represented on the delegation. Besides the social sciences and humanities, annually we have members from the natural sciences, business, education, and the arts. For example, this year's delegation has six participants from the School of Music. Model Leaguers bring the skills, confidence, and leadership gained during participation, as well as their interest in international affairs, into all their classes. This is duly noted by our faculty who like to have Model Leaguers in their classes. They set a standard in class participation that is challenging to emulate. On our quite Eurocentric campus, the emphasis on the Middle East has had many positive returns. Over the years, thirteen of our Model Leaguers have been selected for the very competitive Kuwait Studies Program, a travel-study program hosted by Kuwait University and the Kuwait-American Association, and other members of the delegation have studied in Morocco and Syria. A blind student, who went to Morocco on a National Council study program, became enamored with the language and culture. After returning for a second summer of language study, she completed a master's degree in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and is preparing to be the first blind student in the Peace Corps in Morocco. Other Model Leaguers have served in the Peace Corps in various areas of the world. One former Model League/Peace Corps veteran is now the Director of the Lesotho 'Save the Children' program; another is a

missionary in western China. Touched deeply by her experience representing the Palestinian cause, one student traveled on her own during Christmas break to the West Bank and was involved in the first Intifada. Several others have participated in internships in Middle East organizations in Washington, and one continued as a staff member for the Kuwait-American Association for several years. Through our involvement with the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, five of our faculty have received travel fellowships to the region, and we have begun a visiting professor exchange with the University of Tunis.

As teachers our purpose is to engage students in situations and circumstances to maximize their fullest development. It would be difficult to dispute the proposition that cooperative and collaborative activities in which students have control over their own educational destiny offers the best environment for this to occur. My experience with Model League offers abundant evidence that this is the case. Certainly, it is not the only means, but I believe that it is one 'model.'

Equally important is the knowledge and involvement in Middle East and Islamic issues. September 11 and its aftermath put the issue indelibly before us. Sensitivity and comprehension are imperative. Our students need to be aware of the perspectives of the Islamic world, the dangers and opportunities, and the policy issues involved. Ignorance impales our very national security. I cannot emphasize enough the important educational task before those of us who teach international affairs. Not every institution has the requisite expertise and courses on these subjects, but an activity such as the Model League can play an important role in introducing future opinion makers to this complex region and the vital issues involved.

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