

# ISIS War Game III: The Final Phase

DECEMBER 2015

September 2015 marked the one-year anniversary of President Barack Obama's speech outlining the administration's strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Yet, ISIS celebrated in June its own first-year anniversary of setting up a state by conducting three nearly simultaneous terrorist operations in three different countries—France, Tunisia, and Kuwait.<sup>1</sup> Just last month, ISIS also shocked the world with its attacks in Paris and Beirut and its downing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, killing more than 400 people combined and injuring hundreds more. While nobody expected the destruction of a resilient and agile foe such as ISIS within a couple of years, it is deeply troubling that the coalition is having such a hard time even disrupting its activities.

ISIS's intercontinental terrorist attacks, while dramatic and sophisticated, are only the latest in a string of bold, lethal, and destabilizing acts by ISIS against key NATO allies and partners of the United States in the region. In May, ISIS suicide bombers hit Saudi Shiite mosques in Qatif and Dammam, killing more than twenty-five people. The attacks, the worst in a decade, raised concerns about an organized campaign by ISIS to exacerbate Sunni-Shiite tensions in the country such as the strategy executed by al-Qaeda in Iraq (the terrorist organization which gave rise to ISIS) against Iraqi Shiites

1 In France, an ISIS follower drove into an industrial chemical plant, decapitated one person, and allegedly tried to blow up the factory. In Tunisia, suspected ISIS members murdered thirty-eight mostly British tourists at a seaside resort. In Kuwait, an ISIS suicide bomber blew up one of the largest Shiite mosques, killing twenty-seven people and wounding hundreds of others.

## 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.

in 2004 to 2006.<sup>2</sup> Reeling from a massive bombing on October 10 that killed at least ninety-five people, Turkey also is at war with ISIS. The terrorist attack, which targeted a peace rally in Ankara, was the deadliest in the nation's history. Three months earlier, a suicide bomber struck the border town of Suruc, killing at least thirty and prompting the Turkish government to launch a large-scale anti-terrorism campaign that has led to the arrest of hundreds of suspected ISIS sympathizers.

In Iraq, despite efforts by the US-led coalition to bolster the training of the Iraqi army, ISIS still has a high capacity to conduct military and terrorist operations, as evidenced by its bombings in the eastern province of Diyala on July 18 and in Baghdad five months later,

2 Riyadh's announcement that it has foiled numerous terrorist plots by ISIS and arrested more than four hundred suspects revealed the extent of ISIS's infrastructure in the kingdom. For more on this topic, please see Bilal Y. Saab, "Can the House of Saud Survive ISIS?: Baghdadi's Sectarian War," *Foreign Affairs*, June 11, 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-11/can-house-saud-survive-isis>.

leading to more than 141 deaths.<sup>3</sup> In Syria, ISIS has seized new territory in Palmyra and made important advances toward Aleppo, a major commercial center in the country. In short, while it has lost land to the Kurds, ISIS has been able to organize its assault forces, advance, and overrun local enemy units on multiple other fronts. Despite thousands of coalition and Russian air strikes against its fighters in Iraq and Syria, ISIS's control and acquisition of new territory in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt, as well as its influence and appeal in regions outside the Middle East, have expanded.

Without new thinking and honest self-evaluation in the White House, things could—and probably will—get much worse in Iraq and Syria, allowing sectarian conflicts to fester, the refugee crisis to reach catastrophic levels, and ISIS to thrive and gradually pose a more serious security threat to key US regional partners and allies and to the US homeland and Western societies.<sup>4</sup>

The good news is that the administration knows an ISIS strategy review is long overdue. The bad news is that the President is not likely to make any drastic changes to his strategy in his remaining time in office. Despite top military advisors Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr.'s recent calls for adjustments that entail placing greater emphasis on the Syrian city of Raqqa (the de-facto capital of ISIS's state) and the Iraqi city of Ramadi, none of those changes are strategic in nature.

The administration's resistance to a full reexamination of US strategy should be properly understood. Timing is the biggest complicating factor. It is a little too late for Obama to launch his own comprehensive review of ISIS and Middle East strategy overall. Fixing the ISIS problem sustainably so that another more extreme version of the group does not emerge later means finally addressing the underlying conditions that gave birth to ISIS: bad economics and failed governance, both of which have ailed the Middle East for decades. And if that is not challenging enough, those problems can only be addressed by the people of the region themselves. Sure Washington can nudge and assist, but for this historic transition to succeed, the Middle East must take charge. It will not work any other way. The US misadventure in Iraq has made that painfully clear.

But it is not solely an issue of timing. Should Obama task his national security team with conducting a review

like he did in 2009 with his Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy review, his political rivals would almost surely pounce on him. Republicans would spin his decision in ways that could not only be damaging to a legacy he is working so hard to protect, but, if engineered smartly, these attacks could also sway independent voters and hurt the chances of the Democratic Party to win the upcoming presidential election. Finally, Obama would also have to contend with the possibility that he might not see significant results of the review before he goes, and worse, any successor would most likely scrap his recommendations and start all over again.

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Though an unlikely alternative, Obama could minimize political risk and give a reassessment process more time to finish by creating a bipartisan review of US Middle East strategy that could potentially deliver stronger and more credible recommendations to his successor. A useful model is the bipartisan Middle East strategy task force at the Atlantic Council that is chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former National Security Advisor Steve Hadley. The effort, which started earlier this year and continues to meaningfully involve political and civil society leaders and experts from the Middle East, ultimately seeks to produce a strategic framework as well as practical recommendations on US Middle East policy. Obama could do something similar on a governmental level and essentially begin a process that would set the conditions for future success. In this scenario also, however, the next president could instead go his or her own way after taking office.

The least desirable but most likely option for the year ahead is crisis management or "muddling through." This means that Obama will stay on a course that has not even managed to degrade ISIS. The hope is that he can hand over this crisis to his successor in no worse shape than it is currently. The biggest and most urgent

<sup>3</sup> The attack in Diyala was one of the deadliest single attacks in Iraq in the past decade.

<sup>4</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, "On ISIS, Obama Will Muddle Through for Another Year," *Newsweek*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-obama-will-muddle-through-another-year-393072>.

priority for Obama from now until he leaves office is to end the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, which would help significantly reduce ethnic animosity and sectarian hatred in the region. But if recent regional trends are any indication, civil war termination, as analyzed below, will be extremely hard to pursue.

### Strategic Interaction

Since early 2014, the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative (MEPSI) at the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security has been analyzing the rise of ISIS, and more broadly, the growing influence of violent, nonstate actors in the Middle East and the challenges they pose to US policy. Because ISIS is a symptom of much deeper ills that have plagued the Middle East for years, it has staying power and will not easily be wiped out. This assumption has allowed us at MEPSI to think more strategically about the movement.

Middle East pundits have dug deeply into the history of ISIS, provided explanations of its near-term and long-term goals, assessed its capabilities and the multidimensional threat it poses, and even tried to predict its future. These analytical pursuits have been extremely useful for better understanding ISIS. But rather than examining these important sets of questions independently, we thought we could gain new insights about ISIS and better evaluate the effectiveness of the anti-ISIS campaign by analyzing these issues under a game-theoretic framework of *strategic interaction*.

This meant that our primary focus was systematic analysis of the *strategic setting*. Political scientists David A. Lake and Robert Powell define strategic settings as “environments, disaggregated into a set of actions and an informational structure, and actors, decomposed into preferences and beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> In simpler terms, we continue to be interested in exploring how ISIS's preferences, or what economics (and international relations) literature calls *strategic choices*, are influenced by those of the US-led coalition, and vice versa, and how behavior and policy by each side tries to adapt and evolve as a result of this continuing strategic interaction.

Of course, no intellectual approach is without weaknesses, and game-theoretic explanations of choice are no exception. One important imperfection or controversial aspect of game theory is its assumption of rationality of individuals and groups that are under study. This immediately brought up an interesting question: Is ISIS a rational actor?

Many would say that it is not, because its ideology dominates its decision-making and trumps its ability to engage in cost-benefit analysis, a typical trait of rational actors. Those who believe that ISIS is irrational point out that the movement has managed to create more enemies than friends by deliberately and continuously engaging in provocative actions such as burning a Jordanian pilot to death, beheading an alleged Russian spy, and taking the war to capable regional countries such as Russia, France, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, which does not seem like a smart or sustainable strategy.

On the other hand, there is a substantial amount of evidence from the battlefield suggesting that, for a highly doctrinaire movement, ISIS has exercised a healthy dose of pragmatism and adaptation. It has adjusted its military tactics in response to the air campaign. It has shown strategic patience by not rushing the fight against the Iraqi central government or the Syrian regime. And it has methodically made military advances in ways that are quite similar to secular conventional armies or insurgencies. Moreover, “rational” should not be confused with *reasonable*. There is a lot to abhor about ISIS's behavior, but that does not necessarily make it irrational. It all depends on the goals of the organization and the effective use of means that are chosen to fulfill them. Rationality is not subjective, but rather an objective characteristic that does not follow any moral guidelines. Furthermore, rationality is not an absolute or continuous attribute. An actor can be rational at one given time, and irrational at another. Different situations require different behaviors and sets of policies. In the case of ISIS, it has acted in accordance with the rational actor model on multiple occasions.

Too often we misunderstand or mischaracterize the enemy at our own peril, especially if it has a totally different or radically opposed belief system. We quickly categorize it and provide definitive judgment and sensationalist commentary about its intentions and actions. Unwisely we label any nonstate actor from the Middle East that is armed with weapons and ideology as “terrorist,” even if its aims and means go far beyond, and are more dangerous than, mere terrorism. To defeat ISIS, we must endeavor to think like ISIS and we must avoid lazy analysis. Through creative “red teaming” we can gain fresh and alternative perspectives on how ISIS operates, identify blind spots, and test unstated assumptions.

After the 9/11 attacks, every US intelligence agency was mandated to have a red team—an alternative analysis component—so that people in the government could imagine the unthinkable. In April 2006, following an order by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, CENTCOM established its own red team. Its charter is

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<sup>5</sup> David A. Lake and Robert Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 12.

to provide the CENTCOM commander, leadership, and staff with alternative viewpoints, challenge common assumptions, and anticipate unintended consequences of events and actions. The campaign against ISIS will be a long one, and the United States could use every bit of “outside the box thinking” in its national security machinery to put itself in a position to win.

## Objectives

On October 14, we conducted our third and final war game on ISIS.<sup>6</sup> While the previous two war games, *ISIS War Game: The Coming Stalemate* and *ISIS War Game II: The Escalation Challenge*, emphasized tactical, logistical, and operational aspects of the coalition’s military efforts against ISIS, as well as immediate decisions and policy responses to specific crisis situations, we intended for this simulation, or strategic “path game,” to take a broader view of the conflict.

Therefore, we were less interested in micro aspects of ISIS behavior or coalition activities and more focused on macro perspectives on the conflict. For example, we did not analyze how either ISIS or the coalition could achieve territorial gains. Nor did we assess how the coalition could tweak its air campaign to make it more effective, nor whether cruise missiles and other weapons systems could benefit military strikes against ISIS targets. We deliberately refrained from getting sidetracked by day-to-day, regional developments or overwhelmed by Russia’s military intervention in Syria.

Instead, what we hoped to get out of this final iteration was to think strategically about the United States’ long-term objectives in the Iraq-Syria crisis zone and the region at large. We sought to examine the centers of gravity of the conflict over a longer period of time and to think more *proactively* about the region’s various problem sets. The main questions that drove the entire exercise were the following: *What would the United States like to see happen in Syria and Iraq by 2025, and equally important, how does it envision getting there?* Therefore, we zeroed in on strategic paths that the United States could pursue in its long-term fight against ISIS.

An additional objective of the war game was to help inform the 2015-2016 US presidential debate about US Middle East policy and present our findings to current US government officials and presidential candidates who will be wrestling with complex regional subjects and proposing their own plans for more effective policies toward the region.

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<sup>6</sup> Our media partner for this war game was *The Washington Post*.

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## Design

Instead of simulating specific, hypothetical scenarios such as major terrorist attacks or significant military operations by ISIS, like we did in the previous two war games, we explored three separate strategic paths over a five-year interval that the United States and other key members of the coalition could follow and assessed how ISIS might respond to each. Those broad strategies are as follows:

**Stay the Course:** The United States would not fundamentally change its existing counterterrorism and military containment approach against ISIS. Local forces would still have to do the heavy lifting, with Washington providing various but modest forms of assistance.

**Diplomatic Surge:** In an effort to severely undermine ISIS’s staying power, the United States would lead a serious diplomatic initiative, in coordination with a host of countries with vested interests in Iraq and Syria, including Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, to finally address the governance challenges in Syria and Iraq. Reaching a negotiated settlement in Syria and helping build a functional governance structure in both Syria and Iraq would be core priorities.

**Military Occupation:** Should a diplomatic surge not be possible, conditions rapidly deteriorate, and the transnational threat of ISIS reach alarming levels, the United States might be left with the least desirable of all options: military occupation akin to the US presence in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. Specifically, the United States and preferably other members of the coalition would intensify the air campaign, deploy thousands of combat troops and special operations forces, and use a wide array of other military assets to root out ISIS.

## FACT BOX

The all-day exercise began with a White Team presentation of the three US strategies laid out above. Then each Blue team and the Red Team broke out into separate rooms. There, they independently considered the three paths. Each Blue team selected a five-year strategy it thought would be most effective to achieve its ten-year objectives. The Red Team brainstormed a range of broad responses to whichever courses of action the Blue teams were to choose.

In the first plenary session, leaders from each Blue team presented the path they selected along with a broad outline of their long-term objectives. Each group explained their reasoning and the merits of their selection. Red Team members then provided initial responses about how they might respond to the plans presented by each Blue team.

In the second breakout session, taking into consideration the Red Team's initial response, each Blue team further developed a five-year strategy that would progress them towards their stated long-term objectives. In return, the Red Team sought to fully develop a five-year strategy that would counter the long-term objectives set out by each Blue team in the first plenary.

In the second plenary, the Red Team was first to present its five-year strategy to counter each Blue Team's long-term objectives. Each Blue Team leader presented a detailed five-year strategy, based on the long-term objectives presented in the first plenary, including mitigation strategies to the Red Team's initial response during the first plenary discussion. All teams emphasized the considerations that shaped their plan and the reasons why they thought it would work. After each plan was presented, all participants were asked to provide input into the strengths and weaknesses of other plans comparative to their own.

The exercise built on the following assumptions:

- ISIS has suffered losses from coalition bombing, but has not been significantly degraded.
- Turkey has undertaken air strikes against ISIS targets, but has not committed any land forces to the fight.
- Russia continues to conduct aerial and naval bombardment against a multitude of enemy targets in Syria. There is no confirmation yet of significant numbers of Russian ground forces operating with the Syrian military, but there is a suggested presence of 'volunteers' and advisors.
- Despite recent losses, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces remain entrenched in western Syria.
- Moderate Syrian rebels are further weakened due to Russian attacks and forced into a defensive posture.
- Iraqi security forces, without Shiite militia support, remain in a stalemate near Ramadi.

The simulation, which was the largest of the series with more than fifty US and regional participants (some from Iraq and Syria), featured two Blue teams each representing the United States, one Red team that played ISIS, and as always, one White team that acted as umpire, coordinator, and facilitator. Participants included current senior officials and analysts from various defense, intelligence, diplomatic, and development agencies in the US government, former officials who held key positions on the Middle East, and top Middle East specialists from the think tank community with geographical expertise on Iraq and Syria and functional expertise on security and political development.

## Key Findings

### Blue Teams

To flesh out their ten-year goals, members of Blue Team Two identified what they saw as core US interests in the Middle East that could be affected by the Iraq-Syria crisis: homeland security against terrorist attacks emanating from the region; nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and uninterrupted flow of inexpensive oil from the region to the United States and the global economy.

The ten-year goals determined by Blue Team One broadly consisted of maintaining a strong and credible



presence in the region based on robust diplomatic, economic, and military engagement. Neither withdrawal nor “leading from behind” were good strategic options. Instead, the United States would exercise sustained leadership and restate a genuine commitment to the security and prosperity of its partners in the region. As part of the operationalization of its commitment, the United States would help promote inclusive and legitimate governance and enable institutional reform in the region *in close coordination with its partners*. Putting in place a long-term economic program—like a Marshall Plan—that would straddle US administrations and help integrate regional economies into the global economic system also would be incredibly important.

To facilitate the collective implementation of this positive, long-term vision for the region, the United States would commit to helping end the regional civil wars, most critically in Iraq and Syria, and contribute to fixing the massive, global refugee problem. Blue Team One believed that the United States has a responsibility and indispensable role in assisting those displaced by the conflict who wished to either return to their homelands or settle in foreign countries. There was unanimous acceptance by both Blue teams that, while it was possible to kill ISIS’s leadership and destroy its safe havens, the organization could reemerge later perhaps in a more extreme and lethal form unless the civil wars were effectively terminated.

The task of effectively ending regional civil wars would be enormously challenging, but, as recent European and African history suggests, entirely possible. It would also be costly, though not nearly as expensive as the Iraq War was for the United States. Chief of all prerequisites of success would be political commitment by the President of the United States. Unless the United States commits to full implementation, the civil wars will continue, and ISIS, or violent extremism more broadly, will never truly be halted.

There was a quick realization by both Blue teams that the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars presented distinct challenges that required distinct strategies. As imperfect as the Iraqi government is, its mere existence offers better hope than in Syria, where the coalition has no government with which to work. In Iraq, the President of the United States would have to commit to fully supporting a weak Iraqi Prime Minister in efforts to push for military reform and political inclusivity for both Sunnis and Shiites. Just as US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker did with some level of success in 2008, Washington would have to help the Iraqi Prime Minister shore up political support within the Shiite community and find Sunni partners with which to work. Militarily, the United States could rely on some

existent foundations by consulting US military generals who had worked with their Iraqi counterparts in the past to develop command and control capabilities and enlist the support of Sunni tribesmen. This would require more American troops and advisors on the ground, the number of which Blue Team One preferred not to specify.

THE TASK OF EFFECTIVELY ENDING REGIONAL CIVIL WARS WOULD BE ENORMOUSLY CHALLENGING, BUT, AS RECENT EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN HISTORY SUGGESTS, ENTIRELY POSSIBLE. IT WOULD ALSO BE COSTLY, THOUGH NOT NEARLY AS EXPENSIVE AS THE IRAQ WAR WAS FOR THE UNITED STATES.

In Syria, the priority for both Blue teams was to establish more favorable military dynamics on the ground that would enable successful diplomacy and lead to a new power-sharing arrangement in Damascus. As one participant bluntly put it, “you can meet in Geneva a thousand times a week; it will never change a damn thing unless you achieve a military stalemate on the battlefield.” This would require building a strong and credible opposition force that would effectively take on ISIS and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s forces. General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who recently stepped down, had a sensible proposal for helping to create a Syrian army that serves as a good starting point.

However, to build that conventional army *effectively* would take anywhere between three and five years. In the meantime, the United States might be left with no better option than backing a sufficiently organized Syrian proxy force that has neither American blood on its hands nor apocalyptic visions and irredentist designs (which rules out Jabhat Al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda). Certainly, that is a problematic option, given the ambiguity that typically surrounds proxies’ ultimate

goals and intentions. But Blue Team One members judged that there would be a certain acceptance of these risks and management of these concerns as part of their strategic plan.

Should diplomatic discussions of a new power-sharing arrangement commence in response to new facts on the ground, regional and international powers would reign in the Syrian opposition force (which they initially backed) to prevent it from engaging in systematic revenge operations and mass slaughter (this might even be a *prerequisite* for the launch of negotiations). The new power-sharing arrangement would not necessarily have to be liberal democratic, in fact, it would be up to Syrians to determine what form it would take. But regardless of the structure, federal or unitary, it must at a minimum ensure the political representation of all local parties. Political power and economic benefits would be equivalent to demographic weight, and there would be guarantees for minorities and checks and balances to prevent domination by any one party or political agency over the others. Elements of the Lebanese multi-sectarian model, including a Parliament that represents all communal groups, might serve as a useful example.

Finally, safety and security would have to be guaranteed over the long term, which could be made possible through the deployment of a third-party peacekeeping force after the bullets stop flying. If that proves too difficult to engineer, all parties involved in Syria would commit to building an apolitical and professional military—which would include the Syrian proxy force—to serve as protector of the new Syrian state. The United States made serious progress toward that goal in Iraq in 2009, until it walked away and handed over politics to Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, a corrupt and sectarian leader that re-politicized the military and reversed all gains made by Washington.

These goals would be enormously difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without serious discussion with Iran and Russia, given their significant influence regionally and in both countries. The Russians and Iranians have a common interest in ending the civil wars, which serves as a good foundation for cooperation. It is likely that Russia and Iran would agree to a plan that preserves their core interests, though all sides should expect tough compromises.

Blue team members also emphasized that the United States would have to drastically improve its ability to deliver information. These long-term objectives would be unreachable if the United States continued to badly communicate its actions and intentions in the Middle East. As the Blue Team One leader nicely put it: “The

United States is beaten at every turn in the information war. We can sell toothpaste to every citizen walking the globe yet we cannot put out a clear message that says that ISIS is barbaric.”

### **Red Team**

The Red Team believed it had to transform itself from an organization that suffers from an unhealthy amount of hubris to one that is more reality-based. Red Team members sought to address the serious threats and vulnerabilities they would encounter down the road.

To ensure survival and relevance, the Red Team prioritized a Syria-first strategy, knowing the strategic significance of the Syrian safe haven. Should the United States and other involved parties start making real diplomatic progress toward ending the civil wars and bringing about relative stability, it would be the beginning of the end for Red. Therefore, the continuation of the civil wars was a must. This meant actively working against, or at least delaying, attempts at diplomatic breakthroughs, societal reconciliation, and political engineering in Syria and Iraq by local and intervening powers. To do that, Red would:

- conduct spectacular terrorist attacks against Western cities and targets to distract or overwhelm international diplomacy and possibly provoke Western governments to overreact and deploy ground troops—an ideal scenario for Red. As if on cue, days after the war game, the Paris attacks took place;
- conduct sectarian attacks and target specific religious shrines across the region, particularly in places like Saudi Arabia and Jordan where weaknesses in the monarchy could be exploited. While Lebanon was the latest ISIS terrorism target in the region, Saudi Arabia’s Shia mosques have been hit twice over the past few months;
- try to drive a wedge between the United States and Turkey by attacking Turkish sites of social, theological, political, and military value and “leaving a Kurdish calling card.” The gap between Washington and Ankara on ISIS exists because the latter sees the Kurds as more dangerous than ISIS. ISIS will seek to exploit this schism;
- provoke Russia to “go all in” by finding its personnel on the ground and killing them, and encouraging like-minded jihadists in Chechnya to conduct terrorist attacks deep inside Russia. Russian or Western deployment of soldiers to fight would complete the ISIS narrative of a “war on Islam.” On December 2,

ISIS released a video showing the beheading of a man whom it claimed was a Russian spy;

- seek to keep the foreign fighters spigot on and forbid adversaries from turning it off by mastering the information campaign;
- increase the costs for Turkey and other coalition parties should they decide to mount a heavy ground offensive from Turkish territory into western Syria or western Iraq;
- commit resources and manpower to launch new military fronts in Kirkuk and Erbil in efforts to create as much chaos as possible in both cities and distract the Turkish and Iraqi governments;
- attempt to infiltrate terrorists into Israeli territory from the Golan Heights and conduct attacks, possibly inciting the Israel Defense Forces to intervene militarily in the conflict, which could cause direct conflict with the Russia-Iran-Assad axis and lead to greater regional instability; and
- prevent population centers in areas under Red control from leaving so they could be used and exploited in the fight. The more collateral damage by intervening powers targeting Red, the better. Maintaining territory would not be as important as maintaining populations in those territories.

Unlike the previous two war games, Red's strategic initiative seemed a bit lost, but the ultimate objective was the same: to exist and be relevant. The Red Team questioned whether to adopt a strategy of stasis—through attempting to maintain its current positions—or a strategy of expansion, thereby transcending questions of real estate and tackling issues of branding. This was not about territory alone, but about a caliphate that would live to survive in another location.

But almost unanimously, Red Team members felt they had to continue to do things that were more “state-like.” The plan was to maintain the “Islamic state” by delivering services and developing capabilities like any other normal state. The three-part strategy of the Red Team was to *entrench, exploit, and expand*. Entrenchment entailed the defense of what had been captured. Exploitation, which took a more strategic outlook and was not limited to hijacking or plundering local resources, meant resourcing and funding the state project in a sustainable fashion. And finally, expansion entailed keeping the most dangerous enemies of ISIS off balance, sowing seeds of continued instability, and preserving political vacuums, all of which favor ISIS in the long term.

## THE THREE-PART STRATEGY OF THE RED TEAM WAS TO *ENTRENCH, EXPLOIT, AND EXPAND*.

To accomplish these goals, Red Team members favored dispersal tactics, which might force the United States to go to Libya, Yemen, or the Sinai instead of focusing on Iraq and Syria. The Red Team believed that the current civil wars should not only continue, but should proliferate, which would complicate and hamper any international diplomatic activities. There was no urgent need for the downfall of the Assad regime, the defeat of the Kurds, or the collapse of the Iraqi government, because those outcomes would precipitate solutions, unity, and more effective coordination among coalition members.

Red Team members did not think it was realistic for ISIS to try to build a bigger army and create an air defense corps and/or a navy, but they did agree on seeking to acquire new capabilities to defend themselves from aerial bombardment in ways that they had previously dismissed. They also would step up the information campaign, continuing to send the message that the caliphate is alive and well and even succeeding in transitioning (ten years from now) from the founders to the second generation, thus creating some kind of *historiographical credibility*.

### Conclusions

Although this was a war game about ISIS, there was a unanimous consensus among participants that ISIS is a symptom, not a disease. Thus, team members placed greater emphasis on the futures of Iraq, Syria, and the broader region, and on what the United States hoped to accomplish in the Middle East by 2025.

The key lesson of the simulation was that there are no shortcuts in this multi-generational fight. Sustainable victory means that the Middle East's core issues, including the lack of legitimate and accountable governance, weak national militaries, religious hubris, economic incompetence, corruption, sectarianism, and regional proxy wars, must be addressed and could no longer be ignored.

No matter how we looked at the ISIS challenge, it always brought us back to one or a combination of the aforementioned problems. How could ISIS be defeated if the Sunnis—the main constituency of ISIS—continue



to be alienated, insecure, and marginalized in national Syrian and Iraqi politics? How could ISIS be effectively fought when armed forces in the Middle East lack discipline, professionalism, proper training, effective leadership, and command and control capabilities? How could ISIS be challenged in the theological domain when many sheikhs and religious institutions are not doing their job, and worse, oftentimes helping ISIS's cause by spreading divisive messages and fomenting sectarian animosities across the region? How could ISIS be denied recruits when hundreds of thousands of young men are bereft of hope and economic opportunity and therefore vulnerable to radicalization? How could ISIS be seriously degraded when the priorities of corrupt politicians are not collective security and political stability but power and money? How could ISIS be crushed when regional countries cannot agree on the collective threat it poses or how to work together to counter it? Indeed, this is partly why ISIS survives, not necessarily due to its own capabilities, but due to the weaknesses and contradictions of its adversaries.

IN TODAY'S EXTREMELY VOLATILE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT, SECURITY SHOULD BE PURSUED FIRST, NOT AS AN END IN ITSELF, BUT AS A REQUISITE CONDITION TO ENABLE CHANGE.

Yet, ISIS will survive if we are to wait for long-term reform processes to materialize. Something must be done at present and in the interim, otherwise, we will continue to be overwhelmed by events, watch things get worse, and hop from one crisis to another. Therefore a US Middle East strategy and a commitment to *help enable long-term changes* in the Middle East is of enormous importance. Without wise US engagement these changes will never happen. Middle Eastern leaders will never make these painful but necessary compromises on their own.

Clarity on what the United States can and cannot do in this historic transition becomes absolutely critical. No matter how many times Obama or his successor may say otherwise, the United States *cannot defeat ISIS, or violent Islamist extremism more broadly, on its own*. Only

the people of the region can address its root causes. The United States also cannot force its partners, let alone its adversaries, to reform. But it can degrade ISIS—better than it has thus far—and it can encourage reform by helping to create a more secure environment in which regional governments feel more comfortable making necessary political and economic changes.

In today's extremely volatile regional environment, security should be pursued first, not as an end in itself, but as a requisite condition to enable change. The process of historical change in most parts of the Arab world cannot fully materialize or even begin to achieve desirable outcomes without first addressing the immediate and severe security challenges currently plaguing the region. If a house is on fire, saving the lives of residents should be the first and most immediate priority. Only afterwards does the building of a new, stronger foundation become possible.<sup>7</sup>

As war game participants rightly judged, ending the civil wars is the most urgent security priority in the Middle East. If you stop the civil wars, most of the poison they unleash, such as ethnic hatred or sectarian hostility, can be drained. As the current record shows, this cannot be accomplished by “staying the course.” Killing one ISIS bee at a time when dealing with a massive beehive will get us nowhere. Furthermore, “staying the course” actually ensures the continuation of the civil wars—which is the best outcome for ISIS—and neglects the circumstances that gave rise to ISIS. For those unconvinced that the Syrian, Iraqi, Libyan, and Yemeni civil wars can cause serious damage to major US interests in the region, they have to answer the following question: If the civil wars intensify and expand, as they often do, can we afford to potentially lose Jordan, Turkey, or Egypt? The answer is no. And what if ISIS detonates a bomb in a major American city and causes a massive loss of life and economic disruption? Maintaining the same course, aside from moral bankruptcy charges, is seriously risky business.

Instead, the United States can do a lot without making a costly investment in American lives and treasure. Indeed, there is no need for another military occupation of Iraq or massive deployments of US combat troops to the country or to Syria. Here, the guiding principle for the United States is to help create favorable military dynamics on the ground—ideally a stalemate—in order to give serious international diplomacy a chance to commence and succeed. The merits of this hybridized approach—military surge (which the United States was

<sup>7</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, *The New Containment: Changing America's Approach to Middle East Security* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, July 2015), pp. 27-8.

able to do in Iraq until it withdrew in 2011) followed by a political surge (which the United States failed to do)—going forward are clear: achieving successful outcomes in the battlefield would help propel diplomatic talks by key players in the conflict. That is what both Blue teams concluded, and rightly so.

Surely, ISIS will not wait for regional and international stakeholders to get their acts together. In fact, ISIS will make it as difficult as possible for all parties involved to achieve military and diplomatic breakthroughs. This is where Red Team discussions were absolutely fascinating. Red assessed that they could not ignore these threats (as they did in the two previous exercises) or dismiss their own vulnerabilities. They wanted to pursue goals and ambitions, but could no longer think about those without accounting for their enemies' actions and possible strategies. For myself and other White Team members, this vindicated the design of the war game because it produced real strategic interaction.

While survival and relevance seemed like reasonable goals to adopt if you are playing Red and thinking like ISIS, the question remains: *What is the best way to ensure survival and relevance?* Red Team members smartly came up with an “E3 strategy”—entrench, exploit, and expand—but it became clear that each element had weaknesses that the United States and the coalition could exploit. For ISIS, it was a matter of degree. *How much* entrenchment is possible in the face of relentless coalition attacks? What is salvageable and what is not? What kind of tradeoffs would be acceptable? *How much* exploitation can ISIS engage in before local populations revolt against it like they did with al-Qaeda in Iraq? *How much* expansion without becoming overstretched? What are the limits of offensive action? Of course Red members could not properly engage all these questions due to time constraints, but these are precisely the issues that the U.S. public policy community should be thinking about. Sometimes the best course of action is not direct; on the contrary, it can be indirect by forcing the enemy to make mistakes and miscalculations.

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