

## THINGS FALL APART

### *What do we do if Iraq Implodes?*

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By any definition Iraq is already in a state of civil war.

However, it is not yet at a Lebanon- or Bosnia-like level of all-out civil war and the differences in degree matter. The turmoil in Haiti, for instance, can be labeled “a civil war,” but relatively few people have died or been driven from their homes. Moreover, not all civil wars have the same strategic impact. Strife in Nepal and Sudan has been bloody, but has occurred in peripheral regions and so does not affect U.S. and Western strategic interests directly. The problem with Iraq is that if the current conflict escalates to all-out civil war, it may prove to be that rare combination of rampant violence in a strategically and economically crucial region.

And the trends augur poorly. Inter- and intra-communal carnage claim more and more lives there with each passing month. Perhaps 30,000 Iraqis have already died from strife since the U.S. occupation of Iraq began—and the numbers double when deaths from criminal activity are included. This summer has seen a surge in violence. Refugees and displaced persons number in the hundreds of thousands. While most still cling to the hope that their lives will improve, the numbers are diminishing. The sense of being an “Iraqi,” as opposed to a member of a particular religious, ethnic, or tribal group, is declining too. Militias continue to proliferate as average Iraqis grow fearful of the multiplying reports of ethnic cleansing. Ferocious rejectionists like Muqtada as-Sadr gain new adherents every day—not because Iraqis like what he stands for, but simply because he offers protection and basic services that the Americans and the Iraqi government have failed to provide. Iraq has proven a magnet for Sunni *ihadists* who admire Usama bin Laden, and they have employed unprecedented numbers of suicide bombings with devastating effect. The wealthy, including those recently enriched by graft and organized crime, are sending their money out of the country as quickly as they can, along with their wives and children.

The only thing standing between Iraq and a descent into a Lebanon- or Bosnia-like maelstrom is 135,000 American troops, and even they are merely slowing the fall at this point. Unless the United States and the new government of Iraq take dramatic action to reverse the current trends, the internecine conflict there could easily worsen to the point where it spirals into a full-scale civil war that threatens not only Iraq, but also its neighbors throughout the oil-rich Persian Gulf, with instability, turmoil and war.

This degeneration into all-out civil war is still not inevitable (although the point of no return may be drawing near), and we have laid out in considerable detail elsewhere our visions of alternative courses for the United States to pursue.\*\* We desperately hope to see this scenario

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\*\* See Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Right Way: Seven Steps Toward a Last Chance in Iraq,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2006. Also see Kenneth M. Pollack and the Iraq Strategy Working Group of the Saban Center for Middle

averted, and we are heartened by signs that some American and Iraqi officials, particularly in the U.S. military, recognize the grave problems we face in Iraq and are exploring options to change course. However, given how many mistakes the United States has already made, how much time we have already squandered, how difficult the task is, and how bad things have already gotten, we cannot be confident that even a major course correction from Washington and Baghdad will avert a full-blown civil war in Iraq at this point.

With this in mind, the next question that the United States may have to face is what to do if in spite of (or because of) all our efforts, Iraq explodes into all-out civil war.

### **The Threat from a Civil War**

A full-blown civil war in Iraq would have many disastrous repercussions for the United States, but some would be much worse than others.

Without question, a wider Iraqi civil war would be a humanitarian nightmare. Based on the experiences of other recent major civil wars such as those in the former Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Somalia, Congo, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and elsewhere, we should expect hundreds of thousands (conceivably even millions) of people to die with three to four times more wounded. The same experiences suggest that refugees, both internally and externally displaced, will likely number in the millions. The United States has intervened in other civil wars to stop tragedies on this scale.

Of course, an Iraqi civil war will be even more painful for Americans to bear because, if it happens, it will be our fault. We will have launched the invasion and then failed to secure the peace that will have produced the civil war. For years to come Iraqis, Americans, and indeed most of the world will point their fingers at the U.S. government.

Our efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East will be badly damaged. Americans may argue that what happened in Iraq was not a good test of democracy in the Arab world, but many Arabs are unlikely to see it that way. In particular, both the autocrats of the region and their Islamist political opponents will use the outbreak of full-blown civil war in Iraq to argue that democratization is a recipe for disaster—ignoring all of the risks that democracy's more repressive alternatives entail in terms of breeding more terrorists and more political instability in this troubled part of the world.

A full-blown civil war in Iraq could lead to the loss of most or all Iraqi oil production. Iraqi insurgents, militias, and organized crime rings are already wreaking havoc with Iraq's production and export infrastructure, generally keeping Iraqi production below prewar levels of about 2.2 million barrels per day. Larger and more widespread conflict would almost certainly drive down Iraq's export figures even farther. Unfortunately, there may not be enough spare capacity left elsewhere to cover lost Iraqi production. Thus, all-out civil war, even if it could be contained in Iraq, would drive oil prices even higher than they are today, possibly over \$100 per barrel.

However, the greatest threat that the United States would face from an all-out civil war in Iraq is the problem of spillover. Spillover is the tendency of civil wars to impose burdens, create instability, and even trigger civil wars in other, usually neighboring, countries.

A civil war that did nothing but consume Iraq for 5, 10 or even 15 years would be tragic and painful but not an actual threat to the United States. But civil war in Iraq could drag down its neighbors as well. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran are all major oil producers experiencing

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East Policy, *A Switch in Time: A New Strategy for America in Iraq*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006) and Daniel Byman, "Five Bad Options for Iraq," *Survival* (Spring 2005).

troubling political and economic problems. Jordan is an equally fragile political system in a critical location. We may not like the Syrian regime, but it too is in delicate circumstances and its collapse might not serve our interests either. Turkey is also coping with major societal transformations, and it is a NATO ally we have pledged to defend.

All of these countries matter a great deal to the United States for one reason or another, especially Saudi Arabia, whose oil production is irreplaceable and whose loss as an oil exporter could trigger an economic collapse on the order of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Even low-level strife in Saudi Arabia would roil the markets. Experts on all of these countries worry that the internal problems they already face could cause massive political upheavals. No one should want to find out whether they can also withstand powerful external threats spilling over from a major civil war in Iraq.

### **Managing Spillover**

As historians have noted since time immemorial, some degree of spillover from civil wars seems hard to avoid. Examples of the phenomenon can be found in works on politics from Thucydides to Machiavelli to Hobbes.

However, both the frequency and intensity of spillover vary from conflict to conflict. At one extreme, spillover can mean something as simple and manageable as the loss of trade that countries like Romania and Hungary experienced from the various civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. This was unwelcome, but hardly crippling. At the other extreme, spillover can create interlocking patterns of conflict, with one civil war effectively sparking others in neighboring states. A good example of this phenomenon is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began in the 1920s and continued even after formal hostilities between Israel and neighboring Arab states ended in 1948. The war produced many forms of spillover including masses of Palestinian refugees (augmented in 1967 by Israel's conquest of the West Bank and Gaza). These Palestinian refugees and their continued attacks on Israel contributed to the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, provoked a civil war in Jordan in 1970-71, and when they were defeated and forced to flee to Lebanon, they then triggered the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990. In turn, the Lebanese civil war galvanized internal unrest in Syria, which only ended its own civil war in 1982 by employing horrific levels of violence against its own people.

Frighteningly, such patterns of interlocking civil wars are not uncommon. Genocide and civil war in Rwanda triggered the Congolese civil war that has been raging since 1996. Civil war in Croatia in 1991 triggered the subsequent conflict in Bosnia, which in turn fed the 1998-99 Kosovo war, which gave rise to the guerrilla war in Macedonia in 2001. Likewise, in the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (a civil war within Azerbaijan that was at the heart of Baku's conflict with Armenia) was an important spur to the fighting in Georgia, and both had an impact on the fighting in Chechnya.

Unfortunately, Iraq appears to have many of the conditions most conducive to spillover because there is a high degree of foreign "interest" in Iraq. Ethnic, tribal, and religious groups within Iraq are equally prevalent in neighboring countries and they share many of the same grievances. Iraq has a history of violence with its neighbors, which has fostered desires for vengeance and fomented constant clashes. Iraq also possesses resources that its neighbors covet—oil being the most obvious, but important religious shrines also figure in the mix. There is a high degree of commerce and communication between Iraq and its neighbors, and its borders are porous. All of this suggests that spillover from an Iraqi civil war would tend toward the more dangerous end of the spillover spectrum.

Consequently, if worse comes to worst, and the United States is confronted with an all-out civil war in Iraq, its principal challenge will be to contain any spillover so that it does not destabilize the other states of the region. To do so, the United States needs to start thinking about how best to deal with the five most common and most dangerous forms of spillover.

***Refugees as a Security Risk.*** Massive refugee flows are a hallmark of major civil wars. Afghanistan generated the largest refugee flow since the Second World War, with more than a third of the population fleeing. Conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s also generated millions of refugees and IDPs: in Kosovo, over two thirds of Kosovar Albanians fled the country. In Bosnia half of the country's 4.4 million people were displaced, and one million of them fled the country altogether. Comparable figures for Iraq would mean roughly 13 million IDPs, and over 6 million refugees running to Iraq's neighbors. Congo, Tajikistan, Lebanon, Somalia, and other civil wars also produced massive refugee flows that fundamentally changed the demographics of the country and the region.

The sheer logistical burden of handling the sudden inflow of so many traumatized, impoverished and desperate people can strain even wealthy and developed economies. Countries in the developing world that often fail to provide basic services to their own people may collapse under the strain. Providing water, food, shelter, medical care, and other necessities is often just beyond them. Albania, for example, hosted over half of the 600,000 Kosovar refugees, amounting to roughly 13 percent of its total population—the equivalent of America suddenly taking in 38 million poor, brutalized people.

When refugees flee the carnage of war, they bring with them a host of problems. Most important, refugees often continue the war from their new homes. At times, armed units simply move from one side of the border to the other. The civil war in Tajikistan, for example, forced perhaps 5,000 fighters of the anti-government Islamic Renaissance Party to organize and train from neighboring Afghanistan. Even more worrisome, the expulsion of refugees often swells the ranks of the fighters. Each round of new refugees brings with it stories of rape, murder, and pillage, generating new recruits for the militias.

The millions of Afghans who fled to Pakistan during the anti-Soviet struggle illustrate the potential for violent transformation. Stuck in the camps for years while war consumed their homeland, many refugees were easily persuaded to join radical Islamist organizations in Pakistan that supported various *Mujahidin* movements. When the Soviets departed, refugees became the core of the Taliban, a movement nurtured by Pakistani intelligence and various Islamist political parties that, beginning in 1994, steadily defeated its rivals in Afghanistan and, as it did so, opened the door for 'Usama bin Laden to make it al-Qa'ida's new base of operations.

The refugee camp, often under international protection, often becomes a sanctuary for militia groups. Militia leaders often become the new leaders of the refugee community. Because they have guns, they can offer protection to their kinsmen and impose their will on any rivals. In addition, many of the young men in the refugee camps become prime recruits for continuing the fight: they are angry and jobless, while tribal elders, peaceful politicians, or others who might oppose violence typically find themselves discredited and enfeebled by the flight and the loss of their traditional basis of power (typically control of land).

The presence of militias among the refugees tends to embroil the country hosting them in the civil war. From the camps, the militias launch raids back into their homelands, killing and destroying property. When confronted, they retreat back to their refugee camp hiding behind their own civilian populations. Inevitably, this creates an incentive for their enemies to attack

the camps to get at the militiamen—or even to attack the host government to try to force them to deal with the problem, a pattern Israel repeatedly used to try to deal with Palestinian fighters in Lebanon. Host governments may also begin to use the refugees as tools to influence events back in their homeland, arming, training, and directing them, and thereby exacerbating the conflict.

Perhaps the most tragic example of the problems created by large numbers of refugees occurred in the wake of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. After the Hutu-led genocide unfolded and led to the death of 800,000-1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, which had “invaded” the country in 1990 from neighboring Uganda, intensified operations and toppled the Hutu government. The RPF was drawn from the 500,000 or so Tutsis who had already fled Rwanda from past pogroms and operated from neighboring Uganda. As the RPF swept through Rwanda, almost one million Hutus fled to neighboring Congo, fearing that the evil they did unto others would be done unto them. Mixed in with many innocent Hutus were the *genocidaires*.

The international reaction to the genocide and RPF victory was muddled. Much of the world failed to recognize that the refugees were actually the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of the genocide. So out of revulsion from the Rwandan genocide, countries mistakenly gave humanitarian aid to the architects and implementers of that killing, many of whom had fled to neighboring Congo. For two years after 1994, Hutu bands continued to conduct raids into Rwanda and worked with Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who used them for his own purposes to wreak havoc among the Banyamulenge, a Congolese Tutsi community that lived along the Rwanda-Congo border. Naturally, the new RPF government of Rwanda did not take this lying down: it attacked not only the Hutu militia camps, but also its much larger neighbor, bolstering a formerly obscure Congolese opposition leader named Laurent Kabila and installing him in power in Kinshasa after it fell to the Rwandan (Tutsi) Army. It was this move, coupled with subsequent machinations, that provoked the civil war in Congo in which perhaps four million people died.

As the Congo experience makes clear, refugees can disrupt politics in their new host country with disastrous results. In this case, the refugees became the principal agent of spillover, spreading civil war in Rwanda to Congo.

This is a common consequence of large numbers of refugees. The influx of hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of victims of strife often alarms and angers their kin and supporters in a different country. They may demand that their government take action against the perpetrators. They may directly aid refugee militias. Most worrisome, they may ally with the refugee militias and oppose their own government. Emboldened by the presence of thousands of potential fighters, disgruntled communities may believe they can challenge their own government.

This is particularly true in countries where there is a delicate demographic balance. In Lebanon, for example, the influx of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were expelled from Jordan in 1970 changed the communal balance of power in the country and caused the civil war. The Palestinians were well armed and organized, and they began to work with Sunni Arab supporters in Lebanon. At first, this was simply to allow them to continue their cross-border attacks into Israel from Lebanon. Over time, however, they came into conflict with the Maronites who dominated the government. The Palestinians wanted to attack Israel and the Maronite government tried to keep them from doing so for fear of provoking Israeli retaliation. In response, the PLO increasingly opposed the government (including by force), created their own autonomous enclaves within Lebanon, and encouraged Lebanon’s indigenous Muslim groups—particularly the Sunnis—to oppose the Maronites. Because the Palestinians were

heavily armed, this accelerated the Maronites' mobilization. It was no accident that the Lebanese civil war began with a series of attacks and counterattacks between the PLO and the Maronite militias. Other groups quickly mobilized in response to this violence, and the weak Lebanese government looked on helplessly. Thus, in Lebanon, the "external" problem of Palestinian refugees became a principal source of internal conflict.

The flow of refugees from Iraq could worsen instability in all of its neighbors. In particular, the potential for massive refugee flows among the Shi'ah and Sunni Arabs of Iraq could be devastating to Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Kuwait, for example, has just over a million citizens, roughly one third of whom are Shi'ah. The influx of several hundred thousand Iraqi Shi'ah across the border could change the religious balance in the country overnight. Both these Iraqi refugees and the Kuwaiti Shi'ah might turn against the Sunni-dominated Kuwaiti government if it were to back Sunni groups in Iraq (as seems most likely). The influx of fighters from Iraq could also lead Kuwaiti Shi'ah to see violence as a way of ending the centuries of discrimination they have faced at the hands of Kuwait's Sunnis.

Numbers of displaced persons are already rising in Iraq, although they are nowhere near what they could be if the country slid into all-out civil war. Roughly 100,000 Arabs are believed to have fled northern Iraq under pressure from Kurdish militias.<sup>1</sup> As many as 200,000 Sunni Arabs reportedly have been displaced by the fighting between Sunni groups and the American-led Coalition in western Iraq.<sup>2</sup> In the past eighteen months, 50-100,000 Shi'ah have fled mixed-population cities in central Iraq for greater safety farther south.<sup>3</sup> In an eerie replay of Lebanon, the roughly 30-50,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq are increasingly fleeing the country in response to threats and even attacks by Iraqi Shi'ah and Kurds who see the Palestinians as former henchmen of Saddam and current allies of the Sunnis.<sup>4</sup> So far, in addition to the Palestinians and other foreigners, only the Iraqi upper and middle classes are fleeing the country altogether. Many of them are moving to Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, or the Gulf States, if they can afford it. As one indicator of the size of this flight, since 2004 the Ministry of Education has issued nearly 40,000 letters permitting parents to take their children's academic records abroad.<sup>5</sup> To date, only those with the resources to find a decent life in another country have fled altogether, but if the violence continues to escalate, those without the resources will soon be forced to do so out of sheer necessity and the only place they will be able to afford to go is into vast refugee camps in the nearest neighboring country.

**Terrorism.** Another vexing problem of civil wars is their close association with the problem of terrorism. Critics of the war in Iraq and subsequent occupation have argued, correctly, that it has proven a disaster for the struggle against Usama bin Laden and his allies. In Iraq, fighters are receiving training, building networks, and becoming further radicalized—and the U.S. occupation there is proving a dream recruiting tool for radicalizing young Muslims around the world. Peter Bergen, an expert on al-Qa'ida, argues that the war in Iraq may prove more valuable to the *jihadi* movement than the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan.

Yet a closer look at Iraq and the problem of spillover suggests that a massive civil war there would exacerbate many problems of terrorism and create new ones. Many civil wars have proven to be breeding grounds for particularly noxious terrorist groups, while others have created hospitable sanctuaries for existing terrorist groups to train, recruit, and mount operations—at times against foes entirely unconnected to the civil war.

Interneine conflicts are frequently the most vicious conflicts of all, with many accepted constraints on behavior in warfare falling by the wayside. In part, this is derived from the fact

that in many civil wars, there are no organized armies standing between a civilian population and an attacking army; both armies are generally drawn from, and therefore mixed up among, the civilians, which is why levels of civilian deaths are proportionately higher in civil wars. This in turn tends to rapidly erode the moral prohibitions on killing civilians, and rewards those who are willing to do it. Thus inured, it is only a short step from killing large numbers of civilians in your own country in civil war, to killing large numbers of civilians in another country, especially one that you believe somehow aided your enemies in that war.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Islamic Armed Group (GIA), and the PLO were all born of civil wars. All eventually shifted from merely attacking their enemies in the territory in question (Sri Lanka, Algeria, Northern Ireland and mandatory Palestine, respectively), to mounting attacks elsewhere. The LTTE assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi because of his intervention in Sri Lanka. The GIA did the same in the mid-1990s, beginning with the hijacking of an Air France flight and moving on to bombings in metropolitan France. In the 1970s various Palestinian groups began launching terrorist attacks against Israelis wherever they could find them—including at the Munich Olympics, the Athens airport, and the Rome airport—and then went beyond that to mount attacks on Western civilians whose governments supported Israel. Other terrorist groups that often existed for many years before a civil war broke out expanded their operations as violence at home intensified. As the “Troubles” persisted and led to a low-level civil war in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army decided that it had to take the war home to the British people and so began a campaign of attacks in Great Britain (and also on British targets in the Netherlands and Germany) in the 1980s.

Over the past 25 years, however, the connection between terrorism and civil wars has become even more dangerous because of the rise of radical Islamist movements that have a strong anti-U.S. agenda. The Lebanese civil war became a front in the war Shi’i extremists were waging to spread Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution. Most famously, Iranian Revolutionary Guards helped create Hizballah to secure Shi’i goals in Lebanon and then turned it into an international terrorist organization that has attacked Americans, Israelis, and others on four continents. Hizballah and a number of smaller radical Shi’i groups found a cause, a sanctuary, and a recruiting center in the chaos of civil war in Lebanon.

In recent decades, civil wars involving Muslims have also become part of the Sunni salafi *jihadi* phenomenon, inspiring young men to join the cause and serving as a place for them to arm, train, and organize. In Afghanistan, the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir, and elsewhere, insurgencies that often began for local reasons steadily became enmeshed in a broader international movement whose figurehead is ‘Usama bin Laden. Through skillful propaganda, Bin Ladin’s movement painted these struggles as instances of Western oppression of Muslims, inspiring young men to join the fight and other Muslims to give financially.

Although many local insurgencies and civil wars added fuel to the fire, nothing compared with Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. The anti-Soviet struggle in the 1980s was a key incubator for the movement Bin Ladin came to champion. The successful defeat of the Soviet superpower vindicated the jihadists’ struggle. In Afghanistan, Bin Ladin, his deputy ‘Ayman al-Zawahiri, and many other senior officials and operators forged strong bonds that lasted after the battle with the Soviets ended in 1989. In addition, the Afghan war experience helped reorient Jihadist ideology. Many young Mujahidin went to Afghanistan with only the foggiest notion of what jihad was. They hated the Soviets, and they admired the Mujahidin for fighting back, but they had few firm ideas beyond that. But during the course of the fighting in Afghanistan a

frightening cross-fertilization occurred. Individuals took on the grievances of one another, such that Saudi jihadists learned to hate the Egyptian government and Chechens learned to hate Israel. Meanwhile, through intensive proselytizing, al-Qa'ida was able to convince them all that the United States was at the center of the Muslim world's problems—a view that almost no Sunni terrorist group had embraced before.

Civil wars such as Afghanistan that involve terrorist groups can spawn new, previously unimaginable, forms of horror. Throughout the 1970s, Fatah and other PLO groups were often touted as the worst of the worst when it came to terrorism. Then the Lebanese civil war birthed Shi'i terrorist groups like Hizballah, which conducted mass casualty attacks on U.S. military and diplomatic facilities, and introduced the tactic of suicide bombing as well as aggressive hostage taking. Hizballah for many years wore the badge of “worst terrorist group” until, on 9/11, al-Qa'ida killed almost ten times as many Americans in one day as Hizballah did in its entire history. Iraq's civil war has already seen serial beheadings. The power of violence to shock often diminishes with familiarity, leading terrorists to seek new ways to impress and horrify.

Although locals may not share the terrorists' agenda, they still may seek their aid. Contestants in civil wars often cast about desperately for allies, regardless of how unsavory they are. Bosnian Muslims quietly invited jihadists from around the Muslim world to aid them: international censure of these groups meant little to the beleaguered Bosnians, who welcomed an ally who would fight.

The most worrisome terrorism-related problem should Iraq descend into civil war, especially if, as seems likely, this were preceded or accompanied by an American military redeployment, is that Iraq could then become a sanctuary for terrorist groups of all stripes, possibly even exceeding the problems of Lebanon in the 1980s or Afghanistan under the Taliban. Iraq would likely become an Afghanistan-like field of jihad, a place where radicals come to meet, train, fight, and forge bonds that last when they leave Iraq for the West or for other countries in the region. Although many Sunni jihadists travel to Iraq to fight now, the situation could easily get worse. The anti-Turkish Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which has long fought to establish a Kurdish state in Turkey from bases in Iraq, could again become active. The more that Iraq is consumed by chaos, the more likely that the PKK will again gain a haven in northern Iraq.

Right now, the U.S. military presence keeps a lid on the jihadist effort: although they are highly active, there is no equivalent of the massive training camps or above-ground existence that the radicals enjoyed in Afghanistan. Likewise, Hizballah and other Shi'i terrorist groups have maintained a relatively low profile in Iraq so far, but the more embattled the Shi'ah feel, the more likely they will be to invite greater Hizballah involvement to teach them and even fight for them given Hizballah's demonstrated prowess in both guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Shi'ah fighters might even strike the Sunni backers of their adversaries in Iraq, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, or incite their own Shi'a populations against them.

The Sunni jihadists would be particularly likely to go after Saudi Arabia given the long, lightly-patrolled border between the two, as well as their long interest in destabilizing the Al Saud, who rule the heartland of Islam. Ties are tight: Sunni resistance groups in Iraq have at times turned to Saudi religious scholars to validate their activities.<sup>6</sup> The turmoil in Iraq has also energized young Saudi Islamists, who see it as emblematic of broader problems facing the Muslim world. For now, many Saudi jihadists have decided to fight in Iraq, in part because doing so is a clearer “defensive jihad” than struggling with the Al Saud.<sup>7</sup> In the future, the balance might shift from Saudis helping Iraqi fighters against the Americans and Iraqi Shi'ah



(and Kurds) to Iraqi fighters helping Saudi jihadists against the Saudi government with Saudi oil infrastructure an obvious target. Indeed, in February of this year jihadists launched a serious, but unsuccessful, attack on Saudi Arabia's key oil export node. The attack failed but still caused oil prices to rise by \$2 a barrel—a success would have led to a far bigger jump.

The November 9, 2005 attacks on three hotels in Amman, Jordan that killed 60 people may be a harbinger of a broader terrorism problem to come. The attacks were carried out by Sunni Iraqis, though orchestrated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian. If the jihadists had even more freedom of action, the pace and scale of such attacks would certainly grow.

***Radicalization of populations.*** One of the most insidious problems of spillover created by civil wars is their tendency to inflame the passions of neighboring populations. At the most basic level, this is simply a matter of proximity: chaos and slaughter 5,000 miles away rarely has the same emotional impact as massacres five miles down the road. It is far easier for people to identify and empathize with those they live near, even if they are on the other side of an imaginary boundary. Invariably, the problem is exacerbated whenever ethnic, religious, racial, or other groupings spill across those borders. Then the members of a group have a powerful tendency to identify with, take the side of, support, and even fight on behalf of, the members of their group in the neighboring country. A sense of cross-border affinity, indeed kinship, is particularly strong in the Middle East. As one example, Arabs have embraced the Palestinian cause from Oran to Oman.

Frequently, people demand that their government intervene on behalf of their compatriots embroiled in the civil war. Alternatively, and especially if they perceive that their government will be reluctant to do so, they may begin to aid their co-religionists or co-ethnics on their own—taking in refugees, funneling money and guns, providing sanctuary, furnishing information, or however else they can do so. The Albanian government came under heavy pressure from their people to support the Kosovar Albanians fighting for independence (or, at times, autonomy) from the Serbs. As a result, Tirana provided covert aid and overt diplomatic support to the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998-99, and threatened to intervene to prevent Serbia from crushing the Kosovars. Similarly, numerous Irish groups clandestinely supported the Irish Republican Army against the Orangemen and the British, especially during the early days of the Troubles. Indeed, the signature IRA weapon—the Armalite—was a civilian version of the U.S.-manufactured M-16. Irish Americans famously provided money, guns and other supplies to the IRA and lobbied the U.S. government to intervene on their behalf against the British government.

Sometimes, the radicalization works the other way around: rather than demanding that they or their country intervene on behalf of their compatriots enmeshed in the civil war, just as frequently, it can cause civil unrest and even conflict within the neighboring states. Oftentimes, the neighboring population feels the same or similar grievances as their compatriots across the border. Seeing them fighting to change their circumstances can provoke members of the same group in the neighboring country to do the same. The Lebanese civil war furnishes an example of this. Although Sunni Syrians had chafed under the minority Alawite dictatorship since the 1960s, members of the Muslim Brotherhood—the leading Sunni Arab opposition group—were inspired to action by events in Lebanon. There they saw Lebanese Sunni Arabs fighting to wrest their fair share of political power from the minority Maronite-dominated government in Beirut. This spurred their own decision to begin organizing against Hafiz al-Asad's minority Alawite regime in Damascus. Unfortunately for the Muslim Brotherhood, Asad's regime was not as

weak as the Maronite-dominated government in Lebanon, and at Hama in 1982, he infamously razed the center of the city, a major Muslim Brotherhood stronghold, killing 25-50,000 people and snuffing out the Brotherhood's revolt.

In still other cases, radicalization is manifested in a combination of the two phenomenon: a desire to help compatriots mired in civil war leading to demands on the government, only to have the government refuse to do so, which in turn provokes conflict with the government and its supporters in the population. Lebanese Muslims staunchly supported the Palestinians against Israel and cheered the efforts by other Arab states to aid the Palestinians. After both the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, they were appalled that the Maronite-dominated government did nothing to help the Arab cause against Israel. This was part of the powder keg of animosity between Muslims and Christians that the PLO essentially detonated after it fled Jordan for Lebanon in the early 1970s.

Iraq's neighbors are very vulnerable to this aspect of spillover. Iraq's own divisions are mirrored throughout the region: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain all have sizable Shi'ah communities. In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'ah are only about 10 percent of the population, but they are heavily concentrated in its oil-rich Eastern Province. Bahrain's population is majority Shi'ah, although the regime is Sunni. Likewise, Turkey, Iran and Syria all have important Kurdish minorities, which are geographically concentrated adjacent to Iraqi Kurdistan. Jordan too has important societal cleavages (primarily between "East Banker" Jordanians and Palestinians) and factional conflict in Iraq could antagonize its internal relations as well.

Populations in some of the countries around Iraq are already evincing dangerous signs of such radicalization. In Bahrain, organized confrontations between Shi'ah and government security forces have become matters of real concern. In March 2006, after the Sunni jihadist bombing of the Shi'i Askariya Shrine in Iraq, over 100,000 Bahraini Shi'ah (along with a few sympathetic Sunnis) took to the streets in anger. In 2004, when American forces were battling Sunni insurgents in Fallujah, large numbers of Sunnis likewise came out to protest. Bahrain's Shi'ah are simultaneously angry over the suffering of their co-religionists in Iraq and encouraged by the success of the Iraqi Shi'ah in gaining political power to seek the same for themselves in Bahrain. Naturally, Bahrain's Sunnis reject all of their demands and ascribe their unhappiness to Iranian machinations. *The New York Times* quoted one Bahraini Shi'i politician as saying, "It is only natural that we'd be affected by Iraq, but that effect has begun to hurt us. Whenever things in Iraq go haywire, it reflects here."<sup>8</sup>

Some Kurdish groups have called on their brothers in Iran to revolt against the Iranian regime. There has been unrest in Iranian Kurdistan, prompting Iran to deploy troops to the border and even shell Kurdish positions in Iraq. The Turks too have deployed additional forces to the Iraqi border to prevent any movement of Kurdish forces between the two countries.

Most ominous of all, tensions are rising between Sunnis and Shi'ah in the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where a *Los Angeles Times* report quoted a senior Saudi Shi'i cleric as saying, "Saudi Sunnis are defending Iraqi Sunnis, and Saudi Shiites are defending Iraqi Shiites. There's a fear that it will cause a struggle."<sup>9</sup> The horrors of sectarian war are only miles away. As in Bahrain, many Saudi Shi'ah saw the success of Iraq's Shi'ah as an example to follow and are now demanding better political and economic treatment for themselves. Initially, the government made a number of modest concessions, but now they are facing a backlash from the Kingdom's Sunnis, who are openly accusing the Shi'ah of heresy and of being the puppets of Iran. Religious leaders on both sides have begun to warn of a coming *fitna*, a civil war or schism within Islam.

*Secession breeds secessionism.* Closely related to the phenomenon of radicalized populations is the tendency for one secessionist movement, especially a successful one, to spawn copycat attempts. Repressive regimes make this claim frequently to justify harsh actions against internal dissent, but there is historical precedent during instances of major civil war.

The mechanics are easy to understand. One oppressed group with a sense of national identity stakes a claim to independence and goes to war to achieve it. As long as they don't get crushed immediately, other groups with similar identities and aspirations, can be inspired to do the same—it's often as simple as, "if those guys can do it, so can we." For that reason, foreign recognition and assistance to a breakaway republic is often crucial to whether secession spreads. If one group is awarded with foreign assistance and recognition, other groups will feel that they should risk doing the same.

The various civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s provide a good example of this phenomenon. Slovenia was determined to declare independence, which led the Croats to follow suit—even though they were nowhere near as prepared for it as the Slovenes. When the Serbs (first Croatian Serbs, but quickly joined by the Belgrade government) opposed Croatian secession from Yugoslavia by force, the first of the Yugoslav civil wars broke out. Foolishly, the German government pushed the rest of the European Union into recognizing both Slovene and Croatian independence in the mistaken belief that this would end the bloodshed. Not only did it not halt the Croat-Serb fighting, it placed Bosnia-Herzegovina in a very tough spot. Many Bosniac Muslims wanted independence and when they saw both the Slovenes and Croats rewarded for their revolts, it encouraged them to pursue the same. By the same token, the new Bosnian government feared that if they did not declare independence, Serbia and Croatia would gobble up the respective Serb- and Croat-inhabited parts of their country. Bosnian Muslims had been content in a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, but the departure of the Slovenes and Croats meant that the rump state would be dominated by Serbs. As a result, Bosnia held a referendum on independence on March 1, 1992 that returned a 98 percent vote in favor of independence. The barricades went up all over Sarajevo the next day, kicking off the worst of the Balkan civil wars.

Nor did it stop there. The eventual success of the Bosniacs—even though they had to suffer through four horrific years of war—and the fact that the international community led by the United States came to their rescue, recognized their new state, and forced the Serbs to accede to their independence at Dayton in 1995, was an important element of Kosovar Albanian thinking when they began to agitate against the Serbian government in 1997-98. Serbian repression sparked an escalation toward independence that ended in the 1999 Kosovo War between NATO and Serbia. Although Kosovo only won autonomy, it was a very independent form of autonomy, and in turn it inspired Albanians in Macedonia (aided by former members of the KLA) to launch a guerrilla war against the Skopje government in hope of achieving the same or better.

Secession can engulf groups that seem too small or obscure to merit their own state. South Ossetia, a western sliver of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia objected to its inclusion in the new, independent, Republic of Georgia and fought a civil war for its own independence. Seeing the South Ossetians' relative success, another small group, the Abkhaz, likewise proclaimed themselves independent, spreading the civil strife to the eastern end of the country.

In Iraq's case, the first candidate for secession is obvious: Kurdistan. The Kurds of Iraq are part of a distinct nation of 25 million people living in a geographically contiguous space with their own language, culture, and traditions. If any group on Earth deserves its own nation, the

Kurds surely do. However, if the Kurds do decide to go their own way, they might not be the last to do so. Smaller groups, like the Turcoman and Chaldeans might try the same, believing that it will be too dangerous to remain a part of an Iraq that is descending into widespread ethnic cleansing. Even the Arabs could prove susceptible to the siren song of secession. Throughout the Ottoman period, Iraq was divided in three, creating an antecedent for leaders to cite. Indeed, 'Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the most powerful Shi'ah party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), has been pushing for Iraq's nine southeastern provinces to form a regional bloc with all of the same rights and autonomies as Kurdistan. Although other Shi'ah have strongly opposed SCIRI on this issue, Hakim's position is widely recognized as a first step toward secession for the south.

Not only could declarations of independence by groups within Iraq spur other Iraqi groups to do the same, but it could trigger secessionist movements (and civil conflicts) elsewhere around the region. Iraq's neighbors are just as fractured as Iraq itself. Should Iraq fragment, voices for secession will gain strength among Iraq's neighbors. However, if the Iraqi Kurds declare their independence and are recognized and protected by the international community for doing so, it is not hard to imagine Kurdish groups in Turkey and Iran following suit. Iran already has had problems with its Kurdish minority, and this might also encourage elements of Iran's Azeri, Arab, and Baluchi populations to follow suit. This alone could also have dangerous consequences for some of the Gulf States, but if Iraq's Shi'ah were to precede or follow the Kurds down the path of secession, it would raise a real threat of secessionist movements (and thus, secessionist conflicts) arising among the Shi'ah of Saudi Arabia's eastern province in particular. Nor should we exclude possibilities of surprise secessionist movements. Few predicted that the Abkhaz or South Ossetians would seek self-rule: Iraq and its neighbors are also home to myriad communal groups that, while small, may decide that fighting for independence is better than being dominated by a hostile ethnic or religious group.

*Neighborly interventions.* In part because of the four reasons enumerated above, another critical problem of civil wars is the tendency of neighboring states to intervene in them, turning civil war into regional war and often destabilizing the intervening states. Foreign governments may intervene to "stabilize" the country and so shut down the masses of refugees pouring across their borders, as the European Union did in the various Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Neighboring states will intervene to eliminate terrorist groups setting up shop in the midst of the civil war, as Israel did repeatedly in Lebanon. They may intervene either in response to the radicalization of their population (in other words, their population is angry at the misfortune of compatriots embroiled in the civil war and their country is intervening to help those groups) or to end that radicalization by shutting down the civil war or to stop the flow of "dangerous ideas" into their own country. Iran and Tajikistan both intervened in the Afghan civil war on behalf of co-religionists and co-ethnicists suffering at the hands of the rabidly Sunni, rabidly Pashtun Taliban, just as Syria intervened in Lebanon for fear that the conflict there was radicalizing its own Sunni population. Governments afraid of secession movements in their country will often intervene to prevent groups from successfully seceding across the border. Pakistan repeatedly intervened in Afghanistan in part to forestall Pashtun irredentism that would claim parts of Pakistan's territory. In virtually every case, these interventions only brought further grief both to the interveners and to the parties of the civil war.

Of course, these are hardly the only reasons for foreign intervention in civil wars. At times, it happens for purely humanitarian reasons, although this tends to be half-hearted if there

is no corollary, strategic motive. Thus international action in Darfur has been motivated almost solely by humanitarian impulses, but for the same reason has been rather pathetic.

Opportunism is a more powerful motive. States often harbor designs on their neighbors' land and resources and will see in the chaos of civil war the opportunity to achieve long-frustrated ambitions. While Hafiz al-Asad clearly feared the impact of civil war in Lebanon on Syria's own internal stability, it also seems likely that he saw Lebanon as an illegitimate and artificial state wrested from Syria by Western imperialists in 1943, and that by invading Lebanon in 1976 he could reunite Syria with its wayward province. Similarly, much as Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic may have felt the need to intervene in the Bosnian civil war to protect their fellow Croats and Serbs respectively, it seems clear that a more important motive for both was to carve up Bosnia between them.

Fear of a new, radical or hostile government prevailing in a civil war can also trigger foreign interventions. Rwanda's repeated meddling in Congo after the fall of Mobutu led Angola and other neighbors of Congo to intervene to prevent the government from becoming Rwanda's pawn. A motley alliance of Iran, Russia, and several central Asian states banded together to intervene collectively in Afghanistan because all of them shared the same fear that if the radical Taliban were successful, it would create problems for all of them. The fact that the Taliban were seen as Pakistan's creature was also a cause of concern. Another element of Israel's decision to invade Lebanon in 1982 was its fear that the Muslims (with Syrian and Palestinian backing) would win the civil war and a new Muslim-dominated government would take a more active role in the Arab conflict with Israel.

Intervention can take many forms. Many states attempt only to influence the course of the conflict by providing money, weapons, and other support to one side or another in the civil war. In effect, they use their intelligence services to create "proxies" who can fight the war and secure their aims for them. Frequently though, these proxies prove too weak or too independent to achieve the backer's goals, which creates an incentive for the government to mount a more overt military intervention. Both Syria in 1974-75 and Israel in 1976-82 attempted to employ proxies in Lebanon but found them inadequate to the task, prompting their own invasions. In the Balkans, the United States provided some degree of assistance to the Croatian Army in 1995 and this was one reason for the wildly successful Croat-Bosnian offensive that year. However, by October 1995, the Croat offensive had shot its bolt and was in danger of being rolled back by Serbian counterattacks had the Dayton Accords—and the deployment of 50,000 NATO troops, including a 20,000-man American division—not ended the war.

Interestingly, states typically opt for covert intervention to try to limit the potential blowback against them, but this rarely seems to work. The best example of this is the Pakistani intervention in Afghanistan. Pakistan is one of the few countries to have succeeded in using a proxy force, the Taliban, to secure its interests in a civil war. However, this "victory" came at a horrendous price. Pakistan's support of these radical Islamists affected its own societal balance, encouraging the explosion of Islamic fundamentalism inside Pakistan itself, increasing the number of armed groups operating from Pakistan, creating networks for drugs and weapons to fuel the conflict, and threatening the cohesion of the state. Today, Pakistan is a basket case and much of the reason for this state of affairs lies in its costly effort to prevail in the Afghan civil war.

Pakistan is an extreme example, but all of these interventions—successful or unsuccessful, covert or overt—tend to impose painful or even debilitating costs on the intervening countries. Israel's bitter experience in Lebanon from 1975 until 2000 illustrates the

pitfalls that even a strong state faces when intervening in a civil war. Israel's interventions led to political scandal, the downfall of the Begin government, estrangement between the Israeli officer corps and its political leadership, and growing public animosity with the government. From 1975 till 2000, nearly 1,500 Israeli soldiers were killed in Lebanon, making it the third most deadly conflict Israel fought.<sup>10</sup> As every Israeli knows, Israel was attacked by the Arab states in the two most deadly conflicts—the War of Independence and the October War of 1973, while Lebanon was seen as a war of choice. The expense of Israel's 25-year involvement in Lebanon is ultimately unclear, but the 1982 invasion alone cost it roughly \$2.5 billion (at a time when Israel's GDP was only \$35 billion) and slowed growth to virtually zero while boosting its foreign debt and inflation to record highs.<sup>11</sup> By the 1990s, it was widely called "Israel's Vietnam" by Israelis themselves. Israel, of course, is a wealthy country; the effects on the poor neighbors of Somalia, Congo, Tajikistan, and other conflicts were even more devastating.

Foreign intervention at the covert level is proceeding apace in Iraq. Iran has led the way and enjoyed the greatest advantage. American and Iraqi sources report that there are several thousand Iranian agents of all kinds already in Iraq. These personnel have simultaneously funneled money, guns, and other support to friendly Shi'i groups and established the infrastructure to wage a large-scale clandestine war should they ever need to do so. Iran has set up an extensive network of safe houses, arms caches, communications channels, agents of influence, and proxy fighters, and will be well positioned to pursue its interests in a full-blown civil war if it comes to that. The Sunni powers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey are all frightened by Iran's growing influence and presence inside Iraq and have been scrambling to catch up. They have begun to create a similar network, largely among Iraq's Sunni population. Turkey may be the most likely country to intervene overtly. Turkish leaders fear both the spillover of Turkish secessionism and the possibility that Iraq is becoming a haven for the PKK. Turkey has already massed troops on its southern border, and officials are already threatening to intervene. Thus, it seems highly likely that there will be a heavy international component in any Iraqi civil war.

What's more, none of Iraq's neighbors believe that they can afford to have the country fall into the hands of the other side. Both Iran and the Sunni states would likely see victory in an Iraqi civil war for the other side as being an enormous boon in terms of oil wealth and geographic position. An Iranian "victory" would put Iranian forces in the heartland of the Arab world, bordering Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for the first time—several of these states poured tens of billions of dollars into Saddam's military to prevent just such an occurrence in the 1980s. Similarly, a Sunni Arab victory (backed by the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and Jordanians at the very least) would put radical Sunni fundamentalists on Iran's own doorstep—a nightmare for the Iranians because many Salafi jihadists hate the Shi'ah more than they hate Americans. Add to this the tremendous incentive for each country to at least prevent any other from being able to capture all of Iraq's oil resources, and it argues that if these states are unable to achieve their goals through clandestine intervention, they will have a powerful incentive to launch a conventional invasion. The potential for civil war in Iraq escalating to a regional war is therefore high.

### **The Challenge of Containing Spillover**

If Iraq spirals into an all-out civil war, the United States will have its work cut out for it attempting to prevent spillover from destabilizing the region and threatening key governments, particularly Saudi Arabia. Washington will have to devise strategies toward Iraq and its

neighbors that can deal with the problems of refugees, minimize terrorist attacks emanating from Iraq, dampen the anger in neighboring populations caused by the conflict, prevent an outbreak of secession fever, and keep Iraq's neighbors from intervening.

This will not be easy. In fact, the odds are that we will fail. But if Iraq does descend into an all out civil war, we will have to try. With this in mind, we offer below a number of policy options and broader observations on containing spillover. At best, the options discussed will solve only part of the problem. Moreover, all are difficult, and some are costly and require a large U.S. military commitment.

***Provide Support to Iraq's Neighbors.*** Radicalization of neighboring populations is frequently the most dangerous form of spillover, but it is also the most ineffable, making it very difficult to address. Yet there are historical cases where radicalization did not occur. The Druze of Lebanon were major players in the Lebanese civil war and fought titanic battles against the Israeli-backed Maronites. Israel itself has a significant Druze population that could easily have become enraged against Jerusalem as a result, but did not. The principal reason (along with heavy Shin Bet monitoring) appears to be that Israeli Druze were relatively content with their lot and either chose not to jeopardize it by opposing the government's policies, or else they were less able to empathize with the Lebanese Druze because they did not feel the same degree of anger and desperation with their own situation. Similarly, there were large numbers of Rumanians, Hungarians and Bulgarians in the former Yugoslavia, and all three of these countries were affected economically and politically by the various civil wars there. However, none intervened in the fighting, largely because their socio-economic situations were improving considerably as a result of aid and assistance from the European Union, coupled with the prospect of eventual membership.

This experience suggests that the United States should provide assistance to Iraq's neighbors to reduce the likelihood that their own deprivation will create sympathy for, or incite emulation of, the actions of their compatriots in Iraq. The more content the people of neighboring states, the less likely they will be to want to get involved in someone else's civil war. Aid also provides some leverage with the government in question, making them more likely to hesitate before going against U.S. wishes. Generous aid packages can be explicitly provided with the proviso that they will be stopped (and sanctions possibly applied instead) if the receiving country intervenes in the Iraqi conflict. Thus, much of the foreign aid money currently provided to Iraq itself may need to be redirected to its neighbors in the event of a full-scale civil war.

***Dissuade Intervention.*** The United States, hopefully along with its European and Asian allies, will have to make a major effort to convince Iraq's neighbors not to intervene in an Iraqi civil war. Given the extent of their involvement already, this will be difficult to do. Only a combination of big positive incentives and equally large negative ones have any chance of succeeding. The positives should consist of the economic aid described above, as well as specific benefits tailored to the needs of the individual countries. For Jordan and Saudi Arabia it might be an effort to reinvigorate Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, thereby addressing another one of their major concerns. For Turkey, it might be pushing harder for acceptance into the EU. For Syria and Iran, it might be an easier road to rehabilitation and acceptance back into the international community. Economic assistance will likely be important to some of these countries, but we should not assume that it will be sufficient for any of them.

In addition, Washington and its allies are going to have to level some very serious threats at Iraq's neighbors to try to keep them from intervening too brazenly. Multilateral sanctions packages could be imposed on any state that openly intervenes. At the very least, there should be a general embargo on the purchase of any Iraqi oil sold by any country other than the Iraqi government. This would be hard to enforce because of the ease with which Iraq's oil-rich neighbors could play shell-games with oil stolen from Iraq if they chose to do so. However, it might help remove some of the incentive to seize Iraq's oil fields and every little bit helps.

In addition, specific disincentives will have to be crafted to affect the thinking of specific states. Jordan could be threatened with the loss of all Western economic assistance and Turkey with its bid at EU membership. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait would be extremely difficult for the United States to coerce, and the best Washington might do is to merely try to convince them that it would be counterproductive and unnecessary for them to intervene—unnecessary because the U.S. and its allies will make a major exertion to keep Iran from intervening, which will be one of Riyadh's greatest worries.

Preventing Iran from intervening, especially given how much it has already intruded on Iraqi affairs, is going to be the biggest headache of all. Given Iran's immense interests in Iraq, some level of intervention is inevitable. For Tehran (and probably for Damascus too), the United States and its allies will likely have to lay down "red lines" regarding what is absolutely impermissible—like sending uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq, claiming Iraqi territory, or inciting Iraqi groups to secede from the country. The U.S. and its allies will also have to lay out what they will do to Iran if it crosses any of those red lines. Economic sanctions would be one possible reaction, but this is only likely to be effective if the United States has the full cooperation of the EU, if not Russia, China and India as well. On its own, the United States could employ punitive military operations, either to make Iran pay an unacceptable price for one-time infractions (and so try to deter them from additional breaches) or to convince them to halt an ongoing violation of one or more red lines. Certainly the United States has the military power to inflict tremendous damage on Iran for short or long periods of time; however, the Iranians probably will keep their intervention covert to avoid providing Washington with a clear provocation. In addition, all of this will take place in the context of either a resolution or ongoing crisis over Iran's nuclear program, either of which could add enormous complications to America's willingness to use force against Iran to deter or punish it for intervening in Iraq.

***Problems with Picking Winners.*** From Washington, it is tempting to consider ways to work with one Iraqi faction against another in an effort to manage the Iraqi civil war from within. In theory, the United States could choose proxies and use them to secure its interests.

The experiences of other powers, however, suggest how difficult this is. The Soviet Union tried to prop up Najibullah when they left Afghanistan, and Israel used various Maronite militias—particularly the Phalange—as its proxies in Lebanon, but they all proved ineffective. When its initial bid failed, Israel instead created the South Lebanese Army to perform the lesser function of merely policing the Israeli border, in which it largely failed too (one SLA observer described their role as "sandbags for an Israeli bunker.") Syria initially tried to use the Palestine Liberation Army to secure its interests in Lebanon, but its total failure forced Damascus to invade instead. Washington has tried to do the same in Somalia with equally disastrous results. Proxies are often too weak to accomplish the Herculean tasks an outside power desires, like preventing spillover. Proxies rarely fight well simply out of obligation to a foreign patron. They tend to take the outside power's weapons and money and then act, often brutally, in their own



interests. Indeed, as Pakistan discovered with the Taliban, even success can be dangerous, as the proxy can start manipulating politics across the border.

Moreover, the iron law of civil wars is that they are inherently unpredictable and it is difficult, if not impossible to determine *a priori* who will prevail in a civil war. Interestingly, the “victor” is rarely a key player, or even a known commodity, in the country beforehand. Hizballah did not exist in Lebanon at the start of the civil war there, nor did the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Along these lines, in Iraq, as in most civil wars, it is not clear which proxy would be the most effective militarily. The Soviets, Syrians, Israelis, Pakistanis, and others repeatedly backed proxies that were unpopular, feckless, and brutal. Leadership matters tremendously in civil wars, but only after the fact is a particular leader’s military genius clear. Ahmed Shah Masud’s generalship was the key to the Northern Alliance’s ability to hold out against the Taliban and it is unclear whether they could have survived had the United States not crushed the Taliban a month after his assassination by al-Qa’eda on September 9, 2001. And numbers seldom tell the tale. For decades, Lebanon’s Druze have been one of the country’s most important military factions, despite composing a small fraction of Lebanon’s overall population. Moreover, many communities are divided, fighting against one another more than against their supposed enemies. Thus Iraq’s Shi’a may go the way of the Palestinians or the various Lebanese factions, who generally killed more of their own than they killed of their declared enemies.

***Manage the Kurds.*** Because of the ease with which secessionism can spread, and the number of groups in the Persian Gulf who could easily fall prey to such thinking, it will probably be necessary for the United States to persuade the Iraqi Kurds not to declare their independence anytime soon. Iraq’s Kurds (and all of the Kurds of the region) deserve independence, but this should only come as part of a legal process under conditions of peace and stability. In the runup to or in the midst of a massive civil war, it could create destabilizing problems well beyond Kurdistan.

To some extent, Kurdistan must, nevertheless, be managed as if it were independent—as if it were one of Iraq’s neighbors. Since the Peshmerga are fully capable of keeping the chaos from a civil war in the rest of the country out of Kurdistan, it is likely to look and feel like a different country. The United States will have to convince the Kurds not to “intervene” in the rest of Iraq. That will mean helping them deal with their refugee problems, providing them with considerable economic assistance to minimize the radicalization of their own population, and likely providing them with security guarantees—or better still, U.S. military forces—to deter either Iran or Turkey from attacking them. Indeed, one U.S. red line for Iran ought to be no attacks, covert or overt, on the Kurds.

So far, Kurdish politicians have often behaved with remarkable forbearance and perspicacity regarding both Iraq’s future and their role in it. They understand how difficult it will be for them to secede while Iraq is in a state of upheaval, but there is a powerful popular desire for independence now. If the rest of the country falls into true chaos, it may be difficult for even the most statesmen-like of Kurdish leaders to resist demands for independence. Moreover, there are large numbers of Kurds living in the mixed-population areas of Baghdad and central Iraq who will be threatened by civil war, while many Kurds harbor irredentist designs on Kirkuk and a number of other towns. These forces too will push them to intervene. Thus the United States has to stop being so niggardly with its support for the Kurds; the only way to keep them in Iraq, at least temporarily and technically, will be to ensure their security and prosperity.

In the end, after years of bloodshed and ethnic cleansing, a massive civil war in Iraq may eventually create conditions for a stable partition. However, any movement toward secession today would be likely to trigger the massacres and ethnic cleansing we seek to avert.

***Strike at Terror Facilities in Iraq.*** Should Iraq fall into all-out civil war, Washington will have to accept some level of terrorist activity there. However, we should continue to try to limit the ability of terrorists to use Iraq as a haven for attacks outside the country. The best way to do that will be to retain assets (air power, special operations forces, and a major intelligence and reconnaissance effort) in the vicinity to identify and strike major terrorist facilities like training camps, bomb factories, and arms caches before they can pose a danger to other countries. Thus, the U.S. would continue to make intelligence collection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever such a facility was identified, Shi'i or Sunni, American forces would move in quickly to destroy it.

This requirement is difficult, however, as it does not remove the U.S. military presence from the region. If such strike forces were based in Iraq's neighbors they would upset the local population and likely face limits on their ability to operate in Iraq by the host governments. This was exactly the set of problems the U.S. encountered during the 1990s, and which led Washington to eliminate many of its military facilities in the region after the invasion of Iraq.

On the other hand, maintaining American troops in Iraq, even at reduced levels, will have negative repercussions on the terrorism threat as well. It will allow the Salafi Jihadists to continue to use this as a recruiting tool. It will also mean that American troops will continue to be targets of terrorist attack, although redeploying them from Iraq's urban areas to the periphery would diminish the threat from current levels.

***Buffering the Borders.*** A priority for the United States would be to prevent the flow of dangerous people across Iraq's borders in either direction—refugees, militias, foreign invaders, and terrorists. This will be among the hardest tasks for the United States.

One option might be to create a system of buffer zones and refugee collection points inside Iraq manned by American and other coalition personnel. These refugee collection points would be located on major roads preferably near airstrips along Iraq's borders—thus they would be located on the principal routes that refugees would take to flee the country and would have a good logistical infrastructure to support facilities to house, feed, and otherwise care for tens or even hundreds of thousands of refugees. At these refugee collection points, the United States and its allies would stockpile massive quantities of food, medicine and other supplies, and would build tent cities or other temporary housing. Iraqi refugees would be gathered at these points and held and cared for there. In addition, the Coalition would provide military forces to defend the refugee camps against attack, thoroughly pacify them (by disarming those entering the camps and then policing the camps afterwards), and patrol large swathes of Iraqi territory nearby. The purpose of these patrols would be to prevent both refugees and armed groups from skirting the refugee collection points and stealing across the border into a neighboring country, but also to prevent military forces (and ideally, intelligence agents and their logistical support) of the neighboring country from moving into Iraq.

These zones would thus serve as “catch basins” for Iraqis fleeing the fighting, providing them with a secure place to stay within Iraq's borders and thus preventing them from burdening or destabilizing neighboring countries. At the same time, they would also serve as buffers between the fighting in Iraq and its neighbors by preventing some forms of spillover from Iraq

into their states, and by preventing them from intervening overtly in Iraq (and hindering their ability to do so covertly). Of course, because they are designed to address the problem of spillover, it would not be possible to use them to quell the violence that would consume much of central Iraq.

It would be important to have these catch-basins on the periphery, but inside Iraqi territory in order to ensure coalition freedom of action, hinder the terrorists and militias from crossing into the neighboring states, and reduce the legal burdens the refugees would acquire if they crossed an international border. Moreover, the United States would not want the refugee camps to be on the territory of Iraq's neighbors, because this would allow them to arm and manipulate the refugees and would not allow the catch-basins to serve as a barrier should they decide to intervene directly in the conflict with their own forces.

Although in theory the Catch-Basin concept could be useful, implementing it would be difficult, and it might create as many problems as it solves. Conceptually, there is at least one very big problem with it: Iran. Unlike Iraq's borders with Syria, Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the Iranian border is simply too long and has too many crossing points for it to be policed effectively by smaller numbers of Coalition troops (we envision about 60,000 in country with another 20-30,000 providing logistical support from elsewhere in the region). Iran will never allow the United States the access across its territory, let alone logistical support, that would be necessary to make catch-basins along the Iraq-Iran border a realistic possibility. Thus, employing this scheme could have the effect of making it look like the United States was turning Iraq over to the Iranians; the catch-basins could prove very effective at preventing intervention by any of Iraq's Sunni neighbors while doing nothing to stop any Iranian intervention. For this reason, the United States would have to be able to lay down clear red lines to Iran about not intervening (at least overtly) and then be in a position to enforce them assiduously. This might not be realistic given the many complicating factors in the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

In addition, the Catch Basin concept requires a willingness on the part of the American people to endure ongoing high costs in Iraq, albeit with the intent of diminishing the costs that the U.S. would pay if spillover from an Iraqi civil war were allowed to destabilize other regional states. The United States would still have to deploy tens of thousands of troops to Iraq (albeit on its periphery), as well as provide supplies and otherwise help feed and care for hundreds of thousands of refugees. Because the United States would still occupy parts of Iraq it might not help at all with the problem of terrorism. As with U.S. efforts to strike at terrorists, the U.S. presence would remain a recruiting poster for the jihadist movement. Finally, all of these costs would have to be endured for as long as the war rages, and refugees from the wars in Afghanistan lived away from their homes for over 20 years.

### **The Difficulty of Containing Spillover**

What ought to be clear from this list of steps the United States might consider taking to try to prevent spillover from an all-out civil war in Iraq, is that managing spillover is extremely difficult. No country in recent history has done so effectively, although many have tried. Most have failed miserably. Indeed, in many cases states have simply tried to weather the storm (and often paid a heavy price for doing so), while others have been driven to do what they could to end the conflict instead. Thus, Syria spent at least eight years trying to end the Lebanese civil war before the 1989 Ta'if accords and the 1990 Persian Gulf War gave it the opportunity to finally do so. Israel's 1982 invasion was also a bid to end the Lebanese civil war after its previous efforts to contain it had failed, and when this too failed Jerusalem tried to go back to

managing spillover. By 2000, it was clear that this was again ineffective and so Israel simply pulled out of Lebanon altogether in a vain effort to prevent further spillover. Withdrawing from Lebanon was smart for Israel for many reasons, but it has not put an end to its Lebanon problem. In the Balkans, the United States and its NATO allies realized that it was impossible to manage the Bosnian or Kosovar civil wars and so in both cases they employed coercion—including the deployment of massive ground forces—to bring them to an end.

This last is an important point: ending an all-out civil war typically requires the deployment of overwhelming military power to nail down a political settlement, along the lines of what the United States should have employed during the invasion and securing of Iraq in 2003. It took 30,000 British troops to bring the Irish civil war to an end, 45,000 Syrian troops to bring the Lebanese civil war to an end, 50,000 NATO troops to end the Bosnian civil war, and 60,000 to do the job in Kosovo. Scaling up for Iraq's much larger population, it would likely require 450,000 troops to quash an all-out civil war there. (There are currently 35,000 American and NATO troops in Afghanistan, but they have not succeeded in bringing that civil war to an end—although Operation Enduring Freedom did succeed in ousting the Taliban from power.)

This also contains the last lessons regarding an all-out civil war in Iraq. First, we should not assume that its outbreak will relieve us of our military and financial responsibilities: dealing with the problems of spillover is likely to be just as costly as our current efforts to stabilize the country and so avert all-out civil war. Second, containing spillover is so hard that it rarely ever works and in the case of Iraq, that could mean facing a choice between intervening decisively to end the civil war or risking intolerable harm to our interests, to the stability of the region, and potentially to the international economy. This would be a terrible choice and the United States ought to do everything it can to avoid being forced to make it. And third, bringing a civil war to an end requires a truly massive commitment of military and economic resources, far in excess of what we have already committed.

How we got to this point in Iraq is an issue for historians (and perhaps for voters in 2008); what matters now is how we move forward and prepare for the enormous risks an Iraqi civil war poses for this critical region. Indeed, the outbreak of civil war would not relieve us of our military and financial responsibilities in Iraq. And containing spillover is so difficult that it rarely succeeds. In the Middle East, never assume that the situation can't get worse. It always can — and usually does.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Recknagel, "Iraq: Some Arabs Fleeing Northern Iraq as Kurdish Refugees Return," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 20, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> "Iraq: IOM Provides Emergency Aid to 216,000 Displaced in Falluja," International Organization for Migration Press Release, March 31, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, "Thousands of Iraqis Flee to Avoid Spread of Violence," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2006; Cal Perry, "Fighting Displaces Tens of Thousands in Iraq," *CNN.Com*, April 13, 2006, downloaded April 13, 2006; Edward Wong and Kirk Semple, "Civilians in Iraq Flee Mixed Areas as Attacks Shift," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2006; Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq's Refugee Problem Surges as Violence Rages," *Reuters*, April 13, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley S. Klapper, "UN Refugee Agency Concerned over Death Threats Against Palestinians in Iraq," *The Associated Press*, March 24, 2006; Kirk Semple, Ali Adeeb and Khalid W. Hassan, "Jordan Blocks Palestinians Fleeing Violence in Iraq," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2006, p. A8; Kirk Semple, Hosham Hussein, et. al., "As Palestinians Wait at Iraqi Border, Others Get Threats," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2006, p. A6.

<sup>5</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, "As Death Stalks Iraq, Middle-Class Exodus Begins," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2006, p. A1.

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<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, "In Their Own Words," p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group, "In Their Own Words," p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Hassan M. Fattah, "An Island Kingdom Feels the Ripples from Iraq and Iran," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Megan K. Stack, "Iraqi Strife Seeping into Saudi Kingdom," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Goller "Israel Seeks Terms for Pulling out of Lebanon." *Reuters*, March 2, 1998; Gal Luft, "Israel's Security Zone in Lebanon—A Tragedy?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (September 2000);

<sup>11</sup> Yair Aharoni, *The Israeli Economy: Dreams and Reality*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 85; Yoram Ben-Porath (ed.), *The Israeli Economy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 20-21; Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 164-165.