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University of Maine News

UMaine, Egyptian Students to Discuss Iraq Conflict

Dec. 5, 2002

Media contact: Susan Young (207) 581-3756

ORONO – To help them gain a better understanding of the causes and potential consequences of a U.S.-Iraq confrontation, a dozen University of Maine students will discuss the issue with their counterparts from the American University in Cairo on Dec. 9, beginning at 12 p.m. The students will discuss Middle Eastern issues – with a focus on the situation in Iraq – via a live videoconference hook-up in the Soderberg Center in Jenness Hall. The discussion will also be broadcast to the university’s Hutchinson Center in Belfast.

The 90-minute session was set up to give students in both Maine and Egypt a broader perspective on the potential conflict between the United States and Iraq, says Bahman Baktiari, director of UMaine’s international affairs program and an associate professor of political science. He hopes this will be the first of many such exchanges.

“We want to improve cultural understanding in light of Sept. 11,” Baktiari says. “The goal is to create a more international environment for the campus. This will make Maine’s geographic location and its feeling of isolation less palpable.”

The U.S. has threatened to attack Iraq if the country fails to cooperate with United Nations inspectors and take steps to dismantle programs suspected of producing weapons of mass destruction. U.N. weapons inspectors are currently touring facilities in the country, which was attacked by western forces in 1991 under similar circumstances.

It is important for students, and others in the U.S. to understand that such a war could impact the 280 million people who live in the Middle East, Baktiari says. Questions of regional stability, economic consequences and international support for a military conflict should be addressed.

In addition, the dialogue is meant to help students come to know the real people behind the constant barrage of news footage about the impending conflict. For example, students can ask one another how they and their neighbors feel about their country’s policies.

“It excites me because their viewpoint is different than mine,” says Kaitlin Sighinolfi, a junior international affairs major from Brewer.

She says she was shocked to realize that the students in Egypt had a different perspective on current events based on information different from what she has heard on CNN and read in the Washington Post. This makes her question her sources of information about world events, says Sighinolfi, who hopes for work for the foreign service.

She will be among the 12 UMaine students and two faculty members who will discuss the potential Iraq conflict with 14 students and two faculty members from the American

University in Cairo, an English-language institution founded in 1919 to improve America's understanding of the region while also training the region's future leaders. The university attracts students from around the globe. Students from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Palestine will participate in the discussion. Baktiari and Henry Munson, chair of the anthropology department, will moderate the session along with their colleagues from Egypt.

The students participating in the discussion come from a variety of academic disciplines and are primarily juniors and sophomores so that they will be available to participate in future videoconference sessions. Prior to the Dec. 9 event, students from both schools have been in contact via e-mail to gain a better understanding of one another. Already students at both universities have expressed an interest in visiting one another.

The American University in Cairo has held similar dialogues with Tufts University, the State University of New York, the University of California at Davis. This is the first such live discussion to be held at UMaine.

Baktiari hopes to reconvene the students in six months for further discussions. Future conferences may include faculty, staff and community members.

Members of the public are invited to attend the Dec. 9 discussion, but space is limited. Call UMaine Public Affairs at 581-3756 for more information.

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