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OSIRAQ REDUX: A CRISIS SIMULATION OF AN ISRAELI STRIKE ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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On December 14, 2009, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution conducted a day-long simulation of the diplomatic and military fallout that could result from an Israeli military strike against the Iranian nuclear program.

STRUCTURE OF THE SIMULATION

The simulation was conducted as a three-move game with three separate country teams. One team represented a hypothetical American National Security Council, a second team represented a hypothetical Israeli cabinet, and a third team represented a hypothetical Iranian Supreme National Security Council. The U.S. team consisted of approximately ten members, all of whom had served in senior positions in the U.S. government and U.S. military. The Israel team consisted of a half-dozen American experts on Israel with close ties to Israeli decision-makers, and who, in some cases, had spent considerable time in Israel. Some members of the Israel team had also served in the U.S. government. The Iran team consisted of a half-dozen American experts on Iran, some of whom had lived and/or traveled extensively in Iran, are of Iranian extraction, and/or had served in the U.S. government with responsibility for Iran.

OPENING MOVES

Prior to the simulation, the organizers of the simulation—the “Control” team—told members of the U.S. and Iran teams that the game would begin during a crisis, but prior to an Israeli attack. However, to simulate what Control believed was the unlikelihood in the real

world that either the United States or Iran would have any significant warning of an Israeli attack, the game instead began with all teams receiving reports that a large-scale Israeli strike had already taken place against Iran, motivated by the breakdown of talks between Iran and the P5+1, the failure of the United Nations Security Council to endorse more than symbolic new sanctions against Iran, and the acquisition of highly valuable but highly perishable intelligence information regarding the existence of two secret Iranian nuclear facilities. Control opted to have Israel not tell the United States before the strike that it would be attacking.

At first, many on the U.S. team were outwardly angry that the Israelis had not informed the United States that they were going to attack (and angry at Control for what they felt was an “unrealistic” action). However, during the course of the simulation, members of the U.S. team revealed that had Israel informed the United States of a planned strike, even at the eleventh hour, the United States would have demanded that Israel call it off. Some members of the U.S. team also noted that Israel’s decision not to inform the United States gave Washington the ability to say with complete sincerity that it had not condoned the attack and had not even been notified—positions that later became very important to the American strategy. Finally, most members of the U.S. team also concurred that they would have been much angrier at Israel had it notified Washington, and attacked anyway in the face of Washington’s disapproval. Consequently, most members of the U.S. team ultimately felt that it probably was realistic that the Israelis had not informed the United States because doing so would have created more complexities in an already-

complex mission, specifically in terms of problems relating to the United States-Israel relationship.

- ❖ *Because two successive American administrations have made it clear that they do not want Israel to strike Iran, Washington should not assume that it will be notified if Jerusalem makes the decision to do so despite American opposition.*
- ❖ *One participant observed that it would be a challenge if an Israeli strike were a surprise to the United States, but worse if the U.S. reaction were a surprise to Israel. The same participant noted, “It’s too late to rebuild the relationship once the shooting starts.”*

In reality, there is a wide range of possible outcomes of an Israeli strike against the Iranian nuclear program, from minimal damage to the possibility of complete destruction of about a half-dozen of the key nodes of the program. Control chose to make the strike as successful for the Israelis as possible to imagine, including making the assumption that Israel had secretly developed penetrator munitions that could successfully destroy underground Iranian facilities. We did this purposely in order to test a scenario in which Israel gets its fondest wish and does maximum damage to the Iranian targets.

U.S. AND ISRAELI REACTIONS TO THE STRIKE

Right from the start, the U.S. and Israel teams demonstrated very different approaches to the situation—the aftermath of a successful Israeli airstrike—which created tremendous tension between them throughout the simulation. The Israel team believed (and hoped to convince the U.S. team) that Israel’s strike had created a terrific opportunity for the West to pressure Iran, weaken it, and possibly even undermine the regime. The U.S. team, conversely, felt that Israel had opened a potential Pandora’s Box and it was vital that they (the Americans) get it closed as quickly as possible. Consequently, when the Israel team came in with a list of creative ideas to try to build on the success of the strike, the U.S. team told them, in so many words, that they had made a mess and should go sit in the corner and not do anything else while the United States cleaned it up.

Both sides’ approaches created additional ill-will toward the other. The Israel team saw the U.S. team as strategically oblivious, hidebound, determined to squander a golden opportunity, patronizing, and obtuse. The U.S. team saw the Israel team as wild, undisciplined, oblivious to reality, arrogant, immature, and manipulative. Control wondered whether the U.S. team’s initial emotional response both to the Israeli strike and to Israeli conduct

after the strike might have made the U.S. team somewhat overly-solicitous of Iran during the early stages of the crisis.

- ❖ *Both the United States and Israel need to recognize how differently they are likely to see an attack on Iran’s nuclear program and build these differences into their initial interactions. The American-Israeli bickering created unhelpful opportunities for an aggressive Iran team.*

Right from the outset, the U.S. team insisted that Israel take no further offensive military action—initially toward not just Iran, but its Lebanese and Palestinian allies as well. The U.S. team called for restraint on all sides and was heavily focused on the danger of unintended escalation, not wanting the United States to be dragged into a conflict with Iran that was not of Washington’s making. But, the U.S. team did pledge the United States to Israel’s defense, and early on undertook numerous moves in support of that promise—deploying Patriot batteries and AEGIS warships to Israel, and installing new command and control systems to “net” the U.S. and Israeli air defense teams together. The Israel team accepted these conditions, at least initially, even while Israel was being hit by missiles from Iran, rockets from Hizballah (and a small number of rockets from Hamas), and terrorist attacks by all of the above. The Israel team did mount a pair of covert actions against Iranian targets that had already been planned and put in motion before the strike, but otherwise it simply took the hits.

Meanwhile, the U.S. team aggressively sought to make contact with the Iran team. Ostensibly, the purpose of these overtures was to bring about a ceasefire; however, several members of the U.S. team explicitly stated that they were hoping that the extraordinary circumstances of the crisis might allow Washington to transform its own relationship with Tehran. In its various messages to the Iran team—delivered through a variety of simultaneous channels—the U.S. team stressed that it had not been made aware of the strike and had not been involved. It also said that while it would defend Israel, it had demanded that Israel not mount any further military operations, and that it hoped to meet with Iranian representatives to work out a complete cessation of hostilities.

Some members of both the U.S. and Israel teams averred that Israel’s strategy had been to start a war with Iran in the expectation that the United States would have no choice but to finish it. Not all members of the Israel team agreed with this perspective, some disagreed vehemently. However it was largely the case

that after the initial strike, Israel was increasingly sidelined by the United States both because of its limited ability to do further damage to Iran and because of American insistence that it desist in the hope that Washington could de-escalate the crisis.

- ❖ *Although an Israeli strike mounted to spark a larger, U.S.-led military campaign would reflect a rash and irresponsible calculus that the current Israeli leadership has not so far evinced, an Israeli leadership faced with a strategic situation toward Iran it finds unacceptable might opt to launch a strike simply to “shake-up” the strategic situation, in the hope that doing so would force Washington to take actions that it otherwise would not, and solve (or simply alleviate) Jerusalem’s dilemma. Again, the simulation did not suggest that this scenario is likely, merely that it is possible, and so should be considered by American decision-makers when contemplating their policies toward Israel and Iran.*

IRANIAN REACTION TO THE STRIKE

The Iran team was motivated by a combination of anger at the unprovoked Israeli strike (and the humiliating damage it inflicted) and a sense that, painful though the destruction of the Iranian nuclear program might be, it still created several important opportunities for Iran that could be very useful over the longer term. The Iran team saw opportunities to weaken Israel and demonstrate that Jerusalem would pay a heavy price for attacking Iran; to weaken the American regional position and undertake attacks on U.S. allies that would demonstrate that the United States was a paper tiger and convince those allies that supporting a confrontational policy toward Iran would be painful for them as well; and to bolster Iran’s regional influence in the future. Increasingly over the course of the simulation, the Iran team attempted to secure as many such goals as it could to recoup (or even exceed) the loss of the nuclear program.

The Iran team’s actions were driven by the aforementioned intertwining of motives. The team ordered a wide range of actions meant simply to inflict pain on Israel without any larger strategic purpose: firing small volleys of ballistic missiles first at the Dimona Nuclear Research Center, and then at Israeli air bases; asking Hizballah and Hamas to fire rockets at Israeli population centers; firing a salvo of missiles at the Saudi oil export processing center at Abqaiq; and attempting to stir disgruntled Saudi Shi’ah in the Eastern Province to attack the Saudi regime as best they could. The Iran team also opted immediately after the Israeli strike to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and mount terrorist attacks against Europe in the hope that doing so

would convince European governments to turn on Israel and the United States, not just in the immediate circumstances of the crisis, but over the longer term as well.

The Iran team’s decision to mount attacks on Saudi targets requires some explanation. The Iran team concluded that the fact that many of the Israeli aircraft had traversed Saudi Arabia was proof of Israeli and Saudi collusion. Control allowed this because it decided that in the real world, the Iranian regime might reach such a conclusion, given how paranoid and conspiracy-minded it is.¹ Interestingly, the Iran team believed that it could attack Saudi targets, including Saudi oil targets, without necessarily provoking an American military response. Ultimately, they did overstep, but the measured and balanced initial American response to these attacks convinced the Iran team that they were right in this assumption and caused them to push harder, to the point where they did cross an American red line and provoked the U.S. military response they had sought to avoid.

- ❖ *The Iran team tried hard to gauge American red lines. When they did not get strong resistance to one of their moves, they kept pushing forward until they did—and in the most important instance, actually overstepped a U.S. red line. While we suspect the real Iranian regime would be more cautious about attacking Saudi oil targets (especially given the historical American reaction to Iranian attacks on Persian Gulf oil exports during the 1980s), this still suggests that a highly aggressive Iranian regime may see approaches that the United States considers “even-handed,” “balanced,” or even “neutral” as invitations to escalate. (Of course, a less aggressive Iranian regime might be provoked to escalatory actions they would not otherwise take if they saw American assertiveness as a sign of malign intent rather than as the clarification of a red line and the demonstration of American resolve to defend that red line.)*

Part of the reason that the Iran team acted as aggressively as it did was because of the success of the initial Israeli strike. Members of the Iran team observed that because the Israeli strike had effectively wiped out Iran’s nuclear program, some important elements of restraint had been removed. As they put it, “We felt we had nothing really to lose at that point—certainly we did not feel the Israelis could do much more damage to us since they had destroyed the one thing we cared about that they were capable of destroying.” They also indicated that a less successful Israeli strike (probably a much more likely occurrence), which left part of Iran’s nuclear program intact and which Israeli follow-on

strikes could have threatened, would have made them more conservative in their response.

- ❖ *In reality, Israel can threaten other high-value Iranian targets (like its oil export facilities and leadership targets), but it is certainly true that Israel's ability to do so is relatively circumscribed by various factors. Consequently, this reaction by the Iran team in the simulation might reflect real-world Iranian decision-making. The United States should at least recognize the potential for Iran to lash out more aggressively in response to a strike that does great damage to its nuclear program. Indeed, it raises the possibility that a highly aggressive Iranian response to such a strike might signal that the strike had done great damage to the Iranian nuclear program, and that a more conservative response from Tehran might indicate that the initial strike did little damage and that Iran was fearful of provoking follow-on attacks that might succeed where the first strike had failed.*

According to the Iran team, the even-handed messages they received from the U.S. team, particularly the desire for face-to-face meetings, U.S. restraint, and lack of further Israeli military actions (obviously in response to the American demands) were signs of weakness and/or an aversion to conflict with Iran. Several Iran team members indicated that they took this behavior as a strong sign that Washington wanted to avoid becoming embroiled in a new conflict in the Middle East. Regardless of which perspective Iran team members held, they all indicated that the American team's statements and actions (or the lack thereof) emboldened them to be more aggressive.

- ❖ *American words and even actions are likely to be misinterpreted by all parties concerned in a crisis—certainly by the Iranians, but potentially by American allies, including Israel, as well. Consequently, Washington should concentrate on articulating precise messages, repeating them again and again, because “nuance will be lost in the noise” of the crisis, as one participant put it.*
- ❖ *Washington should understand the importance of conveying the right impression of American “will,” nebulous though this may be. American words and actions need to always be in synch, and in synch in an obvious, “fool-proof” fashion that will minimize misinterpretation. This is less about a readiness to use force, and more about articulating a clear determination to achieve equally clearly articulated American objectives.*

It is worth noting that even this highly aggressive Iran team specifically chose not to create problems for the United States in Iraq or Afghanistan, or to otherwise directly attack American targets.

- ❖ *The Iran team's restraint vis-à-vis U.S. targets is consistent with a widespread supposition that the Iranian regime is able to distinguish between Israeli actions and American actions, and would be loath to bring the United States directly into a fight between Iran and Israel for fear of the damage the United States could do to Iran. However, it is impossible to know whether this would accurately reflect the thinking of the Iranian leadership in Tehran during such a crisis.*

THE ISRAELI DILEMMA

Over the course of the simulation, the Israel team found Israel's situation becoming increasingly painful and precarious. As noted, Iran and its allies were emboldened by the lack of an Israeli military response to their various retaliations. Iran persisted in lobbing small numbers of Shahab-3 ballistic missiles at Israeli targets, and while they did relatively little damage, the Israeli government came under pressure in the media for having undermined the Israeli deterrent.

However, of far greater significance were the Hizballah rocket attacks, which gradually increased to roughly 100 short-range rockets against targets in northern Israel each day and about a half-dozen longer-range rockets aimed at Haifa and Tel Aviv. Although the rockets killed very few people, they crippled the Israeli economy. As one member of the Israel team put it to his counterpart on the U.S. team, “A third of our population is living in shelters 24/7.” Likewise, hundreds of thousands of Israelis were temporarily leaving Tel Aviv and Haifa, creating massive economic dislocations far disproportionate to the actual damage done.

In response, the Israel team began to pressure the U.S. team either to have the United States do something itself or allow Israel to fight back. By the end of the simulation, eight days after the initial strike, the Israel team had secured American permission to act against Hizballah, although the U.S. team made clear that they did not want Israel responding directly to Iran in any way.

Thus, as its final move, the Israel team ordered a forty-eight-hour air and special forces “blitz” against Lebanon to try to diminish, if not eliminate, the rocket fire. The Israel team was already resigned to the likely failure of this operation and had begun preparing for a more far-reaching follow-on operation involving much larger Israeli Air Force strikes and extensive ground operations into Lebanon to smash Hizballah. Israel was still being subjected to Iranian ballistic missile strikes and was unable to do anything about them. It was also fac-

ing stepped up terrorism which was killing far more Israelis than before the strike (although still very low in absolute terms).

- ❖ *One of the most important points that the simulation illustrated was the danger for Israel that any strike against Iran could well force Jerusalem to mount major counter-terror operations against Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.² This is especially true for a right-wing government that has demanded much harsher, bigger military operations against both in the past. It suggests that if an Israeli prime minister, especially a right-wing prime minister, is going to order an attack on the Iranian nuclear program, he or she likely will have to be prepared to order major operations against Lebanon and Gaza too.*

DENOUEMENT

As noted above, the constant American efforts to reach out to Iran, to engage it in direct negotiations, and to restrain Israel even in the face of repeated Iranian retaliation was read by the Iran team as weakness or war-weariness on the part of the United States. Consequently, the Iran team kept upping the ante to see how much damage Iran could inflict on Israel and other American allies without provoking an American response. In the end, they crossed the U.S. team's red line. During Move 2, the Iran team opted to attack Dhahran, Saudi Arabia with ballistic missiles and to begin mining the Strait of Hormuz. Neither move caused catastrophic problems, although a tanker and an American minesweeper were both severely damaged by mines and the price of oil spiked temporarily. Nevertheless, these moves galvanized the U.S. team to action.

- ❖ *Control, and some members of the Iranian team, felt that both of these moves were far more aggressive than was likely to be expected from the actual Iranian regime—at the very least, they were premature given the circumstances in which they were taken. Nevertheless, they buttress the point that the United States needs to be careful lest an even-handed approach to Iran in such a crisis be misinterpreted by Teheran.*

The game ended with the United States having given up on its efforts to engage Iran, having begun a massive military reinforcement of the Gulf region, and having committed itself (including publicly) to clearing the Strait of Hormuz and protecting Gulf oil exports, by force if necessary. Although the American moves were taken in sadness, not in anger, it seems likely that had the game gone on for another move or two, it would have ended with the destruction of all Iranian air-sea-ground assets in and around the Strait of Hormuz on top of the loss of its nuclear program.

- ❖ *It is worth noting that this forceful American reaction came only in response to extraordinarily (probably unrealistically) aggressive actions by the Iran team. Had the Iran team been somewhat less aggressive, the U.S. team would likely not have ordered direct military action against Iran. Iran still would have lost its nuclear program, but would have made some important gains. In the simulation, the Iranian regime was able to conduct a complete crackdown on its internal opposition and put Israel in an extremely difficult position—just how difficult would depend on the results of the new fighting in Lebanon, which were beyond the scope of the simulation. It is impossible to know whether the Iranian leadership would consider such a set of outcomes a net victory or defeat.*

¹ Control found it odd that a group of Americans would believe that another group of Americans would stage a crisis simulation with such fantastical collusion. However, given that we could not rule out that the real Iranian regime would not reach the same conclusion in the same circumstances, we did not interfere with the Iran team's decision-making. Nevertheless, both Control and several members of the Iran team believed that the Iran team had gone considerably further than the real Iranian regime would have in launching direct military attacks against Saudi oil targets in response to an Israeli strike.

² In the game, Hamas showed much greater restraint than Hizballah both because it is not as close to Iran as Hizballah and faced upcoming elections in which it did not wish to be seen as Iranian proxies. In the real world, there is reason to believe Hamas would not be so passive.

WARGAMES, REALITY, AND HOW TO TELL THEM APART

Wargames present a representation of reality and must be tightly controlled to minimize the extent to which they misrepresent real-world events. Having multiple teams in any crisis simulation immediately introduces distortion because the teams and their interaction with each other cannot be modeled to reflect reality perfectly. In the December 14 simulation, Control allowed the U.S. and Israel teams to have extensive interaction, and by Move 2, the two sides were choosing to speak principally prime minister to president. The U.S. and Israel teams were only allowed to communicate with the Iran team indirectly to try to simulate the absence of easy or extensive channels between the two sides. (As noted above, the U.S. team repeatedly offered to meet with members of the Iranian team in person, but the Iran team staunchly refused the offers.)

In addition, employing non-American teams introduces a further distortion into the game because it is never clear how well Americans will represent the thinking and decision-making of foreigners. Those on the U.S. team were highly accomplished former U.S. government personnel, all of whom had participated in National Security Council meetings while in government. All present, including a number of observers from the press, the U.S. government, and Brookings, felt that their deliberations closely reflected how an American National Security Council would approach the scenario presented by the simulation. Similarly, those present—including one very senior-level Israeli observer who had participated in Israeli government cabinet-level discussions—felt that the Israel team had successfully modeled the behavior of an actual Israeli cabinet in such a situation.

However, Americans simply do not have the experience to know how Iranian decision-making bodies work (if they work at all). Consequently, it was impossible for those on our Iran team to know how real Iranian decision-makers would act—or for Control or any of the observers to judge the accuracy of their portrayal.

These abstractions from reality, both in the artificial interaction of the teams as well as in the uncertainty regarding Iranian behavior, have to be added to the other inherent differences between a simulation and reality when attempting to draw lessons from the simulation. It is why considerable caution must be applied when suggesting how the results of a simulation ought to shape real-world policy-making decisions.

