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SIMULATION OF DIPLOMATIC NEGOTIATIONS: CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Barbara Lukáčsová*

On March 3, 2020 the simulation of diplomatic negotiations organized by members of the Euro-Atlantic Centre was held at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. The simulation was focused on latest escalation of the conflict in the Middle East as a result of the attack carried out by the United States, killing General **Suleimani** near the Baghdad Airport on January 3, 2020.

Throughout its long and turbulent history, the Middle East is marked as one of the most stormy and unstable regions in the world. The natural allies and enemies within the region vary in reaction to the complex and constantly changing situation. There is no doubt why the Middle East became a centre of the battle for influence between two power blocks during the Cold War and why it is the case now. This region has one of the largest reserves of natural resources on which many countries, including the United States, depend. Concerning the struggle for influence, Iran has sponsored proxy forces in Iraq for years, competing for influence with American troops who first arrived and were established in the invasion of 2003.

The intensification of tension came after the US decided to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the "Iran nuclear deal" signed in 2015 in order to limit and control Iran's nuclear program. President **Trump** announced the withdrawal on May 8, 2018 following the accusations of Iran violating the deal. He subsequently signed documents reinstating sanctions against Iran which were inactive during the implementation of the JCPOA. The further escalation came last fall after Iranian-backed militias had fired rockets at Iraqi bases housing American troops. Several similar attacks on Americans occurred causing more irritation than any real damage.

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That is also why the attack on K1 military base near Kirkuk on December 27 which killed an American civilian contractor, **Nawres Waleed Hamid**, and injured several others provoke surprise mostly concerning the unexpected casualties not the attack itself. According to the intel possessed by American intelligence service, the main aim of the Iranians was to keep the pressure on the Americans but without the intention to escalate the low-level conflict. The response of the president **Trump** and his team came two days later, attacking five sites in Iraq and Syria, killing at least 25 members of Kataib Hezbollah responsible for the attack and injuring at least 50 more. On December 31, pro-Iranian protesters broke into the American Embassy in Baghdad destroying the compound. Around 100 marines from Kuwait who were ordered to rush to Baghdad then dispersed protesters preventing the bloodshed. At the time of the protests the harder response was forming within the president's nearest team. This option consisted of targeting specific Iranian officials by military strike, between the listed names was the one of General **Suleimani**.

General **Qassim Suleimani** was considered the second most powerful man in Iran as he was the head of the elite Quds Force and was responsible for managing proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen including the campaign killing more than 600 American troops during the Iraq war. He became one of the key personalities associated with the Iranian fight and subsequent defeat of the Islamic state and thus became a "symbol" of Iran's goal of achieving regional dominance. Despite the partial information about the potential attacks on American targets planned by General **Suleimani**, C.I.A. director, **Gina Haspel**, argued in favour of the strike. On January 3, the drone strike carried out by the US army near Baghdad International Airport killed General **Suleimani** together with nine others including deputy chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces and commander of the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia, **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**.

The reaction of the international community was mixed, mostly prevailing were the reactions condemning the attack, describing it as an unjustified escalation of the conflict that could possibly result in a war. It looked like the only opened supporter of the American attack was prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** who appreciated Trump's way of handling the things with its long-time enemy. Right after the attack the world leaders called for easing the tensions in the fear of potential armed conflict eventually affecting not only the Middle East but the whole world as well. In the midst of these turbulent events the Euro-Atlantic Centre decided to organize simulation of diplomatic

negotiations addressing the most pressing questions outstanding from the conflict in order to reach a consensus between all concerned parties and on the academic level try to find solution for this crisis.

The students who took part in the negotiations were set in roles of official representatives of the attending parties to the conflict. Altogether there were 6 represented parties addressing the conflict: Iran, Iraq, USA, Saudi Arabia, NATO and UN as a supervising body leading the negotiations. Each participant was previously offered the option to choose a party to the conflict she/he would like to represent in order to give the attending students the opportunity to address the topic from the point of view which they are most familiar with. All participants were subsequently given the position papers prepared by the members of the Euro-Atlantic Centre considering the individual objectives and demands of each attending party in order to authentically represent the current situation. The position papers also served as a base for the participants on which they could build up their bargaining tactics used during the negotiations for more effective and authentic result. Each participant was given a task of achieving the individual interests of represented party as much as possible with the result of reaching commonly acceptable compromise respecting the interests of all involved parties. Through this simulation students develop their negotiating skills together with ability to flexibly respond to changes and developments of certain situations which thus helps in strengthening their critical thinking and their decision-making ability.

After opening statement from the representant of the UN, each attending party summarized its position, demands and objectives with which it entered into negotiations. The individual requirements were as follows:

Iraq: Right after the attack on General **Suleimani** on Baghdad International Airport Iraqi prime minister, **Adel Abdul Mahdi**, condemns the attack as “an act of aggression on Iraq and breach of its sovereignty that will lead to war in Iraq, the region, and the world”. The strike was considered as violation to the conditions of the US military presence in Iraq and “should be met with legislation that safeguards Iraq’s security and sovereignty”. Council of Representatives of Iraq voted for withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraqi territory. President **Trump** subsequently threatened to impose harsh sanctions if made to leave Iraq. The representant of the Iraq therefore insisted on complete withdrawal of US troops from its territory as it is considered violation of the Iraqi sovereignty. Another aim of the Iraqi representant is to negotiate the exception regarding sanctions imposed by the USA on all states trading with Iran as Iraq vitally depends on

Iranian natural gas and electricity. Considering the relations with Saudi Arabia, Iraq accuses the kingdom of supporting and funding the Islamic state causing destabilisation of its regime.

Iran: Iran stands behind its claim that it did not violate the JCPOA and therefore considers American withdrawal and subsequent re-imposition of sanctions a breach of international law. Iran also agrees to resume all its duties outstanding from the deal once the other signatories will be able to compensate the American sanctions. According to the representant of Iran, the escalation of the conflict in the Middle East is primarily caused by American engagement in the region with the help of its regional ally Saudi Arabia. The attack and killing of General **Suleimani** is considered by Iranian officials as a despicable act and a violation of the international law, which will be addressed with an adequate response. As a part of retaliation Iran accidentally shot down a civilian plane for which Iranian premier apologized and promised an independent investigation. Iran refused any claims holding General **Suleimani** responsible for the attacks on numerous American targets as well as it declined any involvement in attack on Saudi oil fields in September 2019. For the de-escalation, the Iranian representant demanded lifting of American sanctions which would enable Iran to strengthen the trade with its energy raw materials and thus help to stop the economic recession threatening the country.

US: President **Trump** and his team declined the accusations portraying killing of General **Suleimani** as an act of international terrorism as they also declined to be presented as an initiator of the escalating tension in the Middle East. American officials claim that the elimination of General **Suleimani** was necessary defensive measure thanks to which many human lives were saved. US government also issued a number of statements emphasizing their restrained attitude regarding the number of Iranian provocative attacks including the attack on Saudi oil facilities considering the fact that Saudi Arabia is an important American ally in the region. The representant of the US thus threatened to impose sanctions on Iraq if it insists on the departure of American troops from its territory. Regarding the assassination of **Jamal Khashoggi** – a Saudi dissident with a voluntary exile in the US who was murdered on October 2, 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by the agents of the Saudi government, the US government has imposed sanctions on 17 Saudis supposedly involved in the assassination. Despite the number of claims that the assassination was carried out by the order of Riyadh, the US supports the statement of the Saudi crown prince **Mohammed bin Salman** that he has nothing to do with mentioned attack.

Saudi Arabia: The killing of General **Suleimani** and subsequent sanctions imposed on Iran by US significantly contributed to improving Saudi Arabia's position within the region mostly regarding the fact of the long-lasting Iranian-Saudi hostility. The Saudi support of American policy towards Iran and Iraq is strengthened by its strategic partnership and its importance for both countries. Regarding the assassination of **Jamal Khashoggi**, Saudi Arabia refuses the accusations that Saudi crown prince **Mohammed bin Salman** ordered the abduction, torture and subsequent murder of the journalist who was known for his criticism of the regime. In reaction to the journalist's murder Saudi government issued a statement informing about charging 5 people with death sentence in connection with the attack.

NATO: Alliance supported the killing of General **Suleimani** as it was considered as an inevitable step in order to avoid a number of potential conflicts within the region. Right after the attack the secretary general Jens Stoltenberg called for de-escalation and resumption of diplomatic negotiations in order to prevent impending conflict but stood behind the US regarding the attack. NATO, like the US, perceived General **Suleimani** as a dangerous man standing behind numerous attacks killing hundreds of civilians. Number of European NATO leaders however condemned the attack as an unjustified escalation of the conflict and called for its immediate de-escalation. After Council of Representatives in Iraq voted for withdrawal of foreign forces from its territory following the Iranian strike on Iraqi military positions housing American and coalition troops in response to the US attack, NATO announced its partial withdrawal while the US stated that it is not their priority.

UN: United Nations as a supervising body of the negotiations called for the situation to be solved through diplomatic ways offering each attending party a space for presenting their demands and opinions. The UN considered the attack on General **Suleimani** as a threat to international peace and thus demands that the US will be held responsible for it. As for the Iranian strike on the Iraqi bases housing American troops, the UN condemns it as an act of useless violence with predictable effects. Concerning the shoot down of the Ukrainian civilian plane by Iran in response to US attack, UN again strongly condemned the irresponsible and violent act and called for detailed investigation led by independent team of experts. The representative of the UN therefore called for restraint and restoration of dialogue as they believe Iraq should not pay for the foreign rivalries.

After two hours of simulated negotiations and intense discussions our participants were able to reach following objectives:

1. The American troops in Iraq will be put under the UN command in order to secure peace and stability in the Middle East.
2. Following the vote, the agreement establishing an observation mission under the supervision of UN in Iraq was reached allowing detailed the objective assessments of the situation.
3. Regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the Iran was still banned from producing nuclear weapons in order to avoid further escalation in the region and the UN experts were granted access to the Iranian nuclear facilities.
4. The deal was closed between Iran and US ensuring a common approach in the fight against residual IS members.
5. All involved parties reached an agreement which will guarantee establishment of international team of experts under the supervision of the UN and subsequent investigation into the shoot down of the Ukrainian civilian airplane.

Although the negotiation process didn't reflect real event, which unfolded in the aftermath of the growing tensions between the United States and Iran, it clearly illustrated and highlighted that the most effective means of de-escalation would be the use of diplomatic methods instead of means of hard power. Perhaps it wouldn't be for the worst if the world leaders sometimes listened to what such a student has to say about it.