March 2016

Unpacking the Regional Conflict System surrounding Iraq and Syria

Part II: Method for Assessing the Dynamics of the Conflict System, or, There are no sides -- only interests

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NB: *This is Part II of a larger study exploring the dynamics of the central Middle East conflict system. Part I described the system and why it is critical to assess US security interests and activities holistically rather than just in terms of the conflicts (e.g., defeat of ISIL) in which the US is most interested. Part II described the analytic approach used to assess regional dynamics and regional futures based on the alignments and conflicts among three critical drivers: actor interests, resources and resolves. Part III illustrates the analytic process applied to 20-plus actors for five conflicts. It uses the Syrian Civil War as a use case.*

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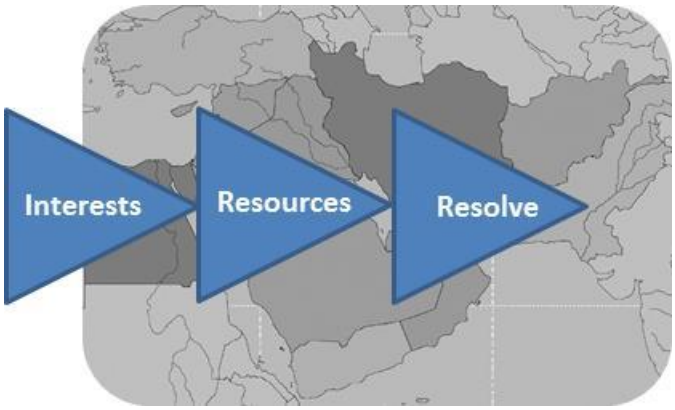
In this region in particular, the absence of warfare does not translate either to stability or to peace. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Dempsey suggested in testimony to Congress[1], the key question is not how to manage or avoid warfare in the Middle East, but which are the general conditions for peace and stability and what might the US and international community do – or avoid doing – in order to promote those.

What are the dynamics embedded in the region's current conflicts that will drive it toward one future or another? The outcomes of conflicts are not the result of a single actor's actions or desires, but are a product of the interactions of opponents; the forces that determine one or another regional future reflect the confluences of actors' interests, capabilities and resolve. Thus, one way to assess the dynamics that propel the system is to consider three factors that condition the behaviors of state, sub-state and non-state actors:



Interests -- the various security, political, social, economic, and influence interests that an actor perceives to be at stake;

Capability -- the ability to directly influence or cause an outcome to occur;[2] and

Resolve -- the intent or willingness to do so.[3]

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[1] Dempsey, Martin, Testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, 17 June 2015; http://www.c-span.org/video/?326584-1/defense-secretary-carter-general-dempsey-testimony-us-middle-east-policy

[2] There are many types of resources that an actor might use to achieve its ends in a conflict. These include: material resources and coercive capabilities (e.g., money, weapons); non-physical means of influence or coercion (such as salient narratives and persuasive messages); a reputation for horrific violence; possession of territory; and alliances including external funding sources and the allegiance of local elites. Importantly not all influence capabilities are equally relevant to all conflicts or objectives. For example, the United States is certainly the world's greatest military power, but may not have the non-physical influence capabilities needed to achieve its desired ends. Similarly, ISIL may have significant ability to control populations through the threat of horrific violence, but lack the organizational capability needed to occupy and control large population areas.

[3] It has long been recognized in international relations literature that the resolve, or willingness of a government or organization's leadership to apply all of its resources, or to "fight to the bitter end" for an objective or principle is a

The alignment of interests between actors will determine the set of potential outcomes for any particular regional or sub-regional event. However, common interests or alignments between actors may vary across events or conflicts; we cannot assume that a preference for the same outcome in one event will result in shared interests among the same actors in other events. While the alignment of actor *interests* determines possible outcomes, the distribution of actor resources and resolve across those outcomes governs the likelihood that an outcome will emerge. In other words, the dynamics that determine one or another future reflect the confluences of actors' interests, resources and resolve.

How stable that outcome is likely to be, however, will be determined not so much by the resources of those who support it, but the resources of those who oppose it. By considering the actors whose interests are blocked or destroyed by a particular outcome, we can also gain insight into the potential durability of a particular outcome. In short, the **outcome** of a conflict is a function of the interests and preferences of the actors with the greatest resources and resolve relative to that conflict. The **durability** of that outcome on the other hand, is determined by the resources and resolve of those whose interests remain unfulfilled by the outcome. In shorthand the analytic model is this: *Interest* + *Resolve* + *Capability* = *Expectations for the Region*.

ACTORS INCLUDED

Hezbollah
Iran
ISIL
Govt of Iraq (Abadi)
Israel
Jordan
Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP)
Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG)
Iranian Kurds (PDKI, PAKJ)
Lebanon
Qatar
Russia
Saudi Arabia
Shi'a Militia (Iraqi)
Sunni Tribal Elites
Free Syrian Army
Revolutionary Command Council
Non-ISIL /Al Nusrah Front
Syria (Assad and Loyalists)
Turkey

Method: Comparative Interests Analysis

This study focuses on analysis of the of the interplay of actor interests as a driver of the Central Middle East conflict system described in Part I. It is based on a method applied by Maoz and Astorino (1992), and Astorino-Courtois (1998) Astorino-Courtois and Trusty (2000), and Allison Astorino-Courtois et al (2009) to understand the bases of choice behaviors in interstate conflict. Rather than focusing in on specific and discrete choice problems we instead use the method to compare actors' interest-based preferences over possible outcomes in each of the conflicts that make up the system.

We can characterize the strategic interests that a state or non-state actor has in accordance with four broad types: national or group security and safety, what will be referred to here as security; economic survival or prosperity; domestic or constituent support; ideology; and international or intergroup prestige and influence. Although tactics can and do change quickly, an actor's strategic or fundamental

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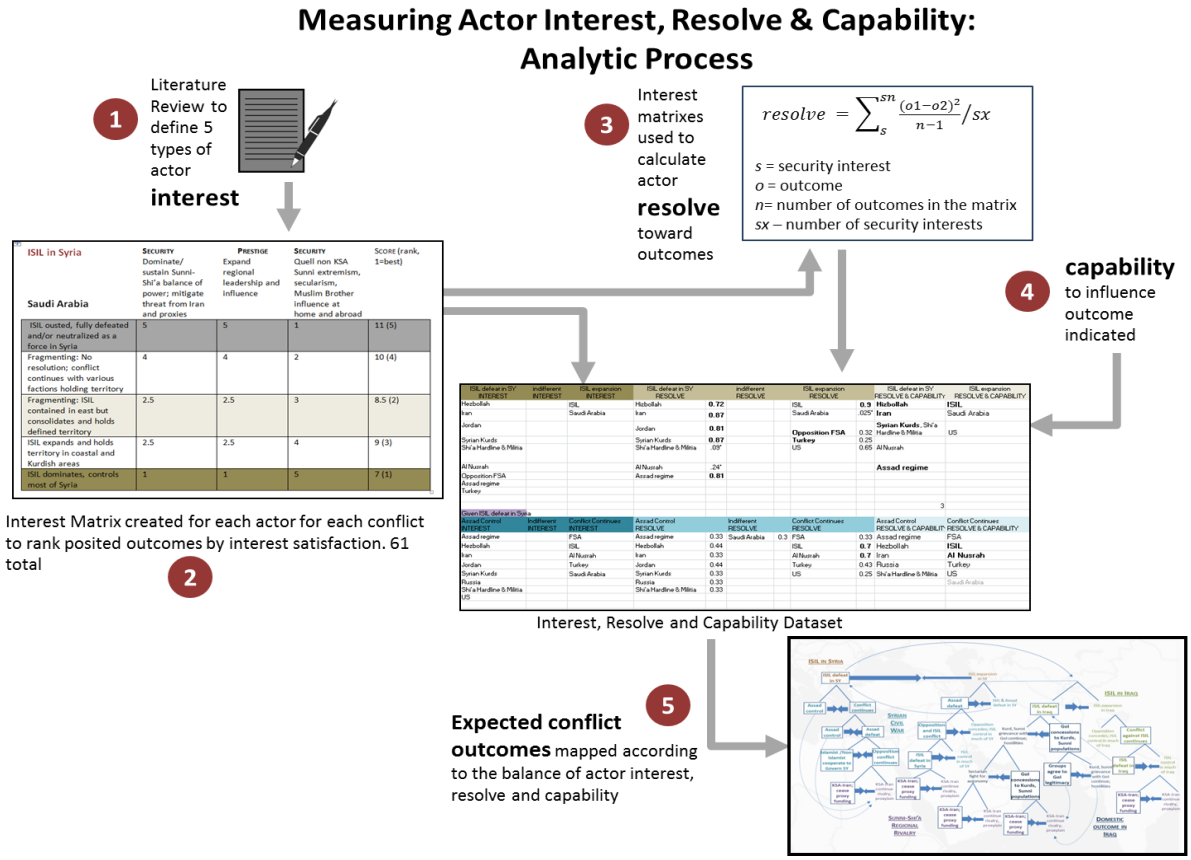
critical deciding factor in the outcomes of international conflict. This is the case even when capabilities are lacking. See for example, Zeev Maoz, 1989. Power, Capabilities, and Paradoxical Conflict Outcomes, *World Politics*, 41(2): 239-266.

interests are more enduring. For example, although the United States has defined its national security interests in different ways over the course of our history (e.g.,. keeping Europe out of the Western Hemisphere, containing the Soviet Union, containing Communism, counter-terror) the enduring nature of our security interest has remained the security and safety of the US homeland and our assets abroad.

The data sources used for this study are the translated statements and interviews where available of the leadership of the various actors, supplemented by insight from subject matter expertise using NSI's Virtual Think Tank process for passive and active elicitation, and from peer-reviewed research and news reports.

Analytic Approach



The Interests Analyses approach consists of five steps.

Step 1: Literature Review. The analysis begins with extensive review of primary and secondary source materials describing how each of the twenty-one actors involved in the conflict system defines its key security, economic, domestic, ideological and prestige interests relative to the regional conflict. The analysis is formalized by identifying which of an actor's interests are at stake in each of the eight conflicts that make up the core regional conflict system. These interests are compared to the possible outcomes for each conflict to determined most and least preferred outcomes for a particular actor in a

particular conflict. This process also serves to systematize the analysis across different actors and settings, which enables the analyst to directly compare across actors and conflicts.

Step 2: Construct Interest Matrixes for Actor by Conflict

Four tasks completed separately for each conflict make up this step in the analysis: Characterizing the Nature of the Conflict; Positing Outcomes; Ranking Interests by Outcome; Comparing Outcome Preferences.

a) Characterizing the Nature of the Conflict. The data collected in Step 1 is used first to identify which of the full range of an actor's interests are perceived to be at stake in a conflict. Comparing the types of interests involved over all the actors involved in a conflict lends insight into the nature of that conflict. For example, as will be shown in Part III, although defined differently, each of the actors involved in the Syrian civil conflict has national security and population safety interests at stake. What may not be as obvious, but is just as important in predicting the likely paths that conflict might take, is how many actors perceived their own domestic constituent support to be at stake.

b) Positing Outcomes. Next, general outcomes for each conflict are posited and described. Outcomes typically range from the complete victory of one of the central adversaries to the complete victory of the other. For example, in the case of the Syrian Civil War, possible outcomes fall between the complete victory of Assad over all of Syria through to either the dominance of ISIL or the "moderate" opposition. Note that as used here, an "outcome" is not necessarily a stable resolution of the conflict but refers to conditions that could arise.

c) Ranking Actor Interests by Outcome. Interest matrices are constructed for relevant actors for each conflict in which it has interests at stake. This provides a graphical representation of the impacts on actors' interests represented by the posited outcomes. Individual actor interests are shown in columns. Posited outcomes are in rows. Each is coded by dimension, e.g., domestic political/constituent support; security; international prestige, honor and identity; economic. Because the purpose of the study is to explore regional dynamics and possible futures, for the sake of simplicity except where indicated actors are treated as unitary actors. Also, because the situation in this region is so fluid, we do not attempt to assign weights to particular interests.

Once the matrix is built, the outcomes (rows) are evaluated and ranked according to the degree to which each satisfies the actor's preferences on each of the identified dimensions. These single-dimension preferences can then be aggregated across the set of dimensions for each outcome to produce a multidimensional preference ordering for the entire choice set.

An example of an interest matrix for the Syrian Civil War is shown. The dark teal indicates the unweighted best outcome across all interests; the lighter teal is the second best outcome. Grey indicates the outcome that is overall the least satisfactory to the actor's interests. Note that not all actors are participants or have interests at stake in each of the conflicts, and not all of a participating actor's interests are relevant to or impacted by each of the conflicts in which it is involved.

Actor interests relevant to conflict coded for type

Conflict →	Syrian Civil War	SECURITY Defend population against Sunni Islamist threat	SECURITY Preserve links to funds, weapons from Iran through Syria	SECURITY Minimize losses to avoid diluting fighting force	CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Maintain political position in Lebanon esp. among Lebanese Shi'a; Keep fighting away from Shi'a areas	PRESTIGE Retain legitimacy/ identity as anti-Western, anti-Israeli resistance org., champion of Arab and Lebanese interests	Score (rank, 1=best)
Actor name →	**Hezbollah**						
Posited range of conflict outcomes →	Assad regains control of Syria	1	1	1	1	1	5 (1)
	Fragmenting: No resolution; conflict continues with various factions holding territory	2	2	3.5	3	3	13.5 (2)
	Fragmenting: Assad falls; ISIL and Opposition remain in SY	3.5	4	3.5	4.5	3	18.5 (4)
	Fragmentation: Assad falls; ISIL gains control of much of Syria	5	4	3.5	4.5	3	20 (5)
	Assad falls; non-ISIL opposition governs unified Syria	3.5	4	3.5	2	5	18 (3)

d) *Comparing Outcome Preferences.* Finally, the outcomes preferences for all actors involved in a conflict are compared to identify common interests, or alliances of interests relative to that conflict. Identifying which outcomes share the balance of actor preferences – even if their interests in favoring one over the other are different -- is one of the key features of the interest analysis and serves as the source of the interests input in the analytic model: *Interest* + *Resolve* + *Capability* = *Expectations for the Region*.

Step 3: Calculate Resolve

$$resolve = \sum_{s}^{sn} \frac{(o1-o2)^2}{n-1} / sx$$

s = security interest
o = outcome
n= number of outcomes in the matrix
sx – number of security interests

The interest matrixes were used to calculate resolve toward an outcome relative to another using the formula as shown. What the equation measures is the difference in interest satisfaction between one outcome and another. An assumption was made that when it came to resolve to pursue an outcome (or avoid another) the most critical interest for an actor would be national and/or domestic security.

Step 4: Assign High-Low Capability.

For this project an actor's capability was defined relative to a specific event; namely, as the actor's overall capacity to determine (high capability) or to influence or indirectly impact (low) the outcome of that event. Thus, capability is a context-dependent variable rather than a static measure as is often the

case as when an actor's capability is operationalized as "size of military" or "gross domestic product". Capability is related to a number of factors including availability of coercive power, economic assets, influence relationships, proximity and given the structure of the conflict, the ability to influence outcomes by "voting with their feet". Consider an example of this last factor: Along with its coercive capabilities including terror tactics and weaponry, its economic extortion of populations under its control and its presence on the ground, ISIL leaders also have the power to bring the "ISIL defeat in Syria" conflict to an end by withdrawing from Syria. They have the relative capacity to do so; i.e., they *could*; whether they *would* is an issue of interests and resolve. Similarly, given its overwhelming military might, there is little question that US *could* bring about the defeat of ISIL in Syria if its interests in avoiding collateral damage, avoiding human rights abuses and retaining domestic and international support were not considered. Instead US capacity to influence the outcome of that conflict is constrained by other interests.

Step 5: Expected Outcomes Tree.

Once the interest, resolve and capability analyses of individual regional conflicts are completed, the relationships among the posited and most likely outcomes of each can be assessed. These are incorporated into a tree diagram representing the weights of actors' interests, resolve and capabilities.

The next part of this report contains an example of Steps 1-4 of the analytic process as applied to the Syrian Civil War. Part IV then turns to the results of the analyses of five of the eight regional conflicts happening in and around Syria and Iraq.

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