

Book Reviews

Gaming Middle East Conflict

Review Article by Rex Brynen

Oil War — Iran Strikes. Decision Games/Modern War magazine/Strategy & Tactics Press, 2012. Designer: Ty Bomba. \$30.

Persian Incursion. Clash of Arms Games, 2010. Designers: Larry Bond, Chris Carlson, Jeff Dougherty. \$71.50.

Battle for Baghdad. MCS Group, 2009. Designer: Joseph Miranda. \$79.95.

Labyrinth: The War on Terror, 2001–?. GMT Games, 2010. Designer: Volko Ruhnke. \$60.

In addition to civil war in Syria, violence in Iraq, and the recent Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, the Middle East is the subject of another sort of conflict — this time of the ludological kind, expressed in electrons or cardboard rather than real-life death and destruction. This review essay examines four recent board games that address regional conflicts, from the “global war on terror” to a possible Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

First, however, it is worth asking why one might devote serious attention to games, other than with regard to their entertainment value? The answer very much depends on the nature of the game. At one end of the spectrum, there are those serious crisis simulations and professional wargames that attempt to use game methodologies to explore current and future policy issues. Many such efforts are heavily classified exercises by governments on which little information is available, although in some cases a few details have been provided to the press.¹ Think tanks and academic institutions also adopt such techniques from time to time, whether to critically explore policy options or advocate for particular policy preferences. The Middle East often figures prominently in these, with the Iranian nuclear issue being perhaps the most publicly “gamed” conflict in the post-Cold War era. As of the time of writing, more than a dozen Iranian crisis simulations have been undertaken by several universities, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv), the Interdisciplinary Center (Herzliya), *Newsweek* magazine, and the Truman National Security Project, among others.² Other recent serious simulations

1. See for example, “U.S. War Game Sees Perils of Israeli Strike Against Iran,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/world/middleeast/united-states-war-game-sees-dire-results-of-an-israeli-attack-on-iran.html>; and Barbara Slavin, “Syria ‘Influence Game’ Explores US Engagement With Iran,” *al-Monitor*, August 1, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/syria-competitive-influence-game.html>.

2. For a constantly-updated summary of Iran-Israeli crisis games, see “Israel vs Iran wargame compendium,” *Wargaming Connection* blog, <http://wargamingcommunity.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/israel-vs-iran-wargame-compendium/>.

have addressed such varied Middle East issues as varied as the Syrian civil war,³ the Palestinian refugee issue,⁴ and weapons of mass destruction and regional arms control.⁵

At the other end of the spectrum are most mass-market digital games, in which a Middle East setting is often largely incidental to the game play. This tends to be the case in “first-person shooters” such as the *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor* series, in which parts of the action may be set in the Middle East or southwest Asia. Here, the games are revealing not for the insight they generate (which rarely goes beyond “try not to get shot”) but rather for what — as a major, multi-billion-dollar element of contemporary mass popular culture — video games indicate about the way in which society views conflict and international politics. Then again, some digital games have also been more deliberately and explicitly political. Hizbullah, for example, has produced two computer games — *Special Force* (2003) and *Special Force 2* (2007) — that seek to promote its view of the struggle with Israel, while Iran has encouraged the development of a domestic gaming industry to offset what it sees as the biases of Western products.⁶ Amir Mirza Hekmati, a former US Marine and former employee of Kuma Reality Games, continues to languish in an Iranian prison, accused (among other things) of having worked with the CIA to produce anti-Iranian video games.⁷ Some digital games have also been designed to promote peace in the region, such as the computer game *PeaceMaker* (2008) in which participants try to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸

The four games reviewed herein lay somewhere between the two poles of serious analytical exercises and mass consumption entertainment. All four are board games, albeit board games intended for dedicated conflict simulation hobbyists. As such, they are not necessarily indicative of cultural and political attitudes at large, but rather cater to a much narrower group of players for whom both a degree of historical accuracy and enjoyable game play are important considerations. Many designers in the commercial wargaming in-

3. Kenneth Pollack, Frederick Kagan, Kimberley Kagan, and Marisa Sullivan, *Unraveling the Syria Mess: A Crisis Simulation of Spillover from the Syrian Civil War* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, August 2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2012/8/syria%20pollack/08%20syria%20wargame%20pollack.pdf>. For a critical perspective on this, see “Syria, intervention, and the limits of wargaming,” *PAXsims* blog, August 10, 2012, <http://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/08/10/syria-intervention-and-the-limits-of-wargaming>.

4. Chatham House, “The Regional Dimension of the Palestinian Refugee Issue: Simulation Exercise Report,” June 2008, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/12092_prsimulation0608.pdf.

5. Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, “What a simulated conference on a WMD-Free Middle East highlights about real life,” *Arms Control and Regional Security for the Middle East* blog, <http://www.middleeast-armscontrol.com/2012/11/08/what-a-simulated-conference-on-a-wmd-free-middle-east-highlights-about-real-life/>.

6. See Rex Brynen, “Video game wars,” *CNN Global Public Square* blog, January 23, 2012, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/23/video-game-wars>; “Iranian video games, nuclear weapons, and the scourge of international terrorism,” *PAXsims* blog, July 2, 2012, <http://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/07/02/iranian-video-games-nuclear-weapons-and-the-scourge-of-international-terrorism>.

7. Shamus Young, “Jailed Spy: CIA Paid Developer to Make Anti-Middle East Games,” *The Escapist*, December 20, 2011, accessed at <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/114877-Jailed-Spy-CIA-Paid-Developer-to-Make-Anti-Middle-East-Games>; Rex Brynen, “Iran, covert information operations, and the politics of videogames,” *PAXsims* blog, January 10, 2012, at <http://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/iran-covert-information-operations-and-the-politics-of-videogames/>.

8. Ronit Kampf and Esra Cuhadar Gurkanyak, “Learning about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through simulations: The case of PeaceMaker,” *PAXsims* blog, June 3, 2012, accessed at <http://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/learning-about-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-through-simulations-the-case-of-peacemaker/>

dustry — including the designers of all four of the games under review — have experience in the military or intelligence community, have worked as consultants on issues related conflict or professional gaming, or might be considered amateur (and sometimes professional) historians. Over the last decade, the rise of internet-based discussion forums mean that in many cases, games undergo a quite public process of design, playtesting, and “crowd-sourced” revisions in which a broader gaming community offers input along the way.⁹

As Philip Sabin has argued in his recent book *Simulating War*, one result of this is that many commercial wargames can offer significant insight into military history and strategy.¹⁰ Indeed, the commercial (and highly detailed) wargame *Gulf Strike* (1983, 1990) was used by the Pentagon during the opening days of the 1990–91 Gulf War to examine possible military scenarios and US responses.¹¹ Wargames can be useful experiential learning tools in university settings, offering student-players an opportunity to explore some of the opportunities, choices, trade-offs, and constraints faced by real-world generals and political leaders. They can be used as tools of historical and policy research. Unlike digital games, players can easily modify manual “cardboard” games simply by adding new rules and components. Finally, the process of wargame design and modification is, at its root, a fundamentally theoretical process of identifying, and modeling the relationships between, key variables.¹²

Of the games under review, *Oil War: Iran Strikes* is closest to a “classic” commercial wargame of the sort that dominated the hobby in the 1970s and 1980s. The game is played on a 22×34 board — a map of Iraq and the Gulf, overlaid with a hexagon pattern to structure movement and with each hexagon coded for terrain type and its associated effect of movement and combat. Over two hundred cardboard markers represent the brigade- or divisional-sized military units of Iran, Iraq, the US, Saudi Arabia, and other countries, each rated for its combat capability. The game is set some years in the future, and depicts a US and Gulf Cooperation Council reaction to Iranian intervention in an Iraqi civil war. Combat between units is resolved on a table that compares the strength of opposing formations, with uncertainty added via the role of a die. Additional rules address the loyalty of Iraqi military units, the arrival of US reinforcements, amphibious and airmobile units, the impact of coalition air superiority on Iranian ground operations, and various randomly-generated political and military events that might shape the course of the conflict, including Turkish and Syrian intervention. The sixteen pages of rules are very simple by wargame standards, although certainly more complicated than your average family game of *Risk* or *Stratego*.

In terms of the insight it offers to potential conflict in the Gulf, *Oil War: Iran Strikes* has a number of weaknesses, starting with a rather vague scenario and the almost complete absence of any political dimension. Iran’s potential future nuclear capabilities are not part of the game in any way. The order of battle (that is, the units available to each country) is somewhat but not entirely accurate, US ground assets are represented in a rather generic way, and the naval and air dimensions are highly abstracted. Still, the game does highlight in a general way the strategic dilemma faced by US security planners as they consider the

9. See, for example, the websites *BoardGameGeek* (<http://boardgamegeek.com>) and *ConsimWorld* (<http://www.consimworld.com>).

10. Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (London: Continuum, 2012). See also Peter Perla, *The Art of Wargaming: A Guide for Professionals and Hobbyists* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1990).

11. T.B. Allen, “The Evolution of Wargaming: From Chessboard to Marine Doom,” in T.J. Cornell and T.B. Alan, eds, *War and Games* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), p. 245–246. See also game designer Mark Herman’s comments in the same volume (p. 260).

12. For this reason, conflict simulation is offered as part of the MA course in War Studies at Kings College London. See <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/people/professors/sabin/consim.aspx>.

challenges of rapidly reinforcing Gulf allies in a future conventional conflict in the region. The game's straightforward design and relatively simple rules also make it quite easily to modify.¹³

Persian Incursion is another game focused on Iran, in this case examining the dynamics of a possible Israeli military campaign against Iran's nuclear program or economic infrastructure. Part of the game is a simple and highly abstracted representation of the political-military dimension of such a conflict, wherein the two players use a combination of assets and event cards to shape the diplomatic positions of key international actors. This is then combined with an *extremely* detailed mechanism for modeling Israeli attacks. When it comes time for the IAF to attack, the Israeli player must decide not only on the missions and targets, but also the route that will be taken, the ordnance load of every single Israeli aircraft (including exactly which type of weapon is carried on each weapons pylon of up to 120 planes), and the specific building each ground attack weapon will be used against. The game includes not only a full depiction of Iran's surface-to-air defenses, but also annotated satellite photos of every major known nuclear target in the country. The pace of game play can therefore sometimes slow to a crawl as the Israeli player takes an hour or more planning strike packages, escorts, suppression of enemy air defenses, electronic countermeasures, and cyber attacks against the Iranian air defense network — all of which is followed by rolling a hundred or more dice to determine hits and damage. Add to that additional rules covering, among many other things, GPS jamming, weapons upgrades, laser dazzlers, fighter interception, downed pilots, special forces raids, SAM decoys, terrorism, Iranian ballistic missile attacks, Israeli anti-ballistic missile defenses, US (or Russian or Chinese) involvement, and blockading the Straits of Hormuz and you have a game with a complexity well beyond the capability of the neophyte gamer. Few students (or scholars) could play *Persian Incursion* straight out of the box.

This is a shame, because the very detailed technical complexity that makes the game challenging also means that it offers considerable insight into the operational constraints that would face Israeli strike planners. The IAF has insufficient strike aircraft and tankers to attack every major nuclear target in Iran with a high degree of certainty as to the outcome, especially if a proportion of its forces are devoted to escorting strike packages and suppressing Iranian air defenses. Equally, Iran has a largely obsolete air force that would be unlikely to successfully engage even a single Israeli aircraft, while its SAM defenses are limited considering the size of the country. Israel's ability to attack is also heavily affected by political considerations: the northern (Turkish) route is probably now unavailable given the current state of Israeli-Turkish relations, and it is doubtful that Saudi Arabia could acquiesce to repeated Israeli use of the southern route despite Riyadh's hostility to Iran. This largely leaves the central route. While there is nothing that Iraq could do to prevent Israeli use of its airspace, Israeli relations with Jordan would undoubtedly suffer if the IAF used this route to conduct multiple strikes or revisit Iranian targets that were not adequately damaged in an initial assault.

While *Persian Incursion* is too complicated for unmodified play with most audiences, it could be used in adapted form as part a larger, more conventional role-play simulation. In such a case, strike planning could be delegated to a subgroup of staff officers, while others focused on national strategic decision-making and diplomacy. An umpire or course instructor could then use the games "engine" to determine the outcome of attacks ordered by the players, without players directly interacting with the game rules. The game designers have also made a number of quick-play variants available online that dramatically simplify mission planning by reducing the number of aim points at each location, and allowing the result

13. See, for example, "Oil War: The Unstable Gulf Variant," *PAXsims* blog, November 12, 2012, <http://paxsims.wordpress.com/2012/11/12/oil-war-the-unstable-gulf-variant>.

of multiple weapons releases to be determined with a single die roll.¹⁴

One of the major developments in board gaming since the 1990s has been the rise of the so-called “Eurogame,” typically characterized by high-quality game components and artwork, and more abstract rules that emphasize playability and the stylized look-and-feel rather than detailed attempts at realistic modeling of the subject matter. The popular board games *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Carcassonne* (2000), and *Ticket to Ride* (2004) are among the best-known examples of the genre. This trend has affected wargames too, both in terms of their improved production quality and the increasing use of card-driven game mechanics whereby players make some or all game decisions by playing from hand of cards drawn from a specially-designed deck.

The effect of this genre can be seen in *Battle for Baghdad*, a game for up to six players designed by the most successful and prolific of all wargame designers, Joe Miranda. Set during the era of American intervention, players assume the role of the United States, the Iraqi government, the Sunni community, the Shi’a community, non-governmental organizations, or “foreign jihadists,” as each struggles to achieve its objectives on a stylized game map of the Iraqi capital. Players use both “security” and “infrastructure” assets to control sectors of the city, collect “arms bazaar” cards to give them particular capabilities, while “Arab street” cards randomly shape the ebb and flow of political resources. Asymmetrical victory conditions make it possible for more than one player to win at once, and fleeting alliances of convenience are a hallmark of game play. Produced during the heyday of American post-9/11 counterinsurgency operations, the game was explicitly marketed as being useful in professional and education settings, as well as being of entertainment value.

The game can be fun to play, generating intense inter-player negotiations (and backstabbing) akin to the classic board game *Diplomacy* (1959). Scholars of the Iraq conflict will find much to object to, however. None of the internal divisions within the various sectarian communities are modeled, nor is Shi’ite political domination of the Iraqi government. The “foreign jihadists” side groups together a particularly odd mix of unlikely bedfellows: criminals, Afghans, Palestinians, al-Qa’ida, and Iranian Revolutionary Guards al-Quds Force. Equally problematic for a simulation of asymmetrical conflict is the way in which all players can use the “arms bazaar” cards in identical ways, leading to situations where NGOs might use terrorist attacks or jihadists can bribe US troops to join their side. Given this, it is hard to see the game being used effectively either in the classroom or to generate analytical insight into the political complexities and security dynamics of post-2003 Iraq. A better alternative in this regard would be *Fardh al-Qanoon* (2012), a two-player game designed by Richard Hossal that explores US-Iraqi security operations against Sadrist militias in Baghdad in 2007.¹⁵

Labyrinth: The War on Terror, 2001–? is, as its name suggests, a two player (or one player) game that depicts the post-9/11 global struggle between radical jihadist groups and the United States. In it the jihadist attempts to mobilize cadres around the world, with the aim of conducting terrorist attacks (with weapons of mass destruction, if it can obtain them) and toppling weak Muslim governments. The US seeks to strengthen the governance capacity of weak Muslim states and win support from allies, while hunting down jihadist cells, deploying troops to assist friendly governments, and possibly even undertaking costly military intervention to topple hostile regimes. The game is card-driven, with each card depicting actual historical events and real-life capabilities, ranging from predator drones to the Danish cartoon scandal to Tony Blair.

Labyrinth has proven very popular among hobbyists, earning consistently high player

14. These can be found at <http://www.clashofarms.com/Persian%20Incursion.html>.

15. The game was designed as part of coursework for the conflict simulations course at King’s College London. It can be downloaded from the *SmartWar* blog at <http://www.smartwar.org/2012/07/fardh-al-qanoon-simulation-version-1-1/>.

ratings as well a Charles S. Roberts Award for the best post-World War II wargame of the year. It has been criticized for inaccurately depicting a world where all radical Islamists march to a single drum, as part of a coordinated global struggle.¹⁶ In this sense, it depicts — in part as a characteristic of being a two-player game — the ideological worldview of some within the Bush Administration or al-Qa'ida much more than it does the actual complexities of local but sometimes loosely interconnected militant struggles. To generate player excitement (but also to reflect some of the post-9/11 fears of Western policymakers and the intelligence community) the game also overemphasizes low probability/high impact scenarios such as the overthrow of governments or terrorist acquisition of WMD.

While the underlying game model of *Labyrinth* is not sufficiently accurate to allow it to be used for analytical purposes, it does have considerable potential as a teaching tool.¹⁷ It is relatively straight-forward to play, once game play has been demonstrated. The historical material on the events cards highlights many of the key developments that shaped the post-9/11 “global war on terror.” It is easily modified through the addition of additional rules and cards. The social scientific shortcomings of the game model can themselves be used as a focus for class discussion, or the subject of a written review assignment. It is also very fun to play, and therefore likely to generate student engagement.

Traditionally, the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia attracted the attention of commercial wargame designers with regard to the Crusades, World War II, or the major armored battles of the various Arab-Israeli wars. In the post-Cold War/post-9/11/post-Arab Spring world, however, other sorts of conflicts have attracted their attentions too — and seem likely to do so. The influential online magazine *Foreign Policy*, which now features a gaming editor, featured a draft wargame of the 2012 Gaza war for reader feedback and commentary mere days after the fighting stopped.¹⁸ *Modern War*, a magazine on recent conflicts that includes a game in each issue, is slated to publish wargames on the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the post-2003 Iraqi insurgency, and a future Arab-Israeli war in its forthcoming issues.¹⁹ One of the most highly-awaited wargames of 2013, *A Distant Plain*, will examine contemporary counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.²⁰ While some of these may only hold entertainment value for gaming hobbyists, others are likely to also have potential educational or analytical value too.

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16. Tom Grant, “Labyrinth: Flawed simulation of a conflict that’s difficult to simulate,” *I’ve Been Diced* blog, December 12, 2010, accessed at <http://ivebeendiced.blogspot.ca/2010/12/labyrinth-flawed-simulation-of-conflict.html>. See also the subsequent discussion of the games underlying model at *BoardGameGeek*, at <http://boardgamegeek.com/thread/594871/flawed-simulation-of-a-conflict-thats-difficult-to/page/1>

17. For further discussion of this, see Rex Brynen, “Using Labyrinth in the Classroom,” *C3i Magazine* 25 (2011).

18. Michael Peck, “Launch Your Own Gaza War,” *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/11/27/launch_your_own_gaza_war. Not surprisingly, both the timing and the topic generated some controversy.

19. Details at <http://modernwarmagazine.com>.

20. Details at <http://www.gmtgames.com/p-416-a-distant-plain.aspx>.