

How to Prevent a Civil War

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Articles & Testimony

Sectarian violence has now surpassed the insurgency as the main security challenge in Iraq. Quelling this violence—which threatens to derail that country’s troubled political transition, devastate the Iraqi people, inflict lasting harm on the country’s social fabric and economy, erode flagging U.S. domestic support for the war effort, and heighten communal tensions throughout the Middle East—is therefore essential if the United States is to achieve its minimal objectives in Iraq.

Because the Sunni Arab insurgency and the sectarian violence it has spawned are driven in part by political grievance and ambition, it was hoped that the formation of a broad-based “national unity” government that included representatives of the Sunni Arab community would help stanch the violence. It is now clear, however, that a strategy of political co-optation will not, in and of itself, bring an end to either the insurgency or the country’s sectarian bloodletting, which show every sign of intensifying.

Accordingly, there is a need for interim measures to contain Iraq’s sectarian violence. Identifying the factors that give rise to and perpetuate such conflicts—drawing on insights from insurgencies and civil wars elsewhere, and proposing practical steps for dealing with them—will be critical to U.S. and Iraqi efforts to contain, if not reduce, the violence. So what is to be done?

Contain the Insurgency. The insurgency is the driving force behind Iraq’s sectarian violence; containing it is therefore a prerequisite for curbing the sectarian bloodletting. Here, Malaya and Kenya offer lessons for Iraq. The fact that the Communist insurgency in Malaya (1948-1960) was largely rooted in that country’s ethnic Chinese minority, and that the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952-1956) drew support mainly from the Kikuyu tribe, helps explain the failure of these insurgencies. Ensuring that the insurgency did not spread beyond minority communities was a key element of Britain’s successful counterinsurgency strategy in Malaya and Kenya.

In Iraq, the Sunni Arab insurgency has mobilized only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of aggrieved Sunni Arabs with military or paramilitary training, and has little appeal beyond that community. Should the insurgency successfully exploit this untapped potential, or forge tactical alliances with aggrieved members of other communities, it could greatly increase its capacity for violence. Unfortunately, the creation of a political alternative to armed struggle has not prevented an increase in sectarian polarization or the rise of extremist Shiite elements, such as the Mahdi Army led by the cleric Moktada al-Sadr, now engaged in a low-level insurgency of their own against coalition forces. It remains to be seen whether U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad can make further headway toward co-opting the Sunnis without turning the Shiites into open enemies of the United States, and whether the sectarian violence has reached a point at which it is self-perpetuating and thus much more difficult to contain.

Mitigate the Consequences of “Sectarian Cleansing.” Victims of ethnic or sectarian cleansing in civil-war-torn countries such as Lebanon (1975-1990) and Bosnia (1992-1995) who are forced to leave their homes and move to new neighborhoods or new parts of the country often cannot continue working at their old jobs. Some may find employment with communal militias and parties in their new places of residence. This provides many of these victims with the means to act on their desire for revenge against their former neighbors, adding fuel to the conflict.

In some cases, these individuals may lead forays of militia death squads into their old neighborhoods in order to settle personal scores, or to seek retribution against former neighbors who belonged to “enemy” parties or militias.

To avert such a dynamic in Iraq, efforts to create legitimate employment outside the militias should be focused on the tens of thousands of displaced breadwinners. (According to a recent Iraqi government estimate, more than 30,000 families and 182,000 individuals have been displaced as a result of the most recent wave of sectarian violence during the past six months.) All such efforts, however, are extremely difficult to implement in Iraq under current conditions. The growth in sectarian violence may indicate that a cycle of revenge-motivated killings is already in motion.

Protect At-Risk Populations. While much of the violence visited upon civilians during civil wars is random in nature, it is not without its own cruel logic and is often perpetrated as part of a deliberate strategy. Atrocities and massacres, for instance, are most common in contested areas and are conducted to secure these areas against potential fifth columnists through ethnic or sectarian cleansing (as in Lebanon and Bosnia) or to deter civilians from cooperating with the enemy (as in the Algerian civil war of 1992-2000).

In Iraq, mixed neighborhoods and villages and those close to ethnic or sectarian fault-lines have been hardest hit by sectarian and ethnic violence and the forced displacement of populations, and thus are at greatest risk. Much of the current violence, however, is relatively low level and covert, occurring under the radar of coalition forces, and thus very hard to prevent.

If, however, violence were to escalate to involve larger groups of insurgents, militiamen, or government forces, it might be possible for U.S. forces to intervene with ground forces, attack helicopters, or gunships. At the very least, a clear willingness to use such means could keep the violence below a certain threshold. It might also be possible, in certain places, to prevent attacks on civilians by using population or traffic control measures (checkpoints and roadblocks) to interdict the movement of violent mobs and militia convoys. For instance, the Mahdi Army frequently buses its militiamen from one place to another. In this way, coalition forces might create “firebreaks” to contain or slow the spread of violence.

Prevent the Breakup of the Iraqi Security Forces. During the Lebanese civil war, some units of Lebanon’s armed forces disintegrated while others stood down and returned to their barracks in the face of spreading communal violence. As a result, militias proliferated to fill the security vacuum. The neutralization or disintegration of the Iraqi army and police under the pressure of spreading sectarian violence would probably mark the death knell of U.S. efforts to transform Iraq into a viable, functioning state. This must be averted at all costs.

Most army units consist largely of Shiite or Kurdish personnel, with a small but significant number of Sunni Arab commissioned and noncommissioned officers. The Iraqi army is therefore unlikely to disintegrate should Sunni-Shiite or Arab-Kurdish violence intensify, though some individuals might desert in order to fight with sectarian or ethnic militias. Desertions of key personnel could, however, significantly degrade the capacity of some units.

The army (and police) are much more likely to disintegrate in the event of intracommunal violence among Shiite or Kurdish groups. Intracommunal conflict among former allies has been a fairly common feature of civil war settlements, and in Iraq, intracommunal violence could have fatal consequences for the security forces. The implication here is that U.S. diplomats need to focus on managing or resolving not only the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites—but also the various latent conflicts among Kurds and among Shiites. While the United States may be well positioned to mediate among the major Kurdish factions, regional actors such as Iran may be better suited to mediate among the Shiites, although it is not clear that Tehran would have an interest in doing so.

Make the Security Forces Part of the Solution, Not Part of the Problem. Some have pointed out that the security forces contribute to Iraq’s sectarian violence because of the ethnic or sectarian make-up of the army and police, the

influence of sectarian militias in some police organizations, and the participation of Ministry of Interior “death squads” in attacks on Sunni Arabs. No doubt there is a great deal of truth to this claim, although this is much less a problem with the army than with the police—which is badly in need of reform, training, and a professional ethos. Reform of the Interior Ministry is a particularly urgent task, for an effective police force is often key to success in counterinsurgency because of the ability of the police to obtain vital intelligence about the insurgents from the civilian population.

More important than the composition of the security forces, however, is their comportment vis-a-vis the civilians with whom they interact. In many places, civilians are desperate for an end to rampant crime, insurgent violence, and official corruption, and would be greatly relieved if the security forces could bring this about—regardless of the ethnic or sectarian make-up of the units involved. In the near term, the key to dealing with this problem is the professionalization of the security forces—particularly the police—and more extensive mentoring by U.S. personnel, and not the ethnic or sectarian rebalancing of the forces, which is not likely to occur until much larger numbers of Sunni Arabs join them.

Halt the Drift Toward Chaos. The fragmentation of political and religious authority may often accompany civil violence and complicate efforts to manage and resolve such conflicts. For instance, during the second Palestinian intifada (2000-2004), the emergence of new counter-elites unresponsive to the authority of the dominant Fatah movement and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority—such as Fatah’s “young guard” and the Popular Resistance Committees—made it much more difficult to control violence in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza.

There are worrying signs of similar developments in Iraq. The rise of Shiite militias operating within or outside the security forces (such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization); the formation of Shiite death squads made up of Ministry of Interior employees; and the emergence of a new generation of younger, more radical Shiite clerics unresponsive to the authority of the traditional Shiite religious establishment, all portend the fragmentation of political and religious authority in Iraq that could accelerate the trend toward chaos and violence.

To counter this trend, coalition forces should accelerate the embedding of police training teams in Iraqi police units (the Iraqis tend to behave better when coalition personnel are around), coalition and Iraqi security forces should intensify current efforts to identify and prosecute members of death squads, and they should clamp down on illegal financial activities that benefit militias—such as the diversion and sale of oil and refined petroleum products. Likewise, Provincial Reconstruction Teams should not disburse funds to individuals or entities associated with militias and radical clerics.

Although a descent into chaos is rightly to be feared, few if any civil wars pit every man against his neighbor; rather, the carnage tends to be the work of relatively small bands of well-organized criminals, thugs, and militiamen (sometimes supported by local police and conventional military forces) who victimize civilians with the tacit or open encouragement of hostile neighbors, cynical politicians, extremist parties, or warlords. This seems to be the case in Iraq as well.

The challenges of humanitarian intervention in civil wars, though not trivial, should not be exaggerated. A well-equipped, professional military should be able to deal with criminals, thugs, and militias—provided that it has enough troops on the ground and that it has trained for this particular type of conflict. In fact, the U.S. military has operated successfully against militias in Iraq on several occasions (most notably, the Mahdi Army in April and August 2004). Nevertheless, supporting a humanitarian intervention would greatly tax already overstretched American forces. Moreover, intervening on behalf of civilian victims on both sides of the Sunni-Shiite sectarian divide could severely strain relations between the United States and key Shiite politicians and parties.

Dismantle the Conflict Economy. Civil conflicts often give rise to economic activities whose purpose is to finance

arms purchases and pay the salaries of combatants. This creates a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict among those who benefit from these activities (drug cultivation in Lebanon and Afghanistan and the trade in “conflict diamonds” in Angola, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo). In Iraq, criminal elements, many with ties to militias and insurgent groups, are involved in the kidnapping of Iraqis and foreigners, the smuggling of oil, and the funding of these groups with the proceeds. A good first step toward dismantling Iraq’s conflict economy would be to crack down on kidnapping rackets and the diversion of oil and refined products by militias and insurgent groups, which costs the Iraqi government billions of dollars a year in lost income.

Halt Foreign Assistance. Civil wars often have a transnational dimension, in that neighboring states may provide political, economic, and military support to one or more warring parties. Thus, efforts to halt civil wars often require the cooperation of neighbors. In the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, for example, regional groupings were established to help broker negotiated settlements and to monitor their implementation—namely, the Balkan Peace Implementation Council, created following the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, and the Six Plus Two forum for Afghanistan, created by the United Nations in 1998.

Iraq is no exception; the violence is being fueled in part by neighbors. Because both Syria and Iran would probably like to see the violence in Iraq continue to simmer in order to keep the United States tied down there, coalition and Iraqi efforts to halt foreign assistance to the combatants are likely to consist mainly of unilateral measures on the Iraqi side of the border.

Efforts by coalition and Iraqi government forces to interdict the flow of foreign jihadists through Syria to the Sunni Triangle have apparently been somewhat successful, but a similar effort to interdict insurgent smuggling routes and “rat lines” along the border with Iran needs to be undertaken. The length of the border and the paucity of Iraqi border security personnel and coalition troops will greatly impede this task. It remains to be seen whether proposed talks with Iran—currently on hold—will produce positive results in this area.

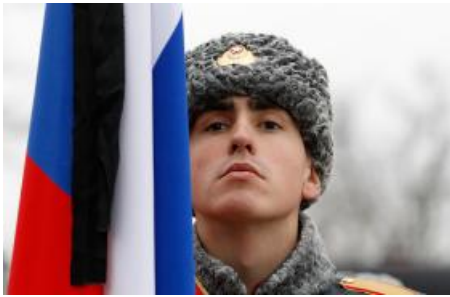
Conclusions. As the sectarian violence in Iraq increases, the United States cannot afford to be seen standing by while Iraqis slaughter each other; this would further undermine its credibility in Iraq and the region and encourage neighboring states to actively support one side or another, making a bad situation worse. The United States has both a moral obligation to act, and an interest in doing so, when U.S. forces can save innocent lives, and when it has a reasonable chance of limiting or containing the violence. The recent U.S. decision to send thousands of extra troops to Baghdad—the site of most of the sectarian bloodletting of the past few months—is thus a step in the right direction.

On the other hand, there is a significant danger that U.S. intervention will further undermine domestic support for an increasingly unpopular war; further stress an already overstretched force; and jeopardize the tacit U.S. alliance with the Shiites, which has underpinned U.S. policy in post-Saddam Iraq. Finding a way to contain the sectarian violence and to balance these latent tensions in U.S. Iraq policy may prove as difficult for Washington as containing the insurgency has been. But it is essential if the United States is yet to achieve an acceptable outcome in Iraq—and if Iraq is to have a future as a viable state.

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