ISSUE IN FOCUS   BY **BILAL Y. SAAB** AND **MICHAEL S. TYSON**

ISIS War Game II: The Escalation Challenge

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More than six months have passed since President Barack Obama delivered a speech outlining the administration's strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The US-led coalition of more than sixty allies and partners has launched a sustained air campaign, killing thousands of militants, destroying more than two hundred oil and gas facilities that fund ISIS's operations,[1] and stopping ISIS's momentum in various key areas in Iraq and Syria including Mount Sinjar, the Mosul Dam, Kobani, and around Baghdad. But ISIS is reportedly gaining ground in Syria and along the Syria-Lebanon border, spreading its message effectively, and recruiting foreigners at an increasing rate. Washington's tactical successes against ISIS notwithstanding, it is still far from achieving its strategic goals.

In September 2014, we predicted in a simulation exercise (ISIS War Game: The Coming Stalemate) conducted at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security's Middle East Peace and Security Initiative that the most likely scenario was a military stalemate.[2] We also realized that such a stalemate was not stable. Since the conclusion of the first war game, ISIS's regional attacks have increased in scope, lethality, and level of sophistication, as evidenced by its military and terrorist operations in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Lebanon.

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1   Susan Rice, "Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice on the 2015 National Security Strategy," White House, February 6, 2015, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/06/remarks-national-security-advisor-susan-rice-2015-national-security-stra
2   Bilal Y. Saab and Michael S. Tyson, "ISIS War Game: The Coming Stalemate," Atlantic Council, October 2014, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/isis-war-game-the-coming-stalemate.

Middle East Peace and Security Initiative
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.

To continue to study the evolving strategic interaction among ISIS, the US-led coalition, and other state actors involved in this crisis, we ran the second iteration of the ISIS War Game series on February 25, 2015. In this all-day exercise, held in partnership with *Foreign Affairs* magazine, we focused on the potential for escalation on the part of ISIS and how Washington and its allies and partners could anticipate and better prepare for such contingencies.

Background

ISIS carries the seeds of its own destruction primarily because it has an extremely small constituency within Islamist populations around the world, an apocalyptic vision, an unsustainable strategy of us-against-the-world, and a failed governance project. However, before ISIS collapses—which could take years depending on US and coalition policy responses—it will most likely attempt to inflict as much pain and cause as much damage as possible, in the region and possibly beyond. To put it simply, ISIS will not go quietly into the night. Therefore, anticipating its strategic moves can prevent further instability in the region.

ISIS can be labeled as a revolutionary group, an insurgent movement, a terrorist army, and a nihilistic cult, but one thing it is not is a status quo actor. By

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definition, the modus operandi of revisionist actors such as ISIS is offensive action and periodic escalation (at least until their ultimate objective, which in ISIS's case is a global caliphate, is fully accomplished). Therefore, it matters less why ISIS might *further* escalate. What is more relevant is that it has both the means and the innate desire to do so. This assessment led us to try to project not only how ISIS might further escalate, but equally important, how the United States and its allies and partners in the coalition could effectively counter.

Objectives

This second war game was specifically designed to be military-operational in nature and approached from the prism of operational containment. We deliberately chose to keep the objectives of this war game limited because this kind of exercise is a critical stepping stone for the next and final war game, which will tackle the ISIS challenge in a holistic manner, looking at the underlying conditions—political, economic, social, and perhaps religious—that gave rise to ISIS. In that respect, this second war game was part of a logical, phased approach. As the saying goes, "we have to deal with the bug closest to the windshield."

Our expectation from this effort was to help US policymakers pool collective expertise; expose senior officials and analysts with Iraq/Syria and broader Middle East responsibilities in the Department of Defense, Department of State, and National Security Council to diverse opinions and options; and promote better understanding within and communication among various US government agencies involved in the fight against ISIS.

More specifically, this war game sought to accomplish three tasks: First, to assess how ISIS might fully test existing US strategy by resorting to various forms of escalation; second, to simulate the response of the United States and that of its allies and partners to potential escalation by ISIS; and third, to provide recommendations to US officials that could help mitigate the repercussions of likely escalatory actions by ISIS, and more broadly protect core US interests in the region.

Design

Like the first war game, this simulation was off the record and applied a strict policy of non-attribution. However, unlike its predecessor, this event was based on role-playing.

- A Blue Team was represented by a small US national security cabinet consisting of the President, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA Director, and senior military and political advisers from various government agencies with deep expertise on Iraq, Syria, and the broader Middle East.

- A Red Team simulated an ISIS consultative council (also known as Shura Council), led by ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, using open source information that is currently available.

- A Green Team included representatives of influential actors in the US-led coalition including European powers, Arab Gulf states, Turkey, and Iraq.

- A Brown Team consisted of two senior representatives from Russia, Iran, and Syria.

- A White Team (also called Control Team) assigned one member to each of the above teams. This team's role was to observe, coordinate, and introduce new issues, challenges, and information to each of the scenarios under study.

The war game included two sessions. For each session, teams broke up into separate rooms and were given a scenario describing escalatory actions by Red. Each team had two hours to discuss each scenario separately and then present their findings in joint plenary sessions. These sessions gave each team a chance to openly discuss and ask questions about the other teams' plans and procedures.

For both scenarios, the following general assumptions (from the real world) were made:

- Obama would not make major changes to the US approach against ISIS.

- Coalition members would not independently intensify military actions against ISIS.

- The United States would not step up or relaunch its training program with moderate Syrian rebels.

- There would be no sudden political leadership change in Iraq or Syria anytime soon.

- US-led coalition efforts would continue to focus on Iraq, causing more ISIS elements to migrate to and possibly make advances in Syria and Lebanon's northern borders.

The scenarios were designed to meet the following criteria:

- Even though they were less than likely (it is always difficult to assess the likelihood of hypothetical scenarios), they were definitely not unthinkable.

- They were sensitive to local contexts as well as regional dynamics and trends in the conflict.

- They presumably had strategic implications for regional security and US interests.

- They had the potential to cause a more forceful US response and possibly push Washington to rethink various aspects of its existing strategy toward ISIS.

Key Findings

To ensure that each team separately engaged in discussions on roughly similar levels and provided a baseline feedback to all war game participants in the plenary sessions, White members suggested four key considerations for Blue, Red, Green, and Brown to address:

1. What are the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic response options to the scenario at hand?

2. For the response chosen, what are the desired effects?

3. What are the reactions and counteractions of all teams?

4. How will this event affect respective team strategies?

These suggestions notwithstanding, it was inevitable that each team, given its unique preferences, capabilities, and constraints, engaged the scenarios differently. Some placed a greater emphasis on the strategic aspects of their response. Others focused more on operations and tactics. The following is a description of the scenarios and a synopsis of the key findings, which we have tried to report as accurately and objectively as possible.

Scenario 1: Baghdad under Siege

Yesterday, hundreds of militants suspected to be loyal to ISIS infiltrated the Sunni-concentrated northwest corner of Baghdad and reportedly established control of that area, overtaking the Trade Bank of Iraq and a major oil refinery west of the capital. The US Embassy is currently on a heightened state of alert and has notified Washington of withdrawal options, although it has not yet issued a request for evacuation.

The rapidly deteriorating security situation has caught the Iraqi government off guard and forced it to temporarily suspend operations. For security reasons, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and President Fuad Masum are reported to be relocating to the large Shia city of Al Nasiriyah to establish an interim seat of government. Iraqi security forces are mobilizing to attempt to neutralize the threat and push back the militants.

However, many government buildings, businesses, and markets, as well as schools and other offices in the northwest have closed or are predicted to close over the days and weeks to come. Baghdad International Airport has suspended all arrivals and departures until further notice. A large segment of Baghdad's population is expected to flee the city and seek refuge in Kurdistan and southern Iraq. Small-scale rioting, looting, and various forms of criminal activity are taking place.

Blue Team

> *I don't think we can ever be criticized for protecting our people and our assets. We have a huge installation. We've got a lot of geography that is US, governed by US law, and I think it's our obligation to make sure it's properly protected.* –**Blue member playing the role of President of the United States**

Blue members agreed that evacuating the US Embassy in Baghdad and withdrawing the US military presence were not options. Doing so, Blue thought, would cause the United States to "lose not only in Iraq, but also in the region." However, Blue wanted to avoid a kneejerk reaction that would automatically lead it to step up military engagement without first assessing the ramifications of military escalation and addressing the broader strategic context.

Blue judged that it was imperative for the Iraqi government to regain full operational capability. Blue members identified the protection of their military and civilian personnel as the first priority. The second was ensuring that Iraq would successfully defend itself, with massive support from Blue and Green. Blue came up with a set of judgments and strategic guidelines, including:

- Red's attack would not require a major change to current US strategy. However, in the event that Red's follow-on actions reignite civil war in Iraq, Blue could not ensure Green Zone security and regional stability with the military assets currently deployed in the area, forcing adjustments to current force posture.

- Blue has invested a great deal of blood and treasure in a stable government in Baghdad, thus it is imperative to preserve it and fight for it.

- In the medium term, Blue would signal that it was not leaving, but could decide to maintain strategic ambiguity as a useful tool to disrupt Red's planning.

- In the long term, Blue would assess strategic options across all elements of national power—diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME)—to enable "the type of Iraq we are hoping for."

The main operations and tactics Blue proposed included:

- Evacuating nonessential embassy personnel and protecting remaining embassy staff, and tailoring US military presence accordingly

- Encouraging the Iraqi government to return to Baghdad, with US security support

- Ensuring that Red does not win the information battle

- Communicating a clear and unambiguous statement to the American people about US interests and commitments

- Developing, executing, and sharing DIME plans with allies and partners to ensure they keep their level of commitment, and encouraging them to increase their role in the fight against Red

  o The Secretary of State proposed reaching out to close allies and partners, especially European powers. The President stated he would call King Salman Bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. Blue would also use its back channels—diplomatic, military, and intelligence—to communicate with Iran and others who are willing and able to play constructive roles.

- Leveraging indigenous forces as well as allies and partners already in the region. This would be another priority for Blue because, without a significant effort from the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) and other local forces, Red could not be effectively stopped.

- Applying deterrence through punishment by intensifying airstrikes and covert action against Red. Blue would clearly communicate to Red that it would swiftly and effectively counter escalation.

Red Team

Our number one goal is…to protect, to defend, and to expand the caliphate. We will make it impossible for anyone to sit on the fence. There is no fence. You're with us or you're against us… –Red member playing the role of ISIS leader

Red members first defined their ultimate objective. Then they articulated a strategy that would be generally sensitive to that objective, but that also would specifically help counter the response of its adversaries to its latest action. After that, they developed specific operations that helped them implement their strategy. Finally, they came up with tactics that supported their strategy.

Within Red's Shura Council, all members agreed that there was no higher purpose than protecting and expanding their Islamic caliphate. To achieve that critical priority and counter Blue's reaction to Red's escalation, Red's strategy was to:

- Maintain escalation dominance vis-à-vis adversaries

- Dominate the media news cycle

- Disable and isolate the Iraqi central government

- Promote the image of the caliphate and maintain momentum at multiple locations

- Magnify the fight's sectarian nature

- Preserve some measure of governance to showcase both the inadequacy of the Iraqi government and the ability of Red to provide and administer services

The main operations and tactics that Red proposed included:

Governance

- Retaining or hiring technical experts to run public services

- Extending racket network and formalizing criminal networks

- Establishing educational and medical services

- Setting up sharia courts and establishing criminal and religious police

- Pooling economic resources by looting banks, and taking over homes of people and selling their items

- Encouraging like-minded groups elsewhere to set up governance, such as in Libya and other "provinces"

- Reaching out to Sunni Arab populations aggressively, including by means of extortion and corruption

- Driving out foreigners both to undermine the Iraqi government and to underscore the fight's purely sectarian nature

Military/Security

- Employing ground attacks to gain control of strategic sites including Baiji Oil Refinery, town of Al-Baghdadi, and the Haditha Dam

- Using ground vehicles to message its ability to mobilize militarily

- Utilizing surface-to-air and indirect fire attacks against coalition forces

- Conducting suicide bomber and Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks

- Employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

- Boosting recruitment of both foreign fighters and locals

- Upholding positions and expanding, subduing, and absorbing rivals in Syria

- Stepping up kidnapping and abduction efforts with a focus on foreigners

- Conducting simultaneous attacks in Damascus and elsewhere to illustrate Red's agility and to solidify sectarian divides

- Disrupting infrastructure to inhibit adversaries' ground transportation network

Brown Team

Even the United States is reluctant…to put boots on the ground, whereas Iran is doing exactly the opposite. **–Brown member playing the role of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

The Russian President vowed that he would continue to provide economic and military assistance to Syria. While Russia upholds international law, he said, the West disregards it. To avert military intervention by the West, he demanded a UN resolution authorizing the use of force. He also offered to host talks over the Syrian crisis, viewing his country as the connecting point for all parties involved and adding that the United States could use Russia as an intermediary to begin talking with the Syrian government. Finally, the Russian President offered humanitarian support to refugees and internally displaced persons. Russia's Defense Minister showed willingness to discuss direct military support to the Iraqi Kurds, rather than through the Iraqi central government. He also requested greater intelligence sharing with the Syrian and Iraqi governments on foreign fighters.

The Iranian Supreme Leader articulated that the Assad regime and the Iraqi central government must survive. His top military commander in the room advised him to separate the Iraq and Syria fights and urge the Syrian government to stay away from events and politics in Iraq. In one of his interventions, the Iranian Supreme Leader questioned the Red attackers' identity, hinting subtly at Saudi or Qatari involvement—possibly as a provocation to pull Iran into wider sectarian conflict. For Iran, the ultimate question was how it could contain the situation in Iraq without jeopardizing its position in Syria and elsewhere in the region. Iran's immediate priority was to push Red out of Iraq. Toward that end, Tehran would mobilize additional Iraqi Shiite militias and deploy a dozen more of its own commanders to Iraq.

The Syrian President's number one priority in this new turbulent environment was to control his government. Following Red's attack, he immediately sent public condolences to the Iraqi leadership, condemning the attacks and emphasizing that Syria was also a victim of Red's terrorism. His goal of defeating the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and leaving Syria as a two-party fight with Red remained the same. The Syrian President clarified that his forces would not respond militarily to Red's attack in Iraq. On an informational level, he emphasized to the Syrian people in a public address that his secular government is essential for preventing Red terrorism. He also communicated that he would refuse an official US delegation in Syria, should one be created, but looks forward to recognition by the West, and the United States in particular, of his government as the only legitimate government of Syria. He requested increased security assistance from Iran and Russia to defeat the FSA. Anticipating that the US-led coalition would intensify its aerial bombing campaign against Red, the Syrian President privately stated that his forces might participate in a pinprick attack against Red and use the opportunity to attack FSA units while all attention is diverted toward Red. He also said he would not share intelligence with the United States, but would offer it to European powers to build bridges and pave the way for their recognition of the Syrian government.

Green Team

Our house is on fire and the next nearest fire station happens to be Iran...however, we [and the Iranians] both seem to be confident that Baghdad was secure, there was no fear there...It turned out that the Iranian position in the other room was exactly what the Iraqi position in our room is. **–Green member playing the role of Prime Minister of Iraq**

As diverse a team as it was, Green's immediate priorities were to recognize the severity of the situation in Iraq and figure out how to best support the Iraqi government. This in itself was a complicated problem, given the complex interactions and often conflicting dynamics among the United States, Iran, Turkey, and European countries in the coalition.

A Green member playing the role of Iraqi Prime Minister surmised that any help would be welcome regardless of the source. The message from Baghdad was clear: whoever invests the most in expelling Red from Iraq would have the most to gain in that country.

Green members made various statements and engaged in the following policy deliberations:

- Iraq saw itself as a "house on fire" and looked for any help it could get. Though the Iraqi government's preference was the West, the Iranians' willingness to provide additional forms of assistance made them an even more attractive prospect.

- Green members playing the roles of France, Britain, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab and European powers expressed strong reservations over increased Iranian intervention. The overall conclusion within Green, with the exception of Iraq, was that a more overt Iranian role in Iraq would deepen sectarian fault lines, which would benefit Red.

- The Iraqi government had difficulty making decisions and articulating its interests outside sectarian confines.

- A Green member playing the role of Saudi Arabia offered to convene the Gulf Cooperation Council and help fund the Iraqi government so it could deal with the worsening refugee crisis.

- A Turkish representative offered to send arms to the Iraqi government. Refugees were already challenging Turkey's security, and Ankara's priority was to effectively contain the problem.

- British and French representatives within Green were united in their response. Both took the lead in Europe's response, but looked to the United States to lead the international coalition. After Ukraine, they, along with other European representatives within Green, were concerned about having another major conflict closer to home. Britain and France said they were already committing substantial diplomatic effort to the conflict. Thus, they would prefer to refocus rather than add new resources. They also preferred a sustained dialogue instead of a one-off offer from Blue. Both registered serious concerns about the welfare of their diplomatic staff in Iraq.

- Green representatives playing smaller European countries were uninterested in escalating their involvement. The combination of a recovering economy, war-weariness and increasing European security threats also prevented them from stepping up their involvement. Lastly, given the record of Blue's past military experience in Iraq, many European representatives doubted that a military return to Iraq would produce any positive results.

Scenario 2: Spectacular Terrorist Attack

Yesterday, a suicide bomber driving what is thought to be a stolen US-made Iraqi armored vehicle detonated his explosives at Al-Asad Airbase, Iraq, killing at least seventy-two coalition personnel, including thirty-two Americans and wounding 125. Among the US casualties is a high-ranking diplomat from the US Embassy.

A joint US-Iraqi investigation is underway to find out how the attacker managed to gain access to this high-security military facility. Complicating this effort is the blast's size, which has made it extremely difficult to identify the perpetrator. However, hours after the attack, ISIS released an online video in which it claimed responsibility for the bombing. Intelligence gathered from US satellite imagery shows that militants suspected to be loyal to ISIS are marching toward the nearby Hadithah refinery which connects to a major pipeline, attempting to seize control of that strategic oil installation. Force protection measures in the region and around the globe have dramatically increased. Operations originating from Al-Asad have been interrupted: airstrikes are suspended and training missions have been cut by 50 percent until airbase security is stabilized.

CENTCOM has reinforced US troops on the airbase and is requesting an increase in airstrikes originating from US forces in the Gulf in order to minimize operational impacts. US European Command also directed its

component commands to implement additional force-protection measures and random security enhancements at facilities across the EUCOM area of responsibility. On the diplomatic front, the United Nations Security Council is expected to hold an emergency meeting to discuss possible reactions to this event. US intelligence reports indicate the increased potential for ISIS attacks in Iraq and elsewhere, including on US soil.

Blue Team

…it's the central dilemma we're up against, of how not to appear impotent, but also how not to take action that doesn't inadvertently strengthen the network you're actually trying to degrade. **–Blue member playing the role of Vice President of the United States**

Blue members' first priority was to ensure the protection of US citizens abroad. Communication of plans and procedures to the American people was also critical, as it would help garner support for any short- or long-term actions taken by the US government.

The scenario caused Blue to assess the type of event that would trigger a major change in strategy toward Red. In that regard, Blue members debated whether a higher number of US casualties—which would lead to the biggest loss of American lives since 9/11—would have tipped the balance and "forced" the President to change his strategy. The President suggested that should a Red contingency cause a shift in US strategy, it would include removing the Assad regime in Syria.

Blue actions that had implications for long-term US goals included:

- Staying committed to the goal of a legitimate, capable, and stable Iraqi government

- Reconsidering the option of a no-fly zone in Syria along the border with Turkey and reassessing whether it would ultimately help degrade and defeat Red. This would be a first step to a broader solution in Syria

Blue's operational and tactical actions included:

- Securing Blue and Green forces on the base, determining who conducted the attack, and delivering a public message to the American people about how Blue would respond to this attack

- Conducting special operations in Iraq

- Aggressively going after Red's command and control through cyberattacks

- Ensuring that other support bases in and around Iraq would increase operations to maintain the operational tempo with respect to airstrikes

- Conducting a full-scale, timely investigation as to what happened on Al-Asad airbase and adjusting security measures prevent future Red offensive actions

- Considering kill team options as tangible support to Iraqi security forces

Red Team

…and, even if there were a massive ground invasion, we thought that we could still survive… **–Red member playing the role of ISIS leader**

Red members agreed that their ultimate goal remained the same—to defend and expand the caliphate. Their strategy was now focused on defense, at least temporarily (an attack on Blue's homeland was not an urgent priority for Red). Regardless of how Blue, Green, and Brown might respond, Red members were confident that they were in a win-win situation.

- Should Blue withdraw or step up military engagement, Red would escalate its attacks. However, the extent to which Blue would double down was somewhat important for Red. If it is small-scale, it would be less of a concern for Red. But if Blue steps up its military engagement by deploying large and multiple brigades, this would help prop up the Iraqi government, undermining one of Red's objectives—destabilizing that government.

- Red assumed that because Blue would immediately resort to securing its facilities, forcing it to temporarily suppress airstrikes, this would allow it to pursue other military attacks.

- Red debated the end state of Blue. If a safe and sovereign Iraq were Blue's ultimate goal, Red would try as hard as it could to destabilize it. If Blue doubled-down on airstrikes, Red assessed that those would impede its ability to have long supply lines and use cell phones, but those would be tolerable effects. If the airstrikes lead to more civilian casualties, this would be a win for Red.

- Red viewed the worst-case scenario as a governance system that would retract into Syria temporarily. Blue's deployment of a larger military force, in Red's mind, bolsters the narrative of "the West versus the Muslim world." Should Blue send additional forces (even though Red thought it was

unlikely, given Blue public opinion), Red would aggressively use IEDs and snipers, and try to capture Blue soldiers for leverage.

- Red hoped that Blue would overreact and make the same mistakes in Iraq. While Red's biggest military resource is local fighters, refugees and foreign fighters are huge assets as well. Red would try to preempt any US attempts to stem the flow of foreign fighters by doing more for people displaced by the fighting (ideally, resettling them). Red would systematically commit barbaric acts to frighten, intimidate and demoralize its adversaries.

Brown Team

I hope it finally brings home to you that we are fighting a common threat, that we would be much better off working together against this common threat…rather than embarking on programs of global hegemony. **–Brown member playing the role of President of Russia**

For too long the United States has pretended that Iran has nothing to bring to the table. **–Brown member playing the role of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

The Russian President stated that his country was a great power whose role in solving regional problems was essential.

Iran wanted Blue to remain engaged in Iraq in order to defeat Red. Iran once again was operating with the mentality of "you break it, you fix it," in reference to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the occupation's violent aftermath, which, among other things, led to Iraq's civil war. Iran viewed the current terrorist attack as an opportunity to engage Saudi Arabia, communicating to Riyadh that Tehran can be a critical partner in the fight against terrorist groups in the region.

The Syrian President and his senior adviser had little to add to the statements they made earlier in the first session. They were comfortable with the status quo and were still focused on finding the most cost-effective ways to once and for all eliminate the FSA.

Green Team

We're going to have to be very reserved in what we can do with you if it looks like you're determined to work with the Iranians…taking what is already becoming a sectarian war and exacerbating it. We can't have any part of that. **–Green member playing the role of President of Turkey**

Green members immediately identified this contingency as primarily a "Blue problem." They also did not anticipate this attack to cause a strategic shift on the part of Blue.

- The Iraqi Prime Minister was concerned about possible reduction of US military involvement, but did not believe that Blue would leave. Attacks on oil refineries and other key infrastructure were also an Iraqi concern.

- The Iraqi Prime Minister proposed debating once again the creation of a National Guard, although his enthusiasm was tempered—possibly because he did not want the force to be an alternative to the regular Shia-dominated army that would be commanded by provincial governors, although these specific concerns were not openly communicated.

- The European representatives' response was focused on securing their own nationals. They anticipated Blue would escalate its offensive and asked it to step up its military involvement, despite political concerns. With several European elections approaching, increased military intervention in Iraq could be a risky and politically costly issue.

Conclusions

This simulation benefited tremendously from the views and active participation of a variety of analysts and practitioners with relevant personal and professional backgrounds. Indeed, British, Russian, Swedish, Saudi, Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian, and other non-US participants in the war game played their roles so well partly because—beyond their experience and expertise—they had matching nationalities. Of course, we could have added a few more members to Green, but we also had concerns about disparities in size among teams. We could have also added additional layers of complexity to the game's design, but we opted not to, and felt we had to apply some controls. We had to strike a balance between realism and practicality.

The Blue Team was almost entirely made up of Americans with long and prestigious government careers; some had worked in the same administrations. Therefore, familiarity with these types of exercises was not an issue. To further encourage outside-the-box thinking, we assigned current senior US officials and advisers who participated in the war game to the Red Team. We are happy to have made that decision because their views were extremely insightful.

On a substantive level, in both scenarios, the Blue Team was in a very difficult position. Its members had to

immediately react to unfolding crisis situations while also making sure not to undermine their own strategic objectives. However, in real life, these types of contingencies happen frequently and more often than not without advance notice. One could even argue that Blue could have seen any of these scenarios coming, given the increasing signs from the battlefield and Red's unmistakable trends of escalation in various theaters throughout the region. Red was simply not going to stay put, and it was only a matter of time before it made its next strategic move. A key takeaway from the war game was that Red had the strategic initiative and time on its hands, while Blue did not.

In both plenary sessions, Red sounded more confident in tone and arguably better prepared than all of its adversaries. But this was not very surprising. Red, a nonstate actor with no known state sponsorship (unlike Hezbollah or Hamas, for example), was not operating under the same constraints as its adversaries, all of whom were nation-states that had to be sensitive to a host of internal and external considerations including domestic audiences, national politics, budgets, reputations, capabilities, and other foreign policy imperatives. Arguably, other than physical capacity, Red had very few, if any, self-imposed constraints.

It was obvious from the Green Team's separate discussions in both sessions, and from their interactions with the Blue Team in the plenaries, that they were actively looking for US leadership. Their willingness to cooperate and coordinate with the United States was evident, but they were concerned that Washington was still keeping its cards close to its chest, despite the worsening crisis. The Saudi-led GCC showed increased willingness to tackle the ISIS problem more aggressively, but fell short of advancing a unilateral approach, without US involvement.

The war game's design obstructed direct communication between Blue and Green. We did not set up telephone lines between the two sides (which we will keep in mind for the next simulation), but even if we had established such a connection, it remains unclear whether Blue would have actually clarified its intentions and shared detailed plans and operations with its counterparts during the separate discussions.

Even though the Brown Team was not directly implicated in the scenarios, its members saw opportunities to further their interests. And they were very active doing precisely that. Syria's representatives were eager to show the world that their government—which they view as the only legitimate government on Syrian territory—should be trusted to combat ISIS and other terrorist groups. The Russian representatives used both scenarios as opportunities to remind the United States of its failures in the Middle East and expand Russian influence in that part of the world. The Iranian representatives shrewdly and pragmatically found ways to partner with the United States in Iraq in order to eliminate any remaining foes there and increase their influence in other areas across the region.

It was telling, but perhaps not surprising to many, that neither scenario caused the Blue Team to change its approach toward Red. Blue came up with more aggressive military plans against Red in response to the latter's escalation, but the strategy essentially remained the same, with no boots on the ground, and little consideration of drastically changing the dynamics in Syria to Washington's favor.

Perhaps, had we designed a scenario whereby Red conducted a spectacular attack against *the US homeland*, Blue would have engaged in a much more concerned effort, ideally in partnership with Green members, to forcefully go after Red. But even with that type of intensified military response, there were no guarantees that Red would be instantly defeated. In fact, another massive US military deployment in the Middle East might strengthen groups like ISIS, and possibly create a few more. After all, ISIS is only a symptom of a much deeper problem, and it cannot be bombed away. So when Red members during plenary sessions provocatively mentioned that "we are ready for anything" and "we welcome boots on the ground," their words—while arrogant and bombastic—were not entirely devoid of truth.