

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Games Kids Play

by Jon B. Alterman

As the United States celebrates its 234th birthday, we should consider an important question: What if the United States were acting like a two-year-old?

A two-year-old's principal characteristic is that they not only assume that the world revolves around them, but also that everyone's actions are a response to their own actions and desires. During a recent war game in the Washington suburbs in which I participated, the two-year-old hypothesis reared its head.

Militaries have used simulated battles for more than a century to test the outcomes of different strategies. In recent decades, the more civilian-oriented "policy simulation exercise" has come to play an important role in training U.S. government officials and enriching analysis, and there are gaming centers inside and outside of the government.

The sponsors of this game asked that the details remain private, but it is not the details that are most interesting to me. In most games in which I have participated, I have played on a team that seeks to simulate the decisions of a foreign government. Drawing from decades of conversations with academics and officials throughout the Middle East, I played the role of an Egyptian or an Iranian, a Syrian or a Kuwaiti. This time, I was asked to play on a team of American officials.

Not surprisingly, the scenario began with a problem for U.S. policy in the Middle East. The U.S. team swiftly leapt into a series of actions intended to direct the actions of its allies and blunt the efforts of its foes. In the second move, things got worse, and the U.S. side tried even harder to marshal its forces, artfully deploying its military and diplomatic assets. By the third move, the situation continued to worsen in many respects, but the U.S. team saw light at the end of the tunnel. We had a plan, and our allies were looking to us for leadership. Equally importantly, they were all acting precisely as we had hoped, abandoning the troublesome sorts of freelancing that had marked their earlier moves. We thought we had played the game well.

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Bad Blood

"To love in sickness and in health" has different meaning in the Gulf. The widespread practice of marrying close relatives—known as "consanguineous marriage"—has led to high rates of birth defects and genetic disorders in the Gulf region. In response, many governments now mandate premarital medical screening.

Consanguinity rates are high throughout the Middle East, but they are especially high in the Gulf, with over 50 percent of Emiratis, Qataris, and Kuwaitis marrying close relatives. The results have been alarming: the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries now all rank among the 20 countries with the greatest prevalence of birth defects (and neighboring Iraq and Yemen help round out the list). Inherited blood disorders such as sickle cell disease and thalassemia, another cause of severe anemia, are also common in the region.

In response, government officials in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates have made blood tests for genetic and sexually transmitted diseases compulsory before marriage. In Kuwait, for example, couples face up to one year in jail or a \$3,485 fine for not obtaining a premarital medical clearance.

Health officials have lauded these measures, with Bahraini officials crediting premarital tests for a 70 percent drop in sickle cell cases over the last 25 years. Still, loopholes threaten to undermine the tests' effectiveness: they are not required for temporary marriages, which remain common in the region's Shi'a communities. ■DM

Gulf Roundtable: Military Balance in the Gulf

The CSIS Middle East Program held a roundtable discussion with Dr. Anthony Cordesman on June 24, 2010 to discuss the conventional military balance in the Gulf. Cordesman contended that in a conventional war against Iran, the GCC countries would almost certainly win. They outspend the Islamic Republic on defense by a factor of ten and enjoy U.S. military support and backing. The real threat to Gulf security and, by extension, the United States' unfettered access to oil, lies in Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities. Cordesman offered his assessment of what these capabilities are and how the United States and GCC countries should counter them. To read more about the event, click [HERE](#). ■

When we all gathered after the final move, however, it was clear how much we had misjudged the situation. Opponents talked about how easily U.S. moves were blunted or ignored. Allies were beside themselves that the United States had missed numerous opportunities to consult with them and raised tensions needlessly. But most importantly, they charged that the U.S. team had fundamentally misjudged the motivations of their actions. The U.S. team had congratulated itself on its ability to integrate all of the instruments of national power—in contrast to allies that could either convene summits or issue statements or host American military forces, but rarely more than one of those and almost certainly not in a sustained, purposive and coordinated way. Yet allies explained that perceptions of their own national interests drove their decisions, and that U.S. actions rarely shaped those decisions. It is true, the U.S. team had moved military aircraft and issued statements to and fro, but the other players did not find it very impressive. They had their own calculus. In their telling, it was as if the U.S. team was trying to take credit for the sun rising in the East. If anything, they said, the U.S. team's actions had made it harder for them to comply with U.S. wishes.

Wargames are not a guide to the future, but they often provide interesting clues. In this case, the urgency that the U.S. team felt to act in a wide range of areas often precluded a full U.S. consideration of others' motivations. Equally importantly, for the U.S. team, the familiarity (and complexity) of its tools, its superior intelligence, and confidence in the utility of its power led the U.S. actors to stress unilateral actions over joint actions, and reject initiatives that did not have the United States in the lead. Over time, the U.S. team's implicit premise that its actions were consequential became self-reinforcing, to the detriment of the team's ability to shape the actions of the game's other players.

Some in the game felt that the presence of a former senior Bush administration official on the U.S. team created an impulse for a muscular U.S. policy that better reflected the motivations of the last White House rather than the current one. It did not seem that way on the inside. Rather, time pressure, an impulse to create comprehensive briefing slides, a perceived need to have an initiative to deal with every aspect of a crisis, and the importance of drawing on a disparate foreign policy apparatus all combined to ensure that our internal processes chewed up all of our bandwidth. It became very hard to integrate efforts with our allies.

Truth be told, it is not clear that having more allied support would have made for a better outcome. The evolving crisis we were all trying to solve was never "one conference away" from resolution. Yet, the same result could likely have been obtained at lower cost to the United States, and greater comity among allies in a crisis would make it easier to coordinate actions on a wide range of non-crisis issues moving forward.

It is true that the world looks to the United States for leadership. This is especially true in areas such as the Middle East, where smaller countries seek protection from larger powers, and where political leaders seek whatever help they can find to quell the forces of instability. Seen this way, the United States is an instrument of stability rather than an enduring partner for progress.

Many governments overdraw the connections between their actions and the desirable actions of others, and U.S. power makes this mistake all the more common here. At least sometimes governments are responding to the United States, but often times they are not. Better understanding the relationship between U.S. intentions and the actions of others would give comfort to U.S. allies and trouble U.S. enemies. That would not be a bad outcome at all. ■ 7/6/2010

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman recorded a CSIS podcast on the implications of Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the White House. Click [HERE](#) to listen.

Jon Alterman was quoted by *The Los Angeles Times* in "Obama and Netanyahu promise to pursue Mid-east talks"

Jon Alterman was interviewed by CNN on comments made by NASA's administrator on Muslim outreach.

Jon Alterman was quoted by *Reuters* in "Saudi king seeks Obama action on Mideast peace"

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