



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume II: Exploring the Middle East: Hands-On Approaches

‘Desert Fever’: A Student-Centered Approach to Learning About the Middle East

Curriculum Unit 02.02.01
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Introduction

When I was in elementary school, the thing I enjoyed most, other than “Sesame Street”, was the games we played in class. I loved when teachers were able to teach us in a fun, creative way. This is the intention of my curriculum unit. “Desert Fever” should be both fun and educational.

The objective is for fourth grade students to learn about people who live in that mysterious land a half a world away from Connecticut: the Middle East. Unfortunately, many of our students live in a very small world: their resources are limited as are their experiences. It is dangerous when what children know comes from a single source. It is even more dangerous if this knowledge does not come at all.

Our students are resourceful and they can be quite empathetic. However, when so many of the schools are still so homogeneous, there is reason to worry about the level of understanding that our students have for other cultures. In addition, there is reason to worry about self-esteem. How can we expect kids to care about others when they do not yet value themselves? In 2002, New Haven produced the lowest test scores of the three big cities in Connecticut. When kids hear teachers and parents talking about these scores, when kids receive their scores and see how they compare with others, it can lead to a negative self-image. If arranged as such, “Desert Fever” can be used to prepare students for the language arts portions of their local and state assessments while also providing a launching pad for the year’s social studies curriculum.

Researching, then constructing, an educational board game finds its roots in student ownership and multiple intelligences. As our kids learn about foreign people and countries, they can also learn about themselves. By mixing independent work with small and large group lessons, students will have the opportunity to assess their own learning style. Aiding kids as they try and work outside of their comfort zone is as important as allowing them to learn what, exactly, their comfort zone is. By challenging them with this student-centered project, we give each student the opportunity to produce a learning tool as well as the chance to overcome any fears they might have about computers, writing and editing, or the biggie, presenting information to their peers.

In conclusion, as important as it is to prepare students for standardized tests, and to meet local and state

curriculum goals, it is also vital that our students feel ownership of their work and a responsibility for understanding people who are different from them in some, but not all, ways. Only when students are fully invested do they care about their work. While learning about the Middle East, the class will be building something unique. At the conclusion of the unit, students will have created something truly their own.

Topical Information on Egypt, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia

I have a friend who is working in Israel with Palestinian businesswomen. He oversees small business loans that have been granted by Catholic Relief Services to these entrepreneurs. My friend is a Protestant from New York.

I share this to shed some light on the influences at work in the Middle East. The histories of each of the countries are as varied as the religions of each individual who lives, and works, there. There are differences in the governments, economies, cultures, and traditions, just as there are differences within our country, regional and otherwise. There are also many similarities; similarities within the Middle East and similarities shared between those countries and ours.

In order to best prepare the teacher, I have gathered some general information on Egypt, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. However, teachers should feel free to use any of the Middle Eastern countries. Relevance to current events might be one reason to look elsewhere. Altering the focus so that it overlaps with a science unit on the effects of an oil spill in Yemen, for example, might be another.

Geography

Area and Population Table

(in order of population)

Country	Area in miles	Population (2001)
1. Egypt	621,900 square miles	69,536,644
2. Iraq	271,422 square miles	23,331,985
3. Saudi Arabia	1,217,521 square miles	22,757,092*
4. Israel	12,898 square miles	5,938,093

*includes 5,360,526 non-nationals working in Saudi Arabia

Source: *CIA World Factbook*

Some Middle Eastern countries are of a considerable size, while others (United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) are smaller than Connecticut. Population sizes vary widely, as well. Egypt is the largest of the four countries in this study. If you put the people of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel together, there would still be more people in Egypt. They only have half the land of Saudi Arabia, though. Saudi Arabia is easily the largest of the four countries. It is almost twice the size of Alaska, the largest state in the U.S., and occupies nearly 80% of the Arabian Peninsula. Despite this size, their population is just slightly smaller than that of Iraq. This means that

of the four countries in this study, Saudi Arabia has the most land, but the second smallest population.

Israel, the smallest of the four nations, in terms of land *and* population, is twice the size of Connecticut. Israel's land holdings stand at just over 12,000 square miles. This includes the "Occupied Territories" where many of the Palestinians live. The population of Connecticut is 3,405,565 (2001), which means that only 2,000,000 less people live in this state than in all of Israel.¹ In comparative terms, Israel has one-tenth the population of Egypt and one-fifth the land.

Interspersed between all of these countries are tremendously important waterways. The names to remember are the Mediterranean, Red, and Arabian Seas, the Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal, as well as the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Jordan Rivers. Israel and Egypt both border on the Mediterranean Sea. However, it has been necessary for both countries to develop systems of irrigation to accommodate their farmers. Citrus fruit has been the leading crop in Israel since the days of the American Civil War.² Whereas Israel has the Jordan River, Egypt has the world's longest river in the world: the Nile, which is 4,160 miles long. Although the Nile is worthy of discussion for many reasons, one piece of information that may capture the students' imagination is the fact that it flows backwards. The Nile travels south to north before its deltas drain into the Mediterranean Sea.

Of these 4 countries, Egypt has the most access to water. They have also attempted to improve their situation by building dams and canals. The Aswan Dam, intended to provide greater control of the Nile's waters, and the Suez Canal, a source of income for Egypt ever since Nasser nationalized it in 1956, are the two primary examples of this. Geographically, though, it is important to note that even though the Nile Valley takes up only 4% of the nation's land, 95% of Egypt's people live on the banks of the Nile.³ The Aswan Dam has helped to control the yearly flooding that used to ruin harvests and chase farmers from their homes. However, some argue that the loss of mineral-rich soil, dredged up and deposited by the yearly floods, has made the land less fertile than it once was.⁴

Stretching between northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula is the Red Sea. The Suez Canal connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, making it a very important causeway for trade between the west and the east. Saudi Arabia and Egypt both have access to the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia actually has access to 2 bodies of water. To the west is the Red Sea and in the east is the Persian Gulf. To the south, beyond the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and Oman, is the Arabian Sea. This access aids greatly in the export of oil. Unfortunately, there are no major rivers to bring water to the interior of Saudi Arabia. Desalinization does make it possible for the Saudis to turn salt water into potable water, though.

Iraq is supported by not one but two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. These meet to form the Shatt al Arab before flowing into the Persian Gulf. Unlike the Nile, both the Tigris and Euphrates flow from north to south. Southern Iraq, when not drained, is home to tremendous marshlands. The Iraqis benefit from winter run-off just as we do here in the U.S. After the snow in the northern mountains melts, it flows south. There is so little rainfall in Iraq that farmers rely on the residual of this water, collected from the country's rivers.

These mountains are located north of the 36th parallel, a line of demarcation that has become important in the post-Gulf War era (this is the No Fly Zone maintained by the United Nations in order to protect the Kurds). These mountains are not only home to the Iraqi Kurds, they form a natural border with Syria and Turkey. Although there is mountainous terrain in the north, and although southeast Iraq is normally home to a marshy delta, there are, indeed, desert lands in Iraq. The Syrian Desert dominates the southwestern part of the country and Iraqis do have to contend with drought and desertification (the spread of sand and the erosion of arable soil).

The northeast of Africa, where you will find Egypt, is, for the most part, a desert. It is here that the sands of the Sahara drift and swirl. Referred to as the Libyan Desert in other countries, Egypt calls their portion the Western Desert. Notable for its dunes, plains, and rocky plateaus, the Western Desert, alone, makes up almost half of Egypt's land. Approximately 98% of Egypt is non-arable. In addition to the repercussions of the Aswan Dam, desertification has given Egyptians cause for concern. This is a sentiment that is certainly shared by many people throughout the Middle East.⁵

Like the other countries in this study, Israel is home to a desert. Taking up more than half of Israel's land, The Negev Desert receives, on average, only two to four inches of rain per year. The Israelis though, through the National Water Carrier Project, have been able to bring water from the Sea of Galilee to parts of the desert. Saudi Arabia's desert is called the Rub al-Khali. One detail that is sure to excite the students: there are sand dunes there that stand taller than 600 feet! The Rub al-Khali occupies close to 25% of the country's land; in all, desert sands cover 75% of Saudi Arabia.⁶ The Rub al-Khali is one of the world's biggest deserts and is virtually uninhabitable, forcing the Saudis, as in Egypt, to live in a few select locations, preferably near either coastline.

With desert sands come natural hazards. Each of these four countries has to contend with sand storms and drought. As we have read, Egyptians and Iraqis also have to contend with floods. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia there are also the problems that come with the import and export of oil. And finally, any country that supports agriculture as a way of life is going to have pollution. Insecticides and fertilizer run off from the farm lands and can negatively impact the water supply. Pollution, be it oil, insecticide, or fertilizer, is a problem that we are also dealing with here in the U.S. This might be a nice opportunity to draw a comparison between your students and the people of the Middle East. The following is a more specific look at each country and the hazards they deal with.

Iraq's natural hazards include the aforementioned floods as well as the dust and sand storms associated with deserts and desertification. After all, 79% of the land is considered non-arable.⁷ Although Saddam Hussein's decision to drain the marshlands of the south could be discussed in political terms (the south is home to Shi'a Muslims and Hussein is a Sunni), it is the environmental and agricultural concerns that will most interest the students. These marshlands are vital to the survival of the Shi'a people because they fish the marshes and use its waters for agricultural purposes. The drainage has caused air and water pollution as well as enough erosion to contribute to further desertification. As in Egypt, before the days of the Aswan Dam, the run-off from melted snow causes flooding in central and southern Iraq. So, the farmers there find themselves in a catch-22 situation: they need this water to keep their crops alive, but when the run-off is too great, there is terrible flooding.

Egypt is also home to a number of natural hazards. Among them are droughts, earthquakes, flash floods, landslides, volcanoes, and spring windstorms referred to as "khamsin". Oil pollution also threatens the oceans and seas, the beaches and the marine life of Egypt just as it does in the U.S. (the Exxon Valdez comes to mind). There is also water pollution from pesticides and raw sewage. A population that is growing all too fast puts additional stress on the environment there. The Egyptian Pollution Abatement Project (EPAP) is one of the main efforts to ease these problems. The EPAP is being financed by the World Bank and the European Investment Bank, an indicator of how Europe is still very interested in Egypt.⁸

Israelis who live by, or travel to, the shore get to enjoy a Mediterranean climate. This includes long, hot summers with minimal rain as well as cool, rainy winters. However, Israel is not without its own environmental issues. In particular, there is pollution from fertilizers and pesticides. Israel is fortunate, however, because

desertification does not hamper life there as it does in the other three countries. This is because Israel has a higher percentage of arable land than Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Only 66% of their land (a number that may seem high by American standards, but not by Middle Eastern standards) is desert.

As you would expect with the extensive desert lands of Saudi Arabia, there are frequent sand and dust storms. Desertification is a concern, especially since, unlike Egypt, Iraq, and Israel, Saudi Arabia lacks rivers. This is why they have developed their desalination facilities. Still, they must be careful with their water. As was mentioned before, the Saudis make money from the export of crude oil, but oil spills can negatively impact the environment, especially the water supply. With their fertile lands, located along both coastlines, the Saudis must also be careful with pesticides and fertilizer.

Desalinization and irrigation allow for farming to take place all over the Middle East. In Egypt, forty percent of the people rely on water (above and beyond personal consumption) because they make their livelihood in agriculture. They are able to do so despite the fact that less than 5% of the land is fertile. Their main crop is cotton. Egypt also produces wheat, rice, corn, tomatoes, beans, sugarcane, dates and assorted citrus fruit. Israel, a neighboring country, also produces cotton, dates, and citrus fruits. Iraqi farmers, especially the Kurdish people in the north, are more concerned with livestock. Farmers in both Egypt and Iraq herd cattle, sheep, and goats. In Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, camels are the best example of a domesticated animal that cannot be found in the average American home. Saudi Arabia has become much more technology-oriented so camels are valued more as racing animals and are rarely seen as viable means of transportation any more. Back when they were used for travel, however, they were very valuable, mainly for their durability. Camels can go five to seven days without eating or drinking and can maintain normal bodily functions even after losing up to one-quarter of their body weight.⁹ The Bedouins (who use one-humped Arab Camels) refer to them as “Ata Allah”, or God’s gift, and students are sure to be interested in these cud chewing dromedaries.

In the U.S., we contend with many of the very same natural hazards as in the Middle East. Water is undeniably the world’s most important natural resource. Sometimes, though, potable water is not as available as we would like. Although there are no deserts in New England, we have all been put under drought restrictions at one time or another. I have a well and constantly work to conserve water. On the other hand, I once had to spend the night in a Red Cross shelter because of flooding in Minnesota. Every year, we read about places that are overwhelmed by mighty rivers like the Mississippi. As you will see in the next section, there are other comparisons that can be made between Americans and the people of the Middle East, especially when considering the children.

People

There are different kinds of people in the Middle East just as there are different kinds of people within the U.S. Bedouins are nomads who travel the desert, leading their herds to oases of water. On the other hand, the Middle East has urban areas that serve as centers of commerce, culture, and education. Christians and Jews live in the Middle East, just as Muslims do. Within Islam, there are different sects (Shi’a, Sunni, Alawis, etc.) just as there are different sects within Christianity. Even amongst the Jewish people of Israel, there are the orthodox and the liberal, Arabic Jews and Jews from Eastern Europe.

As one would hope, though, you can throw a soccer ball towards a group of Americans, Egyptians, Iraqis, Saudis, Israelis, or Palestinians and get a game going. Pose a question to a classroom full of these same kids and you will be greeted by a multitude of raised hands. Egyptian children may get Fridays off (it is considered a family day), but is this really any different from our traditional view of Sundays?

Before going to school, it is important to eat breakfast. So, before we take a look at the education, and the pastimes, of Middle Eastern children... “Mehman hadiyah khodust.” This is a Persian saying. It means, “A guest is God’s gift.” Soheila Kimberley starts her book, *Essential Middle Eastern Cooking*, with this quote. For Kimberley, it sums up perfectly the social importance that many Middle Easterners place on eating. Egyptians like to eat lamb, vegetables, and bread made from corn flour, eggplant, and yogurt. This bread is actually popular in most of the Middle Eastern countries. It is flat and most closely resembles the “mountain bread” that American grocery stores now carry. Iraq and Israel have a connection that predates Israel’s status as a nation. In the thriving culture of 18th century Iraq, Baghdad’s best chefs were actually Jewish. Similar to many of today’s culinary artists, these chefs studied in France and Italy and even brought back to Baghdad a dish very similar to pizza. Chicken Nada, Lamb with Rice, and Pigeon Soup are three Saudi favorites.¹⁰ If unable to convince the kids to eat pigeon, you might want to try some of the simpler dishes enjoyed throughout the Middle East. Among these are humus, baba ghanouge, and tabbouli. There are also desserts like cream caramel and mango mousse.¹¹ But now it’s time for school!

Egyptian schools are free. Children in Cairo, for example, go to primary school for six years, preparatory school for three years, and then secondary school for another three years. Some take the bus while others get a ride from a parent.¹² When they graduate, if they do not wish to attend college abroad, they have the choice of attending one of 6 Egyptian universities.

Education is not required in Saudi Arabia, but it is free for those who wish to attend. One source claims that 3,000,000 children attend one of their 33,000 schools.¹³ The UNESCO Higher Education Database describes schooling that is not so different from the U.S. and Egypt. There are elementary, intermediate and secondary schools, including technical schools much like our vocational high schools. Elementary school lasts from ages six to twelve and there are also thirty schools for special education students. Intermediate school lasts to age fifteen and secondary school until age eighteen. There are seven Saudi universities and sixty-six colleges. English is taught in the secondary schools and every year, 4,000 to 5,000 students study in the United States.¹⁴

Similar to the other nations in this study, children in Israel are provided a free elementary education. It is important, though, to make the distinction between Israeli children and Palestinian children. Palestinians are no longer treated as citizens on par with the Israeli Jews. They must carry identification papers and the sad truth is that many Palestinian children live in refugee camps on the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Education for Palestinians is state-supported although many of the schools have been destroyed by recent fighting. Within the refugee camps, the U.N. has set up makeshift schools. In Israel, college scholarships are only awarded to those who have served in the military. Since Arabs cannot serve, they do not have access to the financial aid that often means the difference between a high school education and a college education.¹⁵

Children in Iraq go to school, as well. Unfortunately, statistics are not available in terms of age and duration. In addition to, or in place of, school these young people have family responsibilities. These responsibilities vary, depending on where they live. In the southeast, kids may help the family to fish while those in the north (Kurdish children, for the most part) care for the family’s livestock. Kids who live in cities like Baghdad, Al Basrah, and Mosul obviously have a lifestyle that is much different from their rural counterparts. Given the harsh realities of the last decade, though, school often has to take a back seat. Above and beyond contending with simple survival, school can be expensive for Iraqi children. Success may be impeded by the cost of materials like notebooks and textbooks. It is also easy to understand, especially for any American who ever went through an air raid drill, how hard it is to concentrate on school work in such conditions. Iraq had made a habit of educating its more accomplished citizens at American schools, but that trend has long since ended.¹⁶

The literacy rate, as defined by the CIA, is the number of citizens, aged fifteen and over, who can read and write.¹⁷ This rate, in Saudi Arabia, is approximately 60%. 72% of men can read, versus 50% of women. Similarly, 58% of Iraqis can read; the breakdown is 71% of men and 45% of women. (The statistics for Iraq are as of 1995.) This imbalance, in terms of gender, continues in Egypt. The literacy rate for Egyptian men is 64% while only 39% of Egyptian women can read. In Israel, the numbers are not only more equitable, they are much more impressive. 97% of men and 93% of women are literate. This includes the Palestinian children, many of whom are multi-lingual.

One story, just published in the *New York Times*, describes a spin-off of "Sesame Street" that is shown on Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian television. In addition to ABCs and 123s, "Sesame Street" is used to teach lessons of peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, the name has been changed to "Sesame Stories" since there are no longer any streets on which the Palestinian and Israeli children can play together.¹⁸

When gauging the quality of life in a country, social scientists will look at not only literacy, but life expectancy. One unfortunately common theme, the world over, is that boys have better access to schools than girls. In turn, the literacy rates for men tend to be higher. In reverse, women tend to live longer than men. Perhaps men need to value women more for their intellect while, at the same time, imitating more closely their healthy lifestyle!

Whereas life expectancy for Egyptian men is sixty-one years of age, for women it is sixty-five. In Iraq, life expectancy for males is once again shorter than it is for women. Women live until they are sixty-eight while men average just less than sixty-six years. By far, life expectancy and literacy rates are the best in Israel. Life expectancy for Israelis is seventy-seven years of age for men while women live, on average, until they are eighty-one. In Iraq, men can be expected to live close to sixty-six years while women can be expected to live for sixty-eight years.

For the sake of comparison, here are the statistics in the United States. Of the 278,000,000 people in our country, the literacy rate is an astounding 97%; this is the case for both men and women. The average life expectancy of an American citizen is seventy-eight years. For women it is eighty years while for men, it is seventy-four years. As with the Middle East (except in the case on Iraq), these statistics are as of 2001.

We may not know enough about education and life expectancy in Iraq, but we do know that Iraqis like to play basketball. Dr. Naismith's sport really has become an international phenomenon. Israel has a professional basketball league and many Israeli teen-agers have come to the U.S. to play college ball. This sport is played in Egypt, as well. Tennis is another sport that is enjoyed in Egypt. And believe it or not, there are golf courses there. You will also find people sailing on the Nile River. For the privileged classes of all four countries, there is sailing and horseback riding. The favorite sport in the Middle East, though, is soccer. This is a game that transcends class and boundaries. Perhaps this explains the popularity of the World Cup Tournament.

Religion is a topic of much importance when considering the Middle East. Whereas sport and education can bring people together, all too often, religion rips them apart.

Over 95% of Iraqis are Muslim. Iraqi children are not just Sunni Muslims, though, as Saddam Hussein is. In the southeast, where the marshlands have been drained (much to the detriment of the people), most of the children are Shi'a. In the north, living in the mountains, are the Kurds. Looking at the characteristics of a child from each of these ethnic groups might yield results similar to a comparison of a California Buddhist, a Mississippi Baptist, and a Sikh from New York City. Everything is somewhat different, from the weather to the clothing to the traditions. Saudi Arabia is a much more homogenous nation; 90% of the population is Sunni.

The language spoken by nearly everyone is Arabic, although English and French are taught in many schools. Arabic is also the primary language spoken in Iraq, along with some Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish.

Israel, even more so than Iraq, offers an opportunity to look at the diversity, and subsequent problems, of the religions of the Middle East. There is more to this diversity than just Jews and Arabs, though. It is important to note that within Israel there are European Jews (Ashkenazi) and Arab Jews (Sephardic), as well as Christian Palestinians and Muslim Palestinians. In total, 80% of Israel's population is Jewish. The Ashkenazi make up the majority of this population, especially since the end of the Cold War when, anywhere from 580,000 to 750,000 Russian Jews immigrated to Israel (depending on the statistical source).¹⁹ Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and English are all spoken in Israel.

Saudi Arabia is a special place for Muslims. The Hejaz region is home to the holy Islamic cities of Medina and Mecca. Approximately 2,000,000 pilgrims come to Mecca every year. Muslims are supposed to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Although there is an American perception of “eye-for-an-eye” justice in the Middle East, three of the four countries in this study are really no different from us. Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia are amongst the eighty-four countries (including the U.S.) that still have the death penalty. Although religion is important in each of these nations, religious leaders have yet to have an impact on the legal systems. Israel is different in that they do not have the death penalty.

History, Government, and Economy

Although the history of the Middle East is extensive, and quite interesting, it is likely that fourth grade students will only be able to absorb recent history. The exception would be the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Persia. It might also be interesting to put into perspective, for them, how short the history of the U.S. is in comparison. This section begins with a brief overview of these histories.

A tie to Great Britain is one commonality that these four countries share. From 1882 to 1956, government administrators and soldiers from Great Britain were stationed in Egypt (although they never considered Egypt to be a colony; rather, they occupied under the guise of protecting King Tawfiq from the Urabi Revolution). William L. Cleveland states that Great Britain's purpose was to:

...to safeguard the Suez Canal, to restore Egypt's political and financial stability, and, in the context of the imperial competition of the era, to prevent France from occupying it first.²⁰

Gamal Abd Nasser took control of Egypt during the Free Officers' Coup of 1952. He was not pleased with the economic support that Egypt was receiving from the West, so he turned to the Soviet Union for help. He took control of the Suez Canal in 1956, sending a strong message to France, Great Britain, and Israel. They were very displeased, but it did not matter to Nasser: his allegiances had changed. Nasser would go on to spread his vision of Nasserism, which was a continuation of Pan-Arabism. Ironic, then, that Egypt would be one the first Arab states to befriend Israel. It was the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, who flew to Jerusalem in November of 1977 in search of peace. It would cost him his life.

The British were not the first to be interested in Egypt. Just as in Iraq, Egypt had been a part of the Ottoman Empire. But before this time, long before even the occupation of the Roman Empire, ancient Egypt was one of the great civilizations (like Persia, which is now known as Iraq). Out of this time came the great pyramids, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Built to be crypts, these pyramids are still standing today. Some even

stand ten stories tall! Students are sure to get excited about the pyramids.

Iraq gained their independence from Great Britain in 1932, twenty-four years earlier than the Egyptians. The Iraqis quickly built their army once British restrictions were lifted. This should sound familiar: Saddam Hussein has been trying to strengthen his country for ten-plus years now, in light of post-Gulf War U.N. sanctions. Throughout the twentieth century, Iraqi citizens have existed under numerous military leaders which should be no surprise given the fact that the country's recent history is dotted with military conflicts. After invading Kuwait, in the early 1990s, Iraq found that it was at the center of the Gulf War. War was nothing new to Iraq, though. From 1980 to 1988, they battled with neighboring Iran. As with so many wars throughout history, land and resources were at the heart of these conflicts.

Iraq provides an interesting, and sad, glimpse of diversity in the Middle East; this, because of Saddam Hussein's treatment of the Kurds and the Shi'a. Hussein is a Sunni and has a history of persecuting others. For example, after the Gulf War, he used chemical warfare against the Kurds. He also drained the marshlands that are so important to the Shi'a way of life. There are nearly twice as many Shi'a as Sunnis which might explain Hussein's harsh, controlling treatment.

The British were also involved in the years that saw Palestine become Israel. As the time for Jewish statehood grew closer and closer, the British decided that between Arab outrage and the activities of militant Zionist groups (the Irgun, the Stern Gang, and the Jewish Agency, for example) they would not be able to maintain peace. It was on May 14, 1948 that David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first prime minister) announced Israel's establishment. On May 15, 1948, armies from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Iraq invaded the day-old country. Israel prevailed; the war ended (in December of 1948); and the U.N.'s hopes for an Israel and a Palestinian Arab state were dashed.²¹ The territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 war (they defeated the Egyptians, Syrians, and Jordanians, once again, to establish themselves as a Middle Eastern power) are at the root of the latest battles with the Palestinians. These territories include the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip is currently the most densely populated place in the world. In this area of 140 square miles, 1,178,199 people make their home. The population consists, for the most part, of Palestinian refugees. 6,900 Jewish settlers do still call the Gaza Strip home, though. There are 176,000 Jews living in the West Bank.²²

The idea of a Jewish homeland was first discussed when Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State* in 1896. From this book came the Zionist Movement, dedicated to establishing Israel. Herzl gave voice while the political maneuverings of Chaim Weizmann (the Zionist spokesman in London) led to Great Britain's Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration was a letter from British foreign secretary, Lord Arthur James Balfour, to Jewish financier, Lord Rothschild, announcing Great Britain's intent to support the Jewish state. The British had pulled out of the region, militarily, but would provide political support. This, combined with the help of American Jews (the Biltmore Program called for open migration to Palestine), the sympathies of U.S. President Harry S. Truman, and the U.N. decision to give the Jews a homeland, has led Israelis and Palestinians to their current place on the map of history.

The State of Israel has been led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon since 2001. Israelis call the holy city of Jerusalem their capital although this, in itself, is a source of controversy. Jerusalem was intended to be, as per the U.N. decree, an internationalized city, shared by both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The fact that it has not worked out that way is indicative of how life has been in Israel since 1948. Even Israel's closest ally, the U.S., maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem.²³ This is out of respect for the intentions of the U.N. The government of Israel consists of a prime minister, a president, and a legislature. Unlike the U.S., Israel does not have a constitution to provide a governmental guideline. Israelis are expected to vote and to

not only register for, but serve in, the military at the age of eighteen. Palestinians who do not live in the Occupied Territories are allowed to vote and can be elected to the Knesset, or Israeli Parliament. In the most recent election, members of the United Arab List party won five seats.

Moving westward, the capital of the Republic of Iraq is Baghdad. Iraq has been led by Saddam Hussein (also spelled “Husayn”) for over twenty years. Hussein’s rule is best categorized as a military dictatorship. Iraqi children grow up knowing that they will be given the right to vote at the same age that they are expected to serve in the military: eighteen.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy that has been led by King (and Prime Minister) Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud since 1982. King Fahd may be a monarch, but he does consult with a ninety member council (members are not elected, they are chosen by Saud). He makes his home in the capitol city of Riyadh. Voting is not an educational incentive in Saudi Arabia, where there is no suffrage. Citizens are never asked to vote because the government is a monarchy without a parliament. There is no suffrage, and there are no political parties.

Cairo is the capital of the Arab Republic of Egypt. Since 1981, Mohammed Hosni Mubarak has held that office. He replaced Anwar Sadat, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who was assassinated by Egyptian fundamentalists. Today, the government of Egypt includes a parliament, a prime minister, and a president. Not only are Egyptian women allowed to vote, they are required to vote; this, because voting is compulsory. The voting age is 18.

In painting a complete picture of these four countries, discussing the economy goes hand in hand with examining the construct of the government. In particular, it is important to look at the balance of imports versus exports when examining countries that are lacking in certain natural resources.

Egypt does not operate under a capitalist system; larger businesses are owned by the government while smaller businesses are privately owned. Unlike Iraq and Saudi Arabia, oil exports do not contribute to Egypt’s coffers. This might explain the imbalance of Egypt’s exports and imports. According to an estimate from 2000, Egypt exported \$7.3 billion worth of goods while importing \$17 billion.²⁴

Iraq is not an ally of the U.S., therefore information is not as available as it is with Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Despite this, it is on record that Iraq was able to export \$21.8 billion worth of goods in 2000. As the U.N. begins to back off on post-Gulf War sanctions, Iraq is being allowed to trade oil for food. So, at least part of that export figure can be attributed to oil. A positive sign for the country is that the import numbers are lower than the export numbers. Iraqis only spent \$13.8 billion on imports in 2000.

As in Egypt, businesses in Israel are owned both privately and by the state. Irrigation allows for the farming of citrus fruits, vegetables, cotton, wheat, barley, peanuts, sunflowers, grapes, and olives. Israel has worked hard to develop its agricultural and industrial sectors over the past two decades. Out of necessity, they have tried to be self-sufficient in food production (including these fruits and vegetables). Still, as of 2000, Israelis were importing almost \$4 billion more in goods than they are exporting (\$31.5 billion).²⁵ This means that they are still not fully self-sufficient; thus, one of the reasons that their relationship with the U.S. is so important to them. The U.S., Great Britain, and Germany are Israel’s biggest trade partners. As in Egypt, the Israelis do not have oil to bank on. So, they are involved in the mining of diamonds as well as the manufacture of chemical fertilizers, military equipment, electronics, and computers.

Early on in the twentieth century, the Saud family (the same family that still rules today) was able to reclaim

the majority of the Arabian Peninsula from the Egyptians and Turks. On September 23, 1932 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed. Ibn Saud gave the new nation his family's name and one year later, the Saudi petroleum industry was established. By 1936 the first oil field had been discovered, changing the country's economy forever.²⁶ Like Iraq, Saudi Arabia is a "rentier state". This means that more than

50% of the national income comes from the rent, or sale of, a natural resource. In most cases, this means no taxes for the citizens. Just how well the economy is doing is evident in the difference between imports and exports: the Saudis are importing \$30.1 billion worth of goods a year while exporting an incredible \$81.2 billion.²⁷ Saudi Arabia is home to more than 5,000,000 foreigners. For the most part, these people work in the oil industry. In turn, it should be no surprise that the Saudis play an important role in OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries). They helped to raise the price of oil, in 1999 and 2000, to its highest level since the Gulf War by reducing production. OPEC seems to have finally agreed that participating countries will not undersell each other, thus successfully maintaining a stable price.

Lessons

This student-centered unit will lead to a product that the class can use: a game of their own creation. Each individual will learn about a specific aspect (geography, people, etc.) of life in the Middle East as they contribute to their small group. Each small group will then contribute their questions and answers to the class's game. This process will allow each small group of students to be well-versed on one aspect of life in, or the history of, the Middle East. In playing the game, each student will benefit from the work of his or her peers. This solves the problem of student ownership while addressing several of the standards for the city and state; not to mention the current events issues that we, as Americans, are dealing with.

As an introduction to the unit, the class will read, together two pieces of Middle Eastern literature, one nonfiction and one fiction. We will also try a Middle Eastern food as we listen to Arabic music. Then, the small groups will break out to do their research. This initial phase may take up to two weeks, depending on scheduling. The class will then enter the second part of the unit, working together on the development of the actual game. Although I have dubbed this game "Desert Fever", I believe that the name should be decided on by the class. Game cards will be generated by the small groups, but as far as the lay out of the game board, the rules, and the means of winning, that should all be determined by the class. The culmination of the unit, one month after introduction, will be the inaugural playing of the game!

In New Haven, units of this nature are expected to comply with district-wide standards. Therefore, the "Desert Fever" unit is aligned with the Social Studies, as well as Language Arts, standards. I am of the opinion that at the elementary level, literacy skills are the most important thing we teach. Done properly, "Desert Fever" should address skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.²⁸

In terms of reading skills, Performance Standards 1.1, 1.3, 1.5, and 1.6 prescribe that students read for information and enjoyment, using print and non-print texts that reflect multiculturalism, and that students be led to a point where they will be confident readers. Students are also expected to construct meaning through reading, to summarize relevant information, and to demonstrate an awareness of the customs, values, and beliefs of not only the subject of the reading but, if it is a primary source, of the author, as well. Students should also demonstrate fluency while reading, as well as creating representations (visual, written, etc.) that

reflect what they have read. Not only will they read aloud, they will be expected to convey information to others.

In terms of writing skills, Performance Standards 2.1 and 2.2 require students to demonstrate strategic writing skills that ensure successful communication. They must demonstrate content and organizational understanding, and appropriate written language skills. The teacher should also be sure to facilitate the students in using feedback and assessment. It is important that a purpose for writing be established. For example, students will be writing the question cards for the game. If even a few students do not produce their “Desert Fever” cards, then the game has less value. Everyone is needed. It is important that these young writers plan for a specific audience; to do the best possible job they must write multiple drafts, revising along the way.

Developing public speaking skills is also important. Performance Standards 3.1 and 3.2 are geared towards ensuring success in verbal communications. As with the writing, the teacher must help the students to establish that there is a purpose to speaking in front of a large group. In this case, the students will be teaching each other about what they have researched and learned. Improving skills of social interaction is also important. Developing appropriate language and literacy skills as well as appropriate thinking skills is among these performance standards. Before speaking publicly, students must plan out their presentation. They must organize the information in a logical order. Once they are presenting, it is important to remember to look at the audience, to speak clearly, to use appropriate gestures and grammatically correct English, including complete sentences, and to respond to audience questions. The students should be reminded that when they are at the front of the room, they are the teachers!

Perhaps most important of all are the listening skills. Performance Standards 4.1 and 4.2 speak to students learning the appropriate listening skills. Students should listen for enjoyment, but they should also think of themselves as critical listeners. Make clear to them what is at stake if they do not listen. Not only do they need to be respectful, they need to learn from the presenter. To go a step further, they need to be able to pick and choose, identifying the most important details that are being shared. After listening, students are expected to be able to define, identify, and paraphrase those important details. Just as the presenter needs to be able to answer questions, the students in attendance need to be able to ask appropriate questions; they must hunt for further details.

In terms of the Social Studies standards in New Haven, the curriculum guide clearly states that students will:

- Gather historical data from multiple sources.
- Identify the main idea in a source of historical information.
- Write short narratives and statements presenting historical ideas.
- Demonstrate understanding through written, verbal, visual, musical and/or technological formats.
- Read about and discuss current events.²⁹

Rather than include objectives with each lesson, I have provided a comprehensive list, followed by the three lesson plans. I believe that this will make abundantly clear what I intend to accomplish with “Desert Fever”.

Knowledge Objectives:

Students will gain a general understanding of the geography, people, history, governments, and economies of the Middle East.

Students will describe the geography, people, history, governments, and economics of a particular Middle Eastern country.

Students will develop a basic vocabulary of Arabic terms.

Students will become familiar with the Internet and other resources.

Students will take part in an interdisciplinary unit that makes use of multiple modalities of learning.

Skills Objectives:

1. To acquire research skills as they read, view, and listen to multiple sources relating to diversity (religious and ethnic), the geography, history, governments, and economies of the Middle East.
2. To work with various materials in creating an aesthetically pleasing, easy-to-understand board game for their own use (and for use by their peers).
4. To present information relating to the geography, people, history, governments, and/or economies of a particular Middle Eastern country.
5. To create a board game following prescribed steps of development.

Attitudinal Objectives:

1. To contrast their lives with a group of people with whom they (seemingly) have nothing in common.
2. To gain an understanding of diversity *within* the Middle East.

Experience Objectives:

To encounter cultural items from the Middle East (food, music, and literature).
To share a finished product with peers (in essence, to be teachers).

Lesson Plans:

Lesson One

Title: Where in the World... Is the Middle East?

Purpose: To learn where the Middle East is and how to use the compass rose.

Materials: Black and white world maps (with compass rose and a color-coded key for each of the four countries), crayons, "Where in the World Is...?" worksheet, and Middle Eastern music (*Putumayo* produces excellent "world music" compilation discs, several of which feature music from Middle Eastern countries³⁰).

Activities and Procedures:

Before breaking the class into small groups, and distributing the "Where in the World Is...?" worksheet, the teacher will use a globe as a prompt for a discussion on:

- Locating North America
- Locating the United States
- Locating Connecticut
- Locating Asia and Africa
- North, South, East, and West

Working in groups of four or five, the students will each have their own map and crayons. There will be one worksheet for each group. Using the guiding questions on the worksheet (example: "Which country lies west of the Red Sea and east of Qatar, north of Yemen, and south of Iraq?"), students will find the desired country then color it in (using the key on the map for reference); the map will then change hands within the group and the next question will be addressed.

For closure, the students will fill out the "**K** now" and "**W**ould Like to Know" sections of their "KWL" chart. Then the teacher will lead a brief discussion using one (or two, if time permits) of the suggestions listed below:

Do you know anyone who has lived, or currently lives, in any of these countries? Anywhere in Africa or Asia?

Why do you think we call this region the Middle East? (if they are having trouble, have them cover the Americas on their map and focus on Europe, Africa, and Asia) it is up to the individual teacher how much they wish to disclose at this point; if the students seem interested, the teacher might want to leave the question unanswered and maybe offer bonus points to the student who hands in the best answer.

Lesson Two

Title: Researching the Game Cards

Purpose: To convert information, taken from a secondary source, into question form.

Materials: Reference books, encyclopedias (might include online and CD-ROM sources), "Game Card Research Sheets", and a pencil.

Activities and Procedures:

Before breaking the class into small groups (based on assigned country), the teacher will play a game of "Jeopardy" using answers to questions based on a current event that has relevance for the students (not necessarily Middle East). This will serve as a model of the relative nature of questions and answers.

Within the small group, each student will be assigned a subject area (geography, education, language, religion, history, government, or economy); some subject areas may require two students.

Students will take notes on subject matter that they:

Think is important, and

Think that their classmates will find interesting.

Students will take notes on four or five different subject-related facts, using one "Game Card Research Sheet" for each fact. The first part of this sheet is for these notes while the second part, titled "Game Card Questions" is for converting the information into question form.

Students will share one fact/question with the group before storing their sheets into their "Desert Fever" folder. On another day, they will type out their questions, then paste them to the blank Game Card. One student from each group will share one chosen question with the whole class; this will serve as an example for students who are struggling to convert their facts into questions. Later, everyone will share all of their

questions, possibly in report form.

Lesson Three

Title: Deciding on a Game Board

Purpose: To select a game board, using democratic methods.

Materials: "Game Board Suggestion Sheet", construction paper, ruler, and a pencil.

Activities and Procedures:

Following up a class "Game Day" activity (each small group spends a half an hour playing a board game), the teacher will lead a brainstorm session on what a game should have, in terms of layout and parts. Students should be lead to include:

- Squares for player movement
- Start and Finish Lines
- Game pieces
- Dice or spinner?
- Area(s) for Game Cards

2. Using the aforementioned materials, students will design a game board. This will be done individually or in small groups, depending on student preference.
3. Each student, or group of students, will then display their game board design (done on construction paper) at the front of the room. Each student will have the remainder of the day to cast a ballot, voting for their favorite game board. They should also be asked to explain *why* they chose that particular game board.

Final Project

Students will create a game board, complete with game cards relating to the Middle East. As they learn about the geography, people, history, government, and economy of each country, they will be following the steps in a creative process that includes research, question writing, cooperative learning, and voting. They will be building an educational tool to be used by their class as well as other classes. When these students sit down to play their game for the first time, this will be the closure to the unit. The teacher will also want to allow time for the "L" ("What I **L** earned") section of the "KWL" chart to be completed.

Unit Vocabulary

Abaya -- A long overcoat often worn over the gambaz; protects from the sand.

Arabian Nights -- Classic collection of one thousand and one stories that includes "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" and "Sinbad the Sailor".

Arabic -- This is usually a reference to language, but is sometimes used to refer to anything that is of the Arab, or Middle Eastern, people; their culture and history.

Baklava -- A flaky pastry.

Bazaar -- An open air market for buying and selling goods (see "souk").

Bedouins -- Nomadic Arabs.

Dromedary -- The one-humped domesticated camel widely used as work animal in the Middle East; also called the Arab Camel.

Fellahin (or Fellaheen) -- Peasant farmers who live along the Nile River.

Fez -- Head piece that looks like a red flower pot turned upside down; also referred to as a tarboush.

Galabeya -- Long cotton gowns.

Gambaz -- Cotton clothing that is like a robe, reaching from the neck to the ankles.

Geddoh - Grandfather.

Great Pyramids of Giza -- Three pyramids that were built to be tombs for three pharaohs.

Great Sphinx -- The famous statue that features a lion's body and a human's head.

Habibi -- An affectionate term shared between adults and children that means "My love".

Harem -- Part of the tent where the women (men can have up to 4 wives according to the Koran) and children live; separate from the man's area.

Hieroglyphics -- Egyptian writings and paintings that offer a glimpse of ancient history.

Imam -- Priest who is also the teacher of children; explains the Koran.

Intifada -- The name for Palestinian uprisings against the Israelis.

Islam -- Religion founded by Muhammad (approximately 600 B.C.) and practiced by Muslims around the world.

Judaism -- The official name for the Jewish, or Hebrew, religion; it is a belief in the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and other Hebrew prophets.

Kaffiyeh -- Head piece of cloth that hangs down to the shoulders and is held in place by two strands of cord; protects head from sand and sun.

Khamsin - Windstorms that take place in Egypt in the spring.

Khan al-Khalili Bazaar -- One of the biggest marketplaces in Cairo.

King Tutankhamon (also called King Tut) -- A famous Egyptian king who ruled for a short time.

Konafa -- Dessert with butter-coated shredded wheat and nuts, covered in a rose water syrup.

Koran -- The holy bible of Muslims, it is the collected sayings of Muhammad. (also spelled Qur'an.)

Colonel T.E. Lawrence -- British soldier who helped Arabs rebel against Turkish rule and gain independence; made famous in the film "Lawrence of Arabia".

Mahalabya -- A pudding made from rice, milk, and sugar.

Mecca -- The Saudi Arabian city that is the birthplace of Muhammad; Muslims are supposed to make the journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Medina -- A holy city in Saudi Arabia.

Mosque -- Muslim place of worship.

Muhammad -- Prophet who created Islam; died during the 7th century.

Muslim -- A believer in Islam.

OPEC- Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

Palestine -- The land now known as Israel; it has been ruled by Hebrews, Egyptians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Turks.

Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) -- Led by Yasser Arafat, this is the governing organization of Palestinians living within Israel.

Papyrus -- A type of paper made from the stems of a tall plant that grew along the Nile.

Pharaoh -- A king in ancient Egypt.

Philistines -- 14th century invaders of what is now known as Israel; the word evolved into Palestinian.

Ramadan -- Holy holiday that involves fasting (Muslims cannot eat or drink between sunrise and sunset).

Sheikhdoms -- Governance by royal families; usually financed by oil.

Shi'a Muslim -- (Shi'ite) The more conservative branch of Islam; they feel that only Ali's male descendants should lead the Islamic community (religious and political leaders).

Souk -- A local marketplace.

Sunni Muslims -- The orthodox branch of Islam; they feel that the first 4 caliphs were the rightful successors to Muhammad.

Valley of the Kings -- desert location where many Egyptian kings are buried.

Zionist -- An international movement for the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

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