

Conflict in the Middle East: why consider this topic for your students?

Conflict in the Middle East, c1945–95 is an exciting period study option for GCSE History Paper 2. **Hugh Castle, Head of History at Lancaster Royal Grammar School**, gave us his viewpoint on what makes this topic a great option. He has taught history for twenty-nine years, is active in curriculum planning and coordinates Parallel Histories in schools.

Interview and article by Ben Armstrong

1. Why do you consider the Conflict in the Middle East option an excellent choice for your students?

Because they learn so much from this topic, and not just about Israel and Palestine – they learn about the very nature of history, about why conflicts persist, and about how to debate strongly-held viewpoints robustly but respectfully. I don't think it is an overstatement to say that this topic is the mother of all controversies. It is history, but it is so relevant today to students because the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians remains controversial, not only as a matter of foreign policy but also for intercommunal relations. When you teach this unit, you really draw out the view from your students. I can understand why some schools do not want to teach this, but it is the right thing to do. If we do not engage with controversial topics, we are sidestepping our responsibility.

As well as the skills that are taught in all of the options for Paper 2 that all GCSE students gain, this topic has great scope for covering big concepts like empire, radicalisation, siege mentality, intergenerational causation and legacy, proliferation of conflict, living under occupation, ethnic nationalism, superpower rivalry and how opinions are formed. I can't think of a better vehicle for engaging in these historical, political and social issues because it is real.

Additionally, Conflict in the Middle East creates some great opportunities for classroom debate. We use [Parallel Histories](#) materials to help prepare the two sides with source evidence on which they can base opposing arguments. Very often we swap which sides the students are on at the next debate so they begin to see how arguments are created and rebutted, how contrasting perspectives can be justified, and how different types of source evidence can be utilised and interpreted.

2. So why do you think some teachers could be put off from selecting this topic?

The main concern is fear of accusations of bias, leading to fear of not being enough of an expert to take on the topic. But this is the very reason that this topic should be openly taught, and the many resources on the Parallel Histories website will help teachers to approach the topic from multiple angles. It allows them to let the evidence do the talking and avoid playing the moral umpire. Additionally, there are many other resources, like textbooks and websites that can support planning. Once students see how the topic links to modern people and events, for example starting a lesson with a declaration made by a political leader like Donald Trump, students quickly grasp its interest and relevance.

3. How have you planned to effectively teach this unit as part of your GCSE scheme of work?

I think the key is to make this relevant to the wider curriculum planning, rather than treating it as an isolated topic. Within the GCSE, we have selected units that harmonise together. For Paper 1, we teach the history of warfare, which sets the military context of the twentieth century; for the British period study of Paper 2, we cover the reigns of Richard I and John, which includes the Third Crusade, and for Paper 3, we teach Weimar and Nazi Germany, which provides the Holocaust in Europe as context for events in Palestine from 1945. However, we also fit the topic in within the wider curriculum. In Year 9, we address the period as an enquiry based upon the Parallel Histories resources. We focus particularly on an overview of events and contrasting the differing interpretations of the period. We then return to the topic in Year 11 as the last GCSE unit. By this point, the students have an awareness of the Middle

East from Year 9, but also a broader contextual understanding from the other GCSE events which means they can really engage with the ideas of narrative and importance. We also link this further than GCSE – as part of the Edexcel History A Level, we use the Middle East as the basis of the enquiry topic for Unit 4. One thing that has helped has been to adjust how we teach the lessons. We have moved away from making lots of notes. Instead, students generally receive a set of notes which they can highlight and keep. Much of the lesson focuses on discussion and debate around the knowledge, which helps to engage with ideas of consequence and importance. Writing is presented as something special and important as it is not continual – students are encouraged to do their best as what they write are the most important things, not everything. Writing after in-depth debates produces a much higher quality of understanding.

4. What resources have you found to be particularly helpful?

Obviously Parallel Histories is at the centre of our resources. We also make regular use of textbooks, both the Pearson and the Hodder editions. One thing we like to do with the textbooks is to ask students to read the text and decide if the content is in the ‘right place’ or whether they would amend the content on the basis of the differing viewpoints that they have considered. The internet has a great range of resources for this. There are some specific resources, such as the Balfour Project, the Israel Forever Foundation or the Quaker ‘Razor Wire and Olive Branches’ pack. There are also several YouTube clips of documentaries as well as the BBC *Our Man from the Middle East*. However, we often like to use the news as a topical lesson starter, such as BBC or DailyMotion clips showing statements by politicians or events in the region.

5. What do you consider to be the greatest challenges and opportunities in teaching this topic?

I think that the challenges are also the opportunities; the very things that require thought to address are the source of the best outcomes. It is not a quick route to results, but an investment in the children that we teach. I think it is about what you want as a teacher. It is not an easy narrative to cover, and creating the investigation requires time. But done well, it is of immense value to the students, the school and the community. One challenge and opportunity is that some students will already have some knowledge of this history, but likely with a strong view of what is right, whereas other students will have little knowledge, even of where the Middle East is. It is great to be able to even this out, helping those with firm views to see another perspective and those with little awareness to have an injection of geographical and linguistic knowledge. Another challenge and opportunity is to help students think in terms of a spectrum of viewpoints, not two simple sides. To give one example – religious conservatism is an important concept to understand for this topic and for life in a modern society, but as students investigate they will see that even within the two prime views, that of the Arab and Israeli camps, there are differing opinions and demands. At the end of the day, it is not like other topics taught in GCSE History – but that is the point.

What is the Parallel Histories Project?

www.parallelhistorie.org.uk

The logo for Parallel Histories, featuring the word 'PARALLEL' in a blue, sans-serif font above the word 'HISTORIES' in a black, sans-serif font. The letter 'I' in 'HISTORIES' is stylized with a blue outline.

Parallel Histories is both an online resource and a classroom methodology. The aim is to support teachers in covering the controversial topic of conflict by telling each historical narrative as two separate, competing stories. The website is an interactive, video-based resource designed to be used by students independently to acquire the necessary knowledge. Each short video has a condensed narrative punctuated by a range of sources; many of the sources have further links to academic articles, meaning that the learning is layered. Included on the website are links to schemes of work, lesson plans, resources and reading lists for students at different levels, with differing pre-existing knowledge and varying length of teaching time.