ISSUEBRIEF   BY **BILAL Y. SAAB** AND **MICHAEL S. TYSON**

ISIS War Game: The Coming Stalemate

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On September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama delivered a speech outlining the administration's strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, also known as ISIS. Achieving success requires four key elements, Obama said: a systematic campaign of airstrikes, increased support to allied forces fighting ISIS on the ground, robust counterterrorism to prevent ISIS attacks against the West including the US homeland, and continued provision of humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians. Airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and recently in Syria have supported the first, third, and fourth elements of this strategy.

However, the Iraqi Army, the Kurdish forces known as the Peshmerga, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), all of whom the United States has committed to bolstering and training for the foreseeable future, have faced significant challenges in rolling back ISIS. The Iraqi Army will simply not be able to launch a large-scale counteroffensive against ISIS until it is militarily ready to do so. Yet its military readiness is a function of not just tactics and capabilities but also political progress and specifically the establishment of a new and stable power-sharing arrangement in Baghdad. The Iraqi Army will have a much better chance of defeating or at least containing ISIS fighters in Iraq if politics in the capital deprive the extremist movement of its alliances with various Sunni tribes.

The Peshmerga are a better organized and more motivated military force than the Iraqi Army, and while they were able to protect Erbil and prevent ISIS from controlling the Mosul Dam with the help of US warplanes, their military operations are unlikely to extend far beyond Kurdish-controlled areas (at least not until Kurdish leaders feel more comfortable about their political and economic rights in any new Iraqi political configuration). The FSA is unsurprisingly the weakest link in Obama's strategy. Given the FSA's very modest human and material capabilities, any US

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.

program—backed by regional partners including Saudi Arabia—to create a moderate Syrian rebel force capable of fighting both ISIS and the Assad regime effectively will take at least two years, if not longer.

Even President Obama has admitted that it will take a while before all elements of his strategy come together. But in warfare, as the saying goes, "the enemy gets a vote, too." In other words, ISIS will not simply wait for its adversary to get stronger and better-organized. It will adjust and possibly acquire new capabilities and survival skills, and there is already evidence from the battlefield that ISIS is adapting to airstrikes and strengthening through increased funding, training, and equipment. In what most likely will be a long, drawn-out conflict, which side will be in a more advantageous position in the near-to-medium term?

On September 22, the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security conducted a war game to address that question and more broadly examine the type of strategic interaction that might ensue between the US-led coalition and ISIS over the next six months. War game participants included senior Iraq and Syria analysts—some from the region, others from the US think tank community—as well as US military personnel from the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Army who served in recent years in Iraq and Afghanistan and are currently on tour with the Atlantic Council, Washington Institute for Near East Policy,

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Center for a New American Security, and Center for Strategic and International Studies.[1] Led by the Scowcroft Center's Senior Fellow for Middle East Security Bilal Y. Saab, the Red Team represented ISIS, while the US-led coalition (although the emphasis was on the US government and military) was played by the Blue Team, spearheaded by Michael S. Tyson, the Atlantic Council's Marine Corps senior fellow.

Given the enormous complexity of the operational environment in Iraq and Syria and the multitude of actors and factors that are involved, participants inevitably missed some aspects of the crisis but hope we captured others that have either been under-studied or neglected altogether. Participants were encouraged to think at the operational, tactical, and strategic levels of war given the obvious linkages. Members of each team proposed courses of action that increased the probability of disrupting and denying each other's near-term plans and goals, respectively, while also achieving their own objectives. The results proved that both sides have a chance to achieve critical tasks in the next six months, but they must each take certain steps to ensure success. Participants found that the most likely scenario six months from now is a military stalemate where ISIS is contained but still controls an impressive amount of territory in the borderlands of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, posing a continued security threat to those countries, the region as a whole, and even more direct Western interests.

Red Team

Goals

Red members started off with a discussion of their desired end goals. Unanimous agreement on priorities was a bit hard to find given the various nationalities of its members (the majority being from Iraq and the region, but many from the West) and dissimilar biases and preferences—international terrorism versus state building and whether they can do both at the same time. Ultimately, Red members reached consensus on the critical importance of gaining and controlling territory to establish a sustainable Islamic State. They agreed that this is a historic opportunity to succeed where all other jihadist actors have failed. This would separate them, they said, from the rest and help them establish long-term dominance in the jihadist universe. Red members concurred that if the "state project goes awry," everything else would fall apart.

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Therefore, Red thought it would be most beneficial to focus in the short term on consolidating gains made in eastern Syria and western Iraq in order to set up the foundations of a governance system in those areas. Territorial expansion would not be put on hold, but rather focused on areas critical to establishing defensible borders and lines of communication. This would mean focusing on the Syrian provinces of Hasakah, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour, while continuing to make opportunistic advances in Iraq. At the same time, Red recognized that Blue's air campaign constrained its ability to make rapid, large-scale territorial advances.

Despite its profound interest in waging holy war against Blue and the enormous symbolism of such a campaign, Red members agreed that it would be prudent to delay the launching of spectacular terrorist attacks against the US homeland. Attacking the United States on its own soil now would bring considerable symbolic and material advantages, but it would also come at the high risk of unleashing the fury of the most powerful military on earth. Washington's most likely response, Red assumed, would be to escalate militarily and deploy US ground troops to completely root out Red. And once Blue goes "all in," according to Red, it would most likely be the beginning of the end for Red

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[1]   Military fellows affiliated with the Brookings Institution expressed interest in participating in the war game but were unable to due to scheduling conflicts.

(that does not mean, however, that Red would not put up a fight and incur heavy losses on Blue before its elimination).

One Red member, however, stressed the need to match Blue's escalatory tactics to demonstrate resolve (to multiple audiences) and ability to hurt the adversary. This includes limited, targeted attacks on Blue interests in the region that stop short of provoking all-out war—a delicate balance between restraint and aggression. If, however, Blue's air campaign begins to existentially threaten Red, then the latter's restraint would be abandoned in favor of escalation to all-out war.

Another member did not approve of the cautious approach toward likely Blue ground troops. He asserted that deployment of Blue ground forces is tremendously advantageous for three reasons: the desire to kill Blue soldiers on Arab-Muslim lands; the imposition of blood and treasure cost on Blue governments; and the fact that Blue governments lack staying power in the region due to political weakness, which will result in their eventual withdrawal (as seen previously in Iraq and Afghanistan).

Tactics/Operations
To accomplish its goals over the next six months and try to deny its adversary's, Red would execute the following tactics and operations:

1 Prevent Blue regional governments from deploying their own ground troops by exploiting their political fragility and the religious sensitivities of their populations through an aggressive social media campaign, threatening revenge terrorist attacks and painting the conflict as a war waged by Blue and infidel governments against the religion of Islam.

2 Create (but do no signal the existence of) terrorist cells in every major regional Blue capital to deter the deployment of ground forces.

3 Expand in size. While Red would prefer, for now, not to formally partner with other Islamist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda (for branding and exclusivity purposes), it would lure them into its network to facilitate tacit cooperation.

4 Step up efforts to gain intelligence on Iraqi Army and moderate Syrian rebel capabilities and potential operations by infiltrating moles within its adversaries' military/security apparatuses.

5 Provide essential services and security for the local populace in controlled areas to boost legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects.

6 Create (but do not signal the existence of) an elite unit that specializes in chemical and biological warfare to maximize the effect of deterrence against Blue regional ground troop deployment, and if deterrence fails, enhance chances of survival.

7 Create supply lines to support operations. The eastern edge of Red's military operations would generally be bounded by Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit, and Fallujah. In Syria, Red would be best suited to expand its network in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Areas such as Hasakah Province, northern Aleppo Province, and Deir al-Zour City are vital to enhancing Red's territorial grip.

8 Continue to extort local populations, raid weapons stockpiles, and find new buyers to sell oil resources it controls, but develop alternative revenue streams to account for Blue airstrikes on strategic assets.

9 Learn how to use newly acquired military equipment to launch spectacular attacks against Blue's air assets.

10 Identify within its foreign fighters contingent or recruit from outside top Internet experts to wage sophisticated cyber operations against Blue's strategic assets.

11 Step up efforts to kidnap Blue civilians (contractors or journalists)—and, if lucky, US military advisors or special operations forces—for the purpose of extracting as many concessions from the adversary as possible, demonstrating capability and attracting new recruits.

Blue Team

Goals
Based on the war game's stated timeline of six months, Blue unanimously felt that its primary near-term goals were to further disrupt Red, force it to stay on the defensive, and work toward expelling it from Iraq. Overall, Blue members analyzed how it will achieve these objectives applying the diplomacy, information, military, and economics (DIME) frame of reference in Iraq and Syria, individually.

In Iraq, it was determined that Blue can to a large extent control circumstances diplomatically, militarily, and economically. Diplomatically, the situation in Iraq is not ideal, but there is hope with greater Saudi-Iranian rapprochement that the new Iraqi government can become more inclusive and the anti-Red alliance remain intact. Militarily, Blue maintains sufficient forces to disrupt Red through coordinated airstrikes and ground operations partnered with reenergized

Iraqi Army and Security Forces. Economically, Blue can degrade Red's funding over the next six months through coordination with Arab partners and targeted action against oil sources as required. The most challenging aspect of DIME for Blue is in the area of information. Red's momentum in this area is much faster and more effective than Blue's. While Blue has made improvements (for example, anti-ISIS campaign videos), it often bows to extensive bureaucratic controls and regulation that bogs down its efforts, while Red is relatively free to move through the information space. In this arena, the best that Blue can hope for is to discredit and delegitimize Red.

In Syria, things are much more challenging, both diplomatically and militarily. Diplomatically, there is no peace or reconciliation process to begin with. Militarily, there are insufficient forces on the ground to make any gains against Red and its allies, and Blue airstrikes are having only marginal effects. Blue also assessed that its adversary has the upper hand on the informational and economic levels of war. Therefore, Syria is not a solvable problem set within the next six months. In fact, it was concluded that military breakthroughs in Iraq by Blue would cause Red to fall back into Syria, consolidate, and possibly reinforce itself.

One specific geographic feature Blue focused on was the borders. For Iraq and Syria, border security would be essential to disrupting ISIS because it would result in military and economic isolation. A secure border between Iraq and Syria would impact funding flows as well as transport for Red's men and equipment. The securing of other state borders is also important to the success of Blue's containment strategy.

One critical assumption made by Blue members is that the United States will not commit conventional ground forces in the next six months. It was further agreed that the defeat of Red could only be accomplished on the ground, and that a more capable ground forces contingent in Iraq and Syria would be needed to accomplish this. Another consequence of the United States not committing ground forces is that other Blue nations would refrain from sending troops as well. Therefore, it was assessed that current Blue forces on the ground will only be able to disrupt Red at best.

Tactics/Operations
To accomplish its goals over the next six months and try to deny its adversary's, Blue would execute the following tactics and operations:

1 Increase hard power in Iraq and Syria to disrupt Red. This will set the example for other terrorist organizations in the region and around the world. In the near term, this can best be accomplished through expansion of the air campaign as well as an increase in covert operations.

2 Bolster efforts to consolidate an effective Iraqi Army and continue to support Peshmerga operations through training, equipment, and air support to facilitate improvements in northern Iraq. While this likely cannot be accomplished within six months, it is a requirement to ensure long-term success in Iraq.

3 Expand the air campaign to disrupt Red's freedom of movement. Maximize cruise missile and drone capabilities within Syria to maintain kinetic and non-kinetic pressure on Red. Establish a free-fire zone along the Iraq-Syria border where anyone in that zone is considered Red and can be attacked as such. This can be accomplished primarily through an information campaign followed by an aggressive air campaign to police this border.

4 Actively discredit Red internationally to counter recruitment process. This will also require transparency about what Blue is trying to accomplish locally, regionally, and globally. Success in the fight against Red must be highlighted in the media as well.

5 Set regional conditions to stop Red funding. This can be greatly improved by seeking cooperation from the Arab Gulf partners.

6 Clarify strategic approach to Iran's role in the conflict. Diplomatically, how Iran interacts with Blue has profound consequences. Iran's ability to cause a major shift in Red's effectiveness in the region must be recognized. While this situation is politically complicated, strategic clarity for Blue will greatly speed up the process of disrupting Red.

7 Concentrate efforts in various cities within north and west Iraq. Specifically, Baghdad and Mosul are two key locations that serve as political and economic centers in the area where Red is most influential. To secure Baghdad will set the conditions for unimpeded governance for the Iraqi government. Blue must also assist the Peshmerga to continue to secure Mosul, Erbil, and Kirkuk.

Key Takeaways

"…what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy." –Sun Tzu

Following their separate meetings, Red and Blue came together for a plenary discussion to compare their

findings (for the purposes of this war game, the simulation was limited to a single round).

- Red members agreed that the most advantageous course of action for them was to expand their network outside of Iraq and Syria (most likely in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf countries), as this would directly counter Blue's hopes of containing them. Therefore, efforts by Blue to build the capacities of allied forces on the ground must be timely.

- Blue was surprised by Red's pragmatism and awareness of the heavy costs of aggressively expanding its geographical grip in hostile territory. Such assumed strategic patience on the part of Red would destabilize Blue's containment efforts as momentum and political will may be lost down the road. In the real world, however, ISIS's aversion to risk should not be taken for granted. In fact, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. ISIS is not a secular insurgent movement with clear territorial and political goals. A lot of what it is doing and will continue to do is driven by ideology. Therefore, cost-benefit calculations and rational decision-making will be informed heavily by ideology and constrained by the very nature of its hierarchical organizational structure (at least on a theological level).

- The results of this war game clearly showed a pending stalemate between Red and Blue. Therefore, the onus is on Blue to adjust to the operating environment in order to ensure success, and efforts across the DIME must be coordinated to defeat Red's strategy. Border security and sufficient military forces will provide the heavy lifting for Blue. First, military operations must disrupt Red in Iraq and Syria with an increase in hard power from Blue. This will take away Red's ability to establish its goal of gaining and controlling territory. Dividing Red in Iraq and Syria by securing their shared border is the first key to success. Second, focusing support in Iraq will capitalize on the lesser of two evils while the circumstances in Syria improve for Blue. Operations geared toward stopping Red funding and delegitimizing their efforts with a strong information campaign will ensure long-term success.

The thoughts presented by the military fellows who participated in this war game as well as those written by Michael S. Tyson in this Issue Brief are those of the individuals and do not represent those of the Department of Defense or any individual military service.