Role playing simulations serve as one of the most effective educational instruments in the study of peace and conflict management. The simulations have two major educational motivations. The first is empathizing with the role that will be played. This requires learning about political group’s interests, fears, previous experiences, internal divisions, norms and culture of the group. The second element of the simulation is experiencing strategic decision making. This requires learning how to collect information about the other actors as well as one’s own capabilities and limitations, formulation of detailed policy alternatives, predicting how the other actors will respond to each policy and experiencing the actual reaction of the other actors as well as unexpected initiatives of they might launch. However, simulations provide one additional advantage. The participants have the opportunity backtrack and repeat the simulation and discover what would have happened if they had chosen an alternative strategy.

We will in this workshop run two different types of simulations. The first is an inter-state simulation, where state governments are engaged in a serious conflict of interests. In this simulation we will focus on the Middle East and observe how states in this system attempt to balance between their external aspirations to defend themselves and shape the region in a manner that serves their interests, while at the same time maintaining economic and domestic interests. The second approach will focus on inter-communal conflict over national, religious, and cultural identities and focus on Israeli-Palestinian attempts to manage and resolve this conflict.

We will replicate a real-life conflict situation in the Middle East as closely as desired. Students will assume roles of the various players involved in the conflict as they analyze data, make decisions, and solve the problems inherent in the situation. As the simulation proceeds, decision makers respond to the changes within the situation by studying the consequences of their decisions and subsequent actions and predicting future problems/solutions. During the simulation students perform tasks that enable them to learn or have their learning evaluated.

We will focus on simulations that provide students an opportunity to learn through playing a role of a decision maker in a scaled-down real-life situation in which
students assume real world roles as they solve problems and make decisions. The student can see and discuss the results of these actions within the parameters of the simulated situation. In terms of application to the real world, the student can hypothesize the impact of her/his actions, but cannot know in real time the consequences that course of action would produce in the real world. Through active participation, however, the students learn and experience the trade-offs involved in decision-making during conflict times in the international system, and the complexities involved in attempting to solve those conflicts.

Our focus in the role-playing simulations will be on “learning by doing”– students learning how decisions are made and actions are taken before and during a crisis, they are simulating decision making that can lead to both short term and long term consequences.

Simulations can be LOTS of fun, but they are also a great pedagogical tool! The appeal of this methodology lies in the student being able to assume the identity of the role she/he is playing and enter the shoes of a decision maker she/he does not necessarily agree with. This allows the student to improve the argumentation skills and to actually understand motivations and incentives of the ‘enemy’. Therefore beyond being a tremendously exciting pedagogical tool, it is also one that can result in important insights that cannot be achieved through other means.