2 Crisis in Galasi
Simulating the urban dimensions of religious conflict

Rex Brynen

The interviewer at Lighthouse Television turned to the Bishop of Galasi, and asked pointedly: “What is your view on the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary at the mosque?” The Bishop shifted uncomfortably in his seat— he suspected accounts of this were a ploy by Christian radicals to build support for the provocative demonstration they planned next week, on Saint Mychil’s Day. But he dare not say so openly, knowing the Church of Redemption would be quick to exploit any misstep. Sitting beside him in the studio, Reverend Zion smiled. He too knew that the moderate Bishop was about to step into a political minefield.

The vignette is a real one, but thankfully not from an actual city perched on the precipice of religious violence. Rather it took place at a workshop held at the Fondation des Treilles in March 2018. There – alongside the more traditional elements of an academic conference – a crisis simulation set in a city of Galasi, in the fictional country of Carana, was used to explore urban dimensions of religious conflict.

This chapter describes the purpose, design, play, and lessons learned from that simulation. It will also show how it contributed to the broader effectiveness of the workshop itself.

Before addressing any of this, however, a more fundamental issue must be addressed: why conduct a simulation at all? Can such an exercise offer added value to academic enquiry in a way that is complimentary to traditional scholarship and workshop discussion, yet unique and insightful?

Simulating peace, conflict, and development
Simulation methods have a long history of being used for the study of human conflict. Modern military wargaming dates back to the early nineteenth century, with Prussian development of Kriegsspiel. First applied to military training, the use of wargaming expanded in the twentieth century to the development of concepts, approaches, and military doctrine; the development and application of new weapons systems; and the planning of military operations. During the Cold War era, so-called POL-MIL (political-military) gaming in the United States and elsewhere examined issues of crisis, escalation, and deterrence in the nuclear age (Perla,
1990; Caffrey, 2018). With the growing importance of peace, stabilisation, and counter-insurgency operations since the 1990s, wargames have also increasingly addressed the “non-kinetic” political, social, economic, and information factors that play such an important role in such contexts (Brynen, 2014, 2016; Train and Ruhnke, 2016; Wong, 2016).

Role-playing negotiation games have increasingly been used in university and professional settings to teach conflict resolution skills (Gill, 2015). These include scenarios that relate to ethnic and religious political violence (Kumar, 2009).

The humanitarian assistance community has also made increasing use of simulations and other serious games for capacity-building and planning purposes (Hockaday et al., 2012). These usually draw from an established tradition of emergency services exercises, as well as the growing use of simulations and games-based learning in the medical field. The development community has been somewhat slower to embrace the technique. However, the World Bank and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have both pioneered a number of innovative games-based methods for capacity building (Milante, 2009; IFRC, 2018).

In order to bring practitioners together and encourage the sharing of ideas, approaches, and best practices, the PAXsims website (www.paxsims.org) was launched in 2009. PAXsims has also designed and implemented serious games for governments, non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies, and educational institutions. The topics for these have included diplomacy and trade; peacekeeping operations; humanitarian assistance/disaster relief; refugee policy; mass atrocity prevention; Arab-Israeli peace negotiations; political violence in Syria and Iraq; and crisis stability in East Asia and the Persian Gulf – among others.

**Why simulate?**

But why simulate at all? How is it that such a technique can enhance learning or policy analysis? There are several dimensions to this.

First, conflict simulations and serious games provide a “safe to fail” environment. Participants are free to explore the challenges and possibilities of a scenario without inflicting humanitarian disaster, developmental missteps, failed peace talks, or political violence on real human beings.

Second, simulations can act as a crowdsourcing technique, pulling together perspectives and insights from a diverse group of participants. There is considerable research to suggest that the “wisdom of crowds” offers greater predictive analysis than that of single analysts, especially when diverse, multidisciplinary groups are involved (Brynen, 2017). Thomas Schelling – who won a Nobel Prize in economics for his work of formal game theory, but who was also an enthusiastic advocate of crisis simulations – once commented to colleagues at RAND,

[Crisis] games are extremely stimulating; people are very active; ideas and conjectures get tossed around and analysed by a highly motivated group of people; a great deal of expertise is collected together in a single room,
expertise that is not often collected together; and people discover facts, ideas, possibilities, capabilities, and arguments that do not depend on any way on the game but nevertheless emerge from it.

(Schelling, 1964, p. 23)

Third, simulations can promote empathy and help participants develop insight into the interests, perceptions, motivations, and strategic calculations of others. Research suggests that “role-playing” outperforms “role-thinking” in this regard (Green and Armstrong, 2011). Moreover, those who role-play conflict scenarios are better able to predict outcomes than those that do not, even when the latter have greater experience and academic credentials (Green, 2002).

Fourth, simulations complement other, more traditional, modes of analysis (Wong, 2016). The robustness of findings is enhanced when conventional methods and conflict simulation findings converge. Simulations can provide a useful way of identifying new issues or alternative perspectives, or otherwise stimulating discussion. In this sense, they represent an “intellectual cross-training” of sorts, exercising different sets of cognitive skills to enhance learning or analysis.

Fifth, simulations can be effective at representing and exploring the implications of complex political and policy processes involving multiple stakeholders with differing interests and capabilities. In doing so they highlight the importance of process, coordination, and “two-level games,” wherein actors are simultaneously worried about both internal/organisational and external dynamics and goals (Brynen, 2010; Brynen and Milante, 2012).

Sixth, simulations can highlight the impact of imperfect and asymmetrical information and organisational dysfunctions – what Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz termed, in the context of military operations, “fog” and “friction” respectively. In noting the interaction of strategy, uncertainty, and risk in decision-making, von Clausewitz himself used a gaming analogy, noting that “[i]n the whole range of human activities, war most resembles a game of cards” (Clausewitz, 1984, Book 1, p. 86).

Finally, simulations can offer other practical benefits. They provide a (hopefully welcome) change of pace, while providing an opportunity to break the ice. By encouraging participants to interact in less formal ways, they even facilitate the development of longer-term professional relationships. Thomas Schelling too identified this as a major positive outcome of the POL-MIL crisis games he was involved with at RAND and for the US government – an interesting observation from a scholar whose academic work focused so heavily on highly theoretical formal modelling of conflict (Schelling, 1964, p. 25).

**Designing the crisis game**

Serious game design must always begin by considering both the educational or analytical objectives of the game and the practical constraints under which it will be played, and balancing the two. In this case, it was important that the game explore the sorts of issues that were likely to emerge in workshop discussions: the
politics of religious mobilisation, ambiguous and contested historical narratives, the impact of changing media environments, cultural property protection, conflict mediation and resolution, the role of the international community, and, of course, the significance of urban space. At the same time, the game had to be playable in approximately six hours spread over four days of workshop, and accommodate up to 18 participants. It could not require local resources (e.g., physical space, technical equipment, or extensive game materials) beyond what was already on site or could easily be brought there. It also could not require any substantial pre-study (since participants were unlikely to do much of this in advance), or use complex game procedures (since these might generate more confusion than insight). Given the variety of participant backgrounds, interests, and personalities, the game design had to be rich enough to fully engage enthusiasts, yet casual enough to be comfortable for those who were crisis-gaming neophytes.

A key initial question in the design process was whether to represent a historical or current case of religious conflict, or place the crisis simulation in a fictional setting. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches (for contrasting views, see Brynen, 2010; Gill, 2015, p. 50).

A real-world case would permit the rich tapestry of actual events and conditions to be part of the simulation. However, it also would limit the issues and elements that could be included to those found in the actual case, and risked tying participants too closely to historical positions and outcomes. The result might look more like a theatrical recreation of events, rather than an environment where participants could fully consider a range of possible actions. There was also the risk that participants might already have strongly held views about the events concerned, and have difficulty transcending these. Historical cases also lend themselves to potential nitpicking by participants who feel that the simulation’s portrayal is inaccurate or incomplete in some way (as it inevitably is).

A fictional scenario, by contrast, could be designed to include all the elements that would be useful for the broader workshop, and could also be written so as to provide an interesting range of possible actions and consequent outcomes – a larger decision space for everyone to explore. On the negative side, however, fictional settings can seem very fake and rather “gamy,” and can be off-putting to those who are uncomfortable role-playing or are dubious about simulation and gaming approaches. It is also impossible to provide the degree of contextual information that a real-life situation includes, thus possibly making conflict resolution processes seem rather less messy and complicated than they are in the real world.

In this case, the primary objective of the crisis simulation – to illustrate and explore a range of issues that would arise from the workshop’s more conventional academic paper sessions – favoured the latter approach. However, in order to enhance the credibility of the scenario with participants, the decision was taken to set the simulation in the fictional country of Carana. The Carana setting was first developed by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations for training UN and other personnel. Various versions of Carana are also used by the African Union to develop regional peacekeeping and stabilisation capabilities; by various peacekeeping training centres; by the World Bank, for training staff on
operations in fragile and conflict-affected countries; and to teach about humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, notably in the educational boardgame AFTERSHOCK (Amani Africa EURORECAMP, 2009; Milante, 2009; PAXsims, 2018). The fact that different versions of this fictional setting have been so widely used in professional settings to train those preparing to deal with real-world civil, ethnic, and religious violence would, it was hoped, add additional credibility to the simulation among participants in the workshop.

It immediately became evident, however, that previous versions of the Carana scenario had downplayed the issue of religion, which was to be the focus of the workshop simulation. Instead, existing scenarios all emphasised tension between fictional ethnic-tribal groups, with only mention in passing that both Muslims and Christians resided in the country. This omission is understandable. The United Nations, African Union, and World Bank all train personnel from a variety of national – and religious – backgrounds. Participants might take offence if a scenario depicted actual religious groups in conflict, all the more so if it involved realistic levels of sectarian radicalisation and incitement. By contrast, no one is likely to be upset if fictional ethnic groups taunt, insult, or attack each other. Moreover, fictional ethnicities are believable in a way that fictional religions are not, so the latter would not provide a solution to this problem.

It thus became necessary to update and modify the Carana setting to emphasise religion as an emerging political fault line and source of potential conflict. To do this, the scenario built on the African Union’s history of Carana, but suggested that the end of the civil war (2006–08) and country’s subsequent transition to democracy had been accompanied by the growing success of a new Christian populist party, the Parti chrétien-démocrate de Carana (PCDC) (see Box 2.1).

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**Box 2.1: Excerpt from Crisis in Galasi: The Church of Saint Mychil Master Scenario Guide (Brynen and Dumper, 2018)**

In 2008, following African Union and United Nations mediation, the Kalari Peace Agreement was signed. A transitional government of national reconciliation was formed, a hybrid AU-UN peacekeeping mission was deployed, and new national elections were held. The security forces were also reduced in size, and made more representative of the population. The national Gendarmerie took on many of the internal security tasks previously performed by the military.

With many political actors discredited by allegations of corruption or association with past human rights abuses, and the adoption of proportional representation electoral system which made it easier for new parties to emerge, the electoral landscape of the country underwent a major change in the 2009 and 2013 elections. In particular, the Parti chrétien-démocrate
de Carana (PCDC) was able to transcend ethnic fault-lines by crafting an electoral message that spoke to the shared Christian beliefs of the majority of Caranese. In the first post-war coalition government, PCDC Finance Minister Peter-Paul Xavier was credited with working with donors and the business community to jump-start the war-ravaged economy. Xavier was elected President in 2013, with the PCDC winning a majority in the National Assembly. The primary opposition party was now the “Renewal and Reform” (PDC-RR) faction of the former Parti démocratique de Carana, which continued to mobilise its support almost exclusively from within the Falin ethnic group.

The rise of the PCDC was aided by the rapid growth of Protestant evangelical churches during the civil war and thereafter. These had provided a message of faith and hope in difficult times, as well as being in the forefront of many local aid efforts. The most important of these has been the Church of Redemption, an evangelical coalition led by Reverend Moses Zion. Zion has effectively used social media, television, and other informational and communication technologies to promote his message. The Church of Redemption has also recently acquired its own television station, Lighthouse TV (“lighting the way to a new Carana”). By contrast, the once-dominant Catholic Church has slowly lost both adherents and influence.

While Carana’s post-conflict transition and return to democracy are celebrated as a regional success story, there has been a darker side to all this too. During the 2013 electoral campaign, the PCDC raised the issue of the “les non-inscrits,” successfully arguing before the courts that several PDC-RR candidates were not citizens and therefore not eligible to stand for office because their forbears had never been registered by the French colonial authorities. During the 2017 elections, this expanded to a broader scapegoating of the (predominately Falin) Muslim community, playing upon the Muslim heritage of many unpopular wartime PDC leaders and CDF commanders, as well as harnessing popular discontent at the wealth of the Muslim business elite who were accused of having been war-profiteers. The campaign put the PDC-RR and its largely secular leadership in a difficult position: on the one hand, it was clearly an effort to split the Falin community; on the other hand, too vigorous a defence of the Muslim minority could well cause some Christian Falin to shift their political allegiances.

The flashpoint for the scenario was provided by the “Church of Saint Mychil,” a former Christian church in the Carana’s capital city of Galasi. This, the scenario stated, had fallen into disuse in the eighteenth century, and had been reconstructed as the Hamid bin Said Mosque in 1790. In 2016, the evangelical Church of Redemption began a major fundraising campaign to acquire the land and rebuild the “Third Church,” an act it proclaimed would
be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Not surprisingly, *waqf* (Islamic property) administrators and the Supreme Muslim Council rejected this. However, the call was quickly taken up by many PCDC candidates during the 2017 election. A coalition of hardline Christian groups known as the “Church Faithful” or *Les fidèles* had called for a major demonstration at the site on Saint Mychil’s Day, 7 March 2018.

Participants were assigned to one of a number of relevant roles (Table 2.1). On successive days workshop simulation would explore the run-up to the demonstration, the demonstration itself, and its aftermath.

*Table 2.1* Simulation roles from *Crisis in Galasi: The Church of Saint Mychil Master Scenario Guide*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles (18)</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government of Carana (and Opposition)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Peter-Paul Xavier</td>
<td>PCDC Christian populist (Tatsi)</td>
<td>Controls Presidential Guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister and Minister of Interior</td>
<td>PCDC Christian hardliner (Kori)</td>
<td>Controls Gendarmerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister of Defence</td>
<td>PCDC Christian pragmatist (Falin)</td>
<td>Controls Army/Navy/Air Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition Leader</td>
<td>MPC-RR Falin pragmatist</td>
<td>Wary and wily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Municipality of Galasi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>Unaffiliated Christian/mixed opportunist</td>
<td>Seeking reelection. Controls local Police, Fire, Ambulance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Muslim Leaders</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair, Supreme Muslim Council</td>
<td>Muslim pragmatist (Falin)</td>
<td>Dialogue is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan bin Said mosque/ <em>waqf</em></td>
<td>Muslim arch-conservative (Falin)</td>
<td>Stubborn. Change is bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Defence League</td>
<td>Firebrand Muslim (Falin)</td>
<td>Defend the mosque!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Christian Leaders</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Moses Zion</td>
<td>Firebrand evangelical Protestant, Tatsi</td>
<td>Church of Redemption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighthouse Television</td>
<td>Christian television station</td>
<td>Church of Redemption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop of Galasi</td>
<td>Moderate Catholic, Falin</td>
<td>Catholic Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader, <em>Les fidèles</em></td>
<td>Firebrand Christian, Tatsi</td>
<td>Destroy the mosque!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Community Groups and Leaders</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>Muslim/Falin moderate</td>
<td>Favours status quo. Wishes to avoid violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>Christian/Falin moderate</td>
<td>Favours redevelopment. Wishes to avoid violence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Many of the elements of the scenario were deliberately adapted from real-world cases, several of which were to be addressed in conference presentations. The primary dispute was largely based on the 1992 clash at the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India, which resulted in the destruction of the mosque and up to 2,000 deaths in subsequent religious violence – albeit reconfigured here as a Christian/Muslim dispute (to better fit the Carana setting), rather than a Hindu/Muslim one. Disputes over churches converted to mosques (e.g., the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul) or mosques converted to churches (as with the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Cordoba) are not unknown, and indeed the pictures used for the scenario were those of the actual Church-Mosque of Vefa, in Turkey. The situation was also analogous to disputes over access to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

The radical Christian activist group *Les fidèles* in the simulation was modelled after the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful (2018) in Israel, which proposes to rebuild the Jewish Third Temple on the current site of the Haram al-Sharif. The *Parti chrétien-démocrate de Carana* drew, in part, on the political success of the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in India – the growth of which was spurred by the Babri Masjid protests and demolition. “Lighthouse Television” was directly named after the Lebanese Shi'ite/Hizbullah television station, al-Manar. The issue of citizenship rights for descendants of Muslim migrants had many parallels, including the situation of the *bidoon* (stateless persons) in Kuwait, controversy over citizenship laws in several West African countries, government treatment of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, and even recent legal cases involving disqualification of Australian parliamentarians who also held New Zealand citizenship.

As the scenario and simulation were developed, all major elements of this were recorded in a *Scenario Master Guide* (Brynen and Dumper, 2018), which provided an objective description of the situation as well as outlining roles, timings, and simulation requirements. The development of such a guide also guaranteed that the conference organiser (Michael Dumper) and the simulation designer...
(Rex Brynen) were on the same page, and that the latter could serve the broader objectives of the former.

Once all of the major parameters of the simulation and scenario were determined, briefing materials were developed for the players. These consisted of the following:

- A three-minute “news video” describing the overall situation in Carana and the growing religious tensions in the city of Galasi. This would be shown to participants on the initial evening of the workshop (Brynen, 2018).
- Information on both the country of Carana and the Church of Saint Mychil, provided in the form of simulated Wikipedia articles. These were distributed to all participants.
- A map of Galasi, provided in the form of a simulated Google Maps image.
- Role-specific briefings and other materials for each player, together with name tags.

The role-specific briefings were absolutely key to the design of the simulation, in that they were deliberately intended to shape player perceptions of the issues at stake by framing them in particular ways. Many of the Christian briefings emphasised the importance of the religious site. By contrast, Muslim briefings highlighted a fear of growing discrimination and Islamophobia, and cast doubt that Saint Mychil was ever associated with the site. Civil society briefings stressed the importance of relevant concerns, ranging from human rights (the human rights group) to the potential for urban redevelopment (the Chamber of Commerce). Politicians were encouraged to think in terms of the political and electoral implications of the crisis. Security briefings pointed to an exaggerated threat from weapons and jihadist radicalisation. Asymmetrical information was also provided: estimates of the Muslim share of the population, for example, ranged from 10% (in some Christian briefings) to almost one third (in some Muslim briefings).

Finally, each briefing contained a description of other participants, written in such a way as to either cement alliances or cast suspicion and doubt. As is typical in simulations of this sort, most participants read their role briefings much more closely than they did the more objective (simulated) Wikipedia pieces and hence internalised partisan perspectives. Such narrative immersion is often critical to the effectiveness of serious games (Perla and McGrady, 2011). It was also hoped that if players were able to identify with their roles and get into the spirit of the simulation, simulation-related discussions would spill beyond the allotted sessions and into coffee breaks, meal times, evenings, and other informal opportunities for discussion.

One challenge in designing the game was that what might happen on the day of the Saint Mychil’s Day demonstration could not be known by the game designer in advance, since it would very much depend on earlier player decisions. Thus, a gaming method was needed that could be adapted to almost any situation that would arise. The approach chosen was to use matrix gaming techniques. This narrative free-form game has few preset rules, but rather determines the outcome of
actions through structured discussion among the participants themselves (Brynen, 2015; Dixson et al., 2015). Because of this, players are free to be creative, yet are ultimately grounded in a realistic appraisal of the situation generated by the group. The *Matrix Game Construction Kit*, developed by PAXsims with the support of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory/UK Ministry of Defence, was used to generate game elements (Brynen et al., 2017). This included a map of the city (Figure 2.1), as well as markers to represent the various elements that might

*Figure 2.1* Map of Galasi (looking suspiciously like Copenhagen), including location of the mosque and main Christian, Muslim, and mixed residential areas
affect events, such as protesters and counter-protesters, regular and riot police, military forces, media, religious figures, and emergency service personnel.

**Crisis in Galasi: the game**

Participants were introduced to the simulation, shown the video introduction, and provided with their role briefings and other materials, on the first evening of the conference. Thereafter, the game proceeded over the full four days of the conference:

- **Day 1 (1 hour) – Prelude.** Players were given one hour to hold discussions and prepare written instructions for what their actor planned to do on the day of the St Mychil’s Day demonstration.
- **Day 2 (2.5 hours) – Saint Mychil’s Day.** Events on the day of the protest were played out based on both previously made decisions and actions taken on the day (Figure 2.2).
- **Day 3 (1 hour) – The Day After: Conflict or Reconciliation?** This part of the simulation addressed the days and weeks after the protest march, based on events and actions during the previous session.
- **Day 4 (2 hours) – Denouement and Debrief.** This session might include additional actions and negotiations, but was primarily intended as an opportunity for participants to discuss the game and any insights it might have generated.

**Prelude**

During the Prelude session, the Catholic bishop of Galasi worked with President Xavier and the Supreme Muslim Council to defuse religious tensions, calling for an ecumenical peace rally to be held outside the mosque/church an hour before the planned demonstration by Les fidèles. The Reverend Zion and Lighthouse Television sought to exploit this moderation to undercut the Catholic Church and attract more followers to the evangelical Church of the Redemption, claiming that a miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary had manifest at the mosque and calling for the Church of Saint Mychil to be rebuilt on the site. When the bishop equivocated and refused to publicly express his private doubts about the “miracle” it caused deep suspicion on the part of some in the Muslim community, especially the imam of the mosque itself. Members of the Muslim Defence League, while stressing the importance of non-violent resistance to any attempt to damage the mosque, also prepared rocks, barricades, and even a few Molotov cocktails should they become necessary to repel attackers. They also formed a human ring around the site.

Local business leaders urged calm, while the opposition and Carana Human Rights Group criticised the political targeting of the Muslim community. United Nations officials felt stymied: they recognised that sectarian polarisation and violence might destabilise the country, but felt they had little influence over local actors at this point, most of whom were driven by powerful domestic political
considerations. There were quiet suggestions from UN civilian police advisers on planning for the event and limiting confrontation, but the UN mission had no desire to get too deeply involved in case they found themselves implicated in violence. The imam of the mosque called for the faithful to rally to the mosque before the scheduled demonstration and pray for its protection.

Meanwhile, the mayor worked with the Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Defence to develop a plan for maintaining order and containing any protests. The minister of interior, however, was aligned with hardline factions of the PCDC

Figure 2.2 The actual map during game play, showing the locations of political and religious leaders, police and military assets, emergency services, and members of the Muslim Defence League (preparing to defend the mosque) on the evening prior to St Mychil’s Day
and sympathetic towards Les fidèles. She grew concerned that the president was showing far too much willingness to abandon the ruling party’s Christian populist base and address Muslim concerns.

Finally, Les fidèles – working in quiet coordination with Reverend Zion – had their own plans. Using a system of SMS text messaging and local neighbourhood organisers, they developed the capacity to rapidly change the start time of the demonstration or the rallying points for protesters – thereby shifting the time of their proposed march to shortly before the planned interfaith rally. They also used social media to promote stories of Muslim street gangs harassing Christian girls. They plotted to symbolically deface the mosque, and recruited thuggish local football supporters to strengthen their numbers on protest day. Most important of all, they smuggled firearms into the area. Shooting, they hoped, would spur mass panic and throw the situation into chaos, and could be blamed on jihadist radicals – providing either an opportunity for protesters to seize the mosque or a pretext for the police to do so.

**Saint Mychil’s Day**

The decisions by Les fidèles to reschedule their protest caught most others by surprise. The interfaith rally was quickly overwhelmed, and the security forces were unprepared for protesters arriving earlier and from different locations than expected. Confrontation grew, and as it did the Muslim Defence League began to build barricades in the streets surrounding the mosque.

The minister of defence ordered the deployment of military forces – including tanks – to contain the situation. The mayor saw such a move as unnecessarily provocative and ordered municipal police to block a key bridge to prevent this. The minister of interior – whose ideological sympathies lay with the Christian protesters – ordered that the national gendarmerie raid the mosque and clear the street barricades, detaining the leader of the Muslim Defence League in the process. She hoped thereby to clear the mosque of worshippers, enabling the government to take control of the site and thereby facilitate an eventual rebuilding of the “Third Church.”

At this point, shots rang out. The crowds scattered, as rumours and accusations swirled. Some protesters rallied at the nearby university, but later dispersed after negotiations with the government. The leader of the Muslim Defence League was badly beaten in detention by Christian officers, who believed the organisation had connections to foreign powers and jihadist extremists.

**Conflict or reconciliation?**

Events on Saint Mychil’s Day highlighted the extent to which President Xavier had lost control of hardline members of his cabinet, who felt his commitment to interfaith dialogue with the Muslim community was an abandonment of the PCDC’s Christian populist ideals. The defence minister was fired and the interior minister quit in support, hoping to thereby force a change in the leadership in the
ruling party. The president, however, reached out to the MPC-RR opposition to form a new coalition government.

Shocked by the violence, the Catholic bishop of Galasi reached out to the imam of the mosque, and the two put aside past suspicion in an effort to find a practical solution whereby the mosque would remain undisturbed but Christian pilgrims would be welcomed to a new commemoration site located adjacent. They soon won support from many other moderates who were alarmed by recent events. This played a major role in blunting efforts by Les fidèles, Reverend Zion, and Lighthouse Television to maintain the momentum of their campaign to replace the mosque with a “Third Church” of Saint Mychil. Meanwhile, the mayor and local business leaders hoped to advance a plan for urban development in the area that might – if negotiated carefully – benefit the mosque, property developers, and the urban economy.

United Nations officials had correctly calculated that too much engagement in the run-up to the protests was likely to be both politically fraught and ineffective. Now, however, as the risks of escalation became clearer, there was much more openness to a UN role. UNESCO in particular offered to assist in archaeological studies and provide other assistance that might help support a cooperative interfaith solution.

Debriefing the participants

The final session of the simulation involved a debriefing and discussion by all of the players. Almost everyone had found the process to be an engaging one – even a few who had been a little hesitant at first due to the challenge of role-playing a sensitive topic had soon found their footing. Perhaps the biggest benefit of the process had been to “break the ice” and encourage interaction among the various participants. The energy and enthusiasm of the group were clearly infectious, and carried on into the coffee breaks and more traditional workshop sessions too. Indeed, it often proved difficult to get members of the workshop to stop plotting and move on to the next item on the conference agenda – always a good sign of narrative engagement by players.

In terms of insight, the simulation generally underscored key themes rather than generating uniquely new perspectives. It was very clear that religious conflicts are shaped by complex two-level games (Putnam, 1988), in which participants are both advancing claims and interests versus other identity groups and playing intra-group politics against potential rivals and challengers. This internal politics can, under certain conditions, favour hardliners over moderates. During the Crisis in Galasi, all of this this was evident in the cabinet revolt faced by President Xavier when he decided to embark on the path of interfaith dialogue. Ambitious PCDC rivals seized on this to try to advance personal political interests. It was also evident in jockeying within the broader Christian community, notably between the evangelical Church of Redemption and the Catholic Church. Early on in the crisis, the latter often found its ability to offer possible compromises limited by rising religious polarisation.
In addition, the simulation demonstrated that most actors have multiple interests beyond religious identity. In Galasi, those representing the business community were more united by a common interest in political and economic stability than divided by sectarian agendas. The mayor of the city, although Christian, needed to win electoral support in all communities to secure reelection. Such complexity in conflict politics neatly reinforced one of the main overall findings of the workshop – namely, that “[a] focus on the religious identities of protagonists in conflicts can mask a more complex mélange of identities, solidarities and motives” (Dumper, 2018, p. 2).

Many of the techniques that can be used to heighten religious polarisation, marginalise moderates, and escalate confrontation were also on full display. Les fidèles – skilfully played by an especially devious player with substantial operational experience dealing with militant groups – used organisational agility, social media and other information technologies, neighbourhood-level mobilisation, provocations, and violence to turn up the heat. He came very close to achieving their aim when the cabinet split, and it was only the willingness of the opposition PDC-RR to throw the president a political lifeline that prevented the hardline faction within the ruling PCDC from taking power.

The role of social (and traditional) media in contributing to religious conflict was fully in evidence during the simulation. The broadcasts of Lighthouse Television were designed to further the views of Christian hardliners. Le fidèles skilfully used images, Internet memes, rumours, and even outright fabrications to fuel religious animosity. The Muslim Defence League pushed back, promoting its own counter-narrative. Interestingly, many of the more moderate actors were much less skilled at this, thus creating an informational echo chamber in which the least tolerant voices were often the loudest.

Although participants were academics and other experts from broadly similar educational and cultural backgrounds, the simulation was striking for the degree of suspicion that quickly developed. Confirmation bias was rife – as it is in real conflicts – with players quick to believe information or rumours that fitted their preconceptions, and sometimes reluctant to accept conflicting information. The simulation also clearly demonstrated the security dilemma at the heart of much of communal conflict, with efforts by one side to enhance its security (e.g., Muslim Defence League preparations to resist a radical Christian seizure of the Sultan Hamid bin Said mosque) being seen as a source of threat by the other side (the Ministry of Interior and Christian hardliners, who viewed the MDL preparations as evidence they were incipient radical jihadists).

Finally, the complex interaction of religious conflict and urban environment was evident in myriad ways throughout the simulation: the location of the mosque, the distribution of Muslim, Christian, and mixed neighbourhoods, key routes and choke points, and the symbolic status of urban locations (not only religious sites but also others, such as the university). The urban environment also made itself felt in other ways, notably the patterns of economic activities and interests it sustained. The heterogeneity of the city created opportunities for cross-cutting communal alliances. Long-standing inter-communal associations (in the
case of Galasi, represented by the Chamber of Commerce as well as the mayor’s cross-sectarian political base) can be an important bulwark against growing ethnic or religious tension. However – as in real life – events during the simulation often moved quickly, reflecting the constricted nature of urban space and the rapid speed of modern media and communications. This made it difficult, at times, for parties to stick to plans, communicate fully with all stakeholders, and coordinate with partners and others.

In total, the Crisis in Galasi simulation and subsequent discussion took up only six and a half hours of a four-day conference. A modified version could be carried out in less time. It provided a different way to explore issues of religious conflict in urban areas, highlighted key aspects of the issue, and contributed to engagement and interaction among seminar participants throughout the workshop.

Those wishing to use the simulation in other settings are welcome to contact the author (rex.brynen@mcgill.ca) for further information and simulation files.

References


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