Explosive Affinities

Cross-Border Consequences of Civil Strife

by Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack

Unless the United States and the new government of Iraq take dramatic action to reverse the current trends, the internecine conflict in Iraq could easily spiral into a full-scale civil war, threatening not only Iraq itself but also, even more vitally, its neighbors throughout the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Spillover from an Iraqi civil war could prove the greatest threat to peace in this strategically and economically crucial region. Spillover refers to the tendency of civil wars to impose burdens, create instability, and even trigger civil wars in other, usually neighboring, countries.

This tendency to inflame the passions of neighboring populations is, at the most basic level, simply a matter of proximity. 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. The members of a group have a powerful tendency to take the side of, support, and even fight on behalf of the members of their group in the neighboring country. This sense of cross-border affinity, indeed kinship, is particularly strong in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, Iraq appears to have many of the conditions most conducive to this kind of spillover because of the high degree of foreign "interest" in the country. Ethnic, tribal, and religious groups within Iraq are prevalent in neighboring countries, and they share many of the same grievances. Iraq's history of violence with its neighbors has fostered desires for vengeance and fomented constant clashes. Its neighbors also covet Iraqi resources, such as oil and important religious shrines. Commerce and communication between Iraq and its neighbors is high, and its borders are porous, which suggests that spillover from an Iraqi civil war would tend toward the more dangerous end of the spillover spectrum.

Refugee Flows

Massive refugee flows are a hallmark of the kind of major civil war that now looks to be taking shape in Iraq. The influx of hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of victims of strife into neighboring countries can have two effects. First, it often angers their kin and supporters in the nearby countries, who may then demand that their government take action against the perpetrators or directly aid refugee militias. Secondly, emboldened by the presence of thousands of potential fighters, disgruntled communities may even believe they can challenge their own government, as happened when Palestinian refugees poured into Lebanon from Jordan in 1970, upsetting the country's communal balance of power.

The heavy flow of refugees from Iraq is likely to worsen instability in all of its neighbors. In particular, the potential for massive refugee flows among Iraq's Shiite and Sunni Arabs 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 Shiite. The influx of several hundred thousand Iraqi Shiites across the border could change the religious balance in the country overnight. It is possible that these Iraqi refugees and the Kuwaiti Shiites 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 Shiites to see violence as a way of ending the centuries of discrimination they have faced at the hands of Kuwait's Sunnis.

The Contagion Effect of Civil Strife

External unrest can cause civil unrest and even conflict within the neighboring states if the neighboring population feels the same or similar grievances as their compatriots across the border. The Syrian 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, which spurred their organization 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 25,000–50,000 people and snuffing out the Brotherhood's revolt.

Iraq's neighbors are very vulnerable to this aspect of spillover since Iraq's own divisions are mirrored throughout the region. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain all have sizable Shiite communities. In Saudi Arabia, the Shiites make up only about 10 percent of the population, but they are heavily concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. A majority of Bahrain's population is Shiite, although the regime is Sunni. Likewise, Turkey, Iran, and Syria all have important Kurdish minorities, which are geographically concentrated adjacent to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Populations in a few of the countries around Iraq are already evincing dangerous signs of such radicalization. In Bahrain, organized confrontations between Shiites and government security forces have become matters of real concern. In March 2006, after the Sunni jihadist bombing of the Shiite Askariya Shrine in Iraq, over 100,000 Bahraini Shiites (along with a few sympathetic Sunnis) took to the streets in anger. When American forces battled Sunni insurgents in Fallujah in 2004, large numbers of Bahraini Sunnis likewise came out to protest. Bahrain's Shiites are simultaneously angry over the suffering of their co-religionists in Iraq and encouraged by the success of the Iraqi Shiites in gaining political power to seek the same for themselves in Bahrain.

Similarly, some Kurdish groups have called on their brothers in Iran to revolt against the Iranian regime. The unrest in Iranian Kurdistan has prompted 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 Shiites in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The horrors of sectarian war are only ☞

miles away. As in Bahrain, many Saudi Shiites saw the success of Iraq's Shiites 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 openly accuse the Shiites 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.

Local Problems, Regional Conflicts

In part because of the reasons enumerated above, another critical problem of civil wars is the tendency of neighboring states to intervene, 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 EU did in the various Yugoslav wars of the 1990s; such interventions may help to reduce the radicalization of their own population and stop the flow of "dangerous ideas" into their own country.

Neighboring states may also intervene to eliminate terrorist groups setting up shop in the midst of the civil war, as Israel did repeatedly in Lebanon. Iran 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 countries 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.

This 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 on their behalf. Frequently 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. States often first opt for covert intervention to try to limit the potential blowback against them, but this rarely seems to work.

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 Shiite 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. 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, the Kurdistan Worker's Party, a militant group that aims to set up an independent Kurdish state. Turkey has already massed troops on its southern border, and Turkish officials are already threatening to intervene in Iraq should the situation escalate. 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 the other side's victory in an Iraqi civil war as 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. (Interestingly, 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 (perhaps backed by the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and Jordanians at the very least) would put radical Sunni fundamentalists on Iran's doorstep – a nightmare for the Iranians since many Salafi jihadists hate the Shiites more than they hate Americans. Add to this each country's tremendous incentive to prevent any other from capturing 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 an Iraqi civil war to escalate into a regional war is therefore high.

Forestalling the Crisis

Yet there are historical cases in which such a crisis did not occur. Large numbers of Romanians, Hungarians, and Bulgarians in the former Yugoslavia were affected economically and politically by the various civil wars there. None, however, intervened in the fighting, in part because their socio-economic situations were improving considerably ,thanks to aid and assistance from the EU coupled with the prospect of eventual EU membership.

This experience suggests that the US 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 Iraqi compatriots. 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 countering US wishes. The US can provide generous aid packages with the explicit proviso that they will be stopped (and sanctions possibly applied instead) if the receiving country intervenes in the Iraqi conflict. Though the outbreak of civil war would by no means relieve the US of responsibility in Iraq, much of the foreign aid money currently provided to Iraq itself may unfortunately need to be redirected to its neighbors in the event of a full-scale civil war.

Only a combination of big positive incentives and equally large negative ones has any chance of succeeding. The positive incentives should also consist of specific benefits tailored to the needs of 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 the country's acceptance into the EU. The US might offer Syria and Iran 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.

Washington and its allies must also level very serious threats at Iraq's neighbors 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 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 stolen Iraqi oil; however, it might help remove some of the incentive to seize Iraq's oil fields.

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 for EU membership. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait would be extremely difficult for the US to coerce, and the best Washington might do is merely try to convince them that it would be counterproductive and unnecessary for them to intervene: unnecessary because the US and its allies will make a major exertion to keep Iran from intervening, which will be one of Riyadh's greatest worries.

Given how much Iran has already intruded in Iraqi affairs, as well as its immense interests in Iraq, some level of Iranian intervention is inevitable. The US and its allies will likely have to lay down "red lines" for Tehran (and probably Damascus) regarding what is absolutely impermissible: sending uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq, claiming Iraqi territory, and inciting Iraqi groups to secede from the country. The US and its allies must coordinate how to deal with 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 US has the full cooperation of the EU, if not Russia, China, and India as well. On its own, the US could employ punitive military operations such as limited airstrikes on Iranian infrastructure or key military units, 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. The US certainly has the military power to inflict tremendous damage on Iran for long periods of time; however, the Iranians will probably keep their intervention covert to avoid provoking Washington directly. In addition, all of this will likely take place in the context of an ongoing crisis over Iran's nuclear program, which could enormously complicate America's willingness to use force against Iran to deter or punish it for intervening in Iraq.

The US and its allies must be very modest regarding their ability to prevent the kind of spillover from an Iraqi civil war that could cause widespread instability in this already troubled region. The historical evidence suggests that it is very difficult to altogether avoid such an all-out civil war. 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. In the Middle East, never assume that the situation can't get worse. It always can – and usually does.

Daniel L. Byman is Director of the Center for Peace and Security Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a nonresident senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Kenneth M. Pollack is Director of Research at the Saban Center and was a C.V. Starr Distinguished Visitor at the Academy in fall 2005. This text is based on the authors' "Things Fall Apart," published by the Brookings Institution.