



ISSUE BRIEF

# Avenues for Conflict in the Gulf: A Matrix Game Simulation

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gulf remains one of the most strategically critical regions in the world. Its stability and security have global implications, yet are far from certain. Along with the Arabia Foundation, the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security believes a convergence of trends in the region has created an inflection point, meaning actions today could have historic and long-lasting consequences.

Consequently, the Atlantic Council and the Arabia Foundation partnered to host a matrix game simulation with the intent to challenge commonly held assumptions of US and regional policymakers about the possibility for conflict in the Gulf, and plausible, but underappreciated, conventional and unconventional Iranian military options. The game recognized that Iran faces increasing pressure domestically and internationally, while simultaneously perceiving a historic opportunity to reshape regional dynamics through multiple regional conflicts. This convergence creates conditions that could lead to a strategic shock, and which warrant serious consideration. Moreover, throughout the region, shifting dynamics are creating new and unpredictable alignments in national interests among a variety of actors.

Because of the current uncertainty and diverse possible future permutations, the game sought to run multiple iterations of the same scenario, in order to explore a range of potential outcomes that would be determined by the decisions of each key actor.

### Key Insights:

- **Proxies in the Periphery.** All teams, particularly the Iran team and the Arab Gulf states teams, avoided direct confrontation and preferred to pressure one another through proxies. In the first session, players focused on Yemen; in the second, they focused on Syria. In the third, due to a shift in scenario focus, they focused on eastern Saudi Arabia. Absent artificial constraints on action, the teams likely would have

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sought to find leverage over the others simultaneously in multiple theaters.

- **Covert Chaos.** To avoid direct confrontation, teams often pursued covert actions to destabilize their opponents. They repeatedly employed nonattributed gray-zone tactics, such as domestic terror attacks, false-flag cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns, to generate unrest. While the moves saw mixed results, neither side was ultimately able to achieve its objectives through these actions alone.
- **Strategic Patience.** The Iran team was fairly comfortable with present levels of stalemate in Syria and Yemen, believing that having its adversaries absorbed in messy proxy conflicts was sufficient to achieve its goals. The Iran team did not feel the need to instigate conflict—particularly direct confrontation. Instead, it preferred to take advantage of the chaos and opportunities within existing unstable environments.
- **Creative Destruction.** While unwilling to directly or conventionally escalate conflict, the Iran team demonstrated a range of creative and carefully calibrated escalations through proxy forces. These included undertaking a space launch over Saudi Arabia, but in a way that did not breach the JCPOA conditions, by: declaring it a civilian satellite launch; attacking cruise ships with US and European passengers by causing an “accidental” maritime collision; and firing on United Arab Emirates (UAE) facilities in Djibouti. Avenues for disruption included targeting of oil transport ships in the Gulf—an action that appears to have recently manifested in the real-world—but were careful never to escalate to outright confrontation.
- **Nuclear Ambitions.** During the second session, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalated significantly, such that each sought access to nuclear capabilities as a security guarantee. While this future outcome may be unlikely, it demonstrated that—under certain conditions—both nations might feel sufficiently threatened and exposed to seek the means to establish nuclear deterrence.
- **Limits of Support.** One question this game sought to explore was how Israel might act in the case of a Gulf crisis, given the perceived threat from Iran. This

game suggested that Israel would do little beyond its immediate border region. On several occasions, the game also tested the limits of the United States team’s willingness to support its Gulf partners. The United States and Saudi Arabia may do well to explore a range of contingency and crisis scenarios to better understand the other’s expectations.

- **Limits of Armed Incursion.** While armed incursions by Iranian-backed militias into Saudi Arabia remain a real and serious threat, participants assessed that this would be logistically difficult to achieve, highly risky, and bringing limited gain. Multiple recent examples demonstrate the salience of this threat, but participants determined that such an incursion would likely be contained reasonably quickly and would be unlikely to trigger a wider escalation.
- **Market Adjustments.** While the impact on Saudi Arabia of threats to its northern oil fields would be significant, subject-matter experts on the adjudication team assessed that the international market implications of a targeted attack on the specific oil fields indicated in this particular scenario would be limited. That said, market perceptions and uncertainty would no doubt create a significant reaction, which could create any number of unexpected second-order effects.

As with any wargame, a number of factors must be considered when reflecting on the outcomes. This was a singular event that demonstrated only a handful of possible outcomes. The game was constrained by several necessary abstractions and artificialities, and cannot fully reflect the complexity of real-world interactions. The decisions made also reflect the beliefs, experiences, and biases of individual participants. As such, these observations should be read as interesting perspectives and opinions to broaden the reader’s consideration of regional challenges, rather than rigorously tested statements of fact.

## INTRODUCTION

The Gulf remains one of the most strategically critical regions in the world. Its stability and security have global implications, yet are far from certain. Along with the Arabia Foundation, the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security believes that after decades of upheaval, competition, and shifting strategic conditions, the Middle East is at a criti-

cal inflection point, meaning actions today could have historic and long-lasting consequences. How current political, security, and economic transformations will ultimately impact the region is not yet clear. But, in upheaval lies opportunity to shape outcomes. With both domestic and international pressure creating an imperative to act, the current Iranian regime may see in today's complex environment a historic opportunity to shape the Gulf's political and security environment to meet its own national goals through military means.

In recent years, the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security has conducted a series of wargames to explore the multifaceted security challenges that threaten the interests of the United States, and its allies and partners. These games have addressed a wide range of issues around the world, including discerning key thresholds for US escalation in Nordic-Baltic contingencies, understanding and responding to the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the potential consequences of shifts in US policy making as it relates to the Gulf, and various crisis contingencies.

The Scowcroft Center and the Arabia Foundation partnered to challenge commonly held assumptions of US and regional policymakers—that Iran would continue to operate only through proxy forces, without escalating to a direct action against US or Saudi Arabian key interests—through a matrix game simulation. Among many significant trends, the game recognized that Iran faces increasing pressure domestically and internationally, while perceiving a opportunity in multiple regional conflicts to reshape regional dynamics. This combination creates conditions that could lead to a strategic shock and warrant serious consideration. Moreover, throughout the region, shifting dynamics are creating new and unpredictable alignments in national interests among a variety of actors. Because of the current uncertainty and diverse possible future permutations, the game set out to run multiple iterations of the same scenario, in order to explore a range of potential outcomes that would be determined by the decisions of each key actor.

## BACKGROUND

Since the onset of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent civil wars, the changes across the region have been dramatic. Syria's civil war is coming to a close, with the Iran-backed Bashar al-Assad regime

prevailing and solidifying its control, but the effects of the humanitarian crisis and refugee movement it has created will continue for a long time. The so-called Islamic State has lost its territorial control, but remains a troublesome force throughout the region, and has the potential to reemerge. The last decade and a half of sectarian violence in Iraq created deep divisions, but also unexpected cooperation within Iraq and with its neighbors. While Iraq appears close to finding a political balance among its factions, the ultimate degree of influence from outside powers is yet unknown. In Yemen, the conflict between the Saudi Arabian and Emirati forces against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels continues, with the former seizing key territory

“With both domestic and international pressure creating an imperative to act, the current Iranian regime may see in today's complex environment a historic opportunity to shape the Gulf's political and security environment to meet its own national goals through military means.”

while the latter displays concerning levels of new capabilities, such as longer-range and anti-ship missiles developed in Iran.

In November 2018, the United States reinstated sanctions on Iran that were lifted as part of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by Iran, as well as the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany (the P5+1 states). The decision to reimpose sanctions was the product of concerns about Iran's ongoing weapons programs and efforts to expand its influence throughout the Middle East. The decision has significantly impacted Iran's already-fragile economy, and it is unclear how the Iranian regime will react abroad to increased international pressure at home. Meanwhile, despite the Iranian government's violent suppression of the 2009 Green Movement protests, recent demonstrations throughout the country have raised questions about



The matrix game board used in the simulation. *Photo Credit: John Watts*

how the Iranian public may react to increased economic hardship.

With an increased US emphasis on great-power conflict in the 2017 National Security Strategy, the Iranian regime may see in this moment a last chance to act before conditions evolve beyond its control, while also perceiving the uncertainty in the shifting environment as an opportunity to disrupt and shape future dynamics in the Gulf—particularly with US attention focused toward threats in Asia.

## APPROACH

Within this context, the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and the Arabia Foundation partnered to explore security risks that may not seem immediate, but are nonetheless plau-

sible and significant enough to warrant serious consideration. This was achieved by hosting a matrix-style wargame designed to give the teams representing various countries' perspectives the freedom of creative, but plausible, action.<sup>1</sup> Every effort was taken to ground the discussion in realistic reflections of regional dynamics, while preserving the intention of the simulation—to challenge commonly held assumptions.

The event was held over one and a half days at the Atlantic Council headquarters in Washington, DC. Over that period, three separate “sessions” were played, each of which resulted in different outcomes, as detailed later in this report. The teams represented were: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, irregular Iranian aligned forces (e.g., Hezbollah, Shia militias, Houthis), Israel, Russia, and the United States. The game was

<sup>1</sup> Matrix gaming is a multi-sided, free-form gaming method in which game actions are resolved and the game narrative emerges through a structured process of discussion among the players themselves. Players representing opposing nations and factions are given creative freedom to take actions within a given scenario, and use logic-based arguments to improve their chances of success, while impeding their competitors. The outcomes of each action are adjudicated by the combination of independent and objective facilitators and random probability, as determined, in this case, through rolling dice. Matrix games emphasize creativity and original thought, and the focus on players' intentions makes these games highly suitable for analyzing political-military strategies.

conducted under the Chatham House Rule in order to facilitate frank and honest discussion during the event.<sup>2</sup>

While the game sought to explore possible *outcomes* through the dynamic decision-making among the teams, the real analytical depth was generated through the *process* of the matrix game. Because it limited the number of actions teams could take, teams were forced to prioritize their actions. Moreover, competing with the other teams through the use of logical arguments meant the insights into the experts' perception of the situation and overall intent were better articulated, while also providing opportunities for in-depth discussion about important questions of fact—such as what air-defense system various actors had available to them.

## SESSION 1

In the opening session, several thematic objectives emerged, including teams' emphasis on shaping international perceptions, fomenting domestic discontent to limit Iran's political mobility, and isolating traditional US allies to constrict unified, strong responses to military escalations in the region. Overall, the teams in this session appeared willing to go a long way to avoid direct military confrontation.

The Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (KSA & UAE) coalition team sought to counter the negative perception of its involvement in Yemen, and to appeal to foreign actors by internationalizing the humanitarian crisis. The KSA & UAE coalition also sought to garner military support for cooperation in a renewed siege on Hodeidah through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The international community acknowledged the importance of ending the blockade on Hodeidah, Yemen but refrained from deeper military involvement in Yemen. The United States team set a hard limit of providing supplies and air support, especially amid congressional opposition to prolonged US military involvement, and the Russia team made clear that it would veto any UNSC resolution allowing military support from member states.

The Russia team wanted to cement Russia's role as an arbiter of conflict in the region by reinforcing its relationship with the Iranians, while establishing its presence as a long-term reality in Middle Eastern politics. Appealing to various actors in the theater, the Russia team publicly announced its intent to bolster relations with Israel, reassured Iran of its intent to ignore US economic sanctions it deems illegal post-JCPOA, proposed an international conflict-resolution settlement for the crisis in Yemen, imported aid and materials to Yemen using international waters, and offered to facilitate a ceasefire so a power-sharing governance agreement could be reached among Yemeni actors. Despite the efforts, most actors, other than Iran and proxy forces, were unwilling to concede heightened Russian presence in the region.

The Irregular Forces team sought to counter US influence in Iraq by escalating violence to confront the US presence with mobilized forces in theater, hoping to draw US forces away from their Gulf partners in Yemen.<sup>3</sup> They also targeted KSA & UAE military capabilities in and beyond Yemen—for example, by targeting UAE military infrastructure in North Africa. The objective was to create a perception of military vulnerability, and to trigger a heavy-handed Saudi government response against Shia minorities in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which would then reinforce Iranian narratives of Shia victimhood internationally. The Irregular Forces also allowed Iran the advantage of undertaking several coordinated, but independent, actions simultaneously.

The KSA & UAE coalition, Israel, and United States teams sought to constrain Iran's maneuverability by drawing red lines for military intervention in Syria and Yemen, while simultaneously emphasizing Iran's destabilizing activities in theater, to fan domestic discontent and incentivize Iran to curb its involvement elsewhere in the region. To escape international condemnation, KSA & UAE, Israel, and the United States preferred covert and ambiguous actions as well as disinformation campaigns, rather than an overt military reaction to Iran. Israel maintained its position on Iranian encroachment in Syria as the red line to spur disproportionate,

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2 A range of perspectives was represented, including from the United States and regional nations. The participants were selected because they have on-the-ground understanding of the dynamics, challenges, and implications of the events under discussion, and included current and former government officials, academics, researchers, and military planners.

3 This team represented any irregular forces that were aligned with Iran and could plausibly take action within the context of the game. This was predominately meant to reflect Hezbollah, Shia militias, and Houthi forces in Yemen, but the team was allowed other forces if they could be reasonably argued. This team was intended to reflect Iran's ability to mobilize its proxies to achieve its goals throughout the region.

reciprocal action, with air power likely to overwhelm Iranian military capabilities. The United States team declared that further use of surface-to-surface anti-ship missiles by Iran or its proxies against US targets would be a red line. It swore, if necessary, to use in-theater assets (likely Tomahawk cruise missiles) in proportional, reciprocal, nighttime retaliation attacks against possible Burkan-2 launch sites in Yemen, as was done in previous incidents. The Iran team determined that domestic discontent in Iran would need to surpass 2009 Green-Movement-protest levels to elicit any reaction from Iran.

Coalition efforts to internationalize the conflict in Yemen worked to Iran's benefit, highlighting that the United States had few desirable options for actions it was willing to take. Iran diminished the strength of a US-KSA & UAE alliance by capitalizing on US hesitancy to commit to complete involvement in the war in Yemen, beyond aerial refueling and material supply. The United States team decided that investing more military infrastructure and personnel in Yemen would leave Iran and its proxies space to solidify control over Iraq, which is more strategically significant to both Iran and the United States in the long term.

Internationalizing the war in Yemen also essentially sidelined Israel, because the conflict was perceived to have no strategic value to Israel. Moving the political balance to focus heavily on Yemen meant Israel was left out of the conversation, degrading the strength of any multilateral reaction.

## SESSION 2

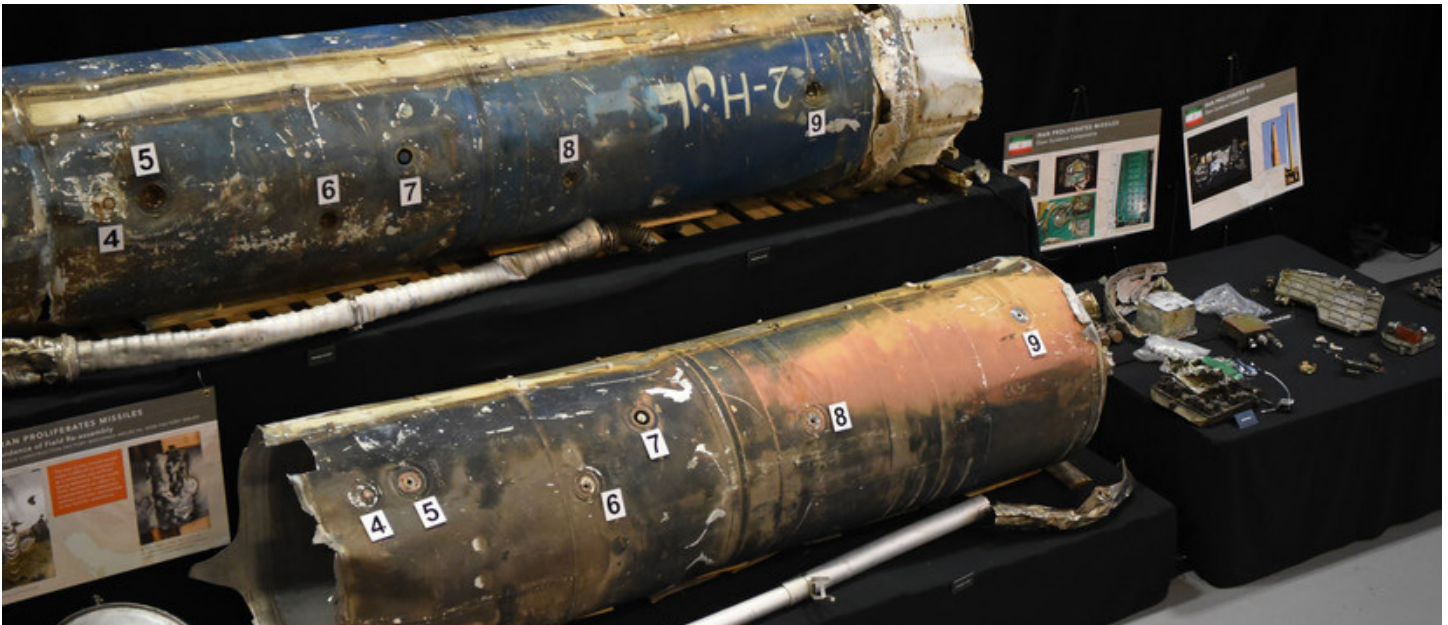
Several actors escalated their responses in the second session, including: in the context of a KSA-Iran proxy war; efforts by Iran and proxies to create rifts in regional alliances; ongoing deterrence efforts by the Israel-US-KSA & UAE coalition against Iran; and Russian efforts to be perceived as the leader of stabilization in Syria.

The Iran team, seeking to capitalize on regional rifts, sought to separate Iran's rivals from one another, and used short-term immediate actions to distract from its long-term strategy. To achieve this, Iran worked in cooperation with the Irregular Forces team, using Hezbollah and Houthis as proxies. The Iran team wanted to isolate Saudi Arabia by provoking Riyadh to move first and aggressively, while maintaining a foothold in Syria to threaten Israel and restrain the United

States. The Iran team had a number of tools at its disposal, including: publicly testing conventional weaponry; sending reinforcements to Syria; threatening to withdraw from the JCPOA; striking at Israel, Saudi Arabia, and US forces in Iraq through Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi Shia militias, respectively; and, international backlash notwithstanding, restarting its nuclear-weapons development activities, such as re-installing centrifuges designed for a nuclear submarine.

While each proxy's interests are different and ideologically distinct, the Irregular Forces team united under the sponsorship of Iran to weaken the Israel-US-KSA & UAE alliance, and thereby strengthen their own positions in their respective conflict areas. For example, Lebanese Hezbollah worked with Iraqi militia groups with footholds near formerly ISIS-held areas of the Iraqi border to facilitate a Syria-Iraq border checkpoint, which could ease ground transportation of military capabilities and help stabilize an Iranian arc of influence stretching to Syria and Lebanon. Hezbollah continued attacking Israeli targets, while the Houthis targeted KSA-coalition capabilities in Yemen and Riyadh, and Iraqi militias took more aggressive anti-US actions. The collective impact increased when these attacks were synchronized. The KSA & UAE team was particularly threatened, and opted to take military action to counter militant incursions, at home and in Yemen.

The KSA & UAE team continued its regional deterrence campaign against Iran, while also building its civilian nuclear capabilities per Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals. The coalition tried to further bolster its alliances and deterrence capabilities by calling for a joint military exercise—however, an exercise with a fractured Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) proved unattractive to allies, and the KSA coalition received no additional support from the United States. Amidst Saudi perception of a growing Iranian threat (via Iran's proxies), the KSA & UAE team tried to escalate its assault of Hodeidah, with the objective of reducing the Houthis' foothold in Yemen. However, the United States declined to support such an operation, and the KSA & UAE team realized it would face international backlash if it carried out the assault. Further, it became clear that coalition partners, including the Saudi military, were unprepared for a large-scale urban warfare invasion, and the Hodeidah attack did not proceed. As an alternative, Saudi Arabia sought to utilize its ties to Pakistan to gain access to Pakistani nuclear arms, as a deterrent to Iran's nuclear program. The success of



Remains of Iranian Qjam ballistic missiles and guidance components are part of a display at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, DC. The Defense Department established the Iranian Materiel Display in December 2017 to present evidence that Iran is arming dangerous groups with advanced weapons. *Photo Credit: DOD photo by Lisa Ferdinando.*

this operation depended on how much, if any, of its small nuclear-deterrence package Pakistan was willing to offer.

Like the KSA & UAE coalition, Israel also sought to deter Iran, but in Syria. The Israel team continued its campaign against direct Iranian presence—through targeted airstrikes and covert operations aimed at destabilizing Iran domestically and limiting the operational capabilities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force in Syria. Israel sought to deconflict with the Russians to avoid another crisis like the IL-20 incident of September 2018, but continued conducting air strikes, emphasizing that its intended targets were Iranian.<sup>4</sup> The Israel team's covert disinformation campaign, aimed at brewing discontent in Iran, was successful, but did not lead to 2009 levels of protest, which were deemed necessary to elicit a reaction from the Iranian regime. Notably, the Israel team did not support KSA & UAE efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Israel stated that while KSA's efforts to deter Iran in the Gulf are to Israel's benefit, Israel could not support nuclear weapons falling into the hands of a state that had the possibility of becoming unstable.

The Russia team sought to implant itself in the region through stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Syria, hoping to be portrayed as a long-term regional partner. However, its efforts to sponsor a peace summit on reconstruction in Syria and its declarations of intent to lead stabilization were supported only by Iran, and were met with skepticism from the United States and KSA & UAE teams. Russia signaled its belief that the United States was not a partner for peace in Syria, which gained support from Iran, but not a broader international audience. Finally, deciding to take matters into its own hands, the Russian team unilaterally developed a plan to initiate long-term strategic investment in Syria—including infrastructure investment in the Tartus port to extend long-term seaport capabilities, and deployment of more S-300 systems and early warning and control radars to Syria.

The United States faced the complex task of seeking to deter Iran from challenging regional allies, while also balancing allied support and its own presence in Syria and Iraq. The United States team first expanded its presence in northeastern Syria through support from Jordan and other Arab allies—not just to counter threats from ISIS, but also to build on its ability to deter

4 "Russia Blames Israel After Military Plane Shot Down off Syria," BBC, September 18, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45556290>.

actions in Syria and Iraq through coercive diplomatic effort. However, this action later became overshadowed by the US response to a more emboldened Iran and Saudi Arabia. To counter Iran and its proxies, the United States covertly sabotaged Iranian missile factories and interfered with weapons transfers to Houthis and other proxies. Facing threats from Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the United States launched a public campaign to sanction Iraqi military leaders and launch cyberattacks against PMF groups. Additionally, in response to nuclear escalation from Iran, the United States transitioned into a pre-JCPOA policy posture that countered a nuclear Iran, and launched a covert disinformation campaign to instigate further Iranian domestic pressure. As the United States tried to maintain a coherent regional strategy, it was challenged by KSA's desire to escalate actions in Yemen, and opted not to support a KSA & UAE campaign in Hodeidah. The United States deemed the latter to be too resource-intensive at a time when the majority of its regional resources were focused on supporting Israel in countering Iran in Syria.

### SESSION 3

As the game paused at midday on the second day, the adjudication team assessed the progress of the game to that point, and decided to redirect analytical focus for the third session. One option was to continue play from the second session, to explore how much further the escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia would go. However, the adjudication team collectively decided that such an approach would have diminishing returns, and that it would be more beneficial to use the third session to explore alternative scenarios. The adjudication team assessed that, because the first two sessions produced such different results, it would be analytically richer to explore how each nation might respond to a scenario in which conflict had already begun.

To this end, the adjudication team adopted a version of a scenario that Arabia Foundation founder Ali Shihabi developed in his 2012 book *Arabian War Games: Cataclysmic Wars Redraw the Map of the Middle East*. In this scenario, Iran undertakes an irregular military incursion into Saudi Arabia from Iraq, under the guise of a popular movement of Shia forces, launching a false-flag operation to blow up a Shia mosque in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Hezbollah forces race across the desert from the border with Iraq to the Ghawar oil

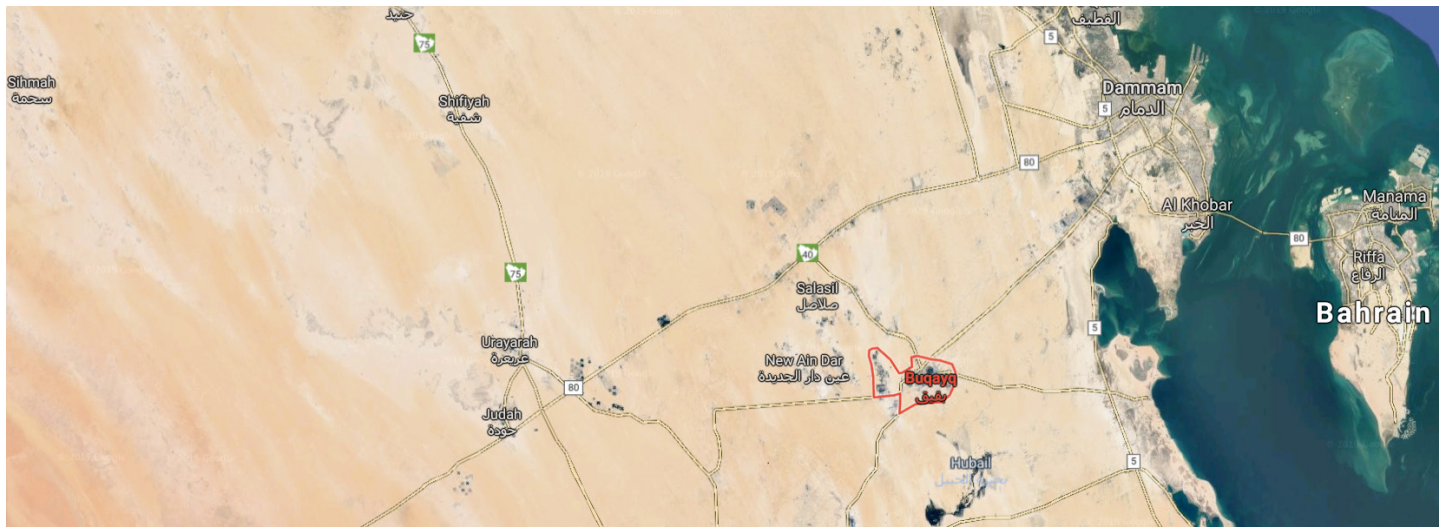
field in the eastern bloc, to take control of key areas where they can plant explosives and threaten to detonate the oil field. The Iraqi prime minister calls the US president in outrage at the occupation of land in eastern Saudi Arabia and promises to help liberate it. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif says the Iranian government publicly opposes the act, even as the Quds Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, covertly runs the operation from Basra. Militia forces stationed in key locations across oil fields that account for 45 percent of Saudi oil create risks to the world economy, and force Saudi leaders to debate whether they should militarily strike the militia forces there if it means destroying the infrastructure that controls almost half of Saudi oil resources.

The Iran team deemed it in its interest to stall the diplomatic decision-making process as much as possible, to lure the KSA & UAE coalition into reacting before the United States provided military or logistical support. The team assessed that the longer the Iranians and their allies forced the United States to wait, the more likely the Saudis would be to react quickly, and without the support needed for a successful operation.

The Iran team's objective was primarily accomplished with actions from the Irregular Forces team. The Irregular Forces reclaimed the Shia enclaves in the southern Jizan and 'Asir regions of Saudi Arabia, with Houthi militia and Hezbollah Unit 3800 deployed to the Eastern Province. By spreading thin the Saudi resources for an overt military response, Iran anticipated that Saudi Arabia would need US support to successfully reclaim land. Participants determined that it would likely be within the capabilities of the Irregular Forces to seize these provinces, but not to hold them. Arming local Shia communities in the Eastern Province, as support for the Irregular Forces, would have taken more time than the game allowed.

The United States team responded to the Iranian use of force by mobilizing US forces in Bahrain and Qatar, using the potential risk of high oil prices to engage China, and thereby internationalizing the situation against Iran. It determined that the threat to the global economic order was more pressing in the long run than the potential risk of proxy forces acting against US infrastructure elsewhere in the region. The United States team was willing to use limited force to defend US forces in Iraq or Syria, but required UNSC support for a conventional military response. The United States





A map locating Abqaiq, a Saudi Aramco oil processing facility in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. *Photo Credit: Google Maps, 2019*

stated its intent to embed special-operations forces into Saudi Arabia in preparation for a response, while weighing public opinion at home.

The United States and KSA & UAE coalition teams imposed a naval blockade on Iran's Bandar Abbas port to apply economic pressure, with the aim of getting Iran to scale back its naval presence in the Red Sea.

The Israel team only offered to continue intelligence sharing with the Saudis on Iranian maneuvers and, in the meantime, conducted air strikes on Iranian facilities in Syria to counter the Iranian presence there. Israel gained diplomatically from the situation, because it took international attention away from Israeli actions elsewhere in the region.

Russia positioned itself as a strategic partner to Iran, but not an unconditional one. The Russia team opposed any Iranian aggression that stressed Russian assets in the region. Ultimately, Russia was willing to condemn Iranian actions, but was more careful in its attitude toward Israel, KSA, and the UAE. The latter were deemed more vital to Russia's end goals in the Middle East, and not as certain of partners as Iran. The Russia team determined that Russia would benefit from staying on the sidelines for a potential conflict in the Eastern Province, because it would ultimately benefit from high oil prices in Saudi Arabia. However, overall Russian behavior in the Middle East shows that Russia is not there just for the oil. There is a reputational power dynamic at play, and Russia would like to

preserve its working relationship with Saudi Arabia so it can continue leveraging influence in the region.

The KSA & UAE team conveyed confidence in the ability of Saudi security forces to respond quickly to the Shia incursion. Participants assessed more broadly that this confidence may have reflected players' opinions, rather than real capabilities or likely Saudi behavior. However, others assessed that it could also reflect recent maturation of the security forces. A more rigorous evaluation of the most likely behavior is worth undertaking.

While the teams explored the reactions of each nation to the scenario, a small planning team was convened to concurrently explore the military feasibility of such a scenario. This "pre-mortem" sought to understand the necessary sequence of events for this low-probability/high-consequence scenario to occur. Through this analysis, the team of military planners identified Abqaiq oil field as the primary target for the scenario, and focused on the operational preparation of the environment through sleeper cells and staging of equipment. The planners assumed that once the target was threatened, Saudi Arabia's response would be swift. Therefore, they decided to slowly and covertly move forces into place. A fast assault across the desert in light four-wheel-drive vehicles was deemed too risky. As an aside, a participant who was not on the planning team later stated that he assessed a flood of small assault boats attacking across the Gulf would be a better attack vector than trucks driving across the desert.

To buy time during an attack, some cells in heavily populated Shia areas would undertake a feint to distract Saudi security forces. The planning team assessed that the objective would not necessarily be holding and securing the oil fields; rather, it would be credibly threatening them. The planning team determined that at least five hundred fighters would be required to do this, and conventional military capabilities would be needed early in the offensive action to generate sufficient credible mass. Covert activities—such as having operatives disguised in Saudi security uniforms and mobilizing civilian protests to mask activity—were deemed important for success. The planning team assessed that there would be opportunities to exploit seams in the Saudi security forces, particularly between reaction teams and the national guard. They assumed Saudi, US, and possibly Jordanian special forces would respond within a ninety-six-hour window, just as logistics issues were becoming increasingly challenging. Their ability to choose the point of contact was the one advantage the attackers would have.

The session concluded that there would be limited utility of such an attack, and that it would be difficult to achieve. Other than stoking immediate fear, the impact on the oil market of a limited attack on select oil fields was unlikely to last long. It was assessed that it would take approximately thirty days of disruption for such an attack to affect oil markets, but the attackers would be unlikely to sustain a credible threat to these oil fields for more than a few days. Moreover, while seizure of these oil fields would be significant for the Saudi economy, the disruption to global oil output would be relatively small, and easily compensated for by increased production by other suppliers, such as Russia. While such an event would no doubt draw significant international attention—and the 2008 Mumbai attacks demonstrated the damage that a small group can cause under certain conditions—the tangible global implications for such a limited attack would be relatively small.

## CONCLUSION

This game sought to challenge some commonly held assumptions, both in Washington and the Gulf region, and to explore a range of “what if” contingencies. Overall, the outcomes of three sessions broadly confirmed that a direct conflict between Iran and its neighbors is unlikely to occur, would be difficult for Iran to undertake, and would achieve less than might

be feared by the United States and its allies. But, the game also demonstrated a range of possible outcomes for the region. For example, one could conceivably see a nuclear arms race emerge, which would be a far more dangerous situation than irregular skirmishes at the border. The game reinforced that ongoing conflicts throughout the region will be difficult for any one side to resolve, and will likely continue to be a focus of competition for influence. It also exposed limitations and fault lines that should be seriously considered prior to the eruption of any real-life crisis.

It must again be noted, however, that this game was a single event bounded by several factors, including the biases and perspectives of those who participated, and the restrictions imposed by the game play. While the game play was rich and demonstrated the deep expertise of those involved, it represents a small data set of potential outcomes, and reality can often be more unpredictable than anyone imagines. As such, the outcomes of this activity should be taken as interesting insights and points of consideration, not as rigorous predictions of future outcomes. As ever, more analysis and further iterations of the game—with the same or different actors and scenarios—increase the understanding of the risks, opportunities, and potential outcomes.

**John T. Watts** is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

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