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Introduction

Iraq is rapidly descending into all-out civil war. Unfortunately, the United States probably will not be able to just walk away from the chaos. Even setting aside the humanitarian nightmare that will ensue, a full-scale civil war would likely consume more than Iraq: historically, such massive conflicts have often had highly deleterious effects on neighboring countries and other outside states. Spillover from an Iraqi civil war could be disastrous. America has too many strategic interests at stake in the Middle East to ignore the consequences. Thus, it is imperative that the United States develop a plan for containing an all-out Iraqi civil war.

As part of a containment approach, our new priority would have to become preventing the Iraqi conflict from spilling over and destabilizing neighboring states, an approach that requires deterring neighboring states from intervening, helping mitigate the risks associated with refugees, striking terrorist havens, and otherwise changing our policy to reflect the painful reality that the U.S. effort to bring peace and stability to Iraq has failed. Not planning now for containing the Iraqi civil war could lead its devastation to become even greater, engulfing

not only Iraq but also much of the surrounding region and gravely threatening U.S. interests.

To that end, this study draws on the history of recent civil wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Congo, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Lebanon, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Somalia, and Tajikistan. It employs lessons derived from these cases regarding the impact of full-scale civil wars on the security, prosperity, and national interests of other states to derive recommendations for the United States as it confronts the possibility of a similar conflict in Iraq.

Patterns of Spillover

The United States will confront a range of problems stemming from the collapse of Iraq into all-out civil war. These will likely include the humanitarian tragedy of hundreds of thousands (or more) of Iraqis killed along with several times that number maimed and millions of refugees. American influence in the Middle East will be drastically diminished, as will our ability to promote economic and political reform there. The loss of Iraqi oil production could have a significant impact on global oil prices, and supply disruptions elsewhere in the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia, could be particularly devastating.

However, the greatest problems that the United States must be prepared to confront are the patterns of "spillover," by which civil wars in one state can deleteriously affect another, or in some cases destabilize a region or create global threats. Spillover is the tendency of civil wars to impose burdens, create instability, and even trigger civil wars in other, usually neighboring countries. In some cases, spillover can be as relatively mild as the economic hardships and the limited numbers of refugees that Hungary and Romania coped with during the various Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s. At the other end of the spectrum, spillover can turn civil war into regional war—as Lebanon did in the 1970s and 1980s—and can cause other civil wars in neighboring countries—just as the civil war in Rwanda triggered the catastrophic civil war in next-door Congo. Unfortunately, Iraq appears to possess most, if not all, of the factors that would make spillover worse rather than better.

Historically, six patterns of spillover have been the most harmful in other cases of all-out civil war:

Refugees

In addition to the humanitarian considerations for innocent civilians fleeing civil war, refugees can create strategic problems. They represent large groupings of embittered people who serve as a ready recruiting pool for armed groups still waging the civil war. As a result, they frequently involve foreign countries in the civil war as the neighboring government attempts to prevent the refugee-based militias from attacking their country of origin, and/or the neighboring government must protect the refugees from attack by their civil war enemies. Moreover, large refugee flows can overstrain the economies and even change the demographic balances of small or weak neighboring states.

Terrorism

Terrorists often find a home in states in civil war, as al-Qa'ida did in Afghanistan. However, the civil wars themselves also frequently breed new terrorist groups—Hizballah, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas, the Groupe Islamique Armé (Armed Islamic Group) of Algeria, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were all born of civil wars. Many of these groups start by focusing on local targets but then shift to international attacks—usually against those they believe are aiding their enemies in the civil war.

Radicalization of Neighboring Populations

Neighboring populations often become highly agitated and mobilized by developments in the civil war next door. Groups in one state may identify with co-religionists, co-ethnics, or other groups with similar identities in a state embroiled in civil war. A civil war may also encourage groups in neighboring states to demand, or even fight, for a reordering of their domestic political arrangements. Examples of this radicalization phenomenon include the anger felt by ethnic Albanians in the Balkans at the treatment of Kosovar Albanians by the Serbian regime during the Kosovo war—which might very well have pushed the Albanian government to intervene had NATO not done so instead—as well as the decision by Syria's Sunni Muslim Brotherhood to rise up against the 'Alawi regime, which led to a Syrian civil war from 1976 to 1982.

Secession Breeds Secessionism

Some civil wars are caused by one group within a country seeking its independence, while in other cases the civil war leads one group or another to seek its independence as the solution to its problems. Frequently, other groups in similar circumstances (either in the country in civil war or in neighboring countries) may follow suit if the first group appears to have achieved some degree of success. Thus, Slovenia's secession from Yugoslavia started the first of those civil wars, but it also provoked Croatia to declare its independence, which forced Bosnia to follow suit, which later convinced Kosovar Albanian nationalists to try for the same, and eventually provoked a secessionist movement among Albanians in Macedonia.

Economic Losses

Civil wars can be costly to other countries, particularly neighbors. First, there are the direct costs of caring for refugees, fighting terrorism, and mounting major interventions, whether covert or overt. Beyond that, civil wars tend to scare off investment, impose security and insurance costs on trade, disrupt transportation networks and supplier arrangements, and increase a state's health care burden, to name but a few.

Neighborly Interventions

The problems created by these other forms of spillover often provoke neighboring states to intervene—to stop terrorism as Israel tried repeatedly in Lebanon, to halt the flow of refugees as the Europeans tried in Yugoslavia, or to end (or respond to) the radicalization of their own population as Syria did in Lebanon. These interventions usually end badly for all involved. Local groups typically turn out to be poor proxies and are often unable or unwilling to accomplish the objectives of their backers. This often provokes the intervening state to use its own military forces to do the job itself. The result is that many civil wars become regional wars because once one country invades, other states often do the same, if only to prevent the initial invader from conquering the state in civil war.

Iraq is already manifesting all of these patterns of spillover. This suggests that these factors may intensify as the civil war worsens, and argues that the United States should be bracing itself for particularly severe manifestations of spillover throughout the Persian Gulf region.

Options for Containing Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War

The historical record of states that attempted to minimize or contain spillover from all-out civil wars is poor. Nearly all of them failed to do so. Those that "succeeded" often paid such a high cost as to render their victories pyrrhic. In many cases, states failed so miserably to prevent spillover that they were eventually forced to mount massive invasions to attempt to end the civil war instead. Successful efforts to end civil wars generally required a peace agreement to bring the war to closure and then an international security intervention with a personnel-to-population ratio of 20 per thousand (or higher) to keep the peace, combined with a major injection of international resources. In Iraq (excluding Kurdistan), such a security deployment could equate to a deployment of roughly 450,000 troops.

Despite these odds, if Iraq does descend into an all-out civil war, the United States probably will have no choice but to try to contain it. Drawing on the patterns of spillover described above, we developed a baker's dozen of possible tactics that the United States might use, alone or in combination:

1. Don't try to pick winners

There will be an enormous temptation for the United States to aid 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. However, proxies often fail in their assigned tasks or turn against their masters. As a result, such efforts rarely succeed, and in the specific circumstances of Iraq, such an effort appears particularly dubious.

It is extremely difficult to know which group will be able to prevail in a civil war. Civil wars are highly susceptible to the emergence of skillful military leaders who tend to start the war as unknowns and gain power only by proving their skills in battle, such as Afghanistan's Ahmed Shah Massoud. Numbers alone rarely prove decisive—Lebanon's Druze were a major force in their civil war despite the small size of their community, whereas Lebanon's Sunnis rarely wielded power commensurate with their demographic weight. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know which group could benefit from external assistance, and history is rife with states that poured arms and money into a civil war to back a faction that could not make use of it.

Moreover, Iraq is badly fragmented—especially within its ethnic and religious communities—making this approach even more difficult. There is no single "Shi'i" or "Sunni" faction to back. There are only dozens of small to medium-size militias, most of which hate one another with equal intensity regardless of ethnic or religious differences or similarities. Moreover, there is no manageable way for the United States to back one faction or another from a diplomatic and logistical perspective. The Shi'i groups are all tied in some way to Iran, and would have to be supplied through Iran because Iraq's other neighbors (except Syria, which has no border with Iraq's Shi'i Arab areas) are Sunni-dominated and would never allow American support to flow to Shi'i militias. The Kurds would be happy to have American assistance, but it is equally unlikely that we could convince any of Iraq's neighbors to support a Kurdish takeover of the country. Washington could certainly find regional support for backing the Sunnis, but most of their armed groups all seem to be closely tied to al-Qa'ida and other *salafi jihadists* (holy warriors), and their community represents only 18 to 20 percent of the population, making this a very difficult proposition. Indeed, the only Sunni warlord who effectively governed Iraq was Saddam Hussein, who had to build one of the worst totalitarian states in history to do so. Finally, as was the case in Lebanon, American backing of one side in the conflict could cause other states, particularly Iran, to ramp up their own interventions, rather than end them.

2. Avoid active support for partition. . . for now

Eventually, after years of bloody civil war, Iraq may be ready for a stable partition. However, a major U.S. effort to enact secession or partition today would be likely to trigger even more massacres and ethnic cleansing. Other than the Kurds, few Iraqis want their country divided, nor do they want to leave their homes. While many are doing so out of necessity, and some are even moving pre-emptively, this is not diminishing the impetus toward warfare. For the most part it is doing the opposite, causing many of those fleeing their homes to join vicious sectarian militias like Muqtada as-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (Army of the Mahdi) in hope of regaining their property or at least exacting revenge on whoever drove them out. Other than the Kurds, few of Iraq's leaders favor partition, instead wanting to control as much (or all) of it as they can. Nor is it clear that a move to partition would result in a neat

division of Iraq into three smaller states. As noted above, the Sunnis and the Shi'ah are badly fragmented among dozens of different militias of widely varying sizes, but none of them are large enough to quickly or easily unite their community. Thus, far more likely than creating a new Sunni state and a new Shi'i state, Mesopotamian Iraq would splinter into chaotic warfare and warlordism.

Partition would be practical only if there were a political agreement to do so that was then enforced by adequate numbers of foreign forces. This would likely require at least 450,000 troops, the same concentration as was needed to enforce the Dayton Accords in Bosnia. Moreover, the situation would be worse in the near term because the Iraqis will see the United States as imposing a highly unpopular partition on them, as opposed to Dayton where the key parties accepted the peace agreement. In short, trying to partition Iraq as a way of containing or ending a civil war is unlikely to succeed absent years of slaughter, a peace agreement among the parties, and a much greater American military commitment.

3. Don't dump the problem on the United Nations

The United Nations can play a valuable role in helping legitimate international action in Iraq and providing technical expertise in certain humanitarian areas. The United States should seek UN assistance to provide aid, police camps, and otherwise help contain spillover. However, the United Nations suffers from numerous bureaucratic limits and should not be expected to provide security. In particular, Washington should not expect, or ask, the United Nations to police refugee camps, dissuade foreign intervention, or otherwise handle difficult security tasks for which it is ill-equipped. Likewise, UN administrative capacity is limited. Although the World Food Programme and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have many highly skilled professionals, the institutions as a whole move slowly in times of crisis. They often take months to fully establish themselves—months in which tens of thousands may die.

4. Pull back from Iraqi population centers

An all-out civil war in Iraq will be a humanitarian catastrophe, and there will be a strong humanitarian impulse to maintain American forces in Iraq's population centers to try to minimize the extent of the violence. Historically,

the only solutions to this situation are either to prevent the outbreak of violence in the first place or to intervene decisively with the forces to end the war altogether—which in the case of Iraq would require the same commitment of roughly 450,000 troops. Half-hearted humanitarian interventions to diminish the violence tend to backfire badly, as the Multi-National Force in Lebanon in the 1980s and the misguided UN safe haven effort in Bosnia in the 1990s demonstrated.

While safe havens may prove to be an important element of a new American policy to deal with Iraq in civil war (see below), we should not assume that they can be easily created in the center of the country, in the midst of the combat, to protect Iraqi population centers. Limited forays are likely to do little more than cause American casualties and embroil the United States more deeply in the conflict while courting humiliating defeat. Consequently, when the United States decides that reconstruction has failed and that all-out civil war in Iraq has broken out, the only rational course of action, horrific though it will be, is to abandon Iraq's population centers and refocus American efforts from preventing civil war to containing it.

5. 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 difficult to address. What appears to have prevented such radicalization in the past, against the odds, has been rising levels of socioeconomic prosperity and particularly high government capacity in the threatened neighboring states. This suggests that the United States can reduce the risk of radicalization in Iraq's neighbors by helping them to build government capacity and increase their ability to placate key segments of their populations. Wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia would not receive economic aid, but could instead be provided additional technical assistance to improve the country's overall strength in the face of various challenges. Aid also provides some leverage with these governments, 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 recipient country intervenes in the Iraqi civil war.

6. Bolster regional stability

An all-out civil war in Iraq will increase instability throughout the region, possibly to disastrous levels, as a result of spillover. Consequently, it will be of considerable importance that the United States do whatever it can to remove other sources of instability in the region and otherwise increase its stability. Unfortunately, at this point a number of other problems are adding to the general instability of the region. Two that loom large include the ongoing deadlock in Lebanon and the worsening state of Israeli-Palestinian affairs.

These two problems will magnify the shockwaves coming from Iraq; therefore, the threat of spillover from an Iraqi civil war ought to add a strategic imperative to the diplomatic and humanitarian considerations pushing the United States to make a greater effort to stabilize Lebanon and revitalize a Middle East peace process. Moreover, the absence of a peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians bolsters radical forces in the Middle East and hurts the credibility of U.S. allies. Throughout the 1990s, the appearance of a vital peace process made it easier for the United States to deal with any number of ultimately unrelated problems in the Middle East, and a revival of that process would likely do so again, particularly with regard to coordinating regional efforts to contain spillover from a civil war in Iraq.

Saying that the United States should aggressively pursue an Arab-Israeli peace should not be seen as code for pressuring Israel; Washington must work tirelessly to broker a peace, but should not attempt to impose it on any party. Likewise, a peace process itself is not a panacea. However, it will help improve the U.S. image among many Arabs. Even more important, it will allow more moderate voices to move closer to Washington without being discredited. This will be vital for close, open, and continual cooperation with Iraq's Arab neighbors.

Similarly, the United States must make a more determined effort to build a capable Lebanese government able to provide its citizens with the security and basic services they often lack—and which among the Shi'ah has driven so many into the arms of Hizballah. Although Washington must also hold firm to its determination to see Hizballah disarmed, it should not hold the provision of aid to the Lebanese government and people hostage to this requirement. Doing so simply bolsters Hizballah's position both rhetorically and materially. Washington has made a number of good pledges since

the Israel-Hizballah fighting of the summer of 2006; now it needs to live up to both their letter and spirit.

7. Dissuade foreign intervention

The United States will have to make a major effort to convince Iraq's neighbors not to intervene in an all-out civil war. Rewards for non-intervention should consist of the economic aid described above, as well as specific benefits tailored to the needs of the individual countries. On the negative side, the United States and its allies will have to make serious threats to 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 anyone other than the Iraqi government or an Iraqi government-licensed entity.

8. Lay down "red lines" to Iran

As part of the negative incentives to prevent foreign intervention in Iraq, the United States may need to lay down "red lines" to Tehran which, if crossed, would provoke a direct American response, whether in the form of political, economic, or even military pressure. These "red lines" should include the entry of uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq, Iranian claims on Iraqi territory, or Iranian incitement of Iraqi secessionist groups. Possible punishments include additional economic sanctions, and, for egregious violations, the United States could employ punitive military operations.

9. Establish a Contact Group

The United States would do well to consider convening a formal, standing group consisting of Iraq's neighbors (and possibly the permanent five members of the UN Security Council) to consult and act collectively to help contain the spillover from Iraq. A Contact Group for Iraq could provide a forum in which the neighbors could air their concerns, address one another's fears, and discuss mutual problems. This alone might help allay suspicions about the activities of others, and so prevent the kinds of interventions that would add fuel to the fire of an Iraqi civil war. In addition, some problems like terrorism, refugees, and secessionist movements will benefit from being

addressed multilaterally. For this reason, it will be particularly important to invite Iran and Syria to participate.

10. Prepare for oil supply disruptions

In its own planning exercises and as part of a multilateral effort, the United States should prepare for potential supply disruptions stemming from the Iraq conflict. Washington should consider further increasing the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in order to mitigate the impact of supply disruptions on the oil market. Washington should also encourage the International Energy Agency to develop contingency plans so that leading oil-consuming countries can collectively manage the risk of disruptions. Such efforts might even reduce terrorist incentives to attack oil production and transit facilities.

11. Manage the Kurds

Because of the ease with which secessionism can spread, it will probably be necessary for the United States to persuade the Iraqi Kurds not to declare their independence anytime soon. The United States could offer to help the Kurds deal with their own problems of spillover from the civil war in the rest of the country in return for their agreement not to declare independence or "intervene" in the rest of Iraq. That will mean helping them with their refugee problems, providing economic assistance to minimize the radicalization of their own population, and providing security guarantees—or even U.S. military forces—to deter Iran and Turkey from attacking the Kurds.

12. Strike at terrorist facilities

Should Iraq fall into an all-out civil war, Washington will have to recognize that terrorists will continue to find a home in Iraq and will use it as a base to conduct attacks outside it. Nevertheless, the United States should try to limit the ability of terrorists to use Iraq as a haven for attacks outside the country. This would likely require the retention of 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 United States would continue to make intelligence col-

lection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever such a facility is identified, Shi'i or Sunni, American forces would move quickly to destroy it.

13. Consider establishing safe havens or "catch basins" along Iraq's borders

One of the hardest aspects of containing the spillover from an all-out Iraqi civil war will be to limit, let alone halt, the flow of refugees, terrorists, and foreign agents (or invasion forces) across Iraq's borders. One potential option that deserves careful scrutiny would be to try to create a system of buffer zones with accompanying refugee collection points along Iraq's borders inside Iraqi territory, manned by U.S. and other Coalition personnel. The refugee collection points would be located on major roads, preferably near airstrips near the borders, and would be designed with support facilities to house, feed, and otherwise care for tens or even hundreds of thousands of refugees. The Coalition (principally the United States) would also provide military forces to defend the refugee camps against attack and to thoroughly pacify them (by disarming those entering the camps and then policing the camps). This option would require the extensive and continued use of U.S. forces.

Another key mission of Coalition military forces in this option would be to patrol large swathes of Iraqi territory along Iraq's borders beyond the refugee collection facilities themselves (though not near the Iranian border for political and logistical reasons). These patrols would aim to prevent both refugees and armed groups from skirting the refugee collection points and stealing across the border into a neighboring country. However, a second, but equally important goal would be to prevent military forces (and ideally, intelligence agents and their logistical support) of the neighboring country from moving into Iraq.

These buffer zones and their refugee collection points would thus serve as safe havens or "catch basins" for Iraqis fleeing the fighting, providing them with a secure place to stay within Iraq's borders while 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 these states, and by preventing them from intervening overtly in Iraq (and hindering their ability to do so covertly).

Some or all of these tactics could be fashioned into a broader strategy for preventing an Iraqi civil war from destabilizing the entire region. Although all of them have advantages, none is a panacea, and many are half-measures at best. Some would require a continued large-scale U.S. military commitment (though less than current levels). A number have considerable costs and risks and would be difficult to implement. Nearly all could prove impossible for reasons of American domestic politics. Thus, no one approach is likely to solve the problem of spillover from Iraq, and even a strategy that saw the United States pursue all of them together with great skill and determination could still fail.

Be Wary of Half-Measures

To make matters worse, in the case of all-out civil wars, history has demonstrated that incremental steps and half-measures frequently prove disastrous. In Lebanon, both the Israelis and the Syrians tried half-measures—arming proxies, mounting limited interventions, striking at selected targets—to no avail. America's own determination to stabilize Iraq on the cheap and postpone making hard decisions has been a major element of the disasters that have unfolded there since 2003. The problems of spillover are likely to prove equally challenging—and we cannot afford to fail a second time.

If there is anything that should make us recognize the need to stay engaged in Iraq, it is the likely impact that such a war could have on the Persian Gulf region (if not the entire Middle East) and the enormous difficulties we will face in trying to contain that impact. If we cannot prevent such a full-scale civil war, then containment, as awful as it threatens to be, might still prove to be our least bad option.