



PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Integrative Learning and Simulating Revolution and Protest in the Middle East

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Abstract

This essay explores insights from our experiences teaching undergraduates a set of paired history and political science courses on protest and revolution in the Middle East. Working in groups, students developed simulations of key moments of revolution or protest explored during the courses. The simulation assignment was designed to engage students in an active learning setting and as a shared assignment across both courses. The most interesting result of this project, from the teaching perspective, was its unanticipated ability to expose students to the contingency and emotion that scholarship has recently emphasized as critical to understanding social movements, but which so often falls out of the study of history and political science analyses of protest and revolution. In this paper we explore the simulation assignment, how student groups designed the simulations with limited guidance from instructors, how students took on the assigned roles by engaging deeply with the histories of the events, and how the engagement in the simulations complicated the analyses that formed the bedrock of our course readings. In our analysis we draw on two iterations of the paired courses and use both student qualitative assessments of the course and student reflections on the simulations that were included in group papers.

Keywords: Simulation; Active learning; Revolution; Protest; Contingency; Pedagogy

When the two of us first decided to teach linked courses on revolutions and protests in the Middle East, we did not envision our classroom being turned into a map of Egypt with railway lines running across the room or a schematic city with a mosque in the center. Nor did we think that students would be throwing balls into buckets, taking each other prisoner, playing with Jenga sets, or using candy as money. We began with somewhat staid ideas of how to simulate moments of protest and revolution and our students surprised and delighted us with the forms those simulations took.

Muhlenberg College, where we both teach, revised the general education curriculum in 2013. Responding to broader concerns in higher education, Integrative Learning emerged as a distinctive element of our undergraduate curriculum. Students must enroll in an Integrative Learning experience that emphasizes making connections across disciplinary, methodological, or epistemological perspectives in order to apply multiple ways of knowing with the goal of empowering students to recognize and solve complex problems, and to ask existing and new questions in more comprehensive ways. While integration across fields of studies happens organically across a liberal arts curriculum, the goal of this curricular requirement is to promote in our students capacities to intentionally engage in integrative learning. In other words, we want our students to recognize and understand that different modes of inquiry approach subjects, problems, or areas of study from different lenses, methods, and ways of knowing, and that many of the complex problems in the world require the application of multiple modes of inquiry. Consequently, the Integrative Learning (IL) requirement foregrounds connections across disciplines in the best tradition of Liberal Arts education. Since the implementation of the new curriculum the College has developed a variety of ways for students to fulfill the IL requirement, including team-taught courses, community engagement courses, and other partnerships between the academic and co-curricular parts of the College.

Our initial curricular element designed to fulfill the IL was what we then called Cluster courses, but now refer to as Linked Courses. These were two courses in two different disciplines that shared a common theme. Cluster courses created mini learning communities insofar as both classes would share the same cohort of students. The two courses were required to have a shared assignment that emphasized the integrative learning goals of the cluster requirement. For this assignment students would have to draw on the perspectives of both courses to demonstrate the relationships between them as well as the limitations of each way of knowing.

We taught our Cluster, “Revolution and Protest in the Middle East,” in Spring 2016 and Spring 2018.¹ The Political Science course, “Contemporary Protest in the Middle East,” applied theoretical frameworks drawn from sociology, political science, and the study of social movements to analyze several recent instances of contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, students focused on the election protests in Iran in 2009, the Arab Spring protests in 2011, and the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey in 2013. The History course, “Revolutions in the Middle East,” focused on the history of revolutions in the twentieth-century Middle East, with emphasis on the constitutional movements in turn-of-the-century Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire, Nasser’s Revolution, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The shared goals of the Cluster included understanding the historical development of

¹ We were in the process of offering a third version of this when Covid-19 forced Muhlenberg to switch from in-person to on-line instruction in the spring of 2020. This disruption changed the nature of the course and forced us to modify the shared assignment away from the simulation project described here.

revolution and protest in the Middle East; evaluating the relationships between regimes and populations over time in order to understand the causes of revolution and protest in the Middle East; and understanding how states and authorities have sought to control populations in the region.

To foreground the curricular goals of the integrative learning requirement, both courses build toward a shared integrative assignment: tabletop simulations of different moments of revolution and protest in the Middle East. Students in the cluster were randomly divided into four groups of five or six students and asked to develop an in-class simulation of one of four moments of protest in the Middle East and North Africa. Early in the semester, groups were given a set of guidelines to design such a simulation. The simulations focused on two moments of protest and revolutionary upheaval in Egypt (the 1919 protests against British colonial rule and the 2011 Arab Spring protests), and two moments in Iran (the 1979 Revolution and the Green Movement's response to the disputed 2009 presidential elections).

Simulations of one sort or another have become popular in history classrooms, with the most famous being the series of *Reacting to the Past* games developed at Barnard College beginning in the late 1990s. *Reacting* games focus on a moment in history and provide instructors and students with extensive materials detailing the context for the historical event, role sheets for the students to prepare to play their roles, primary sources to augment the game book, and an instructor's manual for running the game. Students are engaged in active learning by playing roles and debating the issues outlined in the game materials. There is a wide variety of games available in various stages of development, from prototypes to fully published. Few of these games, however, focus on the history of the Middle East. Of these, only one about the Crusades has been approved for publication. Games focused on the nineteenth- or twentieth-century Middle East are listed only as inactive prototypes.

The simulations our students produced were markedly different from *Reacting* games in that the students both designed the games and played them. Unlike *Reacting to the Past*, our game designers had as much of a learning experience as the game players. Our students designed the games, set the rules, wrote the background materials, and, most importantly, made all the decisions as the games were played. This is unlike *Reacting* games, where the instructor is the primary decision maker. This agency – the placing of students as authority figures in both designing the simulations and weighing the costs, consequences, and feasibility of potential moves – develops a sense of authority in students.² Active learning happened in both the design and play stages for both game designers and players.

The groups began by researching the protest movements and developing a group paper that provided a coherent narrative laying out the historical context, key concerns, important groups, dominant strategies, slogans, and frames, as well as the regime's repressive apparatuses, capabilities, and dominant ideologies. This paper would become the class's shared reading in advance of the

² This idea of authority draws on Paul Hanstedt's *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*, (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2018).

actual simulations in order to assure everyone was sufficiently conversant in the particular historical events in order to take on historically “plausible” roles during the simulation. Groups were instructed to foreground two concerns in developing their simulations: allowing some participants to design a strategy for protest, and allowing others to design a strategy for preserving the regime. In preparing the group papers and the specifics of the simulation, groups were asked to consider a number of factors that shape protest: how the structural environment shaped or constrained avenues of participation; how the logic of authoritarianism shaped both the agenda for protest and the available avenues for protest to occur; the credibility of regime commitments to reform; the likely issues protesters might emphasize and how these issues would be framed; and what resources, tactics, existing networks, and the like could be drawn on to facilitate protest. Groups were also asked to consider a number of factors that affect a regime’s ability to survive: what resources the regime has at its disposal; the regime’s ideology and its resonance within the population; how the regime fosters legitimacy; the capacity for repression and reform; and the mechanisms for repression that the regime could use. These guidelines were generally informed by the dominant theories that have emerged in social movement studies and grounded in the historical record, all things which were discussed in the readings assigned during the first 13 weeks of the courses.

The simulations that the groups designed all shared certain shared elements: each simulation divided the class into relevant social or regime groupings; cast the protests as a game and spelled out the goals for group roles; created incentives and preferences to guide group behavior; designated costs and payoffs for various actions selected; reconfigured the room spatially in such a way as to reflect something about the political geography of the protest under consideration; and identified some mechanism for demonstrating group and regime resources. Simulations began with a key historical event and a prompt asking participants to outline a response to the situation. Action rounds required participants to weigh costs and benefits of particular actions and report back how they would respond to the prompt. This would be followed by subsequent historical prompts until some resolution to the simulation was reached. Essentially, these simulations posed contentious politics in games that invited participants to see social movement activism and revolutionary upheaval as being guided by rational actions designed to meet pre-set preferences through the careful weighing of resources, costs, and potential benefits of particular actions.

There were also some notable differences between the simulations, some of which reflected changes in the resources, locations, and technologies available for protest under consideration, while others involved the simple variation from sequential to simultaneous play for participants. The design choice to have groups act in a round simultaneously or sequentially had extraordinary ramifications on the ability of players to anticipate the reactions and actions of other players. In many ways, the ability of simulations to incorporate simultaneous actions from multiple players more accurately reflects the dynamic nature of social movements and revolutions. Students learned both from the

choices they made in designing the simulations as well as those made while playing them.

Our students were extremely creative in designing their simulations. The instructions were intentionally vague on specifics beyond the necessity of each group having to emphasize either strategies of protest or of repression. Our initial thought was that the simulations would be tabletop exercises, similar to Model UN. We were quite wrong. The student groups devised elaborate games with complex rules, often differentiated for the different social groups being simulated. Each group devised ways to recreate the disparity in resources between protesting groups and repressing states. Each simulation had determined very specific costs to various actions as well as some way to measure those costs, be it pieces of candy or paper “money.” All the simulations found interesting ways to use the classroom space to simulate the geography of protest and repression, and to determine outcomes of the decisions groups had to make in the course of the games, from rolling dice to shooting tennis balls into a basket from various distances designed to reflect levels of difficulty for particular action choices.

A simulation of events in Egypt in 1919, for instance, laid out an elaborate masking tape scheme that included the embedding of the local Egyptian authorities within the sphere of British imperial rule; it included urban protest groups in close proximity to the center of power; it placed rural protest groups in the periphery of the room; it mapped out railway lines linking the rural and urban areas, which could either be used to coordinate protest and move resources, or be cut in acts of sabotage or repression. The Wafd and the ‘ulema’ held central positions in this mapping; a small prison allowed temporary detention of regime adversaries, and a more distant space created the means for sending dissidents into exile.

A simulation of the 1979 revolution in Iran created one central space – “the mosque” – in which the disparate groups (the ‘ulema’, students, the urban poor, and Bazaaris) that made up the revolution gathered before each round of the simulation. There they could communicate freely with each other if they chose, but since the different groups both shared an anti-Shah sentiment and different visions for a post-Shah Iran, some of this communication was quite tempered. The students playing the role of Khomeini were isolated in “Paris” (a taped-off corner of the room) and could only communicate through writings passed to the ‘ulema’ who could then choose how to share his messages to the other protesters gathered within the mosque.

The group simulating the 2009 protests in Iran drew on the importance of Twitter during these protests as a way to engage with both geography and communication across it. Here, Twitter handles were created for each group, and in each round all players would prepare a tweet with their intended action. Updating the twitter feed allowed these actions to be revealed simultaneously, which meant that no group could act with the knowledge of how other groups intended to act. This level of uncertainty nicely illustrated the bounded rationality that more realistically reflects both social movement and regime actors as they engage in the political processes surrounding moments of contentious politics. For this simulation, when actors were arrested they were taken outside of the room and made less aware of how events unfolded in their absence.

The simulation leaders all had to devise ways to determine outcomes to the situations in which they placed the participants. Some groups chose coin tosses or rolling dice. Dice rolls were often made with 12-sided dice to increase the possible outcomes. Other groups used simple games of skill – ball tossing, cup stacking – to determine outcomes. One simulation gave each group of participants a Jenga tower and had them pull out varying numbers of pieces to determine the outcomes of their actions. In this simulation, each group had to maintain its Jenga tower, for failure to do so signaled the regime's successful assertion of repression or control over this social group. Differences in resources were built into the rules. In one version of the Iran 1979 simulation, the regime had many more possible winning numbers in a dice roll than the protestors, who had only one. In a simulation that used tossing balls into a bucket to determine outcomes, the regime got more chances and shot from a shorter distance.

In many cases the possible outcomes of game scenarios had been analyzed by the simulation leaders in advance. In others, participants developed actions unforeseen by the simulation planners. These moments led to the simulation planners having to make in-the-moment decisions about possible gameplay. The simulations and all the actions chosen by players had to be grounded in the historical events being portrayed and informed by the course readings. The participants had to have a good sense of the historical context, the social groups involved, and their interests. Participants had to choose historically plausible actions, even if those choices led to ahistorical outcomes. Some simulations did play out along the lines of actual history, but others did not. For example, one version of the simulation of the 1979 Iranian revolution ended with a military coup ousting the Shah rather than an Islamic revolutionary regime.

These historically plausible actions determined by chance gave the students a direct experience of the dynamic and contingent nature of social movement politics and revolutions. Scholarship in both history and political science tends to freeze history, making it appear as if events occurred in a clearly defined, almost inevitable, logical progression; to underestimate the extent to which actual events owe a great deal to chance, contingency, and luck. The simulations open up the possibilities of alternative outcomes. The students saw firsthand how one single decision could have cascading effects that led to unexpected outcomes. The simulations, among other things, foregrounded the role of contingency in historical processes. This was evident in the course evaluations. One student wrote "It is hard to plan/think of every contingency" and that the simulations "really made people think about the revolutions in a less abstract sense." Another wrote "I thought the greatest strength [of the simulation project] was representing the risk involved with certain actions." The very nature of the simulation games forced the students to contend with the workings of chance and its effect on their revolutions.

Students not only experienced the contingency of protests, but they also were emotionally engaged. Incorporating emotion into the study of social movements and revolutions is something that social movement theorists advocate, but which has generally eluded the work of most historical and political

science analyses of revolutions and protest. The students really got into their roles in the simulations and all the groups wanted to “win.” The game nature of the simulations encouraged competition among the groups. Tensions rose when a student was trying to make a key ball shot or roll a winning number. In several simulations protestors were either arrested or killed. Their colleagues became determined and excited to either get them released or avenged.

Embodying different social and political positions, students became increasingly emotionally invested in the simulation and, even if imperfectly, were able to imagine the emotions that drove the real-world moments of protest and activism. This was also borne out in student evaluations. For instance, one student remarked, “It was interesting to see the level of frustration many students exhibited as their groups were targeted, a sentiment I feel captures some of the real spirit of the Egyptian 1919 Revolution.” That this student was able to sense the frustrations of those in the room provided a concrete way to bring emotions into the analysis of social movements and revolutions. This emotional engagement with the simulations led to greater intellectual engagement with the courses.

Finally, the simulations were fun. Several students who had not been particularly engaged in the classroom were extremely active in both planning, leading, or participating in the simulations. Student written evaluations are full of statements about how much they enjoyed the project and the standardized course evaluations were fairly high for both courses in both iterations. Part of this may just be the active learning that the simulations entailed or the atypical classroom activity. We would argue, though, that the interplay of contingency and emotion that emerged from the simulations was a large part of the fun. The simulations proved to be both engaging to students as well as a means for illustrating both the ways in which emotions inform contentious politics, and that the outcomes of social movement activism and revolutionary upheaval are neither pre-determined nor neat and sequential.

The simulations project successfully achieved the goals of our Integrative Learning requirement. Students drew on the disciplinary perspectives of the two courses to research their moments of protest or revolution and prepare both the background readings and design their simulations. They were able to integrate these perspectives to pose new questions about revolution and protest and find ways to answer those questions. The element of chance built into the games simulated the complexities of real world problems and gave the students opportunities to take charge and apply different methods and to solve the problem at hand. These experiences not only bring together different disciplinary perspectives in the best Liberal Arts tradition but also help to foster in students the sense of authority that is critical for graduating students to become agents of change and “live to their fullest capacity as a human being.”³

³ Hanstedt, 6.

Appendix I: Shared Assignment Simulation Guidelines

The goals for these linked courses include understanding the historical development of revolution and protest in the Middle East; evaluating the relationships between regimes and populations over time in order to understand the causes of protest and revolution in the Middle East; and understanding how states and authorities have sought to control populations in the region.

Part of the goal of the integrative learning component of the curriculum is to provide explicit space for integrating different methodological or epistemological approaches to the study of particular academic topics. To facilitate this process we have incorporated a shared assignment. Our courses will be building toward group-based simulations that seek to apply your learning about historical and contemporary revolution and protest in the Middle East.

As a class you will simulate the experiences of four moments of revolution and protest in the Middle East: 1919 Egypt; 1979 Iran; 2009 Iran; and 2011 Egypt. Students will take on various social roles given the historical circumstances, and will then design and seek to “implement” either a strategy for protest or for preserving the regime based on the roles played. Simulations will be led, that is to say, set up by the groups to which you have been assigned. There are three components to this shared assignment: group papers, simulation leadership, and participation in the simulation. In addition, we will ask for brief (300-400 word) individual reflections about your contributions to the group assignment.

Group Papers:

The goal of the group papers is to prepare an informative document that will become the class’s reading during weeks 14 and 15 of the semester. Your group should systematically describe the particular revolution or moment of protest that has been assigned. Your research and writing should present an historical overview relevant to how your classmates would design a strategy for protest, given the historical context, and how they would design a strategy to preserve the regime.

Papers should provide a coherent narrative, therefore, that lays out the historical context, key concerns, important groups, dominant strategies, slogans, and frames, as well as the regime’s repressive apparatuses, capabilities, and dominant ideology.

Design a Strategy for Protest

- Consider how the structural environment shapes or constrains avenues of participation;
- Consider how the logic and nature of authoritarianism shapes both the agenda for protest, as well as the available avenues and spaces for protest to occur;
- Consider the credibility of regime commitments for reform. What type of promises for reform, for example, would your protest movement accept;
- Identify what are likely to be the key issues and how might you frame these issues;
- Consider what resources, available tactics, borrowed or innovated frames, existing networks, allies, etc. would you draw on.

Design a Strategy for Preserving the Regime

- What resources does the regime have at its disposal;
- What is the regime’s ideology, and how resonant is this with the population;
- In what ways does the regime foster legitimacy, and how might it be able to increase its legitimacy;
- What is the regime’s capacity for repression and/or reform (including the relationship between political and military elites);
- And what mechanisms (e.g. military units, police forces, etc.) does it have at its disposal in order to repress protests?

Simulations Leadership & Participation

When you lead a simulation you will want to consider how you will divide roles for the rest of the class and within the group; you will want to consider the physical layout of the room (are there

ways to reflect the special dynamics of your case?); and you will want to decide what scenario begins the simulation (e.g. will the simulation replicate the start of the event under consideration, or will it replicate events that were already occurring). Leadership may entail preparing supporting materials including maps (if desired) or means of representing key elements of the event in question.

Participation refers to the active engagement of students not in the group presenting. You should not skip these classes!

Appendix II Sample Simulation Rules

Iran 1979 Revolution Simulation

The article in the government newspaper Ettelaat had accused Khomeini of being a British agent, in league with communists, and insinuated that he was not really Iranian and that his religious credentials were questionable.

Rules

- Group members must collaborate together to decide on what actions they want to take
- Have two minutes to talk about move to make
- Round one only allows level one moves
- Round two allows level one and two moves
- Round 3 and subsequent rounds allow two and three level moves
- If everyone agrees to it, make move
- Different person in the group pulls a block each time
- You can test the blocks before pulling it
- Try to make the move realistic
- Accusal period of Savak, if get that right, Savak is kicked out
- Rounds is dependable on how long the Jenga blocks stay up
- Once your tower falls you are done.
- Go in the movie theatre to talk to other groups (only allowed in 2 minute periods)
- If your tower falls within the first 3 rounds, another group can give you another chance to rebuild but they will take away one of your moves for the whole game.
- If you use “do nothing” as an action, it can only be used twice.
- If you join a group in their action, you must pay the cost as well
- You will be given a certain amount of “communication” cards to communicate with other groups, but once you run out you must pay for more. 1 block for 3, 2 blocks for 6.
- If all groups execute 4 protests without repression from the regime, then the shah has to leave the country

Protestors

Action	Jenga Blocks Cost	Conditions	Effects
Publish and distribute articles against the regime	1	Decide what the article is about	Depends on the target
Join Khomeini in his anti-american talks	1	Communication with Khomeini through whatever you decide (non verbal)	U.S. anger
Side with the shah	1	Publicly announce siding with Shah	More support from the Shah
Stage peaceful protests in the streets	1	One person in the group must get up and protest until groups next turn	Military can repress, outcome is dependent on military action
First U.S. embassy attack (gunfire, threats)	2	Tell us your plans on how you attack	U.S. anger
Shah gets help in U.S. and protesters are told by Khomeini to take to protest	2	Communicate with Khomeini on which form of protest to do (non verbal) all must agree on terms	Shah anger
Threaten to attack U.S.	2	Come up with the threat	U.S. anger and Shah angered
Hostage crisis	3	Take a hostage. Everyone must agree on who it is	U.S. no longer involved in Iran. Iraq can invade at any time
Your choice	?	?	?
Do nothing	0	none	none

Regime

Action	Jenga Blocks Cost	Conditions	Effects
Regime expresses sympathy towards the martyrs/reports false number of fatalities	1	Make a public apology in the center of the room	Relationship with protesters improves
Shah gives speech about the beneficial reforms he enacted to appease people	1	Make a speech	Depends on the speech
Shah orders SAVAK to gather intel	1	Choose a group to miss their next turn.	Could expose SAVAK
Regime establishes martial law	2	Other groups cannot communicate, silence next round	Relationships between you and everyone else diminishes, every group takes out 1
Shah purchases US advanced weapons	2	Better relations with America	Unify other groups together against you. Can help lower the cost of blocks for later military actions
Shah orders military to take action on protesters	2	Decide what you want to do. Tear gas? Killings? Rubber bullets?	Depends on the actions; next round all use non dominant hand
Military fires into peaceful crowd without orders	3	If advanced weapons had been purchased, the cost is now 2	Lose all trust from others
Regime orders SAVAK to take out political leaders	3	Come up with a plan (non verbal) with SAVAK and SAVAK has to get notecard back without suspicion	SAVAK may not be a secret anymore
Shah admitted into the U.S for medical help	3	Shah is no longer apart of the group (military needs consent of political elites)	Other groups angered at the U.S.
Military joins another group and form a government with them	3	Shah has to have left the country	Stage a coup
Your choice	?	?	?
Do nothing	0	None	None

Khomeini

Action	Jenga Block Cost	Conditions	Effects
Send a letter	1	Choose where you would like to send it (choice of Protestors or Ulema)	Open communication throughout the rest of the game
Make a speech	1	Send a tweet to #psc283	Everyone can see it
Tell protesters to take to the streets	1	Protesters and Ulema must agree to protest together	Regime can only repress if willing to spend # of jenga blocks
Side with the shah	1	Send a tweet to #psc283	Everyone can see it
Ordering Jihad against the Shah	2	Ulema has to agree through non-verbal contact	Shah is upset and could lead to more military repression and dissuade some protesters
Come back to Iran	3	Shah has to be gone	Power
Your choice	?	?	?
Do nothing	0	None	None

Ulema

Action	Jenga block Cost	Conditions	Effects
Congregate in a movie theater	1	Gather in the center of the room (protesters must agree to it and join)	Depends on what you do
Honor martyrs	1	Military must use harsh tactics prior	Do not have to take out blocks next turn
Tell protesters to take to the streets	1	Come up with protest plan	Depends on the protest
Side with the shah	1	None	Lose Khomeini's permission for actions
Release religious statement condemning the shah	3	None	Allotted 3 minutes to talk with Khomeini
Your choice	?	?	?
Do nothing	0	None	None

Women

Action	Jenga Blocks Cost	Conditions	Effects
Side with the shah	1	Everyone in the group must agree	Skip Your Turn
Orchestrate a boycott against foreign goods	1	None	None
Demand more constitutional, economic, and suffrage rights	1	Write up with a strategy for this	None
Join Khomeini in his efforts to support women	2	Khomeini must have made a speech	None
Wear hijab during protest	2	None	Shah gets to take away one of his blocks
Protest alongside men	2	Have to protest with protesters (who agree with the protest)	Get another turn
Protest peacefully	2	Discuss your plan	None
Provide supplies/aid to protestors on the street	2	Protesters will have had to have chosen a violent form of protest	Everyone get another notecard
Guerrilla attack against government installations	3	Only can do so after have protested alongside men	Face possible death of a teammate (Roll an even number, Regime gets to choose who dies)
Gather in Jaleh Square on Black Friday to protest	3	All must agree with it	Face possible death of a teammate (Roll an odd number, Regime gets to choose who dies)
Your Choice	?	?	?
Do Nothing	0	None	None

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