Gray Zone Crises in MENA and Eastern Europe

OVERVIEW

The United States is regularly challenged by the actions of state and non-state actors in the nebulous, confusing, and ambiguous environment known as the Gray Zone.[1] Planners, decision makers, and operators within the national security enterprise need to understand what tools are available for their use in the Gray Zone and how to best develop, employ, and coordinate those tools. The ICONS team at START recently designed and executed two simulations focusing on Eastern Europe and the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) as part of a larger study to better understand Gray Zone conflict dynamics and the tools available to address these complex crises.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

ICONS was asked to design and execute simulations exploring response options to potential Gray Zone conflicts in the Middle East/North Africa region (MENA) and Eastern Europe. This work was part of a collaborative effort between the Strategic Multilayer Assessment Branch (SMA) at the Joint Staff J39, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The primary objective of the **MENA exercise** was to explore the capabilities needed for maneuver against destabilizing actors in the region in the Gray Zone and to identify how different elements of U.S. power should be utilized and coordinated to respond to various types of threats across the globe. The first two simulations examined competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Gray Zone, both direct and through proxies. The third examined the threat to the homeland of a collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

- In the first phase, "Gray Diplomacy," Iranian and Saudi elements competed to gain influence at the expense of the other in the diplomatic and economic arenas and in the court of public opinion.
- In the second phase, "Proxy Wars," Saudi and Iranian conflict played out in Yemen and Bahrain with both parties' adventurism and use of proxies stretching the limits of Gray Zone activities.
- In the third phase, "Foreign Fighters," ISIS collapsed in Syria and Iraq, bringing the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida to America.

The **Eastern Europe simulation** explored a range of options for international cooperation to effectively counter the cumulative effects of continuous low-level provocative Russian campaigns targeting Eastern European NATO member states. The scenario explored three lower-intensity crises unfolding in Latvia and Lithuania, accompanied by controversial narratives in the pro-Russian media, which put the allied political will to the test. It captured Gray Zone conflict dynamics involving both state (Russian Federation) and non-state (pro-Russian group in Latvia) actors. The exercise started with a simulated cyber-attack on the Latvian energy grid, followed by a drone attack against a Russian school in Latvia, and a mid-air collision of Russian and NATO jets.

METHOD

MENA

The exercise was conducted online over the ICONSnet distributed Internet-based platform and unfolded over three days. Each simulation ran for four hours. Participants in the simulations were drawn from various U.S. government agencies and from universities, research centers, think tanks, foreign governments and militaries. Within each of the three simulations participants were given start states and asked to react to events introduced into the scenario. The start state placed participants in mid-2017, about six months into a new U.S. administration. The play began with a start state and continued with event injects that presented either a phenomenon or an event and then tracked the aftermath or follow-on actions taken by the actors or other state or non-state actors, including the U.S. government. The first two simulations involved a Blue Team[2] reacting to a series of

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[1]The Gray Zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use single or multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.

[2] In this simulation, Blue Team included government and non-government actors that fused their knowledge to identify and develop potential courses of action in response to the scenario and additional injects.

events and phenomena driven by a Control Team. In the third simulation, four Blue sub-teams (federal law enforcement, public affairs, intelligence, and liaison) were confronted with events and phenomena to which they had to react and keep other groups informed of. In all three simulations, the Control Team had access to an analytic support team (identified here as Red).

EASTERN EUROPE

The exercise was conducted online over the ICONSnet distributed Internet-based platform and unfolded in two rounds, three hours each, over the course of two days. The simulation timeline encompassed a period of several months. The pace and time-space framework were geared towards exploring international cooperation and interagency preparedness to effectively counter the scattered elements of a long-term Russian campaign, identifying potential turning points worthy of responses while maintaining macro-scale awareness. The simulation involved 29 players and over 30 observers. The players divided into 10 teams representing the United States, NATO, European Union, European states, and the pro-Russian non-state actor group. Participants were high-level experts from the United States and Europe, with military, government, and academic background. To help advance the narrative, the Control Team pushed event injects, stipulating insights from the intelligence community and media reporting of events. Anticipated public mood shifts in reaction to unfolding events, and its implications for government control and overall stability were tested using the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's (TRADOC's) Athena behavioral modeling system.

FINDINGS

MENA

Participants in the Iran-Saudi Arabia simulations stated in after-action reviews their belief that the United States must recruit, train, and deploy the right people with the right skills, including a mix of government and non-government thinkers. There was also a note that the U.S. government lacked a cabinet-level information agency dedicated to developing and disseminating the U.S. narrative and to countering enemy narratives. In their after-action reviews, participants in the foreign fighter scenario focused on the difficulties of developing and maintaining a common operating picture across federal, state, and local entities; the importance of understanding the roles, capabilities, and authorities of each entity; the importance of accurate and timely intelligence; and how to share information to best effect across agencies where security clearance levels vary.

1. Influencing and shaping Gray Zone activities by states and non-state actors' presents the United States with particularly difficult challenges, quite different in scope and impact from conventional warfighting. It may not be possible to influence or shape Gray Zone activities by other states or non-state actors, especially when those actions are not directed toward the United States.
2. Violent extremist organizations may act in the Gray Zone in an attempt to escalate conflict out of the Gray Zone. State actors need to have appropriate strategies developed and responses queued for rapid delivery.
3. The research team recommends a *whole-of-government-plus* structure where government reaches out to non-government regional and technical specialists, subject matter experts, and other "different thinkers" to formulate courses of action.
4. The United States is not the sole major power assessing threats and opportunities in Gray Zone conflicts and competitions. It is possible that actions by other major powers could draw the United States further into conflicts or drive parties to violence.
5. Controllers noted a clear bias among the U.S. government participants toward Saudi Arabia and against Iran, and a willingness to move directly to kinetic or other military action by some of the military players. Such overt biases and tendencies may adversely affect the ability of the United States to take advantage of opportunities for influence in Gray Zone conflicts.

EASTERN EUROPE

In the Eastern European simulation, the European Union became the central mediating and coordinating body. While NATO was able to play a constructive supporting and assuring role, many players felt that new institutional practices and mechanisms should be considered to empower NATO to address emerging Gray Zone crises. Throughout the exercise Latvia consistently downplayed the crises as low-level domestic disturbances that could be handled internally. The simulation thus underscored the importance of using regular communication and cooperation channels among NATO member states to construct a baseline for what constitutes a normal flow of events in Eastern Europe, and to make parties mutually more attuned to a crisis that could get out of hand. In a Gray Zone crisis, it will be important for NATO member states to find ways to engage the media more effectively, shifting the narratives and public attention to counter Russian propaganda.

1. NATO and its Western members showed keen perception of the Russian Gray Zone pressure tactics and indicated political will to respond. However, without Article 4 being invoked, NATO's role in the Gray Zone crises was mostly limited to political support to member states and cooperation with the EU.

2. The EU successfully used its reputation as genuine broker and its competencies in the realm of development work to oversee a joint civilian counter-terrorism task force and to act as the key facilitator in the Gray Zone crises. The broad spectrum of EU tools and forums could be successfully leveraged in managing future Gray Zone crises.
3. Eastern European countries show a consistent propensity to downplay any ongoing crisis and avoid reaching out to Western partners for assistance – holding out until a "doomsday scenario" can no longer be avoided. While such prudence in spending political capital is laudable, this may subsequently limit allied abilities to de-escalate the conflict early and/or widen its scope (to multilateral) in a negotiation.
4. Closer regular cooperation among NATO member states would help establish a baseline of political, economic, and other developments with potential security implications, making deviations mutually more obvious. Cooperation in resolving low-level crises would help build alliance cohesion and demonstrate united resolve.
5. Engaging with Russia on a multilateral basis was established as an important escalation management tool, shifting the power balance in favor of NATO member states that, on a bilateral basis, found it difficult to stand up to Russian provocations. Widening the institutional engagement and geographic pertinence of issues at hand strengthened the message of united commitment.
6. Effectively countering pro-Russian media narratives remained a serious challenge, and many NATO members were reluctant to engage in the battle of narratives, particularly on social media. Member states' behavior was driven by conviction that propaganda is obvious, a battle of narratives is unwinnable, and that countering Russian actions will suffice. NATO member states should continue to look for ways to engage the media and shift the public attention – including inviting expert commentary to highlight alternative narratives. Publicly acknowledging and challenging disruptive Russian activities could become another tool in constructing the counter-narratives.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Researchers can use the results from the simulation to explore the capabilities needed for maneuver against destabilizing actors in the Gray Zone and to identify how different elements of U.S. power should be utilized and coordinated to respond to trans-regional threats with multi-domain responses.

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