

# TEACHING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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## PART III, LESSON ONE: PARTITION AS A POLITICAL TOOL

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### Teaching Strategy

This complex lesson has three parts: World War I, Wartime Agreements, and the Partition of the Arab World. You probably will not be able to cover everything. These are some suggestions:

1. Students need a map orientation. The Teacher Overview section (p.7-12) and Lesson One (p. 21) have lists of places students should know. There are suggested exercises in the student section that try to get students to think in terms of function: How do we get from A to B? How long would the trip take? Why is this place strategically important?
2. Begin by telling students about the conflict pattern summarized in the Teacher Background section below, then point out that the Arab world was historically relatively peaceful. By showing that something true today was not always true, you can also point out that it need not be true forever, that historical developments have causes and (perhaps) solutions. Understanding what causes conflict and how to reduce it will be the focus of this lesson and indeed of the whole unit.
3. To discuss the war in Europe, there are two maps and several questions. The student reading focuses on why decisions about the Arab world were linked to the war in Europe. You might want to pursue that idea of the eastern and western fronts, why Britain thought it could weaken Germany by attacking Gallipoli or by encouraging Arab or Jewish nationalism.
4. To discuss the various wartime agreements or commitments break students into groups as outlined in Question 7. Each group can decide which of the statements are favorable to their interests and why. They could draw up their own proposal and illustrate it on a map. After 20-25 minutes of preparation, their spokesperson could present the proposal to the class. The last part of the question--"can you work out arrangements that will satisfy all of you"--might be a creative project.
5. Orientation to partition: Present the American analogy then ask students to look at how the Arab world was divided. Focus discussion upon whether this strengthened or weakened the region, increased or decreased tension. Have teams as above discuss the territorial outcome. Is this what they expected or wanted? To what extent are their interests protected?

### Teacher Background

Today, the Middle East is currently one of the most politically unstable regions in the world. Since 1970, 14 Middle East countries have had conflicts with neighbors: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestinians, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen. (This list excludes

internal uprisings and the Gulf War of 1990-1991.) Also since 1970 US troops have been involved in combat situations in the following places: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Israel, Iran, Syria, Somalia. (In addition, the US army prepared to intervene in Jordan during the Black September Uprising of 1970 and went on worldwide Nuclear Alert over the Israeli-Egyptian conflict in the Sinai in 1973.)

Historically there was no such pattern of conflict. The tension level we see today originated in this century. It cannot be explained in terms of Arab or Islamic culture or in terms of historic disputes that go back centuries (although there are such disputes). We have to ask what happened to produce the development of these on-going conflicts.

The partition of the region by Britain and France after World War I established a state system that was weak, unstable, and often rooted in ethnic regimes that were undemocratic. The purpose of the lesson is to understand what these powers, having brought the Arab world under control through victories over the Turks in World War I, did to maintain their dominance. The thesis is simple: to enhance their power Britain and France set up states that could be controlled. They used three techniques to achieve this: partitioning countries, shifting provinces and cities from one country to another, and relying upon ethnic minorities. While it was not necessarily their purpose to create weak, unstable, undemocratic regimes, that was the result, intended or not.

Keep in mind alternative techniques of control. In classical colonialism one country directly administers the affairs of another. Colonialism may or may not involve the transfer of populations from the ruling country to the ruled and the consequent capture of land. But there are other structures of control that do not rely upon imposed government. These may use mechanisms of influence and domination in which the weaker country governs itself but is controlled from the outside by economic or political means that are often invisible. In such situations, key resources and structures of power (such as banking, resource development, or arms supplies) are controlled from abroad. Also, local rulers may be beholden to overseas patrons.

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## WORLD WAR I

To understand how this partition occurred and why it occurred the way it did, it is important to understand the nature of World War I and the decisions and promises made during that war. Particularly significant were promises made to Arabs and to Jews and the secret arrangement between Britain and France to divide the region. Students must understand how deadly the war was and how desperate Britain was for a breakthrough. This was a war of trenches with human losses greater than the world had seen before. By the end of the war in 1918 there were 10 million dead and 20 million wounded. In 1915 in the Battle of Ypres (in Belgium, to block a German advance into France) Britain literally lost half its total army. (Britain was a sea power with a standing army of about 100,000. In Ypres, they lost 50,000). This battle necessitated creation of an entirely new British army in 1916 made up of conscripts and volunteers. (The need for volunteers produced the famous "Britain Needs You" poster with Lord Kitchener looking sternly ahead and pointing ominously at the viewer. In America this became "Uncle Sam Needs You").

British strategy was to end run the German army by knocking Turkey out of the war and opening another front. In March 1915 Britain attacked Gallipoli south of Istanbul. The attempt was a disaster. In ten months of fighting British forces never got off the beaches. Their total losses were 25,000. The battle was such a failure that Winston Churchill's career was temporarily destroyed (he was Lord of the

Admiralty--Navy Secretary--and was blamed for the defeat). The date of this battle is even now the National Day of Australia and New Zealand. (The fine Australian movie Gallipoli, starring Mel Gibson, tells the story of this battle as seen by four young men.)

In 1916 on the first day of the Battle of the Marne Britain lost very nearly the number the US lost in all of Vietnam (just under 50,000 compared with 58,000 in Vietnam). France and Russia were suffering comparable casualties. By this time, there were serious domestic tensions inside those countries. Britain began to think in different terms. First, they decided that instigating an Arab revolt would weaken Turkey and divert Turkish soldiers from the European front. Offering to support Arab independence would be the way of fomenting such a revolt. Second, they decided that having Jewish support for the war could be advantageous, and offering to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine would win world-wide Jewish support.

Some British leaders were ideologically sympathetic to Arabs and thought they deserved to achieve their national aspirations; likewise, some British leaders were sympathetic to the plight of Jews in Eastern Europe or were persuaded by evangelical religious teachings that it was God's wish that the Jewish people be returned to their ancient homeland (such people are called Christian Zionists). In both cases, those motivated by strategic considerations were more significant in the decision process than those with humanitarian considerations. And in typical realpolitic style, they concealed their true motives by statements that were couched in cultural terms or in embraces of high principle.

## **The Arab Revolt**

The British alliance with the Arabs was worked out between Sir Henry McMahon and Sherif Hussein of Mecca during 1915. Sherif Hussein is sometimes called King Hussein of the Hejaz. (Hejaz is the western province of what is now Saudi Arabia.) Hussein's Hashem family (hence called the Hashemites) historically looked after the Holy Mosques at Mecca and Medina. He was also a descendent of Muhammed, a fact that granted him a certain status. He had four sons, Abdullah and Faisal being the most famous since they later became the kings of Jordan and Iraq. The letters of negotiation between Hussein and McMahon are quite controversial. Hussein was convinced the Arabs had been promised a unified Arab kingdom including Syria and Palestine. The British said later they had fulfilled their promise by putting Hashemites on thrones in Jordan and Iraq.

The Arab Revolt began in 1916. The purpose of the revolt was not that Arab armies defeat Turkish armies (although they did on several occasions), but that the revolt would divert Turks from the European war. British historian Arnold Toynbee later estimated that the Revolt tied down 65,000 Turkish soldiers.

It is important to discount somewhat the Lawrence of Arabia myth created by T. E. Lawrence and reporter Lowell Thomas: that the Arabs were disorganized tribes that had no concept of themselves as a people but that Lawrence--the brave, principled Englishman--organized them and taught them to be proud. This myth suggests that the Arabs were not militarily significant and had no aspirations for independence or capabilities of their own but were granted unearned concessions at the end of the war by benevolent Europeans. This is not a version of their history that Arabs respect, nor does it correspond to the facts.

## **The Balfour Declaration**

In America, President Wilson was reelected in 1916 on the slogan "He kept us out of war." Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan was an outspoken pacifist. American public opinion opposed entry into

the war. The British wanted America in the war and were convinced that Jewish influence could make a difference.

In February 1917 the Russian Revolution occurred and the new government threatened to take Russia out of the war. (This was the first of two revolutions. The Second Revolution in November brought Communists to power). Russian neutrality would have allowed Germany to concentrate its armies on the Western Front, a disaster for the Allies. Many British leaders were convinced the Russian revolutionary government of Alexander Kerensky was run by Jews (Kerensky himself was Jewish) and that by appealing to them as Jews they could keep Russia in the war. They also feared Germany was about to declare support for a Jewish state.

In 1916, Britain began negotiating a deal with Zionists: British support for a Jewish homeland in exchange for Zionist support for the war. The Balfour Declaration was issued in November, 1917, pledging Britain to support a Jewish "homeland" in Palestine. What the word "homeland" meant was unclear since Britain also committed itself to protect the rights of non-Jewish inhabitants, including their "civil" rights, a term that implied the right to participate in political decisions.

In 1936, Lloyd George (prime minister during the war) said "The Zionist leaders gave us a definite promise that, if the Allies committed themselves to giving facilities for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine they would do their best to rally Jewish sentiment and support throughout the world to the Allied cause. They kept their word." In 1937 he added that the Zionists "were helpful in America and in Russia, which at that moment was just walking out and leaving us alone."

**Danger:** If you discuss this be careful not to reinforce inadvertently anti-Semitic stereotyping. There is no evidence that the Russian Revolution or the Russian Communist Party were Jewish dominated and certainly most Jews who were Communists were (like other communists) ideologically opposed to Jewish or other ethnic nationalism. Nor is there evidence that prominent Jewish advisors or friends of President Wilson (Justice Louis Brandeis and Professor Felix Frankfurter are best known) were the determining factor in his decision to go to war. What is important is that some British leaders saw Zionism as an exceptionally powerful force in Moscow, Berlin, and Washington and apparently allowed these judgments (reinforced by Zionist leaders) to affect their decision. If you discuss this, emphasize that these views were distorted, but nevertheless seem to have been the basis of British action. You might also mention that a mere 20 years later Jews were rounded up in the Holocaust and were totally unable to protect themselves, a fact clearly inconsistent with British perceptions of Jewish "power" in 1917.

**Opportunity:** This might be a chance to discuss how perceptions of reality based upon stereotypical views of ethnic groups can distort decision-making even by top officials from whom we expect better judgments. Where do these views originate? Why do advisors not point out to leaders that their assumptions are unrealistic? Are such views really overriding factors in decisions or are they merely cited retroactively as reasons, while other considerations (such as the drive to power) are the true basis of decisions? In addition to perceptions of Jewish power, you might mention perceptions of Arab power. Universities and organizations that accept grants from an Arab state or even from Arab-Americans have been attacked as being under "Arab" control or influence. Such charges were made against Jesse Jackson when he ran for President since his urban development organization, Operation PUSH, had taken donations from Saudi Arabia. Cartoons showed Jackson in an Arab headdress with the title "Jesse of Arabia." Another showed him walking out of the Saudi Embassy with bags of money with the title "Run, Jesse, Run."

Likewise, in recent years there have been several cases of campaign contributions by Arab-Americans being returned as unwelcome. The most well-known of these incidents (but not the most recent) was

when a donation by former Senator James Abourezk (a Lebanese-American from South Dakota who left office in 1981) to Massachusetts Congressman Joseph Kennedy was returned, with the comment that Kennedy's campaign did not want "that kind of money."

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## THE PARTITIONING OF AMERICA

There is a useful analogy to help students understand what happened to the Arab world. Suppose by some strange quirk the United States was conquered by outside powers Uruguay and Brazil. They would immediately run into two problems: First, the United States is a big country. Providing enough soldiers and administrators to control such a territory would be nearly impossible. Second, while Americans may squabble among themselves, where their country is concerned they are a patriotic people and would pull together to resist foreign rule. Clearly if this conquest is to succeed two things must happen: America must be divided into smaller, more controllable units, and Americans must lose their sense of unity. Have students discuss how Uruguay and Brazil could weaken us for purposes of control. Ask students to suggest possibilities. Prompt them with suggestions below as necessary.

1. Divide us into multiple countries: (for instance, New England, South, Midwest, Pacific Northwest). Smaller areas are easier to control than larger ones.
2. When there is a strong state or region, split away its key city or province. (Thus New York state would lose New York City and Illinois would lose Chicago. Texas would be independent of the South, the Farm Belt would be independent of the Midwest, Florida and California would be on their own.)
3. Our conquerors could play religious and ethnic groups against each other. Where there is a majority group, put someone from the minority in control. **Note:** emphasize that our conquerors would not choose people of good will but militants who are intolerant of others. The purpose is not to bring us together by giving opportunities to minorities but to drive us apart by making us distrust each other. (If you can raise this with sensitivity and without playing upon latent prejudice, ask students to suggest cases: who would be in charge of New York, the Farm Belt, Utah, Mississippi, San Francisco?)
4. Bring in outside rulers. (Put Spanish-speaking Cuban Communists in charge of the Farm Belt and Utah conservatives in charge of San Francisco. Make rulers fearful of their own people.)
5. Establish a haven for refugees. (Turn northern California into a homeland for the Vietnamese boat people and other Vietnamese refugees who have no where else to go. Since California is a big state, the people in northern California could move south. Of course, since the "Republic of New Vietnam" would need all the water it could get to resettle refugees, it would terminate the export of water to southern California, disrupting agriculture in the dry half of the state. This would create tensions between the north and south. There would also surely be other disputes over sovereignty, territory, and legitimacy. Some southern Californians would probably question whether there even should be a RNV.)
6. Life after partition. Have students discuss what they think would be the relationships between these American states after partition. Would they be peaceful? What kind of disputes would arise? Would there be violence-prone nationalist groups that would question the very right of these states to exist and try to overthrow them by violence so as to reunite America into one? (Option: divide

the class into groups representing the 4-5 new "countries." Within each group assign one person the role of the "outside" ruler, who announces his new plan for the country. What will be the reaction of the people? Over what issues will they disagree?

7. There is a saying that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." It is also true that in some cases breaking up a larger group into smaller groups unleashes creativity and productivity that was previously inhibited and suppressed. Have the students discuss whether they think America would be stronger or weaker as a result of this partition. In the political realm? In the economic realm?

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## PARTITIONING THE ARAB WORLD

At the end of World War I the Allies imposed the Versailles Treaty on Germany. It took German territory, left German provinces under occupation, imposed heavy reparations, and declared Germany responsible for the war. In retrospect the treaty was so disastrous it was doomed to fail. A cynic might even say it had two unwritten clauses that were as powerful as if they had been signed in blood: that there shall be an Adolf Hitler to defy these treaties and there shall be a second world war to correct the decisions that ended the first.

In the Middle East, the agreements worked out were as disastrous as Versailles and set the stage for generations of conflict and violence. Playing upon Wilson's high goal of "a war to end all war" one contemporary general observed, it was "a peace to end all peace."

In discussing these agreements, note that we are focusing upon the motives of the Western powers, not the motives or interests of Middle Eastern peoples. Lebanese Maronites, Kurds, Jews, Druze, Alawis, Bedouins, and others had legitimate interests and sometimes powerful grievances. While the Western powers often used these grievances and interests for their own advantage, those interests are not addressed in this lesson.

Remember that Britain and France are acting to advance their influence in the region, not to advance principles of justice. While individuals may sometimes be motivated by principles, states are typically motivated to a desire to advance their interests. To the extent that they claim to be motivated by higher goals (the good of humanity, etc.) we are justified in being cynical. If students want to advance such arguments (which are common in American thinking), ask if they believe other countries are also motivated by such high goals: Mexico, Cuba, Iraq, China, Japan, Russia. This might generate some interesting discussions.

Early in the war Britain ordered a study of its interests in the Arab world. They had historically backed Turkish control of the region but now began to reconsider. The DeBunsen Report (1915) was an internal study of what British policy should be. While never officially adopted, it shows British strategic thinking. It suggested that Britain seize Arab territories after the war. British interests in India made the Persian Gulf and Iraq prime targets. Iraq was the most valuable place in the region with water, rich soil, and strategic location (Iraqi oil had just been discovered and the British fleet had just shifted from coal to oil). Iraq had two outlets to the sea--through the ports of Basra-Kuwait and across land to Palestine (particularly the port at Haifa). These places had to be secured to control Iraq. Other places--such as Lebanon and Syria--were recommended for takeover but were less significant.

**Note:** This was an era prior to airplanes and satellites so strategic thinking was influenced by what was called "geopolitics." This was the assumption that by controlling certain geographical locations you

could control or have influence in other locations. There was exceptional attention paid to certain "chokepoints" such as the Suez Canal, the Black Sea straits, the Panama Canal. Britain was particularly obsessed with enhancing its control of India, its greatest colony, the Jewel in the Crown. The most famous geostrategist was Sir Halford Mackinder of Britain who popularized the Heartland Theory. Mackinder said that if we stepped back and looked at a world map we would see that a giant "world island" (the Euro-Asian continent) spans the earth. The "heartland" of that island is Central Europe. According to Mackinder's famous conclusion: who controls the heartland controls the world island, who controls the world island controls the world. While this is not immediately relevant to the Arab world, it shows how such people thought.

In 1916 Britain and France secretly agreed to divide up the Arab world after the war (Sykes-Picot Accords). These agreements were secret until late 1917 when the Russian Revolution occurred and the Communists released the documents to the public. The release caused much diplomatic embarrassment since the agreements contradicted other agreements and public statements. In general terms, the Accords would have given the areas of contemporary Iraq, Jordan and Palestine to Britain; Syria and Lebanon would have gone to France; Russia would remain dominant in Central Asia; and Italy would get concessions in Asia Minor. Turkey would have been considerably truncated.

Arab leaders were shaken by the Sykes-Picot Accords. The Turks invited them to switch sides. But the US had entered the war and President Wilson's statements were reassuring. Wilson renounced secret treaties and insisted that in the Arab lands the people should shape their own destiny and should be autonomous. (American papers suppressed all information about the Sykes-Picot Accords until after the war. Wilson renounced secret agreements but not the secret agreements.) The Arabs remained in the war on the Allied side.

One of the British letters noted that the coastal area west of a line running through Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo would be treated differently. While this string of cities stopped well north of Palestine, it was this type of ambiguity that later enabled the British to say that they had not betrayed the Arabs but that the Arabs had simply not understood the letters.

Woodrow Wilson: President Wilson made several statements on the War that were very reassuring to Arabs:

1. Fourteen Points, January 8, 1918: He renounced secret agreements and said all diplomacy and negotiations must take place in public. Point 12 specified that "The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development."
2. Four Principles, February 11, 1918: "That peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were chattels or pawns in a game, even the great game, now for ever discredited, of the balance of power.... Every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as a part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states...."
3. Four Ends, July 4, 1918: "The settlement of every question, whether of territory or sovereignty, of economic arrangement, or of political relationship, upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned, and not upon the basis of the material interest or advantage of any other nation or people which may desire a different settlement for the sake of its own exterior influence or mastery."

## **The Post-war Treaties:**

The contradictory wartime promises and agreements were hammered out at the end of the war in various treaties. The most relevant was the Treaty of Sevres (1920), an effort to dismantle the Ottoman Empire. It granted independence to the Kingdom of the Hejaz (western Saudi Arabia), and turned Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia over to the Allied powers; it partitioned Turkey into Zones of Influence (Italian, French, British, Russian), gave independence to Armenia, and "autonomy" to Turkish Kurdistan (with independence forthcoming). Apart from separating the Arab provinces from Turkey, none of these provisions were implemented, primarily because Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, refused to accept the partitioning of his country, and organized military resistance to prevent it. Because of fierce Turkish opposition to being colonized, the powers met again in 1922 and finally signed a new agreement, the Treaty of Lausanne, in January 1923.

## **The Mandate System:**

During World War I there were commitments by President Wilson that this was a war of principle, not a war to acquire territory. Of course, Britain and France had different ideas. When the war ended, it was necessary to think up a new term for a colony. According to the logic of the day, a Mandate was not rooted in greed or expansionist impulses but in a desire to help various peoples "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world..." Acquiring these territories was a "sacred trust of civilization." Mandates were put into three categories (A, B, C) based on their level of civilization. Arab countries including Palestine were Level A Mandates, meaning they were sufficiently advanced to have "Provisional" independence, and that the "wishes of these communities" would be taken into account.

President Wilson was very interested in participating in these arrangements. He sent to the Senate a proposal to create an American Mandate over Armenia but it was defeated by opponents who said it would involve the commitment of up to 100,000 troops. The US also sent a delegation to the Middle East (the King-Crane Commission) to determine Arab wishes for their future. It found that Arabs wanted two things: 1) Greater Syria be kept as one unified entity and 2) if there had to be a mandate over Greater Syria it should be American, not British or French. The British and French, naturally, were not sympathetic to this American "meddling."

## **Hashemite Rulers:**

The Hashemite family of Iraq continued to rule until 1958 when it was overthrown in a bloody military coup. Faisal, the first of the Iraqi Hashemites, was a dynamic and creative ruler who won a certain level of popular support. Later rulers however, were less popular and effective. In 1958 Iraq was ruled by Faisal's grandson, a young boy called Faisal II. Actual power was held by an inner circle of corrupt rulers who were closely aligned with Britain. When Iraq joined Britain in a strategic alliance called the Baghdad Pact, military leaders overthrew the government. The boy king and other leaders were killed.

In Jordan, the first Hashemite ruler Abdullah was also a dynamic and creative leader who was very popular with his people. He also was closely linked to Britain in a strategic alliance, so closely linked in fact that in the mid-1950s the Jordan army was headed by a famous Englishman named John Glubb (also called Glubb Pasha). As mentioned elsewhere, the Jordanians were involved in the 1948 Palestine war in a way that offended many Palestinian nationalists. Abdullah was assassinated by a Palestinian in 1951. He was succeeded for a short time by his son Talal but the alleged breakdown of Talal's health led to his removal by the royal family. Talal's young son Hussein became king in the tumultuous period of the mid-1950s. He and his brother Crown Prince Hassan continue to govern the country.

## **Bedouins and Families:**

Bedouins are migratory people who live in the drier regions of the Middle East. They are particularly prominent in southern Jordan near Saudi Arabia. While well known to readers of National Geographic because of their "romantic" lifestyle, they are relatively few in number, being no more than perhaps 3% of all Arabs. They are often governed by tribal-type councils or family structures.

Arab society is characterized by extended families that may include thousands of persons. Some families control extensive farm or grazing lands. Most trace their origin to some famous ancestor. The Hashemites were of the family of Hashem, from which Muhammed sprang. As such they traditionally controlled and managed the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina. The leaders of the Hashemite family were politically ambitious and had been associated with various efforts to enhance their influence. The British aligned with them during World War I, but the rise of the Saud family displaced them from their base in Arabia. Today the king of Saudi Arabia is called Protector of the Two Mosques.

Families are typically governed by councils or associations of family heads. Like the early Scottish clans, they often function as political units, working together to support favorite sons or political candidates. Because they have an internal authority structure, it was logical for the British to seek out prominent and influential families as potential allies, both during the war and for the creation of post-war governments. As a result of the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, the Hashemites became Britain's chosen rulers-to-be. This close alliance between British imperialism and the Hashemite family raised serious questions in the eyes of Arab nationalists about the very legitimacy of the country of Jordan in particular and of its rulers. The survival of Jordan's Hashemite dynasty beyond the tumultuous 1950s is a noteworthy achievement.

You will have to explain to your students what we mean by families. Most will assume the term refers to the smaller, nuclear families such as we have. In the west Arab families are sometimes called tribes, a word best avoided because of its association with primitive or backward ways. The more you can explain families as logical social and political entities, the easier it will be for your students to understand events.