Iraq's Civil War

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NO GRACEFUL EXIT

As sectarian violence spiked in Baghdad around last Thanksgiving, Bush administration spokespeople found themselves engaged in a strange semantic fight with American journalists over whether the conflict in Iraq is appropriately described as a civil war. It is not hard to understand why the administration strongly resists the label. For one thing, the U.S. media would interpret a change in the White House's position on this question as a major concession, an open acknowledgment of dashed hopes and failed policy. For another, the administration worries that if the U.S. public comes to see the violence in Iraq as a civil war, it will be even less willing to tolerate continued U.S. military engagement. "If it's a civil war, what are we doing there, mixed up in someone else's fight?" Americans may ask.

But if semantics could matter a lot, it is less obvious whether they should influence U.S. policy. Is it just a matter of domestic political games and public perceptions, or does the existence of civil war in Iraq have implications for what can be achieved there and what strategy Washington should pursue?

In fact, there is a civil war in progress in Iraq, one comparable in important respects to other civil wars that have occurred in postcolonial states with weak political institutions. Those cases suggest that the Bush administration's political objective in Iraq -- creating a stable, peaceful, somewhat democratic regime that can survive the departure of U.S. troops -- is unrealistic. Given this unrealistic political objective, military strategy of any sort is doomed to fail almost regardless of whether the administration goes with the "surge" option, as President George W. Bush has proposed, or shifts toward a pure training mission, as advised by the Iraq Study Group.

Even if an increase in the number of U.S. combat troops reduces violence in Baghdad and so buys time for negotiations on power sharing in the current Iraqi government, there is no good reason to expect that subsequent reductions would not revive the violent power struggle. Civil wars are rarely ended by stable power-sharing agreements. When they are, it typically takes combatants who are not highly factionalized and years of fighting to clarify the balance of power. Neither condition is satisfied by Iraq at present. Factionalism among the Sunnis and the Shiites approaches levels seen in Somalia, and multiple armed groups on both sides appear to believe that they could wrest control of the government if U.S. forces left. Such beliefs will not change quickly while large numbers of U.S. troops remain.

As the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad proceeds, the weak Shiite-dominated government is inevitably becoming an open partisan in a nasty civil war between Sunni and Shiite Arabs. As a result, President

Bush's commitment to making a "success" of the current government will increasingly amount to siding with the Shiites, a position that is morally dubious and probably not in the interest of either the United States or long-term regional peace and stability. A decisive military victory by a Shiite-dominated government is not possible anytime soon given the favorable conditions for insurgency fought from the Sunni-dominated provinces. Furthermore, this course encourages Sunni nationalists to turn to al Qaeda in Iraq for support against Shiite militias and the Iraqi army. It also essentially aligns Washington with Tehran against the Sunni-dominated states to the west.

As long as the Bush administration remains absolutely committed to propping up the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or a similarly configured successor, the U.S. government will have limited leverage with almost all of the relevant parties. By contrast, moving away from absolute commitment -- for example, by beginning to shift U.S. combat troops out of the central theaters -- would increase U.S. diplomatic and military leverage on almost all fronts. Doing so would not allow the current or the next U.S. administration to bring a quick end to the civil war, which most likely will last for some time. But it would allow the United States to play a balancing role between the combatants that would be more conducive to reaching, in the long run, a stable resolution in which Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish interests are well represented in a decent Iraqi government. If the Iraqis ever manage to settle on the power-sharing agreement that is the objective of current U.S. policy, it will come only after bitter fighting in the civil war that is already under way.

WAR RECORDS

A civil war is a violent conflict within a country fought by organized groups that aim to take power at the center or in a region, or to change government policies. Everyday usage of the term "civil war" does not entail a clear threshold for how much violence is necessary to qualify a conflict as a civil war, as opposed to terrorism or low-level political strife. Political scientists sometimes use a threshold of at least 1,000 killed over the course of a conflict. Based on this arguably rather low figure, there have been around 125 civil wars since the end of World War II, and there are roughly 20 ongoing today. If that threshold is increased to an average of 1,000 people killed per year, there have still been over 90 civil wars since 1945. (It is often assumed that the prevalence of civil wars is a post-Cold War phenomenon, but in fact the number of ongoing civil wars increased steadily from 1945 to the early 1990s, before receding somewhat to late-1970s levels.) The rate of killing in Iraq -- easily more than 60,000 in the last three years -- puts the conflict in the company of many recent ones that are routinely described as civil wars (for example, those in Algeria, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and Sri Lanka). Indeed, even the conservative estimate of 60,000 deaths would make Iraq the ninth-deadliest civil war since 1945 in terms of annual casualties.

A major reason for the prevalence of civil wars is that they have been hard to end. Their average duration since 1945 has been about ten years, with half lasting more than seven years. Their long duration seems to result from the way in which most of these conflicts have been fought: namely, by rebel groups using guerrilla tactics, usually operating in rural regions of postcolonial countries with weak administrative, police, and military capabilities. Civil wars like that of the United States, featuring conventional armies facing off along well-defined fronts, have been highly unusual. Far more typical have been conflicts such as those in Algeria, Colombia, Sri Lanka, and southern and western Sudan. As these cases illustrate, rural guerrilla warfare can be an extremely robust tactic, allowing relatively small numbers of rebels to gain partial control of large amounts of territory for years despite expensive and brutal military campaigns against them.

The civil war in Iraq began in 2004 as a primarily urban guerrilla struggle by Sunni insurgent groups hoping to drive out the United States and to regain the power held by Sunnis under Saddam Hussein. It escalated in 2006 with the proliferation and intensification of violence by Shiite militias, who ostensibly seek to defend Shiites from the Sunni insurgents and who have pursued this end with "ethnic cleansing" and a great deal of gang violence and thuggery.

This sort of urban guerrilla warfare and militia-based conflict differs from the typical post-1945 civil war, but there are analogues. One little-discussed but useful comparison is the violent conflict that wracked Turkish cities between 1977 and 1980. According to standard estimates, fighting among local militias and paramilitaries aligning themselves with "the left" or "the right" killed more than 20 people per day in thousands of attacks and counterattacks, assassinations, and death-squad campaigns. Beginning with a massacre by rightists in the city of Kahramanmaras in December 1978, the left-right conflicts spiraled into ethnic violence, pitting Sunnis against Alawites against Kurds against Shiites in various cities.

As in Iraq today, the organization of the Turkish combatants was highly local and factionalized, especially on the left; the fighting often looked like urban gang violence. But, also as in Iraq, the gangs and militias had shady ties to the political parties controlling the democratically elected national parliament as well. (Indeed, one might describe the civil conflicts in Turkey then and in Iraq now as "militiaized party politics.") Intense political rivalries between the leading Turkish politicians, along with their politically useful ties to the paramilitaries, prevented the democratic regime from moving decisively to end the violence. Much as in Iraq today, the elected politicians fiddled while the cities burned. Fearing that the lower ranks of the military were becoming infected with the violent factionalism of the society at large, military leaders undertook a coup in September 1980, after which they unleashed a major wave of repression against militias and gang members of both the left and the right. At the price of military rule (for what turned out to be three years), the urban terror was ended.

Especially if the United States withdraws from Iraq, the odds are good that a military coup in which some subset of the Iraqi army leadership declares that the elected government is not working and that a strong hand is necessary to impose order will result. It is unlikely, however, that a military regime in Iraq would be able to follow the example of the one in Turkey in the early 1980s. The Turkish military was a strong institution with enough autonomy and enough loyalty to the Kemalist national ideal that it could act independently of the divisions tearing the country apart. Although the army favored the right more than the left, Turkish citizens saw it as largely standing apart from the factional fighting -- and thus as a credible intervenor. By contrast, the Iraqi army and, even more, the Iraqi police force appear to have little autonomy from society and politics. The police look like militia members in different uniforms, sometimes with some U.S. training. The army has somewhat more institutional coherence and autonomy, but it is Shiite-dominated and has few functional mixed units. Some evidence suggests that high-level figures in the army are facilitating, if not actively pursuing, ethnic cleansing. Accordingly, a power grab by a subset of the army leadership would be widely interpreted as a power grab by a particular Shiite faction -- and could lead the army to break up along sectarian and, possibly, factional lines.

What happened in Lebanon in 1975-76 may offer better insights into what is likely to happen in Iraq. As violence between Christian militias and Palestine Liberation Organization factions started to escalate in 1975, the Lebanese army leadership initially stayed out of the conflict, realizing that the army would splinter if it tried to intervene. But as the violence escalated, the army eventually did intervene -- and broke apart. Lebanon then entered a long period of conflict during which an array of Christian, Sunni, Shiite, and PLO militias fought one another off and on (as much within sectarian groups as between them). Syrian and Israeli military involvement sometimes reduced and sometimes escalated the violence. Alliances shifted, often in surprising ways. The Syrians, for example, initially sided with the Christians against the PLO.

A similar scenario is already playing out in Iraq. Whether U.S. forces stay or go, Iraq south of the Kurdish areas will probably look more and more like Lebanon during its long civil war. Effective political authority will devolve to regions, cities, and even neighborhoods. After a period of ethnic cleansing and fighting to draw lines, an equilibrium with lower-level, more intermittent sectarian violence will set in, punctuated by larger campaigns financed and aided by foreign powers. Violence and exploitation within sects will most likely worsen, as the neighborhood militias and gangs that carried out the ethnic cleansing increasingly fight among themselves over turf, protection rackets, and trade. As in Lebanon, there will probably be a good deal of intervention by neighboring states -- especially Iran -- but it will not necessarily bring them great strategic gains. To the contrary, it may bring them a great deal of grief, just as it has the United States.

LEARNING TO SHARE?

When they do finally end, civil wars typically conclude with a decisive military victory for one side. Of the roughly 55 civil wars fought for control of a central government (as opposed to for secession or regional autonomy) since 1955, fully 75 percent ended with a clear victory for one side. The government ultimately crushed the rebels in at least 40 percent of the 55 cases, whereas the rebels won control of the center in 35 percent. Power-sharing agreements that divide up control of a central government among the combatants have been far less common. By my reckoning, at best, 9 of the 55 cases, or about 16 percent, ended this way. Examples include El Salvador in 1992, South Africa in 1994, and Tajikistan in 1997.

If successful power-sharing agreements rarely end civil wars, it is not for lack of effort. Negotiations on power sharing are common in the midst of civil wars, as are failed attempts, often with the help of outside intervention by states or international institutions, to implement such agreements. The point of departure for both the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the rebel attack that ended it, for example, was the failure of an extensive power-sharing agreement between the Rwandan government, Hutu opposition parties, and the Tutsi insurgents.

Power-sharing agreements rarely work in large part because civil wars cause combatants to be organized in a way that produces mutually reinforcing fears and temptations: combatants are afraid that the other side will use force to grab power and at the same time are tempted to use force to grab power themselves. If one militia fears that another will try to use force to win control of the army or a city, then it has a strong incentive to use force to prevent this. The other militia understands this incentive, which gives it a good reason to act exactly as the first militia feared. In the face of these mutual, self-fulfilling fears, agreements on paper about dividing up or sharing control of political offices, the military, or, say, oil revenues are often just that -- paper. They may survive while a powerful third party implicitly threatens to prevent violent power grabs (as the United States has done in Iraq), but they are likely to disintegrate otherwise.

The Bush administration has attempted to help put in place an Iraqi government based on a power-sharing agreement among Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish leaders, but it has done so in the midst of an escalating civil war. The historical evidence suggests that this is a Sisyphean task. The effective provision of security by an intervening power may even undermine the belief that the government could stand on its own without the third party's backing. U.S. military intervention in Iraq is thus unlikely to produce a government that can survive by itself whether the troops stay ten more months or ten more years.

Could Iraq in 2007 be one of the rare cases in which power sharing successfully ends a civil war? Examining earlier such cases suggests that they have two distinctive features that make power sharing feasible. First, a stable agreement is typically reached only after a period of fighting has clarified the relative military capabilities of the various sides. Each side needs to come to the conclusion that it cannot get everything it wants by violence. For example, the Dayton agreement that divided power among the parties to the Bosnian war required not only NATO intervention to get them to the table and enforce the deal but also more than three years of intense fighting, which had brought the combatants essentially to a stalemate by the summer of 1995. (Even then, the agreement would not have held, and the government would surely have collapsed, if not for a continued third-party guarantee from NATO and effective sovereign control by the Office of the High Representative created under Dayton.)

Second, a power-sharing deal tends to hold only when every side is relatively cohesive. How can one party expect that another will live up to its obligations if it has no effective control over its own members? Attempts to construct power-sharing deals to end civil wars in Burundi and Somalia, for example, have been frustrated for years by factionalism within rebel groups. Conversely, the consolidation of power by one rebel faction can sometimes enable a peace agreement -- as occurred prior to the deal that ended the first war between Khartoum and southern Sudanese rebels in 1972.

Neither of these conditions holds for Iraq. First, there are many significant (and well-armed) Sunni groups that seem to believe that without U.S. troops present, they could win back control of Baghdad and the rest of the country. And there are many Shiites, including many with guns, who believe that as the majority group they can and will maintain political domination of Iraq. Moreover, among the Shiites, Muqtada al-

Sadr seems to believe that he could wrest control from his rivals if the United States left. Indeed, if the United States withdraws, violence between Shiite militias will likely escalate further. Open fighting between Shiite militias might, in turn, reaffirm the Sunni insurgents' belief that they will be able to retake power.

Second, both the Sunnis and the Shiites are highly factionalized, at the national political level and at the level of neighborhood militias and gangs. Shiite politicians are divided into at least four major parties, and one of these, Dawa (the party of Prime Minister Maliki), has historically been divided into three major factions. Sadr is constantly described in the U.S. media as the leader of the largest and most aggressive Shiite militia in Iraq, but it has never been clear if he can control what the militias who praise his name actually do. The Iraqi Sunnis are similarly divided among tribes outside of Baghdad, and the organizational anarchy of Sunni Islam seems to make groupwide coordination extremely difficult.

If Maliki had the authority of a Nelson Mandela, and a party organization with the (relative) coherence and dominance of the African National Congress in the antiapartheid struggle, he would be able to move more effectively to incorporate and co-opt various Sunni leaders into the government without fear of undermining his own power relative to that of his various Shiite political adversaries. He would also be better able to make credible commitments to deliver on promises made to Sunni leaders. As it is, intra-Shiite political rivalries render the new government almost completely dysfunctional. Its ministers see their best option as cultivating militias (or ties to militias) for current and coming fights, extortion rackets, and smuggling operations.

Tragically, more civil war may be the only way to reach a point where power sharing could become a feasible solution to the problem of governing Iraq. More fighting holds the prospect of clarifying the balance of forces and creating pressures for internal consolidation on one or both sides, thereby providing stronger grounds for either a victory by one side or a stable negotiated settlement. Should the latter eventually come into view, some sort of regional or international peacekeeping force will almost surely be required to help bring it into being. The Iraq Study Group report is quite right that Washington should be setting up diplomatic mechanisms for such eventualities, sooner rather than later.

BALANCING ACT

Hopefully, this analysis is too pessimistic. Perhaps Iraq's elected politicians will muddle through, and perhaps the Iraqi army will, with U.S. support, develop the capability and motivation to act effectively and evenhandedly against insurgents and militias on all sides. The optimistic scenario is so unlikely, however, that policymakers must consider the implications if civil war in Iraq continues and escalates.

Suppose that the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad continues and Sunni insurgent groups and Shiite militias continue to fight one another, U.S. troops, and civilians. If the Bush administration sticks to its "stay the course toward victory" approach, of which the surge option is the latest incarnation, it will become increasingly apparent that this policy amounts to siding with the Shiites in an extremely vicious Sunni-Shiite war. U.S. troops may play some positive role in preventing human rights abuses by Iraqi army units and slowing down violence and ethnic cleansing. But as long as the United States remains committed to trying to make this Iraqi government "succeed" on the terms President Bush has laid out, there is no escaping the fact that the central function of U.S. troops will be to backstop Maliki's government or its successor. That security gives Maliki and his coalition the ability to tacitly pursue (or acquiesce in) a dirty war against actual and imagined Sunni antagonists while publicly supporting "national reconciliation."

This policy is hard to defend on the grounds of either morality or national interest. Even if Shiite thugs and their facilitators in the government could succeed in ridding Baghdad of Sunnis, it is highly unlikely that they would be able to suppress the insurgency in the Sunni-majority provinces in western Iraq or to prevent attacks in Baghdad and other places where Shiites live. In other words, the current U.S. policy probably will not lead to a decisive military victory anytime soon, if ever. And even if it did, would Washington want it to? The rise of a brutal, ethnically exclusivist, Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad would

further the perception of Iran as the ascendant regional power. Moreover, U.S. backing for such a government would give Iraqi Sunnis and the Sunni-dominated countries in the Middle East no reason not to support al Qaeda as an ally in Iraq. By spurring these states to support Sunni forces fighting the Shiite government, such backing would ultimately pit the United States against those states in a proxy war.

To avail itself of more attractive policy options, the Bush administration (or its successor) must break off its unconditional military support for the Shiite-dominated government that it helped bring to power in Baghdad. Washington's commitment to Maliki's government undermines U.S. diplomatic and military leverage with almost every relevant party in the country and the region. Starting to move away from this commitment by shifting combat troops out of the central theaters could, accordingly, increase U.S. leverage with almost all parties. The current Shiite political leadership would then have incentives to try to gain back U.S. military support by, for example, making more genuine efforts to incorporate Sunnis into the government or reining in Shiite militias. (Admittedly, whether it has the capacity to do either is unclear.) As U.S. troops departed, Sunni insurgent groups would begin to see the United States less as a committed ally of the "Persians" and more as a potential source of financial or even military backing. Washington would also have more leverage with Iran and Syria, because the U.S. military would not be completely bogged down in Baghdad and Anbar Province -- and because both of those countries have a direct interest in avoiding increased chaos in Iraq.

Again, none of this would make for a quick end to the civil war, which will probably last for some time in any event. But it would allow the United States to move toward a balancing role that would be more conducive to ultimately gaining a stable resolution in which Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish interests are represented in a decent Iraqi government.

Despite the horrific violence currently tearing Iraq apart, in the long run there is hope for the return of a viable Iraqi state based on a political bargain among Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish leaders. Indeed, they may end up cooperating on terms set by a constitution similar to the current one -- although only after a significant period of fighting. The basis for an Iraqi state is the common interest of all parties, especially the elites, in the efficient exploitation of oil resources. Continued civil war could persuade Shiite leaders that they cannot fully enjoy oil profits and political control without adequately buying off Sunni groups, who can maintain a costly insurgency. And civil war could persuade the Sunnis that a return to Sunni dominance and Shiite quiescence is impossible. Kurdish leaders have an interest in the autonomy they have already secured but with access to functioning oil pipelines leading south.

There are, of course, other possible outcomes of continued civil war in Iraq, including a formal breakup of the country or a decisive victory south of the Kurdish areas by a Sunni- or Shiite-dominated military organization that would impose a harsh dictatorship. Insofar as the United States can influence the ultimate outcome, neither of these is as good a long-term policy objective as a power-sharing agreement. As the Iraq Study Group has argued, attempting to impose some kind of partition would probably increase the killing. In addition, there are no obvious defensible borders to separate Sunnis from Shiites; the Sunnis would not rest content with an oil-poor patch of western Iraq; it is not clear that new Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish states would be much more peaceful than Iraq is at present; and there would be considerable economic inefficiencies from making three states from one in this area. It is conceivable that civil war will someday lead the combatants in Iraq to agree on Iraq's partition anyway, but this is a decision for Iraqis rather than outsiders to make.

Most civil wars end with a decisive military victory -- and this one may as well -- but a decisive military victory and political dictatorship for some Sunni or Shiite group is even less appealing as a long-term U.S. policy objective. A decisive military victory for a Shiite-dominated faction would favor both Iran and al Qaeda, and a decisive victory for Sunni insurgents would amount to restoring oppressive minority rule, a major reason for the current mess.

Two less extreme outcomes would be much better for most Iraqis, for regional peace and stability, and for U.S. interests in the region. The first would be a power-sharing agreement among a small number of Iraqi

actors who actually commanded a military force and controlled territory, to be stabilized at least initially by an international peacekeeping operation. The second would be the rise of a dominant military force whose leader had both the inclination and the ability to cut deals with local "warlords" or political bosses from all other groups. Neither outcome can be imposed at this point by the United States. Both could be reached only through fighting and bargaining carried out primarily by Iraqis.

To facilitate either outcome, the U.S. government would have to pursue a policy of balancing, using diplomatic, financial, and possibly some military tools to encourage the perception that no one group or faction can win without sharing power and resources. A balancing policy might be pursued from "offshore," implemented mainly by supplying monetary and material support to tactical allies, or "onshore," possibly drawing on air strikes or other forms of U.S. military intervention originating from bases in Iraq or close by. The mechanics would necessarily depend on a complicated set of diplomatic, political, and military contingencies. The important point is that the only alternative to some form of balancing policy would be to support decisive victory by one side or the other, which would probably be undesirable even in the unlikely event that victory came soon.

Even if the coming "surge" in U.S. combat troops manages to lower the rate of killing in Baghdad, very little in relevant historical experience or the facts of this case suggests that U.S. troops would not be stuck in Iraq for decades, keeping sectarian and factional power struggles at bay while fending off jihadist and nationalist attacks. The more likely scenario is that the Bush administration's commitment to the "success" of the Maliki government will make the United States passively complicit in a massive campaign of ethnic cleansing. Standing back to adopt a more evenhanded policy in the civil war already in progress is a more sensible and defensible course. To pursue it, the Bush administration or its successor would first have to give up on the idea that a few more U.S. brigades or a change in U.S. tactics will make for an Iraq that can, in President Bush's words, "govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself" once U.S. troops are gone.

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