



at BROOKINGS

# MIDDLE EAST *memo*

Number 31

January 2013



*Free Syrian Army fighters look on as their fellow fighters fire an anti-aircraft weapon towards forces loyal to the Syrian regime in Aleppo's al-Ansari al-Sharqi neighborhood, December 26, 2013. | Reuters*

## **HARD ROAD TO DAMASCUS: A CRISIS SIMULATION OF U.S.-IRANIAN CONFRONTATION OVER SYRIA**

**KENNETH M. POLLACK**



**Kenneth M. Pollack** is a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

On September 11, 2013, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution conducted a day-long simulation of a confrontation between the United States and Iran arising from a hypothetical scenario in which the Syrian opposition had made significant gains in its civil war and was on the verge of crushing the Asad regime. The simulation suggested that, even in the wake of President Rouhani's ascension to power and the changed atmosphere between Tehran and Washington, there is still a risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation between the two sides.

### Structure of the Simulation

The simulation was conducted as a three-move game with separate country teams for the United States and Iran. The U.S. team represented a hypothetical National Security Council Principals Committee and was comprised of former senior American government officials. The Iran team represented a hypothetical Supreme National Security Council meeting and consisted of experts on Iran from both the United States and Iran, including some who had served in the U.S. government with responsibility for Iran and others with insight into the Iranian government.

### Overview of the Scenario

The simulation was set in 2015 and began in March of that year. It posited a hypothetical situation (*very* hypothetical from the perspective of real-world events at the time of the game) in which the Asad regime had suffered a number of significant setbacks that had greatly weakened its position. The Russians had largely ceased to resupply the regime in return for huge purchases of Russian arms by the Gulf states. Meanwhile, Gulf and Western states had increased their provision of arms to the opposition, particularly providing large numbers of man-portable anti-aircraft missiles and cutting-edge anti-tank weaponry. The new Western arms combination of these two factors produced a significant degradation of the regime's firepower; the new weapons led to the destruction of more and more regime war machines, while the loss of Russian resupply meant that the regime could not keep pace with the soaring attrition rate.

The scenario further postulated that, unable to lean on firepower as they have throughout the civil war, the regime's forces suffered a series of important battlefield defeats. This despite the projected worsening fragmentation of the opposition. At the start of the simulation, the regime had already lost both Dar'a in the south, as well as Idlib and Aleppo in the north. In many of these battles, the formidable Salafist opposition groups had conducted ethnic cleansing campaigns

---

after securing the cities, producing a flood of refugees—mainly Alawis and other minorities—fleeing to the regime strongholds along the coast. As the simulation began, the regime was anticipating large rebel offensives against both Hama/Homs and Damascus, with little prospect of holding either back with conventional munitions.

The scenario further assumed that the worsening fighting and opposition successes in Syria had exacerbated the instability in both Lebanon and Iraq. In both, Gulf-backed Salafist groups had flourished and gone on the offensive against Hizballah and the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government respectively. In particular, the increased violence in Lebanon had forced Hizballah to withdraw much of its combat power from Syria to concentrate on holding on to its position in Lebanon, depriving the Asad regime of one of its most important allies and some of its most effective forces.

---

The regime wanted the Iranians to threaten the Americans with retaliation if the Americans intervened in response to the regime's use of chemical warfare.

---

Finally, the scenario posited that the Russian-brokered agreement to eliminate Syrian chemical warfare had broken down, with the regime refusing to comply in full. This prompted a small American military strike to punish the regime for its non-compliance and original use of chemical warfare. Although the strike had done relatively little damage, the regime had not employed chemical warfare since then. Intelligence reports suggested that the regime feared that further use would bring a larger and more painful response from Washington which was not worth it to the regime leaders. At the time, the sentiment of the regime's leaders was that they did not have the ability to fight both the Americans and the opposition.

### Course of Events

The first move of the simulation centered largely on a request by the Syrian regime for assistance to Iran. The regime feared that it would lose control of Damascus, Homs, Hama or possibly all of them to the impending rebel offensives. The regime had decided that only large-scale chemical warfare use would prevent such a defeat, and had sent a high-level delegation to Iran to ask for Tehran's support against the United States and its allies. The regime wanted the Iranians to threaten the Americans with retaliation if the Americans intervened in response to the regime's use of chemical warfare.



The Iran team concluded that in the circumstances in which they found themselves at the start of the simulation, Tehran would likely conclude that Syria—or at least Bashar al-Asad himself—was a lost cause. They saw Iran as embroiled in a wider struggle with Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies (like Turkey and Qatar), and *not* really with the United States and the West. Thus, the Iran team did not want to overcommit themselves to the struggle in Syria, which they saw as an increasingly poor theater of operations for Iran. Consequently, Tehran was more interested in damage limitation in Syria rather than how best to save the Asad regime.

Working from this assessment, the Iran team took the following actions:

- Iran urged Hizballah to concentrate on maintaining its power in Lebanon and not diverting it—and potentially squandering it—in Syria.
- It suggested to Asad himself that he should abandon the fight and flee to Iran.
- It insisted that Syria refrain from using chemical warfare and offered a modest increase in trainers, ammunition, combat consumables and small arms.
- It considered stirring additional trouble in Yemen, Bahrain or elsewhere in the Gulf to put additional pressure on Saudi Arabia (and explicitly *not* the United States).

For its part, the American team focused on how the U.S. would respond if Syria employed chemical warfare and Iran were willing to threaten greater action on Asad's behalf. A debate developed among members of the American team. One group advocated a more confrontational approach toward Iran. This group saw Syria as a key Iranian ally, and advocated a major increase in military support to the Syrian opposition coupled with large-scale direct U.S. strikes against the regime itself if it employed chemical warfare. The goal of those strikes would be to help facilitate the military operations of the opposition. The rest of the U.S. team saw the collapse of the Asad regime's position as an opportunity to secure Iranian support for a peaceful transition in Syria to prevent further bloodshed, anarchy and Salafist control over the country. Ultimately, the U.S. team favored the latter approach, at least initially, with the explicit caveat that they could shift to the more confrontational approach if Iran proved unresponsive to their early overtures.

Consequently, the U.S. team sent messages to the Iran team (via the Omanis, Swiss, and Iraqis) that it was willing to cooperate with Tehran in finding a peaceful solution in Syria. The Americans stated that such a solution would see Asad removed, a new inclusive Syrian government established, and the Salafists marginalized to the extent possible. The American team hoped that the Iran would be willing to give up on Asad in return for the prospect of a new Syrian polity that



would include the Alawis and exclude the Salafists. However, the American messages also warned that if the Syrian regime employed chemical warfare the United States would use force to back up its red line.

***The Second Move.*** The next move began on July 2015. In response to the Iranian imprecations, the Syria regime chose not to employ chemical warfare. Despite the slight increase in Iranian assistance, the Asad regime had lost control of Hama to the opposition and both Homs and Damascus were also threatened by new rebel advances. Not surprisingly, Asad and his lieutenants were now desperate, believing that it was their only hope to stop the rebels. They were now debating whether they should even try to hold Damascus, or pull back and consolidate their defenses in the mountains fencing the Alawi heartland. Moreover, Western and Gulf Arab arms transfers to the opposition had only increased, and these had once again played an important role in the regime's continuing losses.

A similar increase in Gulf support to various Sunni groups (including Salafist groups) in Lebanon had resulted in a virtual civil war between Hizballah and Sunni militias there. As a result, Hizballah was fully engaged in Lebanon and had largely withdrawn its forces from Syria. Trouble was also brewing in Bahrain, where various Shi'ite groups were engaging in almost daily protests. There had also been a terrorist attack on a hotel in Doha, Qatar, which had killed over 70 people, including 17 Americans. In contrast, heavy Iranian pressure in Iraq had produced a change in power that had calmed down the violence there, at least for some time.

In light of its deteriorating military situation, Asad had sent his brother Maher to meet with Qasem Sulaymani, the head of Iran's feared Quds force and Tehran's point man on Syria, and tell him that the regime would now employ chemical warfare to hold both Damascus and Homs. They also planned to demand that the Iranians keep the Americans off their backs when they did so.

For the American team, there was a sense that events in Syria were mostly going their way, but that Iran was becoming a problem—although there was considerable debate over how much of a problem Iran was offering. On the one hand, the U.S. team assumed that the events in Bahrain and Qatar were a warning to Washington that Tehran was prepared to engage in horizontal escalation if the West did not rein in its support to the Syrian opposition. Moreover, the Iran team had chosen not to respond to the American messages, suggesting to the U.S. team that the Iranians were not interested in a cooperative solution to Syria. On the other hand, the Syrian regime had not employed chemical warfare and Iran had



---

only modestly increased its own support to Asad, both of which seemed to suggest that Tehran was not going to pull out all the stops to back its Syrian allies.

Thus, the primary concern for the U.S. team ultimately focused on how best to prevent an increasingly desperate Asad regime from resorting to chemical warfare to stave off catastrophic defeat – and how best to convince the Iranians not to further escalate with more trouble in the Gulf or elsewhere. The U.S. team again tried a combination of another message to Tehran offering a cooperative approach to transition in Syria, coupled with a number of threatening moves in the intelligence and military arenas to signal to Tehran Washington’s willingness to escalate if the Iranians were unwilling to de-escalate.

---

The question of what to do became even more acute now that the easiest, and most obvious solution had been tried and found wanting.

---

The Iran team once again found itself facing a difficult dilemma. Its demands that the Asad regime refrain from chemical warfare use in return for a modest increase in Iranian support had succeeded in buying Syrian forbearance, but had failed to shift the military balance in any appreciable way. Thus, additional such offers were unlikely to sway their Syrian allies. But Tehran continued to see its interests as best served by preventing further Syrian chemical warfare use. The question of what to do became even more acute now that the easiest, and most obvious solution had been tried and found wanting.

In the end, the Iran team opted to cut this Gordian knot by deploying 10,000 elite Revolutionary Guard troops to Syria to bolster the regime’s defenses in return for Asad’s pledge not to employ chemical warfare. It was a shocking development for the U.S. team, many of the observers of the simulation, and even the Control group.

***The Third Move.*** By the early fall of 2015, the situation on the ground had radically changed as a result of the Iranian decision to deploy large IRGC combat formations to Syria. The Iranian troops had not only stopped the rebel offensives cold, they had gone over to the offensive, shattered several opposition fronts, relieved the pressure on Damascus and Homs, retaken Hama and Idlib and were threatening to retake Aleppo. There was widespread fear of the outright defeat of the opposition.



Moreover, with Iran fully committed to the fight, Hizballah had made an all-out effort and inflicted a series of heavy defeats on the Sunni militias and Salafist groups it had been tussling with across Lebanon. As a result, the northern Levant seemed once again firmly in the hands of the Iranians and their Shi'ite allies.

Not surprisingly, it was the U.S. team that now found itself with the harder choices. The Americans felt that the Iranians had not just rewritten the rules of the game, but had taken a dangerous escalatory step and may have even crossed an unwritten red line by introducing their own troops into the Syrian conflict. There was a consensus on the American side that this needed to be stopped, if not rolled back. However, the U.S. team remained uninterested in committing American troops to the fight in Syria and equally determined to keep America's regional allies from intervening and getting into a direct, conventional war with Iran over Syria.

To try to square this circle, the U.S. team opted for the following steps:

- Establish large “safe-havens” where opposition forces could seek sanctuary protected by American air power, to defend them against further regime/Iranian attacks and to halt the progress of the regime/Iranian forces.
- Massive provision of new support to Syrian opposition groups, including heavy weapons (tanks, artillery pieces), crew-served weapons (bigger anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry), and the training to employ them.
- A reinforced American military presence in the region as well as increased military support to Turkey and Jordan.

It was at that point that the simulation ended.

### Potential Lessons

Wargames offer merely 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. Moreover, while the participants chosen for our teams of Iranians and Americans were among the best available—and boasted both extensive substantive expertise on these issues, experience in high-level governmental positions akin to the roles they played in the simulation, and considerable insight into both the Rouhani and Obama Administrations—it is impossible to know how closely their decisions would reflect those of the real actors facing the same situations. A simulation can only model so much, no matter how well-conceived and prepared.



---

These abstractions from reality, both in the artificial interaction of the teams as well as in the uncertainty regarding behavior of each, 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. Nevertheless, a number of useful lessons suggested themselves as areas for the U.S. government to consider with regard to its Iran and Syria policies.

---

The Saudis and their allies have deliberately sought to characterize the fight as a Sunni-Shi'a conflict both because they truly believe it to be such and because they recognize the same demographic and diplomatic calculus.

---

***The Importance of the Saudi-Iran Conflict.*** As is our wont, Americans have tended to focus on the Iranian nuclear issue and Iran's rivalry with the United States as the key destabilizing factors in the Middle East. However, in large part as a result of the Syrian civil war (and secondarily the Iraqi civil war that preceded it), the struggle between Riyadh and Tehran has become a more important driver of tensions and instability in the region. This conflict is often portrayed by Sunnis as a wider Sunni-Shi'a war, and the more that the Sunnis treat it as such, the more that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Still, the Iranians have tried to avoid that description—let alone a real division along those lines—because 90 percent of the Muslim world is Sunni. Iran would be left badly isolated and outnumbered if it truly came to that.

For its part, the Saudis and their allies have deliberately sought to characterize the fight as a Sunni-Shi'a conflict both because they truly believe it to be such and because they recognize the same demographic and diplomatic calculus Tehran does and seek to take advantage of it. Nevertheless, Saudis themselves often use the terms Sunni-Shi'a and Saudi-Iranian interchangeably to describe this conflict, making clear that they too regard it as being as much about geostrategic rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran as it is about religious differences.

Although Syria is the hottest front in this conflict, it is hardly the only one. Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and even Pakistan are also theaters of conflict, in some cases of greater importance than Syria. Both the Saudis and the Iranians look upon these fronts as interrelated and



interactive. They view the conflict as a single war between the two of them and their proxies, rather than a series of disconnected internal conflicts in which both are stirring the pot. The latter is how many Americans and Europeans tend to see regional developments.

This difference in perspective can also lead to differing actions, and misunderstandings of those actions. For instance, in the simulation, members of the Iran team—particularly those with arguably the most intimate knowledge of the Iranian regime—argued simultaneously for a non-confrontational approach toward the United States and a highly confrontational approach toward Saudi Arabia. These participants surprised others with their degree of animosity toward the Saudis and other Sunni Arab states.

Moreover, some of the actions they advocated for had important unintended consequences. In particular, the Iran team (following the lead of these team members) ultimately opted to stir trouble in Bahrain and Qatar as a way of pushing back on the Saudis and their Gulf allies. These moves were not intended to provoke the United States, and were coupled with other moves that the Iran team believed that the U.S. team would see as reassuring. However, the U.S. team assumed that attacks on America's key regional allies were meant as surrogate attacks on the U.S. either as a lower level of provocation than a direct move against Americans, or because the Gulf states were easier targets for the Iranians than U.S. entities.

This suggests a similar potential problem in the real world. While the Iranians are currently deep in negotiations with the United States, they are fighting with America's Sunni Arab allies across the region. All signs suggest that the Obama Administration hopes that a negotiated settlement of the nuclear impasse will lead to a wider improvement in relations between the West and Iran. However, the Sunni Arab states staunchly oppose the negotiations—seeing them as an American betrayal of the mutual alliance against Iran—and are terrified of an American-Iranian rapprochement.

The Sunni Arab states fear that such a development would remove America from their side of the Saudi-Iranian/Sunni-Shi'a conflict, and worse still might lead to the U.S. switching to Iran's side. While the latter seems highly unlikely, fear of it could drive the Saudis and others to precipitous action that would create problems of its own. Likewise, as in the simulation, the Iranians may take action against Saudi Arabia or other Sunni Arab states as part of this regional conflict without recognizing that it might be seen in Washington as an attack on the U.S. At the



---

very least, that could scuttle the U.S.-Iranian negotiations, and at worst it could lead to unintended escalation between the two countries.

***The Difficulty of Keeping Limited Intervention Limited.*** A second, related lesson highlighted by the simulation was how difficult it may be to control escalation within the charged atmosphere of the Middle East and specifically with regard to the Syrian civil war. Both the U.S. team and the Iran team were determined to limit their exposure in Syria from the start of the simulation to the end. Moreover, both acted at every step to try to defuse tensions, prevent escalation, and do the bare minimum to protect their interests. Indeed, more conservative members of both teams pressed for more far-reaching steps at every juncture, but were consistently outvoted by the majority of their team-members. And yet, by the third move, roughly eight months of game time, the U.S. and Iran were coming remarkably close to open warfare in Syria.

---

Most governments know better than to intervene directly in someone else's civil war, so they go looking for a proxy.

---

The problem lay not with the decision-making of either team, but with the nature of the situation. Because intercommunal civil wars like Syria's tend to be waged by relatively poorly-armed and poorly-organized armies, small factors can have an outsized impact. A particularly good commander, a small body of highly competent (or motivated) troops, a small increase in the type of weaponry supplied, the loss of an external supplier can all dramatically affect the military balance of a civil war. The generalship of Ahmed Shah Masoud, the rise of the Taliban, America's provision of Stingers for the Mujahideen, and the withdrawal of Pakistani support in 2001, are all examples of these phenomenon in the Afghan civil wars alone. And the problem for external powers is that a sudden shift in the fortunes of a civil war can significantly threaten the interests of one side or another.

Throughout history, states bordering or near a country that has fallen into an intercommunal civil war see their interests threatened by the conflict. Such wars almost invariably produce spillover in the form of refugees, terrorist groups, secessionist movements, radicalizing effects on their own populations, economic dislocation, and a desire to secure valuable resources—all of which can threaten neighboring interests to a greater or lesser degree. Most governments know better than to intervene directly in someone else's civil war, so they go looking for a proxy. They pick out one group or another that they believe can help them defend



their own interests in the civil war, and they provide that group with weapons, money and other forms of support. Often, the group will have ethnic, religious, cultural, or other historical ties with one or more of the elements of the neighboring state's society, but not always.

Problems typically arise because at some point, someone's proxy starts to lose. When that happens the neighboring state can either accept defeat and stop defending its interests, or double down. Far more often, it chooses to do the latter rather than the former. Again, most governments are not stupid, so they try to do as little as they can at first. But the usual pattern is that either what they do is inadequate and so they have to escalate further, and/or other neighboring states see the first neighbor ratcheting up its involvement and they feel that they must respond in kind to prevent the defeat of their own proxy. In this way, civil wars can metastasize, spreading to neighboring states or turning into regional wars.

That is effectively what happened in this simulation. The Iranians were faced with the defeat of their Syrian ally. The Iran team was willing to accept fairly sizable compromises to avoid becoming more heavily embroiled in the conflict (including trying to force Bashar al-Asad out). It also tried to prevent a worsening of the conflict. However, it found that the only way to secure its interests in Syria as its side increasingly lost ground was to progressively increase its involvement there. Ultimately, facing the collapse of its ally and the potential for the Syrian regime to employ chemical warfare to prevent that, the Iran team opted to intervene itself. That, in turn, provoked a major American (and Sunni Arab) escalation intended to counter the sudden Iranian-Syrian run of victories.

This development in the simulation should simply underscore the point that it is difficult for external powers to limit their intervention in conflicts as complicated as intercommunal civil wars. In the simulation, creeping escalation led eventually to massive escalation. And as their proxy's defeat loomed larger, the Iranians felt compelled to keep upping the ante to protect their interests (including preventing chemical warfare use), which caused the Americans to do the same.

This should be a cautionary note about all plans for limited American intervention in the Syrian civil war: they may be hard to keep limited. Consequently, it may be wiser either to stay out altogether or else commit to a larger and more meaningful intervention from the outset in the expectation that doing so will produce decisive results, rather than being sucked in piecemeal. Among its many problems, the latter typically results in the waste of time and public support for intervention before anything useful can be accomplished. This tendency should also serve as a



caution that if the Russian-brokered agreement to remove Syria's chemical warfare arsenal should break down, it may prove quite difficult for the U.S. to punish the regime militarily—as President Obama's Administration had initially intended—without becoming more deeply embroiled in the wider war.

**Direct Communications Matter.** Finally, one last potential lesson the simulation seemed to illustrate was how easy it remains for the United States and Iran to misconstrue and overreact to the other's moves because of the absence of reliable, real-time communications between them. In the simulation, the two teams were separated by nothing more than a few inches of drywall and were composed of people virtually all of whom knew one another. What's more, the primary approach of both teams was to try to minimize conflict and maximize opportunities for de-escalation between them. And yet the two sides significantly misread the actions of the other team on some very important points.

Moreover, these misperceptions led to serious escalations between them. The Iranian decision to strike back at the Saudis—which they assumed the Americans would not see as directed at themselves, but the U.S. team *did see* as directed at them—was one example of this. Another was the Iranian decision to deploy IRGC troops to Syria, which the Iran team saw as the best way both to prevent the fall of the regime and prevent it from using chemical warfare, which they knew would cross America's red line and so provoke greater American intervention. But the Americans saw the IRGC deployment as unacceptable and highly provocative on its own, and so prompted precisely the kind of American escalation that the Iranians had sought to avoid.

In the simulation, the two teams were prohibited from communicating directly. It was this communications gap that—as in the real world historically—produced the worst misinterpretations by the two sides. It also prevented them from devising confidence building measures that might have allowed both to develop trust in the other and identify mutually-compatible courses of action to avoid escalation. In short, while there is no guarantee that the conflicting interests of the two sides coupled with the inherent centripetal dynamics of an intercommunal civil war might not have produced a similar outcome on their own, it does seem that miscommunication made a bad situation worse.



1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, NW • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • PHONE: 202-797-6462 • FAX: 202-797-2481  
[www.brookings.edu/sabancenter](http://www.brookings.edu/sabancenter)

