Quelling Iraq's Sectarian Violence:

What the United States Can Do

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Mar 27, 2006

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Brief Analysis

The ongoing debate over whether or not Iraq is on the verge or in the midst of a civil war is a distraction from the main challenge the United States now faces in Iraq: how to reduce or contain sectarian (and ethnic) violence that could derail the political process and drag Iraq's neighbors into the conflict. That said, the recent increase in sectarian violence following the attack on Samarra's Askariyya Shrine does not necessarily alter the fundamental character of the conflict: attacks on Shiites have long been an important element of Sunni Arab insurgent operations, although Shiites have only recently begun striking back in a sustained way. The violence does, however, have the potential to spiral out of control should another insurgent attack damage an important Shiite shrine or result in very large loss of life.

Influencing the Dynamics of Conflict

The violence in Iraq is first and foremost a struggle over who will rule the country. For this reason, efforts to forge a national unity government are rightly seen as the key to curbing the violence. But a range of nonpolitical factors influence the scope, nature, and dynamics of the conflict. Identifying these factors is key to understanding how the U.S. and Iraqi governments can contain, if not halt, the sectarian violence.

Limiting the insurgency's recruitment base. The insurgency has little appeal beyond the Sunni Arab community, and has mobilized only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of aggrieved Sunni Arabs with military or paramilitary training. Should the insurgency successfully exploit this untapped potential, it could greatly increase its capacity for violence. This underscores why it is so important to offer Sunni Arabs a political alternative to armed struggle and to avoid pushing the insurgents into tactical alliances with aggrieved members of other communities, such as the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Mitigating the consequences of "ethnic cleansing." During the Lebanese civil war, victims of ethnic-cleansing were often unable to continue working at their former jobs in their old neighborhoods. As a result, they frequently found employment in sectarian militias, which enabled them to act on their desire for revenge by serving as guides during forays into their old neighborhoods and fingering former neighbors who belonged to enemy militias or political organizations. To avert such a dynamic in Iraq, it would be highly desirable -- but likely very difficult -- to find

legitimate employment for internally displaced persons.

Protecting at-risk populations. Violence against civilians in civil wars is often neither spontaneous nor random, but part of a deliberate strategy. Atrocities and massacres are most common in areas contested by insurgent and government forces. Insurgents often attack civilians to deter defections to the government side, while government forces often attack or forcibly relocate civilians in order to "drain the sea" in which the insurgents swim. It may be possible for U.S. forces to establish early warning and rapid reaction capabilities in and near anticipated flashpoints and, in some circumstances, to intervene to halt atrocities with ground forces, attack helicopters, or AC-130 gunships. It may also sometimes be possible to prevent attacks on civilians by using population control measures such as 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 to other areas.

Preventing the breakup of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Most ISF units consist largely of Shiite or Kurdish personnel. As a result, the ISF is unlikely to fracture along sectarian lines or to disintegrate should intercommunal violence between Sunnis and Shiites or Arabs and Kurds intensify, though some individuals might desert in order to fight with sectarian or ethnic militias. The ISF is much more likely to fracture or disintegrate in the event of intracommunal violence among Shiite or Kurdish groups.

Halting the drift toward chaos. During the second Palestinian intifada, the emergence of new elites unresponsive to the authority of the Fatah and Palestinian Authority leadership (such as Fatah's "young guard" and the Popular Resistance Committees) made it much more difficult to control violence and stave off chaos 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 independent of the ISF (such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades); the emergence of Shiite death squads comprised of employees of the Ministry of the Interior; and the rise of a new generation of younger, more radical Shiite clerics unresponsive to the authority of the traditional Shiite religious establishment (particularly Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani) portend a further fragmentation of political authority in Iraq and a drift toward escalating violence. To counter this trend, the United States should try to identify and monitor members of Interior Ministry death squads (the embedding of U.S. police training teams in Interior Ministry units should help), deny resources (such Commander's Emergency Response Program funds) to individuals and entities associated with militias and radical clerics, and clamp down on illegal financial activities that benefit the militias (such as the illegal diversion and sale of oil and refined petroleum products).

Dismantling the conflict economy. Civil conflicts often give rise to economic activities whose purpose is to finance arms purchases and pay the salaries of combatants, and that create a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict among those who benefit economically. In Iraq, criminal elements, many with ties to the insurgency, are involved in the kidnapping of Iraqis and foreigners, the smuggling of oil, and the funding of insurgent groups and activities. A good first step toward dismantling Iraq's conflict economy would be a crackdown on the diversion of oil and refined products by militias and insurgent groups, which cost the Iraqi government billions of dollars a year in lost income.

Halting 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. Iraq is no exception; the conflict there is being fueled, at least in part, by its neighbors. Any effort to curb the violence must therefore address this factor. Efforts by the coalition and the Iraqi government to interdict the flow of foreign jihadists through Syria to the Sunni Triangle have apparently been somewhat successful, but a similar effort needs to be undertaken along the border with Iran. The length of the border and the paucity of border security personnel and coalition troops will greatly complicate this task. It remains to be seen if forthcoming talks with Iran will produce positive results in this area.

Conclusion

U.S. forces in Iraq must be prepared for the possibility of a dramatic increase in violence in the event of another successful big attack on a Shiite target in Iraq. While it is not clear whether such escalation would be short-lived or sustained, localized or widespread, or involve mob violence or militia combat, the United States will have a hard time finding enough troops from its overstretched forces to deal effectively with both insurgent attacks and escalating sectarian violence. The U.S. ability to influence such events, and the forces that sustain sectarian violence, will dwindle further as its forces in Iraq are drawn down in the coming years.

On the other hand, the United States cannot afford to be seen standing by while Iraqis slaughter one other; this would further sully America's image and undermine its credibility in Iraq and the region. Neighboring states would almost certainly move in to fill the vacuum. Thus, when U.S. forces can save innocent lives and stand a chance of limiting or containing the violence, they should intervene. However, there is a major risk that intervention will further undermine dwindling U.S. domestic support for an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq. Managing these tensions in its Iraq policy may well prove to be one of the most difficult challenges facing Washington in the coming months.

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Policy #1090

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