

UNSCRAMBLING THE MUDDLE EAST: CRISIS INFLUENCE ON MENTAL MAPS OF THE GULF THEATER

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ABSTRACT: During 1990 and 1991, list-format mental map data were compiled of high school and college students' conceptions of the countries comprising the Middle East. The results span student awareness prior to, during, and after the Gulf War. The results also permit an appraisal of grade-specific awareness of the Middle East in Upstate New York secondary schools from grades 7 through 12. Awareness differences capture the advance and recession of the perceived importance of some countries in the region, including the region's micro-states. Despite media coverage variations and the relative prominence of Gulf War combatants, factors such as population and geographical area remained the principal factors associated with awareness differentials. By late summer 1991 a follow-up survey of college student awareness permits a fairly accurate estimate of the transiency of the conflict's impact on mental maps of the region.

WAR AND REMEMBERING

By appropriating and modifying the title of the sequel to *Winds of War*, I mean to stress that direct American involvement in international conflict heightens geographic awareness of the military theaters of engagement. During the Second World War, for example, the nation's geographic literacy quickened under its constant and close exposure to articles and maps in major newspapers¹, newsreels, radio broadcasts, and wartime magazine correspondents such as Martha Gellhorn². Added to this was the relentless new globalism of American popular culture, stoking awareness through motion pictures, popular music, advertising, and mass fiction³. Naturally, of special importance was family and community concern for the millions of armed forces personnel sent overseas. Little wonder that even today many septuagenarians exhibit an enviable geographic literacy rooted in their wartime experience.

Now that national interest in the list-making absolutism of E.D. Hirsch, Jr.⁴ seems to have waned, it is time to reaffirm the mutability of the loose corpus of cultural literacy in American society, and its necessary, very desirable dependence on what is absorbed outside the classroom. The Gulf conflict combines several features of interest as a stimulus to American awareness of the Middle East. First, unparalleled real time continuous media coverage made for intense public involvement. Second, maximum use was made of maps as visual aids, most eloquently in the case of the floor-to-wall studio map used by Peter Jennings. Third, seven months of preparation preceded a brief, tactically decisive, and mostly invisible test of arms. In this respect the Gulf conflict (and perhaps the geographic awareness it engendered) was the antithesis of the Vietnam experience. Fourth, the Gulf conflict was sandwiched between powerful images of Eastern European freedom or the tragedy of Tiananmen and 1991's stunning events in the Soviet Union. Finally, unlike Korea, Vietnam, and most other occasions for American armed intervention in the post-War era, the Gulf War embroiled familiar nation states in a volatile and, of course, much publicized world region. Thus one might expect a

bedrock American geographic awareness of the Middle East focused on the region's many wars and crises extending back to Israeli statehood.

SURVEY DESIGN

At the start of the academic year in September 1990, I asked the students in my introductory human geography class to list all the countries they could think of in the Middle East. Barring a few bizarre responses such as 'Bolivia', and a smattering of pan-Islamic mentions from Morocco to Bangladesh, the Geneseo students showed broad general agreement over which countries comprise the region. Table 1 profiles the fifteen countries within this core perceptual region, and the ability of six respondent groups to identify those countries between September 1990 and a year later. Nine Geneseo undergraduates surveyed Middle East awareness in New York State schools during November 1990. Rob Wells and I re-surveyed student awareness in introductory geography classes in January and September 1991. In all, 974 schoolchildren and undergraduates reported their sense of the Middle East during the build-up, climax, and aftermath of the Gulf War.

RESULTS

Euphony and notoriety combine to fix Iran and Iraq in young Americans' mental map of the Middle East (Table 1). These two countries were always named by at least 90 per cent of Geneseo students and 80 per cent of the high school students. Kuwait, the casus belli, eluded many during the early phases of the military build-up, and some during the bombing and ensuing ground war. Awareness of Kuwait has now slipped to less than 75 per cent among the Geneseo students surveyed, a level not much greater than that of grade six pupils less than a year ago.

The results for Saudi Arabia and Israel surely reveal the transfixing impact of missile attacks broadcast live. In January almost all the students named these two countries; now only three-quarters do. Similar transitory peaks characterize the students' awareness of Jordan and Syria. Turkey and Egypt, on the other hand, are both key gateway countries for the region, but were not accorded much media coverage during the air and ground war. Thus, they exhibit awareness levels that have changed very little over time. In fact, the levels also differ very little between undergraduate and high school students.

Student awareness of Lebanon has improved recently, presumably owing to renewed news coverage of western hostages held there. Awareness of the small Persian Gulf states and Yemen remained low throughout the crisis, and is commonly slightly higher among high school students than among the undergraduates surveyed. Historically these countries have received almost no media coverage (Table 1). Awareness levels of circa ten per cent possibly reflect self-imposed rote learning or atlas familiarity rather than classroom instruction.

MEDIA EXPOSURE

Geneseo students surveyed in January 1991 were asked to state their newspaper reading habits (Table 2). The students' awareness of the six principal countries and three major cities touched by the Gulf War was high and unrelated to students' newspaper reading habits. For all other Middle Eastern countries and cities Geneseo's self-described frequent newspaper readers consistently exhibited the highest awareness levels.

RETENTION

Unaided recall of Baghdad and Tel Aviv fell precipitously between January and September 1991 (Table 3). In general the dramatic decline in students' awareness of Middle Eastern cities reveals the transitory impact of a few weeks intense media exposure. Riyadh, Dhahran, and Amman for example have faded from all but a few memories (Table 3). Already less than one half the students identify Baghdad. Media coverage of the oil fires and post-war conditions have heightened awareness of Kuwait City, while the combined impact of hostage releases and Secretary Baker's travels prompted awareness of Beirut and Damascus at the time of the survey. Such ripples of recall may persist for little more than a day or so.

CONCLUSION

Intense media coverage of the Gulf conflict produced heightened levels of awareness of the Middle East. For the young Americans we surveyed, this heightened appreciation of the region's geography was usually little more than knowing the handful of countries and cities drawn most fully into the conflict and its repercussions. Since the American withdrawal began, between 20 and 25 per cent of the students seem to have forgotten important pieces in the puzzle such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Israel. Indeed, the nucleus of the students' mental map has contracted to a status quo ante focused on Iran and Iraq. Thus, the unusual features of the Gulf conflict - notably its lengthy preamble, riveting television journalism, and quick decision - have not left an enduring mental map. That short war bred some very short memories.

NOTES

1. Vaughan-Thomas, Wynford (Ed.). Great Front Pages. D-Day to Victory (London: William and Collins & Sons Ltd., 1984), published in the United States by Joshua Morris, Inc., Westport, CT.
2. Gellhorn, Martha. The Face of War (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988) first published in 1959, revised.
3. Lingeman, Richard R. Don't You Know There's a War On?: The American Home Front, 1941-1945 (New York: Perigee Books, 1980) See especially Ch. VI, pp. 168-233 "Will This Picture Help Win The War?" See also Paul Fussell's Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
4. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. Cultural Literacy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

TABLE 1. SURVEYS OF MIDDLE EAST GEOGRAPHIC AWARENESS, 1990-91

COUNTRY	AWARENESS LEVEL OF SCHOOL-CHILDREN BY GRADE, NOVEMBER 1990			AWARENESS LEVEL OF COLLEGE STUDENTS (GENESE0 INTRODUCTORY GEOGRAPHY CLASS)			POPULATION OF COUNTRY (millions)	PAST NEWS COVERAGE (No. of <u>New York Times</u> articles during 1989)
	GRADES 6&7	GRADES 9&10	GRADES 11&12	Sept 11 1990	Jan 24 1991	Sept 5 1991		
	(per cent of students who named country)							
Iraq	84	90	94	97	100	94	18.8	78
Iran	70	86	89	93	95	93	55.6	342
Kuwait	70	82	88	69	85	74	2.1	18
Saudi Arabia	67	83	80	89	97	74	15.0	70
Israel	39	43	66	57	96	78	4.6	472
Egypt	23	40	51	43	37	32	54.7	133
Jordan	25	26	44	61	85	57	4.1	51
Turkey	31	31	31	31	27	33	56.7	65
Syria	22	20	30	35	59	36	12.6	116
Lebanon	20	10	29	35	26	44	3.3	264
Yemen	14	12	18	15	13	14	9.8	6
United Arab Emirates	19	12	17	23	19	17	1.6	4
Oman	12	11	11	9	9	11	1.5	1
Quatar	17	10	10	7	5	6	0.5	1
Bahrain	10	7	9	0	7	2	0.5	0
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	167	230	245	122	110	100		

SOURCES: November 1990 survey of 642 middle and high school students for research papers in an introductory human geography course at S.U.N.Y. Geneseo. Research undertaken by: Andrea Vogt, Kristin Brock, Robert Burd, Matthew Reding, Bruce Van Weelden, Tracy Aiello, Melissa Younker, Melissa Arnone, and Greg Zah. Cooperating NYS schools included: Williamsville, Hornell, Byron-Bergen, Saranac Lake, Hilton Central, and three other schools. Geneseo introductory class data compiled by the author and Rob Wells, work-study assistant, Department of Geography, S.U.N.Y. Geneseo. New York Times coverage based on the New York Times Index, 1989.

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TABLE 2. MIDDLE EAST AWARENESS AND DAILY NEWSPAPER EXPOSURE, S.U.N.Y. GENESE0, INTRODUCTORY GEOGRAPHY CLASS, JANUARY 24, 1991.

COUNTRY	STUDENT'S STATED HOME EXPOSURE TO DAILY NEWSPAPER			(per cent who named country or city)
	"FREQUENT"	"OCCASIONAL"	"RARE"	
Iraq	100	100	100	100
Saudi Arabia	100	100	90	90
Israel	100	96	93	93
Iran	90	94	100	100
Kuwait	86	87	83	83
Jordan	86	85	86	86
Syria	72	50	62	62
Egypt	48	37	28	28
Turkey	45	33	34	34
Lebanon	52	17	17	17
United Arab Emirates	34	13	14	14
Yemen	17	13	7	7
Oman	14	10	3	3
Bahrain	17	6	0	0
Qatar	10	2	3	3
CITY				
Tel Aviv	93	81	86	86
Baghdad	86	85	79	79
Jerusalem	76	69	66	66
Tehran	62	37	21	21
Riyadh	52	33	10	10
Amman	41	21	31	31
Calro	45	25	14	14
Dhahran	34	25	21	21
Beirut	34	21	7	7
Kuwait City	31	13	10	10
Damascus	24	10	3	3
Mecca	7	2	0	0
Medina	3	2	0	0
Ankara	3	2	0	0
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	29	52	29	

SOURCE: Survey and analysis by Darrell Norris, compilation by Rob Wells, Department of Geography, SUNY Geneseo.

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TABLE 3. FADING AWARENESS OF GULF THEATER CITIES

CITY	January 24, 1981	September 5, 1991
	(per cent who named city)	
Baghdad	84	47
Tel Aviv	85	18
Jerusalem	70	51
Tehran	39	24
Riyadh	32	7
Amman	29	3
Cairo	27	14
Dhahran	26	4
Beirut	21	18
Kuwait City	17	35
Damascus	11	14

SOURCE: SUNY Geneseo freshman geography class surveys.