The Case for Incorporating Middle East into the Curricula

Ali Akbar Mahdi
Ohio Wesleyan University

Why to Teach about the Middle East?

Why should we incorporate the Middle East into our curriculum? Why not other areas of the world? I have no ethnocentric vision of Middle East. I do not think that the Middle East is necessarily any better than any other area to be taught for achieving cross-cultural understanding and developing a more balanced impression of our global interdependence. Everywhere in the world is important and every one person on this planet is important. We need to know about each land and each person to the extent of our curiosity and our relationship with them. The point is not importance but relevance. The question is how relevant the knowledge of an area is to the theoretical and practical objectives of the course. Each area of the world has its own merits and the knowledge and understanding of all of them would be very desirable. However, given the organizational limits on our curriculum, that would not be possible. We need to approach this issue on the basis of demand, necessity, priorities, and relevance. Whether we focus on the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America, or any specific country in any of these areas has to do with the objectives of the course we are planning to teach.

I do not think that we should do all countries and continents because it would be non-discriminating. Following fashion in education is both costly and inappropriate. We need to be more specific in terms of what it is that we want to teach and what it is that we want to cover. Course selection and development are a discriminatory process in the positive sense of the term. Of course, we need to be concerned about how comparatively we are approaching our materials. Whichever the area and whatever the topic, in social sciences we need to worry about the comparativeness of our methodology and course content. The level of comparativeness itself is dependent on the topic and the objectives of the course. Teaching interdependence requires balancing elements of analysis and coverage. For instance, in teaching economic dependency, Egypt provides an excellent case to be included in a course on development. Dealing with superpower rivalry in the contemporary international relations and the proxy wars, Afghanistan will be an excellent case for study. Analyzing single product dependency makes Saudi Arabia and other small Persian Gulf countries prime cases for inclusion. On the other
hand, dealing with the so-called Islamic fundamentalism one could either focus on one country or cover series of countries like Egypt, Iran, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Teaching a course is a practical matter. We only have 10 or 16 weeks, depending on whether one is in a quarter or a semester system. Given this time limitation, we need to balance various practical, theoretical, and pedagogical concerns. Practical concerns are determined by time, resources, and energy. Theoretical concerns deal with questions of where, when, how, and why. Why the Middle East should be taught and why should we incorporate the Middle East into our general curriculum? What kind of information about the Middle East is relevant to our course? Are we looking for factual information, sociological analysis, cultural description, or historical perspective? What periods, what issues, what groups, what parts of the area, and which countries are relevant to the objectives of our course? These questions should be seriously addressed before one approaches the task of incorporation. The decision to incorporate the Middle East follows the establishment of a balance among the above concerns and the specification of course objectives.

Aside from individual cases, I submit that the Middle East provides a strong pedagogical tool form incorporation into our curriculum. In the following, I will attempt to make a case that inclusion of the Middle East in our curriculum is a matter of high importance.

1. First, there is the utilitarian question of oil. From early twentieth century, the West has been intimately involved in the politics of the area in order to secure necessary fuel for its industrial machines. Access to Middle Eastern oil has been and continues to be associated with the national interest of countries like the United States, Germany, England, France, and Japan (Blair, 1977; Yergin, 1991). For American students, it is important to realize how much their purchasing power is affected by the prices of oil coming out of the Middle East. Middle Eastern oil has lubricated the growth of Western manufacturing industry and continues to be the cheapest source of energy for production of goods and commodities so inexpensively available to the middle class Americans. Changes in the political conditions in the Middle East are immediately reflected in the prices of gasoline posted on the sideboards in American streets. Our students should realize that what goes on in the Middle East is directly related to their daily lives, minute by minute as they push the gas pedal under their feet.

2. Second, for more than five decades the West was concerned about the Russian expansion and its influence on the Middle Eastern societies. Containing communist influence and preventing Russians from taking Middle Eastern oil wells were important cornerstone of Western policy toward the area. In post WW II, the United States accepted the responsibility of not allowing the Soviet Union extend its influence onto the countries located the other side of the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

Western alliance with the countries in the area also provided ready bases for
military maneuvers and the establishment of intelligence satellites overlooking Soviet territories nearby. Military alliance with Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey was an important aspect of Western strategy, especially the U.S., for curtailing Soviet expansion in the region. A concern for oil and containment of Soviet influence practically involved the Middle East in major rivalries of the twentieth century. The increasing interdependency of the global markets in recent decades has further increased the importance of the Middle East in the new world order (Mahdi, 1994).

3. Politically speaking, Middle East has been a hot international spot for most of this century, especially after World War I, and it continues to be so today. The Western world is extremely worried about the rise of so-called Islamic fundamentalism in the area and its influence on other Moslem countries around the world (Ellsworth, 1995; Esposito, 1992). Many of the countries in the area with close ties to the U.S. are threatened by the real and perceived dangers of the Islamist groups in those countries. These groups are demanding a halt in the importation of foreign luxury goods, sale of alcohol, showing of foreign movies, and economic ties with the Western countries. The close alliances developed between these countries and the West are opposed by these groups.

4. Pedagogically speaking, teaching Middle East is an exercise in deconstruction. So much of what is taught about the Middle East is wrapped up in the Orientalist unfounded assumptions and ethnocentrist views that it becomes absolutely necessary to take a corrective pedagogy toward teaching the Middle East. Students in American elementary and high schools hear and read very little about the Middle East. What they hear and read are often found to be extremely limited, distorting, and biased. Even when these students enter colleges and universities, they still remain either misinformed or unfamiliar with the Middle East (Amirahmadi and et al., 1993). Courses on the Middle East are non-existent on American campuses. Often history departments, if they are large and have someone on faculty familiar with the Middle East, teach one or two courses about the area. In larger universities, where there are Middle Eastern Studies Centers, one can find more courses on the Middle East. In these campuses, mostly students specializing in the Middle Eastern studies are exposed to the knowledge of the Middle Eastern society and culture. For other students, courses on the sociology, history, and anthropology of the Middle East remain exotic alternatives for fulfilling their elective credits.

Knowledge of the Middle East in the U.S. has been a monopoly of a select few in higher education or experts in and out of the government. Faculty members teaching Middle East are predominantly American and affiliated to think-thank organizations doing research on foreign policy. These think-thank organizations are best known for generating policy-oriented knowledge of the area—a knowledge heavily biased by US foreign policy interests in countries under the investigation. The information processed by these centers for strategic studies are often biased and tainted by the political interests of those organizations and foundations funding
them. Therefore, it is crucial to expose our students to the Middle East as it exists for the Middle Easterners. Without such an empathic knowledge of the area, we continue to have political leaders who base their policy orientation on their preconceived notions of the area -- conceptions which have often led us to political blunders in dealing with the people and cultures of that area in the past three decades (Rubin, 1980; Sick, 1985).

5. Culturally speaking, Middle East is important to know about because there is, in spite of all the similarities that exist between the cultures and social structures in the Middle East and the United States, important differences that serve as excellent pedagogical tools for enlightening discussions in the classroom. These differences are paramount in the conception of civil society, the role of religion in public life, the role and obligations of the individual in society. In the following, I illustrate several of these differences.

Islam is a semantic religion having an Abrahamic root much in the same way that Christianity and Judaism are rooted in this tradition. Despite this similarity, Islam presents a different contrast for our students because it has a different emphasis on social life. In terms of the way in which people come to understand their own religion and incorporate it into their daily lives Islam really provides a contrast to many ways in which we in the Christian world organize our lives. For instance, take the role of the government in society and its relationships to religion. Governments in most Western countries are formally organized on the principle of separation of church and the state. Islam does not accept such a separation. From the beginning of this century, secular elites educated in the West have attempted to graft this notion of separation into the political structures of the Middle East. Such an effort has not worked very well (Sivan, 1985). The development of modern nation-states based on purely secular objectives has been viewed by the masses as a Western imposition, especially when such development was administered by the political elites receiving material and non-material support from the Western countries. This imposition of change from above without adequate consideration for indigenous cultural values has left the Middle East in a state of political instability as we find it today. From the moment this idea was introduced to the region at the turn of the century until now there has been strong opposition by the ulama (religious leaders) and other traditional sectors to it. It was this historical opposition which culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy in Iran in 1979 (Keddie, 1983). The Islamic Revolution in Iran replaced the most secular, Westernized, and powerful friendly government to the West with a theocratic state which is based on incorporation of religion to secular politics. It brought religion back at the center of social, economic, and political life in the society. Therefore, we need to discuss and understand these dimensions of the changes in the Middle East from factual and historical viewpoints. The case of the Islamic Republic of Iran provides a very good contemporary example for discussing the effects of weaving religion into the fabric of modern society. The case of Israel provides an excellent example of what religious nationalism means
and what it can achieve. A comparative understanding of workings of Islam in the context of the contemporary Iran also makes it much easier to show the effects of religious reforms in the Christianity in the past two centuries.

Another point of contrast is the emphasis on individualism in the West. Islam is a community-oriented religion de-emphasizing entrepreneurial individualism so prevalent in Western societies. American educational system puts a great deal of emphasis on the role of individual in the society. Individualism has become one of the major cultural values in the American society in general, especially in the corporate America (Bellah, et. al., 1985). Schools teach a heavy dose of self-reliance, self-promotion, and self-marketing. The management of self and individual feelings has become a major industry in American society. Marketability no longer is a term limited to the economic courses. Students are taught and encouraged to choose marketable majors and to position themselves for growth in the future global market. Success is defined in terms of individual financial achievement and material positions.

In the Islamic Middle East, you find a different trend. Here, except for the forces of modernization and secularization, you find the traditional value system viewing individualism as arrogant, egoistic, and detrimental to societal fabric. Individual identity is derived from collective engagement in the clan, kinship, community, and society (Barakat, 1993). Success is determined not in terms of individual achievement but in terms of individual contribution to the enhancement of family and group interest. That is a very different type of perception of who one should be and what kind of child rearing and child raising a family should practice in society.

6. In the next section of this paper, I will argue that public knowledge of the Middle East in the West is both limited and biased. If so, then the mere acceptance of the fact that our knowledge of the Middle East is distorted makes it necessary to educate ourselves and our students about the Middle East. There is so much about the Middle East as we know it that is in need of correction. Most people in this country think that the Middle East basically consists of Arab people and all Arabs are Moslems. This information is wrong and should be corrected.

We have the responsibility of informing our students that not all the people living in the Middle East are Arabs. You have Persians, Turks, Afghans, and Kurds who are not Arabs. True, majority of people in the Middle East are Moslem but Islam is not the only religion in the Middle East. The largest Islamic country in the world, i.e. Indonesia, is not even in the Middle East. Indeed the majority of the Moslems of the world live outside of the Middle East.

We need to teach the fact that the Middle East is not a monolith. Neither Middle East as a geographical unit nor Islam as a religion are uniform. Diversity, rather than uniformity, is a better adjective for describing the cultures and people of the Middle East. There are Moslems of all types in the Middle East: Shi'i, Sunni, young, old, radical, moderate,
conservative, peaceful, violent, modernist, and traditionalist. There are people of several ethnic groups practicing several different religions. Understanding this diversity is very important for our students confronting the complexities of political and economic interdependence in the twenty first century. The importance of this cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity should be emphasized and a recognition of differences in people's experiences should be advanced.

Difficulties in Teaching about the Middle East:

Incorporating the Middle East into the curriculum is an important task but a difficult one. The difficulties in teaching about the Middle East stem from several political, sociological, historical, and educational factors. In what follows, I will try to briefly discuss some of these difficulties.

The first difficulty in dealing with the Middle East has to do with recent negative images of that region in American media. Hardly any week passes during which Americans are not exposed to some negative news about the Middle East, especially news of bombing, hijacking, hostage-taking, anti-American demonstrations, or stone throwing at Jews in Israel. Since escalation of the civil war in Lebanon in early 1980, the phrase "Iranian-backed Hezbollah" has been associated with every militant activity taking place in the region. The fear of the "communism" has been replaced by fear of the "Islamic fundamentalism" (Ellsworth, 1995). Little of what is reported in the news about the region is positive or helpful for better understanding of the complicated nature of events in that part of the world. Such a high level of negative exposure definitely frustrates viewers with the Middle East and the Middle Easterners as well. Our students as well as the public are turned off by the images of events in that region as reported in our mass media.

Added to this negativity is the high level of misinformation given to an audience who either knows nothing about the area or what little it knows is inaccurate. What has been taught about the area in high schools is both limited and distorted. Moslems are viewed as Arabs. Their religion is identified as Mohammadan -- a characterization both contrary and offensive to Islamic beliefs (Gibb, 1969). Women are shown either as passive creatures bundled up in chador (veil) or sexually attractive belly-dancers for private harems of the kings and viziers (Mobro, 1991). As for the knowledge of the area, research has shown that most American students are not adequately familiar with the people and cultures of the area. Many American high school students have even problem locating well-known countries of the area on the map.

The anti-Americanism of the past decade and a half has also contributed to further reinforcement of the negative images and stereotyping of the people of the Middle East in the West. While there has been an increase in the number of publications on Islam, Iran, and the Islamic revolution since 1980, there has been little decrease in the confusion about the nature
of politics, cultural expressions, and religious revivalism in the countries of that area. As a matter of fact, the rise of the Islamic militancy and new political hostility between the West and Islamist groups have contributed to the development of a new stereotype for young, bearded, Moslem Middle Easterner as suspicious "terrorists." Since the takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran, "terrorist," "violent," and "mad" are comfortably used for describing people of this region. Moslems are regarded as mad people who are engaged in violence in order to destroy the West. In numerous occasions when I have introduced myself as an Iranian, I have humorously confronted the question "you are not one of those terrorists? Are you?"

Given these conditions, the level of interest in learning about the Middle East in the United States is very low. The Middle East is too remote from the subjectivity of American students and its objective relevance is too abstract, and often confusing, for them to be able to understand. The area is too far away, its cultures are too different from anything our students know, its languages are totally unfamiliar, its religion is alien, and attitudes of its people towards Americans seemingly too antagonistic. With this kind of image at hand, it becomes very profoundly difficult to convince the American student to invest his/her time in learning about the Middle East.

Another difficulty in teaching about the Middle East is the oppressive character of the realities associated with the socio-politico-economic realities of the region. Of course, this is a generic problem in teaching about the Third World. Images of hunger, starvation, poverty, violence, deprivation, torture, and substandard life style are very depressing to students who live in a rich country with the highest living standards on the earth. For a student who has been shielded from negative realities of his/her own society, such images are heartbreaking and depressing. Given the lack of political activism and prevailing ethnocentrism among our students (Parenti, 1994), such exposure promotes their sense of helplessness. This is the most negative effect of this encounter. Most of the American students find themselves overwhelmed by the extent of the poverty and brutality of conditions of social life in these societies. These problems seem insurmountable and at times even very difficult to understand.

Contradictions in these societies are visibly startling. Amazed by the prevailing contradictions of poverty and riches, good and evil, strong cultural traditions and weak protection of individual rights, courageous but often corrupt political leaders, strong religious institutions and weak civic establishment, these students develop a resentful attitude towards the people of the area as though they are the only ones responsible for their current predicament. Given the multitude, persistence, and depth of these problems, it is very difficult for an American student to imagine how things can be changed. While this often makes most of the students very frustrated, it turns some of them off thinking that if they can not do anything about it why bother to learn about it.

This apathy is very difficult to remove. In teaching sociology of development in the past fifteen years, I have always run into this problem. Teachers have to work on this
problem very hard in order to convince students that learning about these problems is itself an important step in changing them. They have to demonstrate that knowing that poverty exists, knowing that oppression exists, even knowing that some of those people who have fought for eliminating poverty, oppression, and abuses of human rights have failed, does not mean that we should give up our hope for change.

Teaching about these areas of the world requires a broader perspective allowing us to see that the Middle East does not consist of people who live there today, but of people of generations of struggle, generations of existence, and generations of efforts. We have to take a historical look at the process of social life in the underdeveloped countries and approach it in a more positive way. For this reason, the first requirement in teaching the Middle East is the same as in teaching development, that is, to provide our students with a sense that the mission looks impossible but it is both possible and doable and we need to work at it. We need to convey to our students that people living in these countries continue to live and work at their problems. Middle Eastern people know how bad their social, economic, and political situations are but they do not despair. They do not sit back and watch things happen to them.

Oppression exists and situation at times looks very bleak. But struggle also exists and there are thousands of points of light. Let me provide an example of how inaccurate our perception of reality in the Middle East is and how such inaccuracy feeds into our doomsday. I had not been in Iran for more than sixteen years. The images we have been receiving from that country are very bleak. These images are received not only from the media but from academic publications as well. Prior to my departure, many of my enlightened academic colleagues questioned my wisdom of going back to that country again! Of course, they were concerned for my safety and well-being. But they also had the impression that the country is not safe for travel. That I would even run the risk of being physically harmed. That economic shortages and political constraints would make it difficult for me and my children, who were accompanying me, to enjoy our trip. Well, I went to Iran and found out that some of those stories I had read in American newspapers about Iran were true, some half-true, and some others very exaggerated. But life in Tehran and other cities we visited was going on. People were not sitting there waiting for an American to come there to save them. People were sanely dealing with a war-afflicted economy, with a newly emerging political elite attempting to monopolize opportunities for its own, and with an exploding population balloon. People know all these things but they continue to go to work, come back home, take care of their families, and in the meantime work on removing the obstacles in their way of achieving their goals. They were very busy, tired, and stressed but very hopeful. True, the Islamic government is very repressive and the economic situation is almost hopeless. But people are resisting these pressures and dealing with these problems in many creative ways that are unimaginable for us in this country. We need to understand this about people. That they are adaptable and creative. As teachers, we need to talk about this resistance
Exposing students to these realities has the effect of educating them and preparing
them for enlightened activism. Seeing how much the people of the Middle miss in what
Americans have encourages students to appreciate the quality of life and the quantity of
opportunities they have in their own country. In fact, if it happens, this would be the most
positive effect of such an encounter with the area. Such an enlightenment will hopefully
translate to some form of action in the form of taking more active interest in learning about the
area and effective lobbying efforts for social change.

How Should We Teach the Middle East?

A good way to begin the study of another culture is to begin with a discussion on
ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and their functions and effects. The study of the Middle East
should start with a discussion of Orientalism. So much we know about Orient is the product
of our own imagination. Edward Said’s Orientalism becomes a must here (Said, 1979). He has
done a marvelous job of showing how much what we know about the Middle East is really a
projection of what we know about ourselves. The images we have developed of the people and
cultures of the Middle East are really antitheses of our own. The Orient as we know it in the
West is the antithesis of the Occident. In the Orient, we wish to see what we do not like to see
about ourselves. We project onto the others what we do not wish to be. Orient is a constructed
image which says more about ourselves than about the Other. Recent studies about the Middle
East have demonstrated that Orientalist view of the Moslem world is based on unfounded
assumptions, inadequate data, biased formulations, and inappropriate materials. Most of what
Marx and Weber wrote about Islam and the Middle were based on information taken from
sources with very limited exposure and understanding of the area (Said, 1978, 1981; Naderi,

Teaching about the Middle East, or incorporating the Middle East into current
curriculum, then, requires efforts which go beyond exposition and presentation. We should
begin with de-programming or undoing of what has been taught in the past. We have to begin
demystifying the Middle East as a place of hidden sexual treasures, rich sheikhs, and poor
camel-riders wandering the arid lands. We need to provide a non-biased picture of Islam and
the cultural beliefs of diverse inhabitants of that region (Said, 1981). We must inform our
readers that Islam is not a monolithic religion and the Middle is not inhabited only by Arabs.
That the region is diverse in climate, culture, ethnicity, and religion. We have to start talking
about the real Middle East not the imagined Middle East created by the Orientalists (Said,
1978). We have to begin to talk about the real people of the region not those made for the
movies in the Hollywood. We have to create the image of Avicenna (980-1037) rather than
Aladdin! The real people, culture, history, and happenings in the Middle East should be the
subject of attention by American students interested in learning about our interdependent world.
To do this, we need to go beyond the usual utilitarian interest in Middle Eastern oil. Historically, we have been interested in the Middle East because of the oil. There also has been some fascination with the exotic features of life in the Middle East: the mysterious women, the pyramid, the desert, the wandering dervishes, and Aladdin and the magical lamp. But beyond that we really do not find much interest in the Middle East among the public. This lack of interest is prevalent on campuses too. Courses on the Middle East either do not exist or if they do, they are not as attractive as courses on Europe to which we are historically and intellectually connected. Introduction of the Middle East into the curriculum requires efforts at the departmental and institutional level so that not only courses and topics are introduced into the curriculum but also students are encouraged at all levels to take these courses and expose themselves to the knowledge about the area.

After removing negative attitudes and distorted views about the region, we need to create a positive attitude about the Middle East among our students. This positive attitude on the part of our students is necessary. How do we do this? We do this by raising questions about the students’ attitudes towards the Middle East. We have to elicit students’ apprehensive and positive feelings about the lives of people in that part of the world. This exercise requires both cognitive and affective learning strategies by which a student can confront his/her attitudes about the region and its inhabitants. Students’ concerns and curiosities have to be excited. They have to be able to make cognitive connection to the lives of people and the structures of the community in that area. The students should be helped to move from a prospective upon them to a feeling of concern, involvement and identity with the people of the region.

The best way to achieve such an identification is to begin at an affective level through novels and films. The worst approach is to start with a textbook. It will be much more effective to use a case study or a novel through which the student can really go into the lives of these people and see them in their natural places in their own social web. Students can touch and be touched by the characters and the lives of people they see or read about. Approaching these people this way, students see that people of this area are very much like themselves who have daily lives similar to theirs in this country. That these people fight the same daily battles that you and I fight every day, week, and month of our life. That they have to put up with difficulties similar to those we experience everyday. That they are normal people. This provides students with a holistic picture of life in the Middle East -- a picture very different than the one narrated and put in brief phrases in a dry textbook. Videos and films can reach students at the affective level much more effectively than any other means.

Having provided the opportunity for cognitive learning, students now are able to begin evaluating their knowledge of the area and its people more objectively. Now it is the time to bring in theories and perspectives for analyzing the structure of politics, economy, religion, and so on. The cognitive picture can be supplemented by analytical understanding. Simulations become very effective at this stage (Travis, 1975).
Furthermore, we need to approach the Middle East both historically and holistically. We need to show the comprehensive picture of the reality in the Middle East. To introduce students to bits and pieces of images, information, and photographic shots reinforces the stereotypes and makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive picture of the realities of the Middle East. Today, the Middle East is not what it was in the past. So much of what the Middle East is today is the result of Western involvement in the political and economic affairs of the area in the last century. Current Middle East is the product of Western political engineering between the World War I and World War II. None of the current boundaries in the area represent the historical or natural boundaries of the countries in the region. Borders of Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, and all the small countries of the Persian Gulf were all drawn by the European powers, namely England, Germany, France and the United States (Fromkin, 1991). These historical facts should be brought to light.

We need to demonstrate the historical roots of current problems in the area. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the civil war in Lebanon, the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border dispute which led to the take-over of Kuwait by Iraq and the subsequent involvement of a multinational force for driving Iraqis out of Kuwait, the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq and Kurdish resistances in Turkey and Iran, the Armenian conflict with the Turks, and all other conflicts in the area have historical roots and should not be viewed as something that appeared in the past few years or decades. These conflicts are very much tied to the developments taking place in the West in the last century and a half. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 should not be seen as the making of a religious fanatic gone mad but as the historical consequence of forty years of US involvement in Iran supporting a dictator as a modernizing king.

Finally, teaching about the Middle East should promote an attitude among our students that views international relations in terms of understanding, negotiation, cross-cultural communication, and mutual respect, rather than violence, conquest and military might. An attitude which respects each country’s traditions, values and history.

If we teach our students historicity, if we approach the Middle East and other parts of the world in historical terms, if we establish historical connection between development in the West and underdevelopment in the Middle East, then we have provided our students with a broader perspective that hopefully in the future help them to better deal with the developments in that part of the globe. Such an understanding could help our students as future leaders to view foreign policy issues in a broader human, rather than political, terms. Our students planning to go to foreign services should develop an attitude that does not approach other countries in terms of immediate gains, but as members of a large family who are bound together in a common goal for decent survival on this planet. They have to develop an appreciation for mutual respect, sharing, and cooperation.
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