

ISSUE BRIEF

Exploring US Engagement in the Middle East: A Crisis Simulation

SEPTEMBER 2016 REX BRYNEN

Preface by Bilal Y. Saab

The next US president will inherit an array of major foreign policy challenges from nearly every corner of the globe. However, none seems more complex and perhaps consequential, I think, than identifying America's role in the Middle East now and into the future.

Critics of President Barack Obama's handling of the Middle East see a relationship between the scaling down of US involvement in the region and the drastic deterioration of security conditions, and more specifically, the ascendancy of the very powers—state and nonstate—that US policy has long sought to counter or contain, including Russia, Iran, and the band of terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). These critics also believe that Washington's aversion to military intervention in the Syrian conflict and its nuclear agreement with Iran (which did not address its bellicose regional agenda) have made the United States' traditional regional partners wary of its intentions.

Proponents of Obama's Middle East policy argue that much of the region's increased instability has little to do with US designs, changed or not, and should be attributed instead to preexisting and local problems. Furthermore, it was over-involvement during the George W. Bush presidency, they contend, that partly led to the present travails. Had the United States not gone to war against Iraq in 2003 and disbanded the Iraqi army, for example, ISIS would not have come to the fore. Had the United States not promoted free elections with little regard for institution-building, illiberal Islamists would not have hijacked politics in several countries in the region. Finally, it is seen as a net gain for all sides, and for regional security, that regional partners are reducing their security dependency on the United States and further investing in self-defense capabilities.

It is very difficult to tell whether reduced or increased US engagement in the Middle East would make a dramatic difference for regional

Established in 2012 as a core practice area of the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council, the **Middle East Peace and Security Initiative** brings together thought leaders and experts from the policy, business, and civil society communities to design innovative strategies to tackle present and future challenges in the region.

stability. Part of the problem is that we do not have a clear definition of engagement. The historical record of US military, political, and economic engagement in the Middle East is not conclusive either. For example, US intervention during the 1990-91 First Gulf War was essential. Yet Washington's decades-long embrace of dictators and the war against Iraq were disastrous. US efforts to help broker peace between Israel and Egypt in 1979, and then (to a lesser degree) Israel and Jordan in 1994 were instrumental. Yet, US peacemaking on the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian fronts was often problematic and ultimately unsuccessful. However, the United States' role in curbing Iran's nuclear program in recent years has been indispensable. Washington also has provided much needed humanitarian and development assistance to various war-torn or underdeveloped Middle Eastern countries over the past few decades.

Would a more engaged US policy in Libya or Syria, for example, have made things better or worse for regional security and US strategic interests? Any serious and comprehensive evaluation of US engagement in the Middle East will run into methodological and analytical hurdles. However, one thing is clear: Regardless how one defines and measures engagement, US engagement is not the deciding factor when it comes to stability in that complex part of the world.

Somewhere between the extremes of over-involvement and inaction lies the United States' future role in the Middle East. How the United States will achieve that happy medium without alienating friends and waging costly wars against foes will be an enormous undertaking for the next administration.

To address this issue, on June 23, 2016, the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security's Middle East Peace and Security Initiative (MEPSI) held a crisis simulation on the Middle East in partnership with the Middle East Strategy Task Force (MEST) at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Co-convened by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley (who also serve as MEST co-chairs), the simulation sought to credibly test the scenarios of *decreased* and *increased* US engagement in the Middle East and how each posture might affect regional stability

and core US interests. Broader goals of the exercise included generating policy-relevant insights for the next administration that might help it in identifying a more fruitful path for US policy and raising awareness among a Middle East-fatigued American public about the costs and benefits of either greater or lesser engagement in the region.

Held under the Chatham House rule, the simulated crisis featured a **dangerous escalation in Saudi Arabian-Iranian tensions with some complexity and ambiguity as to which of the two was most at fault.** Such a scenario allowed game participants to explore how the United States might respond to the demands of its regional partners, as well as threats that might challenge US interests more directly. The ability of the United States to help dampen or resolve regional tensions also was tested. To preserve the integrity of the game, we made sure not to design the game around "showing the negative effects of US disengagement." Indeed, we had no interest in building the simulation in ways that would validate a preconceived conclusion. We wanted a fair and meaningful test.

As chairman of the ISIS War Game Series at the Scowcroft Center (which has now transitioned to the Middle East Crisis Simulation Series) and member of the White Team (or Control Team), I took great pleasure

in leading this effort and working closely with my colleagues John Watts and Rex Brynen, nonresident senior fellows at the Scowcroft Center. John and Rex are highly experienced "wargamers," having run various high-level simulations for international governments and institutions throughout their careers. Their expertise in game planning and execution was absolutely vital.

I would like to thank Secretary Albright and Mr. Hadley for their guidance and substantive input throughout the planning process, and all game participants who joined us from the US government, the Arab diplomatic community in Washington, the private sector, and the US think tank community. Owen Daniels and Katherine Wolff, program assistants at MEPSI, are commended for their impeccable research and administrative assistance. Katherine, in particular, provided an oasis of calm. At times when I was confused about some

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process-related aspects of the game, Katherine was there to answer all my questions. She worked late nights, tirelessly, and with wonderful passion and dedication. I am grateful to her. Last but certainly not least, I would like to extend sincere appreciation to our interns at the Atlantic Council. Without them, the game would not have been possible. Among other activities, they conducted research and prepared briefing materials; took important notes; acted as liaisons between the White Team and all other teams; transmitted instant messages via online group chat; helped team leaders write their tactical and strategic action plans; and offered their own post-game insights and perspectives.

Although this was a team effort, special thanks and credit go to Rex, whose role in creative game design and implementation was simply outstanding. He was a formidable force throughout the process and a ton

of fun to work with. I am sure all team members would agree that we learned a lot from him. Below is Rex's brief synopsis of the proceedings and key findings of the game. If simulations are part of your programming and research portfolio, I encourage you to read his analysis.

Sincerely,



Bilal Y. Saab

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With the current American election campaign and change in presidential administrations due in January 2017, the debate over appropriate levels of US engagement in an unstable Middle East assumes vital importance. Should a new administration be more proactive in seeking to address threats, resolve conflicts, support allies, and deter foes? Should the new US president be wary about excessive American involvement in complex overseas problems, and focus on other concerns and issues closer to home? What should be done directly by Washington, and what is best addressed by local actors, alliances, and coalitions of the willing? What is the appropriate balance between doing too little and trying to do too much?

Objectives and Design

We focused in our June 23, 2016 crisis simulation on how differing levels of US engagement might affect Washington's ability to respond to a regional crisis and how differences in US posture and policy might affect the political-military calculations and behavior of key regional and international actors. Approximately fifty former and current officials, diplomats, academics, and journalists from several countries took part as players or observers.

Examining these questions posed a methodological challenge. The typical seminar wargame explores

a single set of policies, looking at the factors that might shape them and the possible responses of key stakeholders. A single game, however, offers no firm basis for evaluating two sets of policy alternatives. To do so, one would need multiple iterations, each representing a different US policy stance but keeping other variables constant. Multiple games, however, place high demands on time and resources. If the players are the same across two games, learning from the first can contaminate the second. If the players are different, variations in outcome may be more due to idiosyncratic factors than differences in the US policy posture being explored.

In order to provide a methodologically rigorous exploration of the key questions, the event was structured as two *simultaneous* games using the *same group of participants*. One game (PURPLE) presupposed greater US engagement compared with the policies of the current Obama Administration. The other game (GOLD) presupposed less American engagement. These differences were not meant to represent the policy positions of either US presidential candidate, but rather opposite tendencies on a spectrum. The crisis scenario and initial injects in both games were identical. However, once the games began they were free to diverge. Separate teams represented the United States in the PURPLE and GOLD games.

PURPLE (MORE ENGAGED) GAME

The newly elected US president has indicated that the United States will strengthen its engagement in the Middle East in order to safeguard collective interests and uphold regional security.

- Although US military deployments and posture in the Gulf remain largely unchanged, some additional forces have been deployed to Iraq and Syria in support of the campaign against ISIS.
- A carrier group remains on station in the Gulf, and another is currently operating in the Central Mediterranean.
- US aircraft and special operations forces have taken part in periodic attacks against ISIS targets in Libya, in conjunction with coalition partners.
- The United States continues to provide material and intelligence support for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) operations in Yemen.
- The President has expressed interest in reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace talks during his/her first term.
- There is no change in US economic and military assistance in the region.

GOLD (LESS ENGAGED) GAME

The newly elected US president has indicated that the United States expects its regional partners to assume a greater share of the burden of maintaining regional stability and security. The United States will avoid entanglement in local conflicts that are tangential to core US national interests.

- The number of US military personnel in Iraq has been reduced by at least one-third, and the White House is considering the withdrawal of all special forces assets currently in Syria.
- The US Navy has recently decreased the number of ships on station in the Gulf, and no longer maintains an aircraft carrier permanently on station there. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar have been asked to contribute more toward the costs of maintaining US facilities. The US Navy has reduced patrols in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.
- In discussions with Arab partners and European allies regarding the ISIS threat in Libya, Washington has indicated that it would prefer not to be involved in direct military activity.
- The administration has quietly reduced its support for GCC-led coalition operations in Yemen.
- Reports suggest the administration has little interest in engaging in Arab-Israeli peacemaking.
- Washington is currently reviewing aid commitments to Israel, Egypt, and other countries. The president has indicated that foreign aid and military assistance across the region may be reduced so as to allow greater focus on deficit-reduction at home.

However, all of the other teams—Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC), Iran, Russia, China, coalition allies (Europe, Turkey, and others)—played in both alternative policy universes. This placed them in a position to compare and contrast how differences in US posture affected their own actions. An additional Red Team represented a variety of violent, extremist non-state actors that might seek to exploit a regional crisis. Teams were asked to interact with other teams, submit operational orders that would take effect immediately, and submit longer-term strategic actions that would take effect at the end of each turn.

The scenario was carefully designed so as to not favor a particular set of policies or generate a predetermined outcome. Given that a key complaint by proponents of greater US engagement is that Washington is failing to adequately support partners and allies or deter opponents, it was decided to focus on a series of hypothetical Iranian-Saudi confrontations that could escalate and even ignite broader regional conflict. Would Washington be able to both reassure its Gulf partners and to discourage Riyadh from taking rash or escalatory action? Would US policy be able to deter Iranian escalation and opportunism? How might other

IMMEDIATE BACKGROUND (PRE-GAME EVENTS)

June 16, 2017 (one week prior): Backed by Russian and Hezbollah forces, the Syrian government takes control of all remaining areas in and around Aleppo.

June 21, 2017 (two days prior): A massive car bomb heavily damages the Iranian embassy in Beirut. Syrian jihadist elements are believed to be responsible, and Tehran suspects possible Saudi involvement.

GAME TURN ONE

June 23, 2017 (briefing): Several small attack craft belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are involved in a brief confrontation with the Saudi frigate RSN Al Dammam in disputed waters southwest of the island of Abu Musa. One IRGC boat is sunk, and one Saudi sailor is missing. Each believes the other to be responsible for initiating the clash, and both place their military forces on alert.

June 24, 2017 (inject): A car bomb explodes outside the Saudi embassy in Manama, Bahrain. A local Shia opposition group is believed responsible, but Saudi Arabia suspects outside Iranian involvement.

GAME TURN TWO (APPROXIMATELY ONE MONTH LATER)

July 2017 (briefing): A Saudi C-130 transport aircraft is shot down by a man-portable air defense system (MANPADS) on approach to coalition-controlled al-Anad air force base in southern Yemen. Some twenty-six Saudi military personnel are killed, including one senior officer who was a member of the Saudi royal family. Subsequent investigation reveals the weapon to be a Chinese-made QW-1M, likely supplied to the Houthis by Iran.

July 2017 (inject): A large un-flagged dhow departs Chabahar, Iran and is believed to be en route to Yemen with arms supplies. In the PURPLE game, US naval assets are closest to the vessel, while in the GOLD game, reduced US engagement means that a Saudi vessel is positioned to make the earliest possible interception.

actors react? Players were given an initial game briefing before Turn One, and then various developments were injected into the game, whether preplanned by the organizers or reflecting actions by participants (see box above). Based on team actions, the game was then advanced by approximately one month, and the process repeated. A final plenary session provided game participants with an opportunity to reflect on their experience and identify key lessons.

The scenario and injects were carefully designed so that neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia was locked into the role of aggressor. Rather, the initial incidents were of a sort where each side was inclined to assume nefarious intent by the other, setting the stage for potential—but certainly not inevitable—escalation. In such a situation, a US role could well prove key.

Key Outcomes and Findings

An immediate issue for everyone—especially the US GOLD team—concerned **how to best conceptualize and operationalize greater or lesser “engagement” in**

the Middle East. Clearly, greater disengagement does not mean that the United States no longer has interests in the region or that it takes no action to pursue these, any more than greater engagement implies American actions always involve more military actions or are more interventionist. One suggestion derived from the game discussions was that engagement could be thought of in terms of *breadth* (including the array of things viewed as US interests, as well as the range the tools available to pursue them); *depth* (the extent or degree of US capabilities and actions); and *consistency* (including the weight given to the reliability of US support and the importance of long-standing partnerships).¹

In both games, Saudi Arabia and Iran were convinced from the outset that they were the threatened party. The GCC quickly sought US backing against what they saw as an aggressive Iran. For its part, Tehran showed frustration at not being accorded the attention and

¹ We are grateful to Dan Chiu, Deputy Director at the Scowcroft Center, for suggesting this definition.

ANALYTICAL CAVEATS

No serious game can fully explore the complexity of crisis behavior. For that reason, and in keeping with the Atlantic Council's commitment to refining and advancing the art of wargame design, several caveats are in order.

- While the game design was deliberately intended to minimize the idiosyncratic effects of player selection and behavior, these cannot be discounted entirely. A different group of participants might have behaved in somewhat different ways. Nonetheless the involvement of many experienced, highly qualified participants, and feedback received during and after the game, both suggest that the game outcomes were plausible and credible.
- Although the scenario was intended to offer insight into important issues of deterrence, escalation, crisis management, and conflict resolution, it was but a single (multi-part) scenario. A different situation—for example, primarily focused on counter-ISIS efforts, or on repression and human rights, or humanitarian crisis—might well have produced different results.
- Practical constraints limited the representation of actors in the game and how many participants could be assigned to them. At various points, participants suggested the potential value of greater differentiation within the GCC team (to reflect Saudi-Omani policy differences on Iran and to enable an “Omani channel” between the two sides) or having a dedicated team to represent Israel or Egypt.
- The simulation was a simulation. Some players may have been less risk-adverse or sensitive to domestic opinion than would be the case when dealing with a real crisis. On the other hand, it was clear that players did exhibit many of the characteristics associated with actual crisis behavior, including a focus on reputation, sunk costs, and a tendency to emphasize information that confirmed their preexisting beliefs. As in real crises, signals often reflected in-group discussions and were not necessarily perceived in the intended way by their intended target: what seemed calculated, proportional, or bold to one side, sometimes seemed ill-considered, escalatory, or irrelevant to another.

respect it felt was due. The two sides made little effort to talk directly, but rather signaled through public statements and actions.

Although neither game resulted in further direct military conflict between the two sides following the initial naval incident, in both games Tehran and Riyadh proved willing to use proxies and other regional conflicts (in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere) as a way of undermining the other and settling scores. In particular, in both games the Iranian team responded to what it (incorrectly) saw as Saudi involvement in the Beirut bombing by having Hezbollah conduct a retaliatory attack against Saudi diplomatic targets; it also launched a series of largely ineffectual cyberattacks against GCC financial and petroleum targets.

In both games, US decision making was often less agile and responsive than that of other actors, slowed by the number of internal stakeholders, US domestic politics, and the need to consult with allies and others. Greater engagement by the US PURPLE team meant they were

more prized as interlocutors, while the GOLD team sometimes found they had greater difficulty securing attention and consideration from allies.

The games also diverged in significant ways. In the PURPLE game, the United States was willing to utilize increasing amounts of military power to contain Iran and pursue other, related regional objectives. In particular, the US PURPLE team augmented naval capabilities in the Gulf, stepped up support for the Syrian opposition, took direct action against Syrian military helicopters (so as to halt the regime's use of barrel bombs), supported local Syrian Kurdish and Arab allies in the liberation of Raqqa from ISIS control, and eventually secured Turkish and coalition support for a safe zone in northern Syria. The United States also covertly attacked and sunk the dhow carrying suspected Iranian arms to Yemen. The US team was anxious to signal new resoluteness in US policy through bold action—although, as discussed later, its statements and actions were not always perceived in that way by others.

By contrast, in the GOLD game Washington favored more limited actions, usually in closer coordination with other coalition partners. In the case of the Iranian arms shipment, for example, a multinational naval interception was organized. Feeling less pressure to be in the forefront of crisis response each time, the US team devoted more time to considering US interests. At the same time, cautious decision making and fear of overreach meant that the US GOLD team sometimes struggled to respond to events in a timely fashion.

US Engagement

Player actions in the two games, and differences between them, pointed to several key lessons regarding US engagement in the Middle East.

- The fundamental policy question that needs to be addressed is primarily one of *how* the United States engages in the Middle East, rather than simply *how much*.** Assessing the outcome of the two games, it would be hard to argue that one policy posture was unequivocally superior to the other. Certainly the more disengaged policy of the GOLD team generated concern in Riyadh and other GCC states, which felt that they could no longer fully rely on a historic ally. On the other hand, GCC actions differed little between the two games, largely because they were reluctant to use their own substantial military forces in a direct military confrontation with Iran. In the PURPLE game, the US team signaled its support of allies and resolute pursuit of American interests by adopting a much more ambitious policy in Syria. While this had major elements of success (the liberation of Raqqa), other aspects were countered by Russia (which intensified some air operations) and Iran (by deploying several thousand ground troops to buttress the Assad regime). With greater US initiative also came greater risk of unanticipated second and third order effects: the liberation of Raqqa and establishment of a US-Turkish safe zone in northern Syria, for example, led the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units or YPG (Red Team) to declare independence—something that almost certainly would have provoked direct

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Turkish military activity within the supposed safe haven, which then would have severely complicated US policy.

- US policy levers can only influence, not control, events in the region.** Our simulated Middle East proved to be a complex adaptive system with a multiplicity of competing local interests. In both games, US policy was often not the primary driver of local behaviors, and US actions did not always have the intended effects. The real Middle East is, of course, infinitely more complex. This is not to suggest that diplomacy or other instruments of US policy are somehow futile. They clearly are not. It is to suggest that overconfidence is a dangerous thing, and that, once again, it is the kind of US engagement—and not its extent—that is of critical importance.

- Adversaries may not be fully deterred by a greater American military presence, but rather focus on other arenas where American power is more limited.** Despite both more substantial military assets deployed to the region in the PURPLE game and a greater willingness to use them, US opponents consistently reported that this had little or no effect on their political calculations. In the case of Iran, Tehran was disinclined to take actions that might provoke a military response.

Instead, it limited the effects of US conventional military power by operating asymmetrically, indirectly, and through proxies. Following the naval clash (and in response to what it saw as aggressive Saudi behavior), Iran asked Hezbollah to undertake multiple terror attacks against Saudi targets on its behalf. It also used its own limited cyber capacity to harass the GCC states. In the PURPLE game, Iran also responded to increased US intervention in Syria by stepping up its own support for the Assad regime. Similarly, ISIS (played by the Red Team) felt that both US postures presented opportunities as well as challenges: intensified coalition military actions in the PURPLE game hurt ISIS on the ground, but made it easier for the organization to point to Western intervention in the Muslim world. To compensate for battlefield losses, ISIS stepped up support for jihadist terrorism. It also sought to use growing

Saudi-Iranian confrontation to stoke regional Sunni-Shia tensions, including a car-bombing outside a Shia mosque in Bahrain and the attempted capture of senior Iranian advisors in Syria.

Up to this point [in the GOLD game], the US has been unhelpful. If they see the consequences of us taking action...are the Americans then going to be willing to step in and help us?

GCC Team Member

There's no way you want to do that [in the PURPLE game] without coordination with the US and getting permission to do it.

GCC Team Member

- **Gulf partners are reluctant to act without US support**—but may do so if they feel they have been abandoned. In the PURPLE game, the GCC team was hesitant to act without US approval. Because US backing was seen as credible, they felt greater need to coordinate actions, and were reluctant to take measures that might antagonize Washington. By contrast, in the GOLD game, the GCC team felt US support was inadequate and were willing to consider acting alone. The GCC team also considered pursuing closer ties with Russia as a way of prodding the United States into taking a more active role.

Are we in danger of being manipulated into something here?

US PURPLE Team Member

- **Gulf partners will seek to use US power as a proxy for their own.** The GCC states massively overmatch Iran in air combat power and have comparable naval capabilities. Despite this, at no point in either game did the Gulf states consider using their own military forces against Iran. Instead they were anxious to use US capabilities to further both their immediate and broader strategic interests. When US interests fully align, this poses no problems. However, the US PURPLE team did, at one point, express concern about the extent to which their perception of, and response to, the crisis was being manipulated by Gulf allies for their own ends.

- **Russia and China cannot act as substitutes for the United States in its role as regional crisis manager.** In both games, Moscow was quick to offer its services as intermediary and mediator. China—acting somewhat more actively than is currently the case, but in a manner that is likely to become more common as its global interests grow—also sought to position itself as a potential fixer. Both sought to shift discussion of the naval incident into the United Nations Security Council so as to increase their profile and dilute any unilateral American role. In no case did any of the local parties seriously consider this, however. Russia's willingness to use the crisis to advance arms sales in both Iran and the GCC states only contributed to player perceptions that it was acting opportunistically but lacked the diplomatic weight of the United States.

The less engaged US doesn't give us much to work with.

COALITION Team Member

- **Europe and other US coalition members cannot provide an alternative for US leadership.** Despite a more disengaged US posture in the GOLD game, no regional actor looked to Europe to provide alternative leadership or critical resources in addressing the simulated crisis. Europe, too, appeared much more willing to support US initiatives than to try to strike out on its own, supporting efforts by the US PURPLE team to increase pressure against ISIS and establish a safe zone in northern Syria. Amid continuing Eurozone challenges, the Mediterranean migration crisis, the conflict in Ukraine, and Brexit negotiations, it seems likely that European states would be even less well positioned in the future to fill any vacuum generated by US disengagement. Moreover, in the military sphere only the United Kingdom and France can make significant contributions, although even their capabilities have dwindled (but they may, nonetheless, be increasingly required in order to face Russian challenges).
- **Both US teams felt that their alternative policies gave them more freedom than the current administration's approach, but in different ways.** The PURPLE (more engaged) US team expressed that they felt greater freedom to take action and were less risk averse. It took them time to adjust from current thinking about what options they

would use, but by the end of the simulation, they were getting more creative with the tools they could employ. It is worth noting, however, that these new approaches were not necessarily any more effective, and arguably increased tensions at points during the simulation. On the other hand, the GOLD (less engaged) team reported that they felt fewer obligations in terms of what they “must” do and had the freedom to choose new policy options. Again, the benefits of that freedom are arguable.

Other Lessons

The simulation also highlighted several issues with regard to the Middle East and crisis stability more broadly.

- **Regional conflict and sectarian tensions provide fertile ground for crisis escalation.** Current regional conflicts, especially in Syria, provided actors with multiple alternative arenas for proxy conflict. Actors thus found opportunities to punish each other by escalating these conflicts—likely with tragic consequences for the people living in those societies. Sunni-Shia tensions added a further volatile element; in both games, they added to perceived threats, helped shape alliance and proxy patterns, and were leveraged as a source of potential escalation (notably by ISIS). Existing regional tensions tend to aggravate problems of misperception and act as a barrier to the sorts of empathetic understanding needed to anticipate the actions of others, reduce tensions, and build a degree of mutual confidence. Indeed, current tensions between Iran and major GCC states (in particular, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates) have created a sort of “sunk investment” in hostility that constrains more productive diplomacy on both sides.
- **Iranian behavior is deeply problematic and partly driven by a desire to be seen as having a legitimate role in the regional order.** There is no doubt that many aspects of Iranian behavior are deeply problematic, even destructive, whether in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, or elsewhere. However,

Tehran sees itself as a responsible, often status quo-oriented regional power. In both games, the Iran team’s behavior was reported as motivated by a desire to show that it could not be intimidated. Therefore, actions taken to deter or pressure Tehran often produced the opposite of the intended effect. Failure to effectively engage Iranian officials also tended to be viewed as confirming the need for more assertive Iranian policy. Interestingly, in both games, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was seen as an underlying constant. No actor seriously considered using it as leverage or abandoning it, nor did any feel that their crisis actions would derail its implementation.

Current regional conflicts, especially in Syria, provided actors with multiple alternative arenas for proxy conflict.

- While **cyberattacks** may be an increasing part of the landscape of conflict and hybrid warfare, they pose real challenges in terms of US and allied response. During the game, Iranian cyberattacks against GCC were amateurish and ineffectual. However, they provoked extended discussion of how the United States might provide assistance in this realm to its allies, and whether there was value in unleashing US offensive cyber capabilities against a country for actions that did not result in much more than a temporary irritant.

Conclusion

In “exploring US engagement in the Middle East,” the Atlantic Council utilized an innovative simulation game design that enabled participants to explore the regional effects of two very different US postures. The results underscored the need to move beyond a generally unhelpful discussion of Middle East policy in terms of *more or less engagement*. On the one hand, the United States cannot walk away from the region—it is simply too important, and the US role is irreplaceable. On the other hand, the games also highlighted that US actions can sometimes create as many problems as they solve, that Washington cannot resolve every issue, and that coalition partnerships will prove essential.

All of this suggests that what is required is more reflective discussion of what US interests are in the region, coupled with more creative thought as to how the United States can best leverage the full range

of diplomatic, information, military, and economic resources to protect and pursue these interests.

The game also demonstrated that the United States has not yet fully worked out how to engage Iran as a serious actor in the region with its own legitimate concerns, while at the same time pushing back against Iranian actions that threaten regional stability, challenge US interests and those of its regional partners, or are otherwise problematic. Washington's relations with the Arab Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia, proved to be another challenging element. On the one hand, these are bedrock relationships that are critical to regional security and American diplomacy. At the same time, interests do diverge, and regional partners are quite happy to entice Washington into pursuing Gulf interests that do not always fully align with those of the United States. Adding a further complication is the risk that, if the United States fails to adequately back Gulf partners, some might be tempted to "go it alone" rashly, in ways that have potential adverse consequences.

US actions in the Middle East can have profound implications, for both the region and the world, with repercussions that can last generations. This places a momentous responsibility on Washington to use that influence in a positive way, and at the very least "do no (further) harm." The work of the Atlantic Council's Middle East Strategy Task Force, the activities of its Middle East Peace and Security Initiative, and the discussions generated by these and other events in the new Middle East Crisis Simulation Series hopefully represent useful contributions toward achieving that goal.

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