



**O**n January 17, Study Abroad advisors, coordinators, faculty and university administrations were suddenly brought face to face with the worst possible scenario for practitioners in our field: the outbreak of war and the serious potential threat to the safety and welfare of our students abroad. Although the actual hostilities were, technically speaking, limited geographically, the threat of random terrorist reprisals against U.S. citizens anywhere in the world, and particularly in Western Europe, were not, and still are not, so easily containable. Despite this, however, very few programs were actually cancelled or suspended. The study abroad community, through effective "networking," was able to minimize overreaction and panic while exercising care and prudence. The damage control was due in great part to the excellent communications networks that enabled faculty and administrators to keep in touch with each other, with State Department officials, and with overseas coordinators, resident directors and others on site responsible for our programs and students. Now that the end is in sight, let's compare notes.

## Comparing Notes: How We Weathered the Gulf Crisis

**Q:** What was the first reaction of study abroad directors to the announcement of the outbreak of hostilities?

**A:** Instinctively, advisors went into action on two fronts: contacting the appropriate U.S. government authorities to get the latest on security in areas where they had students and contacting those in positions of responsibility abroad able to communicate quickly with the students themselves.

**Q:** What sources of information turned out to be the most useful?

**A:** The State Department "hot line," or Citizens Emergency number (202-647-5225) recorded response was frustrating to many of us because it takes so long to get site-specific information (for Europe, press 1 now, for France, press 2 now, etc.!) but fortunately, there is a direct line to a "real person." (202-647-5226)

Overseas resident directors in some European countries were contacted by the nearest U.S. consular official and brought together for meetings and updates. This gave them access to information on security from both regional and local security forces, including the local police. A good working rela-

tionship with U.S. diplomatic representatives is generally perceived to be the best insurance for any future actions our institutions might decide to take, from cancelling of programs to emergency evacuation of students. The next most useful thing was the FAX machine, which enabled us to send all kinds of advisories and announcements directly to each other and overseas almost instantaneously. Finally the NAFSA electronic mail network, via BITNET, was a lifesaver. Updates on State Department security advisories came to all of us almost daily throughout the crisis. Even more important was the tracking down of rumors of program closings by that indefatigable quartet of detectives, Laubscher, Sangster, Pearson and Slind, the SECUSSA "team."

**Q:** How prepared were study abroad offices for this emergency?

**A:** Most universities had already laid some groundwork, beginning last August. Worried university authorities, parents and students themselves—usually the last ones to worry—were being advised to think about study abroad as a personal decision, which as Cornell wrote

"must be made by each student and his or her family in the light of their own interpretation of events and their willingness to live with a certain degree of ambiguity." Cancellation or suspension of programs was certainly contemplated as a future possibility, but only if the State Department so advised or if information from other sources or events so warranted. Daily contact with the State Department on the climate in Israel, for example, was reassuring, as was the fact that the major Israeli universities have offices in New York. As tensions mounted, the universities scheduled early exams to enable foreign students to depart prior to January 15. Israel provided a testing ground for U.S. study abroad crisis management, but we were fortunate in a sense to be dealing with a nation experienced in preparing for conflict, with students with a commitment to being there under stressful conditions, and with parents who understood this in cases where students did not wish to return home.

**Q:** How did program directors prepare for the impending war in the Middle East?

**A:** Communications on programs in the Middle East started circulating almost daily among study abroad offices at the beginning of January, gearing up to the possible start of hostilities. In the days before January 15, everyone we checked with had made a contingency plan. California and Indiana advised students on their programs to leave the Middle East entirely during semester break. When the State Department advised all U.S. citizens not on essential business to leave the region on January 10, Illinois faxed their students directly enrolled at Haifa, Hebrew and Tel Aviv via the overseas offices of these institutions in New York, instructing them to leave Israel. Students were advised that if they chose to remain, as some ultimately did, the home university could not take responsibility for their welfare.

There was much phoning around among colleagues on the legal aspects of institutional liability. Adhering to State Department advice and leaving a paper trail was considered to be the absolute bottom line. (Perhaps this subject could be addressed at the next meeting of

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the National Association of College and University Attorneys this summer.) Contact with parents in this case was also necessary, as some parents were supportive of their child's remaining in Israel and others were not. Reliable, rumor-proof sources were also crucial in containing panic. Ben deWinter notes that he "is giving an honorary 'Cornell Abroad' degree to an alumnus for his daily interpretations of events in the Middle East."

**Q: Programs were cancelled in some of the major European cities. Under what circumstances did this occur?**

A: Here the major problem was fear of terrorism. A few specific factors played an important role in the decision to cancel or suspend programs already underway; geographic location near a U.S. military base (in Germany) or other strategic site; actual threats, homemade bombs outside U.S. program buildings; programs that were travel-based. The media certainly played a part in the number of students that dropped out of programs in London. Programs that were about to begin suffered higher attrition rates, and some were simply cancelled for lack of enrollment. For students on year-long programs abroad, the dictates of common sense and prudence led most study abroad directors to advise students to limit their movements or remain at their study sites rather than grab a plane and deal with the risks of international travel. The timing of the situation led some schools to encourage students to return home immediately while they could still pick up classes for the second semester rather than risk receiving no credit because of possible cancellation later on. The fact that a single site abroad can be the base of a large number of individual U.S. programs

makes it even more important for study abroad professionals to present a coherent and united front in terms of suspension or cancellation of programs. Where programs were not cancelled, universities were careful to communicate to their students that the final decision to continue or to withdraw was up to them.

**Q: Where should the major responsibility lie within the home institution for the decision to maintain or cancel programs abroad in times of crisis?**

A: It is best to locate this decision with the university official closest to the programs and to the sources of information, but there must be an institutional support system ready to go into action to provide guidance. This should consist of whatever committee structure already exists to support and advise the study abroad office, usually a group of involved faculty and deans which reports to a Vice-President of Academic Affairs. The university legal counsel must also be closely involved. In a vacuum, overreaction at higher levels can result. Sudden decisions based on information coming from media sources, unconfirmed rumors and hysterical phone calls can create just the kind of chaos they are intended to prevent. Be ready with press releases, and statements on institutional policy related to the issues at hand. For example, what about media requests for names of your students abroad for telephone interviews? How much logistical information about your programs should you reveal? What arrangements are you prepared to make to help students return to campus, catch up and make up coursework? What about a refund policy?

**Q: What has been the reaction overseas to our preoccupation**

**with the welfare of U.S. students studying in these countries?**

A: On the whole, there has been tremendous support. Our undergraduates come from a highly protective educational system. They are in the hands of our friends and allies who understand our position on security and liability. Part of the implied contractual relationship in an exchange agreement with a foreign educational partner is that the welfare of our students becomes their concern. In sending all of these instructions on security precautions for our students, we have tended to forget about the potential for offending the sensibilities of our foreign hosts who, after all, are also potential targets and who must continue to live and study side by side with our own students.



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**Q: Based on the experiences of this past month and a half, which type of programs offer the best protection for American students in emergencies?**

A: There are pros and cons to both the "enclave" and the scat-

tered group or individual exchange models. High visibility as representatives of the United States living together and/or studying together in a foreign city makes students "sitting ducks." Students must especially be cautioned about behavior outside of the program building, and security should be extremely tight. Although we have no statistics as yet, it appears that more students withdrew from enclave programs than those in which students are scattered across university departments and are able to choose from a variety of housing options, where they make an effort to speak the language of the country and otherwise blend into the landscape. The presence of an in-country resident director can be very reassuring in this type of program; lacking this feature, sending schools must have excellent communications with contact persons at the universities where students are enrolled.

**Q: How have the events of the past few months affected study abroad in the long and short run?**

A: Most institutions report decreases of up to 10 percent in numbers of students applying for programs for the academic year 1991-92. This can be assumed to be a temporary situation, as were the student withdrawals and program cancellations based on low enrollments this Spring.

It would be a great error to pull back now from encouraging our students to learn more about the rest of the world. The many political and economic changes taking place in Europe, the Soviet Union and yes, the Middle East, will ultimately play a major role in their own futures. □