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A sniper from the Free Syrian Army takes position in Aleppo | Reuters

UNRAVELING THE SYRIA MESS: A CRISIS SIMULATION OF SPILLOVER FROM THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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INTRODUCTION



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On June 27, 2012, the American Enterprise Institute, the Institute for the Study of War, and the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution jointly conducted a one-day crisis simulation that focused on the impact of spillover from the deepening civil war in Syria. The simulation consisted of three moves and featured an American, a Turkish, and a Saudi team. The intent was to explore the interaction between the U.S. government and two of its most important regional allies, allies most able to act in Syria for various reasons (and among the most affected by the violence in Syria). The simulation looked at potential developments between August 2012 and April 2013.

Key Findings:

- An expanding humanitarian crisis in Syria was insufficient on its own to drive any of the teams toward intervention.
- Both the American and the Turkish teams were generally reluctant to be drawn into the conflict. The Saudi team was eager to participate financially (by funding rebels, for instance), but had little ability to affect decision-making in Ankara or Washington—let alone the situation on the ground in Syria.
- The Turkish and American teams were concerned about the aftermath of Asad’s fall, but for different reasons: The U.S. team was primarily determined to ensure that the United States would not be responsible for Syria after Asad’s departure and cared less about what followed; the Turkish team similarly feared being left holding the bag, but unlike the U.S. team, had distinct views about what kind of government it wanted to see emerge in Syria. The Saudi team cared very little about post-Asad Syria so long as the Sunni majority was in power.
- The U.S. and Saudi teams regarded Turkey as indispensable for any action in Syria and felt constrained in their actions by what the Turks could be persuaded to do.
- The Saudi team came to be concerned about the collapsing situation in Iraq, but found that Saudi Arabia could do little to affect that situation. The Turkish team evinced considerable concern with the deteriorating situation in Iraq, but felt that Turkey’s interests in Syria had to take precedence. For a variety of reasons, the American team showed little interest in the events in Iraq and took virtually no action in response.
- The game ended with Syria collapsed as a state and Turkish military forces mounting a creeping intervention but not in control of Syria, Iraq headed back toward 2006-levels of violence and internal conflict, and Lebanon devolving toward sectarian civil war as well. The Saudi team regarded that

outcome as a success. The Turkish team was extremely concerned about this situation, but felt that all of its other options were far worse. The U.S. team was largely content with the result in Syria and focused on that outcome to the exclusion of the other regional problems.

- The U.S. team's unwillingness to consider options for handling the evolving crisis in Iraq suggests that there is such an aversion to anything Iraq-related among the U.S. policy elite that even catastrophic developments there (as depicted in the simulation) may not elicit meaningful American involvement. It means that the United States may have a more pressing need to take action to shut down the Syrian civil war sooner, before it destabilizes Iraq, because the United States is not likely to do anything to shut down an Iraqi civil war once it has resumed, even though an Iraqi civil war could be extremely threatening to American vital interests.

It's All About the Spillover

One question that the simulation sought to test was whether humanitarian motives would be enough to trigger a Western-Arab intervention in Syria as it (arguably) did in Libya. The scenario therefore depicted a rapidly worsening humanitarian tragedy in Syria. In this instance, the teams' responses suggested that humanitarian issues alone might not suffice to prompt intervention in the post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan world. Instead, the factor that eventually produced a reluctant intervention was the strategic threats created by spillover from the conflict: terrorism, refugee flows, cross-border fighting, economic problems, and radicalization of the neighboring populations that typically accompany any such intercommunal civil war, and that are already manifesting themselves in the case of the Syrian civil war.

Turkey's Crucial Role

Perhaps the most striking lesson to emerge from the simulation was the central role of Turkey. Both participants and observers alike said that the simulation demonstrated that anything meaningful the United States might want to do in Syria would require full Turkish cooperation. Turkey should therefore have priority of focus in the U.S. foreign policy effort.

Turkey's importance emerged in the simulation because the scenario played out events in the Syrian civil war into the future, forcing all of the teams to think about how to bring the conflict in Syria to a successful close (with each team defining "success" fairly differently). The exercise therefore required all three teams to grapple with the implementation of much more far-reaching policy options than are currently being considered. All three teams found themselves



having to think hard about no-fly zones, expanded assistance to the Syrian opposition, carving out safe-havens, limited military operations, or large-scale multilateral interventions.

Once the country teams began to look at these options and to consider which would best serve their interests and be the easiest to implement, the Turkish team's decisions increasingly constrained the U.S. team's options. The more that the teams considered their options and worked through how best to implement them, the more they came to the conclusion that Turkey was the key to making any of them work.

Nevertheless, despite Turkey's significance, American power still went a long way. For instance, the Saudi team evinced interest in the battles for the arms-supply routes through Lebanon which the scenario depicted as escalating—and in the deteriorating situation in Lebanon more generally. But the Saudi team again found itself relatively unable to explore options there without support from the U.S. team. The Saudi team also considered working with Jordan as an alternative (or supplement) to Turkey, but the other teams (principally the U.S. team) showed little interest in pursuing the feasibility of that option.

The United States and Saudi Arabia can't succeed without Turkey, but Turkey can't succeed without the United States and Saudi Arabia.

In addition to highlighting Turkey's centrality, the simulation underlined the terrible dilemmas that Turkey faces when it contemplates its options toward Syria. Turkey wants to see the violence end quickly in Syria, but it has a limited ability to bring peace there rapidly, let alone to leave in place a stable political solution and a workable economy. Consequently, while simulation participants concluded that Turkey is indispensable in finding and implementing a solution to the Syrian civil war, they also realized Turkey needs the help of the West and the Arab world. The United States and Saudi Arabia can't succeed without Turkey, but Turkey can't succeed without the United States and Saudi Arabia.

This conclusion created a particularly problematic tension. The American team posited that after the U.S. presidential elections, Washington would likely be inclined to make a much greater effort to bring about the end of the Asad regime than it has so far—or that the American team felt warranted prior to the U.S. election. Consequently, in early 2013 (in simulation time) the American team increasingly focused on bringing about a resolution to the Syrian civil war. However, the U.S. team did not want to absorb the costs (financial, political, diplomatic, and military) of a major American military commitment and so increasingly focused on convincing the Turks to intervene instead. For its part, the



Turkish team, was terrified of exactly this prospect because they concluded that Turkey simply could not absorb those costs itself. As a result, the American team found itself pressing hard for ever-greater Turkish intervention, while trying to limit American/NATO commitments of support. The Turkish team was equally determined not to intervene without extracting maximum support from NATO and the Arab states. (The Saudi team from the very start of the simulation had decided that it needed to convince both the Americans and Turks to intervene to topple the Asad regime and shut down the violence there.)

As a byproduct of this larger U.S.-Turkish tension, the Turkish team was determined to secure NATO support for its military moves in Syria and simultaneously to control all of those military operations. The Turkish team feared that American (or, conceivably, European) control of these operations would mean that they might go well beyond what Turkey was ready to handle, and would end up getting Turkey far more deeply committed in Syria than it wanted to be. The American team was equally determined to minimize the American/NATO commitment but to insist on controlling any military scenarios that occurred, in part because the American team was fearful that the Turks would force their hands in the same way. The Saudi team found itself frustrated by the resulting inaction.

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The result was several important missed opportunities for cooperation early on in the game, coupled with tremendous difficulty in even discussing post-Asad reconstruction. On this latter point, the Turkish team's position was that external powers would have to make a significant, long-term commitment to rebuild Syria politically and economically to ensure that it did not fall back into violence; however, the Turkish team was equally determined not to have Turkey left with the sole, or even the lion's share, of responsibility for rebuilding Syria. The American team's position was that the United States would not take on the challenge of rebuilding another country in the Muslim world and, to the extent that any postwar effort was required, it ought to be a Turkish one (funded by the Gulf Arabs). The Saudi position was that the Kingdom would pay a lot of money to achieve its objectives, but wanted to be assured that its objectives—principally the removal of Asad and the installation of a Sunni government in Syria—would actually be met. Given the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan regarding the criticality of both planning for long-term postwar reconstruction and being ready to accept such a commitment, the results of the simulation suggest that it will be vital for the United States, Turkey, and other regional allies to work out in advance postwar planning and a mutually-agreed upon political outcome.



Whereas Turkey loomed large in the simulation, Russia was relegated to the bleachers. (The simulation did not have a Russian team, which some participants felt was a notable gap). Participants appeared to have assumed that Russia was effectively neutral (or neutralized), and would not attempt to deter Western intervention through pre-positioning military forces or undertaking any repeat of the Pristina excursion. Nor would Russia take any action to help remove Asad. All agreed, as has occurred, that Russia would block any UN Security Council resolution of significance.

With Russia therefore largely out of the picture, bilateral U.S.-Turkey discussions centered on gaining NATO, rather than UN, support for an operation, which helps explain the common sentiment of many participants that too much policy effort now is being devoted to managing Moscow. The fact that Turkey—a NATO member—shares a border with Syria and was suffering military and paramilitary attacks on its territory as part of the spillover, reinforced the perspective that the Syria problem is better viewed through the NATO, rather than the UN, prism. But, because the participants playing Turkey and the United States each wished to involve NATO on their own country's terms, there were significant delays in intervention. The U.S. team wanted Turkey to request NATO support, and the Turkey team wanted the United States to offer NATO support preemptively, in order to reduce their country's relative responsibility for entering the intervention.

The Limited Arab Role

In contrast to the centrality of the Turkish role in any scenario of Western/Arab intervention in Syria, the simulation suggested that the Saudis (and wider Arab world) are more likely to play a supporting role in any more assertive scenarios. The Saudi team was very active in attempting to push their interests, but generally found that they got little traction when doing so independently. The reason for this was that the tools available to the Saudis (and the wider Arab world) are not decisive in themselves. The ability to provide some diplomatic cover and support and to fund oppositionists, insurgents, and terrorists are useful adjuncts to a larger policy, but they cannot bring about a decisive change on their own (at least not in the near term). In particular, Saudi actions can generally cause greater instability (through the funding of proxies), but cannot drive constructive undertakings toward stability. In recognition of this limitation, the Saudi team generally evinced a high degree of tolerance for regional instability and conflict, so long as larger Saudi interests were preserved.

Consequently, the Saudi team found that Saudi Arabia had only a modest impact on events in Syria itself, and made little headway with either the American or Turkish teams until the Americans and Turks had decided on their own—and for reasons having nothing to do with Saudi efforts—to intervene in Syria. At that point, Saudi/Arab help became extremely useful, but even then it was not decisive:



the American and Turkish teams had made up their minds to do so based on their own interests, and would have intervened (and felt they could have intervened) with or without Arab support, although the Arab support was certainly welcome.

Divergent Interests

The simulation reinforced a critical point that could become increasingly important if, as seems likely, the Syrian civil war continues to worsen. Namely, the United States and its key regional allies ultimately have interests that diverge in important ways, which could become a significant impediment to action. These divergences were most acute with regard to the importance and nature of what followed the removal of the Asad regime, reinforcing the lesson from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, etc., that the “take down” of a regime is ultimately much less important than the follow through—the political, economic, and social reconstruction that must follow the fall of an autocratic regime.

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The American team saw its primary interest as removing Asad quickly and securing the installation of a stable new government with minimal American economic and military commitment. As the scenario unfolded, this minimalist agenda translated into a willingness to accept virtually any alternative government as long as it was stable. The U.S. team operated under the assumption that the United States would likely back whichever group seemed to have the greatest ability to form a government that could stabilize the country (even at the expense of other American interests like democracy and human rights), and very little interest in post-conflict reconstruction. The U.S. team assumed that the Muslim Brotherhood (via the Syrian National Council) would inevitably dominate the Syrian Sunni majority and was prepared to accept that outcome. Consequently, the U.S. team did not explore whether there were ways to arrive at an alternate outcome, for instance by intervening at a different time or in different ways.

If the American team was prepared to live with a Muslim Brotherhood victory, the Turkish team positively desired it, and eagerly accepted whatever political space American resignation created for them to pursue that outcome. The Turkish team was, not unexpectedly, far more concerned with what followed Asad because Turkey would have to live with that successor regime (or system) for years to come. Moreover, the Turkish team was worried about post-conflict reconstruction: they felt it had to be done right, but that Turkey could not be left holding the bag.



The Turkish team sensed the ambivalence of the American team and feared that the American team wanted to make post-conflict reconstruction Turkey's problem, something the Turkish team felt would be disastrous for Turkey and well beyond its economic, military, and even political strength. Indeed, part of the Turkish team's reluctance to intervene despite the increasing strain that refugees, crime, terrorism, and economic dislocation were placing on their country stemmed from their concerns about "the day after."

The Saudi team felt that it was important to get rid of the Asad regime, and little else. This meant that they evinced less interest in the nature of the post-Asad government so long as it was Sunni, although the topic did not come up much in discussion among team members because of the relatively marginal influence that the Saudis exerted in the simulation. The Saudi team explicitly concluded that the Kingdom could accept very high levels of instability in post-Asad Syria. In part this was based on the calculation that whatever followed the Asad regime—including a radical Sunni Islamist regime—would still be better for Saudi Arabia than either the Asad regime or the current situation. Indeed, the game suggested that Riyadh's tolerance (even propensity) for a radical successor regime could be another source of divergence between Saudi Arabia and the United States and Turkey. However, the Saudi team also made clear that another important element in their thinking and willingness to accept a very wide range of end states, had been Saudi Arabia's limited ability to affect developments in Syria.

The Vanishing Land

The simulation presented a scenario in which spillover from Syria helped push Iraq back into another round of civil war. Indeed, by the end of the simulation, Iraq's violence was approaching levels similar to what the country had experienced in 2006—and the country's trajectory was unmistakably downward. The three teams reacted very differently to this set of developments, and in ways that are useful to consider as we ponder what to do about Syria.

The Saudi team saw the chaos in Iraq as preferable to the state of affairs there at the start of the simulation (i.e., the present day). The Saudi team believed that Riyadh sees Iraqi prime minister Maliki as an irredeemable puppet of Tehran, and as a result, Iraq becoming another Iranian vassal state. They saw Saudi interests in the region as a whole as focused on waging a zero-sum struggle with the Iranians, and therefore anything that hurt Iranian interests benefitted Saudi interests. Consequently, the Saudi team was more than willing to take actions to help the Syrian opposition even when these actions were likely to undermine Iraqi stability. Indeed, the destabilization of Maliki's Iraq was something of a *bonus* from the Saudi team's perspective.

The simulation suggested that Turkish interest in Iraq is certainly high, but much less than its interests in Syria (in part because the Turks now feel that they



have a useful partner—and buffer—in Mas’ud Barzani’s Kurdistan Regional Government), and if Ankara is forced by events to prioritize among them, it will focus on Syria over Iraq. Initially, the Turkish team was quite concerned about developments in Iraq, but those events tended to be relatively low risk for Turkey, such as a contest between the Syrian armed forces and the opposition to control Syria’s border crossings with Iraq, and the mobilization of Iraqi army units to meet the threat. The Turks could justify a focus on Syria instead (where the early events were far more dramatic). As the simulation proceeded, however, spillover from Syria engaged Iraq’s own internal sectarian and political tensions and created a snowball effect that carried the country back into civil war as it approached the provincial elections planned for the spring of 2013. The Turkish team recognized that what was going on in Iraq was very problematic for Turkey, but ultimately concluded that the spiraling Syrian conflict was more threatening to Turkish interests. By the end of the simulation, the Turkish team had effectively redefined Turkey’s interests in Iraq as being limited to events in Iraqi Kurdistan—the scenario depicted the Iraqi Kurds taking advantage of the recurrence of civil war to move rapidly toward a declaration of independence—and even then, the Turkish team members were debating just how bad that would actually be for Turkey. In short, faced with problems in both Syria and Iraq, the Turkish team felt that the Syrian problems were far more threatening to Turkey, and that Ankara would be willing to make previously unimaginable compromises on its interests in Iraq to secure its interests in Syria.

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The U.S. team was largely uninterested in developments in Iraq. They spent little time discussing it, and did little to head off the problems that the scenario depicted as occurring there. To some extent, this was an artificiality of the game: the American team had its hands full with developments in Syria (and Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain, and elsewhere). However, even this prioritization reflects a decision to focus on Syria at the expense of Iraq. Another American team, one that saw America’s interests differently, might have looked at the developments in the game and concluded that the team’s attention should turn away from Syria and toward Iraq because a civil conflict there presented a greater challenge to U.S. national security interests—something that the Saudi team assumed that the U.S. team would do. The fact that the U.S. team chose not to do so (not unrealistically, in our opinion) suggests that this was *not* a function of the simulation, but a reflection of the team’s assessment of the American perspective.



What makes this particularly noteworthy is that instability in Syria engages American strategic interests only insofar as problems there spill over into Turkey, Israel, Jordan, or Iraq. In contrast, Iraq's own burgeoning oil production and relationship with its neighbors (as well as the fact that spillover from problems in Iraq has the potential to further affect the oil production of Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia), make it intrinsically important to American interests. Yet the course of the simulation showed an American team willing to intervene (to some extent) to shut down a civil war in Syria but unwilling to do the same in Iraq, where America's interests are far greater.

At some level, this is not surprising, and the U.S. team's decisions strike us as accurately reflecting American political opinion at this time. It appears to stem in part from a pattern in American foreign policy: the United States will not contemplate intervening in a country where it previously experienced an unpleasant intervention in the past, regardless of how compelling the rationale might be. (This also appears to explain the American team's lack of interest in events in Lebanon, where civil war had also been rekindled by the end of the simulation.)

This is a potentially important finding. It suggests that there is such an aversion to anything Iraq-related among the U.S. policy elite that even catastrophic developments there (as depicted in the simulation) would be unlikely to elicit meaningful American involvement. This is problematic because, again, the Syrian civil war does hold the potential (albeit, hardly a certainty) to push Iraq back into a civil war that would threaten U.S. interests more directly than a similar civil war in Syria. This suggests that the United States has a more pressing need to take action to shut down the Syrian civil war sooner, before it destabilizes Iraq, because the United States is not likely to do anything to shut down an Iraqi civil war even though an Iraqi civil war could be far more threatening to American vital interests.

Compartmentalization

The American team's response to the simulation's situation in Iraq (and Lebanon) illustrated another potential lesson. The American team evinced a highly realistic tendency to compartmentalize the different problems of the Middle East. While this accurately reflected how Washington has formulated its policy toward and handled events in the region, the simulation seemed to echo criticisms of this approach. Thus, the U.S. team focused on Syria to the exclusion of nearly everything else, particularly Iraq and Lebanon, both of which were as deeply mired in civil conflict as Syria by the end of the scenario. As noted above, while a hard-nosed assessment of U.S. interests might excuse the relative dismissal of the Lebanese fighting, the opposite should have been the case for Iraq. The simulation's presentation of events in Jordan and Bahrain, sparked by the Syrian fighting, also did not register high on the American agenda despite the potential for developments in Bahrain to affect the U.S.-Bahrain relationship generally, and



the 5th Fleet headquarters specifically.

The Saudi team, on the other hand, took a far more integrated view of the region—arguably reflecting the Saudi approach to regional developments. The Saudi team discussed events in Syria in a regional context from start to finish, and their decisions about their actions in Syria (as well as toward Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Bahrain) were all driven by a region-wide perspective on what it was that they were trying to achieve and where their interests lay. Indeed, the Saudi team probably reflected Riyadh’s actual approach (as best we understand it) by *overemphasizing* the linkage among various events, and their inevitable connection to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

As a result, by the end of the simulation, the American team could be said to have successfully accomplished its near-term objectives toward Syria. However, most of the participants, observers, and organizers felt that American interests across the region were more threatened than they had been at the beginning of the simulation, and America’s ability to secure its long-term interests were unclear at best. The Saudi team, in contrast, had advanced its interests across the board—at times and in places at the expense of U.S. interests—and ended the simulation in a stronger position than they had begun.

None of this is to criticize the actions of the U.S. team, or to suggest that the actions of the Saudi team accurately reflect either the goals or likely actions of the real government of Saudi Arabia. However, it does suggest that the American tendency to compartmentalize Middle Eastern problems is potentially problematic and that Washington would be better served by a more integrated, strategic perspective that identified and prioritized American interests everywhere, and then devised strategies toward different countries that reflected that prioritization.

