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What Next?

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The debate is over: By any definition, Iraq is in a state of civil war. Indeed, the only thing standing between Iraq and a descent into total Bosnia-like devastation is 135,000 U.S. troops -- and even they are merely slowing the fall. The internecine conflict could easily spiral into one that threatens not only Iraq but also its neighbors throughout the oil-rich Persian Gulf region with instability, turmoil and war.

The consequences of an all-out civil war in Iraq could be dire. Considering the experiences of recent such conflicts, hundreds of thousands of people may die. Refugees and displaced people could number in the millions. And with Iraqi insurgents, militias and organized crime rings wreaking havoc on Iraq's oil infrastructure, a full-scale civil war could send global oil prices soaring even higher.

However, the greatest threat that the United States would face from civil war in Iraq is from the spillover -- the burdens, the instability, the copycat secession attempts and even the follow-on wars that could emerge in neighboring countries. Welcome to the new "new Middle East" -- a region where civil wars could follow one after another, like so many Cold War dominoes.

And unlike communism, these dominoes may actually fall.

For all the recent attention on the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, far more people died in Iraq over the past month than in Israel and Lebanon, and tens of thousands have been killed from the fighting and criminal activity since the U.S. occupation began. Additional signs of civil war abound. Refugees and displaced people number in the hundreds of thousands. Militias continue to proliferate. The sense of being an "Iraqi" is evaporating.

Considering how many mistakes the United States has made in Iraq, how much time has been squandered, and how difficult the task is, even a serious course correction in Washington and Baghdad may only postpone the inevitable.

Iraq displays many of the conditions most conducive to spillover. The country's ethnic, tribal and religious groups are also found in neighboring states, and they share many of the same grievances. Iraq has a history of violence with its neighbors, which has fostered desires for vengeance and fomented constant clashes. Iraq also possesses resources that its neighbors covet -- oil being the most obvious, but important religious shrines also figure in the mix -- and its borders are porous.

Civil wars -- whether in Africa, Asia, Europe or the Middle East -- tend to spread across borders. For example, the effects of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, which began in the 1920s and continued even after formal hostilities ended in 1948, contributed to the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, provoked a civil war in Jordan in 1970-71 and then triggered the Lebanese civil war of 1975-90. In turn, the Lebanese conflict helped spark civil war in Syria in 1976-82.

With an all-out civil war looming in Iraq, Washington must decide how to deal with the most common and dangerous ways such conflicts spill across national boundaries. Only by understanding the refugee crises, terrorism, radicalization of neighboring populations, copycat secessions and foreign interventions that such wars frequently spark can we begin to plan for how to cope with them in the months and years ahead.

Refugees Spread The Fighting

Massive refugee flows are a hallmark of major civil wars. Afghanistan's produced the largest such stream since World War II, with more than a third of the population fleeing. Conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s also generated millions of refugees and internally displaced people: In Kosovo, more than two-thirds of Kosovar Albanians fled the country. In Bosnia, half of the country's 4.4 million people were displaced, and 1 million of them fled the country altogether. Comparable figures for Iraq would mean more than 13 million displaced Iraqis, and more than 6 million of them running to neighboring countries.

Refugees are not merely a humanitarian burden. They often continue the wars from their new homes, thus spreading the violence to other countries. At times, armed units move from one side of the border to the other. The millions of Afghans who fled to Pakistan during the anti-Soviet struggle in the 1980s illustrate such violent transformation. Stuck in the camps for years while war consumed their homeland, many refugees joined radical Islamist organizations. When the Soviets departed, refugees became the core of the Taliban. This movement, nurtured by Pakistani intelligence and various Islamist political parties, eventually took power in Kabul and opened the door for Osama bin Laden to establish a new base of operations for al-Qaeda.

Refugee camps often become a sanctuary and recruiting ground for militias, which use them to launch raids on their homelands. Inevitably, their enemies attack the camps -- or even the host governments. In turn, those governments begin to use the refugees as tools to influence events back in their homelands, arming, training and directing them, and thereby exacerbating the conflict.

Perhaps the most tragic example of the problems created by large refugee flows occurred in the wake of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. After the Hutu-led genocide resulted in the death of 800,000 to 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front "invaded" the country from neighboring Uganda. The RPF was drawn from the 500,000 or so Tutsis who had already fled Rwanda from past pogroms. As the RPF swept through Rwanda, almost 1 million Hutus fled to neighboring Congo, fearing that the evil they did unto others would be done unto them.

For two years after 1994, Hutu bands continued to conduct raids in Rwanda and began to work with Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. The new RPF government of Rwanda responded by attacking not only the Hutu militia camps, but also its much larger neighbor, bolstering a formerly obscure Congolese opposition leader named Laurent Kabila and installing him in power in Kinshasa. A civil war in Congo ensued, killing perhaps 4 million people.

The flow of refugees from Iraq could worsen instability in all of its neighboring countries. Kuwait, for example, has just over 1 million citizens, 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. Both these Iraqi refugees and the Kuwaiti Shiites could turn against the Sunni-dominated Kuwaiti government, seeing violence as a means to end the centuries of discrimination they have faced at the hands of Kuwait's Sunnis.

Numbers of displaced people are already rising in Iraq, although they are nowhere near what they could be if the country slid into a full civil war. About 100,000 Arabs are believed to have fled northern Iraq under pressure from Kurdish militias. As many as 200,000 Sunni Arabs reportedly have been displaced by the fighting between Sunni groups and the American-led coalition in western Iraq. In the past 18 months, 50,000 to 100,000 Shiites have fled mixed-population cities in central Iraq for greater safety farther south. So far, in addition to the Palestinians and other foreigners, only the Iraqi upper and middle classes are fleeing the country altogether, moving to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or the Gulf States. As one indicator of the size of this flight, since 2004 the Ministry of Education has issued nearly 40,000 letters permitting parents to take their children's academic records abroad. If the violence continues to escalate, even those without resources will soon flee to vast refugee camps in the nearest country.

Terrorism Finds New Homes

The war in Iraq has proved to be a disaster for the struggle against Osama bin Laden. Fighters there are receiving training, building networks and becoming further radicalized -- and the U.S. occupation is proving a dream recruiting tool for young Muslims worldwide. As bad as this is, a wide-scale civil war in Iraq could make the terrorism problem even worse.

Such terrorist organizations as Hezbollah, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were all born of civil wars. They eventually shifted from assaulting their enemies in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Algeria, Northern Ireland and Israel, respectively, to mounting attacks elsewhere. Hezbollah has attacked Israeli, American and European targets on four continents. The LTTE assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi because of his intervention in Sri Lanka. The IRA began a campaign of attacks in Britain in the 1980s. The GIA did the same to France the mid-1990s, hijacking an Air France flight then moving on to bombings in the country. In the 1970s, various Palestinian groups began launching terrorist attacks against Israelis wherever they could find them -- including at the Munich Olympics and airports in Athens and Rome -- and then attacked Western civilians whose governments supported Israel.

In Afghanistan, the anti-Soviet struggle in the 1980s was a key incubator for bin Laden's movement. Many young mujaheddin went to Afghanistan with only the foggiest notion of jihad. But during the fighting in Afghanistan, individuals took on one another's grievances, so that Saudi jihadists learned to hate the Egyptian government and Chechens learned to hate Israel. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda convinced many of them that the United States was at the center of the Muslim world's problems -- a view that almost no Sunni terrorist group had previously embraced. Other civil wars in Muslim countries, including the Balkans, Chechnya and Kashmir, began for local reasons but became enmeshed in the broader jihadist movement. Should Iraq descend into a deeper civil war, the country could become a sanctuary for both Shiite and Sunni terrorists, possibly even exceeding the problems of Lebanon in the 1980s or Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Right now, the U.S. military presence keeps a lid on the jihadist effort. There are no enormous training camps such as those the radicals enjoyed in Afghanistan. Likewise, Hezbollah and other Shiite terrorist groups have maintained a low profile in Iraq so far, but the more embattled the Shiites feel, the better the chance they will invite greater Hezbollah involvement. Shiite fighters may even strike the Sunni backers of their Iraqi adversaries, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, or incite their own Shiite populations against them. And lost in the focus on Arab terrorist groups is the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), an anti-Turkish group that has long fought to establish a Kurdish state in Turkey from bases in Iraq. The more Iraq is consumed by chaos, the more likely it is that the PKK will regain a haven in northern Iraq.

The Sunni jihadists would be particularly likely to go after Saudi Arabia given its long, lightly patrolled border with Iraq, as well as their interest in destabilizing the ruling Saud family. The turmoil in Iraq has energized young Saudi Islamists. In the future, the balance may shift from Saudis helping Iraqi fighters against the Americans to Iraqi fighters helping Saudi jihadists against the Saudi government, with Saudi oil infrastructure an obvious target.

Radicalism Is Contagious

Civil wars tend to inflame the passions of neighboring populations. This is often just a matter of proximity: Chaos and slaughter five miles down the road has a much greater emotional impact than a massacre 5,000 miles away. The problem worsens whenever ethnic or religious groupings also spill across borders. Frequently, people demand that their government intervene on behalf of their compatriots embroiled in the civil war. Alternatively, they may aid their co-religionists or co-ethnics on their own -- taking in refugees, funneling money and guns, providing sanctuary.

The Albanian government came under heavy pressure from its people to support the Kosovar Albanians who were fighting for independence from the Serbs. As a result, Tirana provided diplomatic support and covert aid to the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998-99, and threatened to intervene to prevent Serbia

from crushing the Kosovars. Similarly, numerous Irish and Irish American groups clandestinely supported the Irish Republican Army, providing money and guns to the group and lobbying Dublin and Washington.

Sometimes, radicalization works in the opposite direction if neighboring populations share the grievances of their comrades across the border, and as a result are inspired to fight in pursuit of similar goals in their own country. 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 spurred to action when they saw Lebanese Sunni Arabs fighting to wrest a share of political power from the minority Maronite-dominated government in Beirut. This spurred their own decision to organize against Hafez al-Assad's regime in Damascus. By the late 1970s, their resistance had blossomed into civil war, but Assad's regime was not as weak as Lebanon's. In 1982, Assad razed the center of the city of Hama, a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold, killing 20,000 to 40,000 people and snuffing out the revolt.

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

Populations in some countries around Iraq are already showing dangerous signs of radicalization. In March, after the Sunni jihadist bombing of the Shiite Askariya shrine in Iraq, more than 100,000 Bahraini Shiites took to the streets in anger. In 2004, when U.S. forces were battling Iraqi Sunni insurgents in Fallujah, large numbers of Bahraini Sunnis protested. There has been unrest in Iranian Kurdistan in the past year, prompting 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 Shiites and Sunnis in the key Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. As in Bahrain, many Saudi Shiites saw the success of Iraq's Shiites and are now demanding better political and economic treatment. The government made a few initial concessions, but now the kingdom's Sunnis are openly accusing the Shiites of heresy. Religious leaders on both sides have begun to warn of a coming civil war or schism within Islam. The horrors of such a split are on display only miles away in Iraq.

Secession Breeds Secessionism

Iraq's neighbors are just as fractured as Iraq itself. Should Iraq fragment, voices for secession elsewhere will gain strength. The dynamic is clear: One oppressed group with a sense of national identity stakes a claim to independence and goes to war to achieve it. As long as that group isn't crushed immediately, others with similar goals can be inspired to do the same.

The various civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s provide a good example. Slovenia was determined to declare independence, which led the Croats to follow suit. When the Serbs opposed Croatian secession from Yugoslavia by force, the first of the Yugoslav civil wars broke out. The European Union foolishly recognized both Slovene and Croatian independence, hoping that would end the bloodshed. However, many Bosnian Muslims wanted independence, and when they saw the Slovenes and Croats rewarded for their revolts, they pursued the same course. The new Bosnian government feared that if it did not declare independence, Serbia and Croatia would gobble up the respective Serb- and Croat-inhabited parts of their country. When Bosnia held a March 1992 referendum on independence, 98 percent voted in favor. The barricades went up all over Sarajevo the next day, kicking off the worst of the Balkan civil wars.

It didn't stop there. The eventual success of the Bosnians -- even after four years of war -- was an important element in the thinking of Kosovar Albanians when they agitated against the Serbian government in 1997-98. Serbian repression sparked an escalation toward independence that ended in the 1999 Kosovo War between NATO and Serbia. Kosovo, in turn, inspired Albanians in Macedonia to launch a guerrilla war against the Skopje government in hope of achieving the same or better.

In Iraq's case, the first candidate for secession is obvious: Kurdistan. If any group on Earth deserves its own country, it is surely the Kurds -- a distinct nation of 25 million people living in a geographically contiguous space with their own language and culture. However, if the Iraqi Kurds declare their independence and are protected by the international community, it is not hard to imagine Kurdish groups in Turkey and Iran following suit.

Moreover, the Kurds are not the only candidates. Shiite leader Abdul Aziz Hakim has called for autonomy for Iraq's Shiite regions -- a likely precursor for demands of outright independence. If Iraqi Shiites try to split off, other Shiites in the Gulf region might agitate against their own regimes along similar lines. Moreover, if ethnic or sectarian self-determination begins spreading throughout the Middle East more generally, secessionist movements could also spread to unlikely groups such as Iran's minority Azeri and Baluch populations.

Beware of Neighborly Interventions

Another critical problem of civil wars is the tendency of neighboring states to get involved, turning the conflicts into regional wars. Foreign governments may intervene overtly or covertly to "stabilize" the country in turmoil and stop the refugees pouring across their borders, as the Europeans did during the Yugoslav wars. Neighboring states will intervene to eliminate terrorist groups setting up shop in the midst of the civil war, as Israel did repeatedly in Lebanon. They also may intervene to stem the flow of "dangerous ideas" into their country. Iran and Tajikistan 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 Sunni population.

In virtually every case, these interventions brought only further grief to the interveners and to the parties of the civil war.

Opportunism is another powerful motive. States often harbor designs on their neighbors' land and resources and see the chaos of civil war as an opportunity to achieve long-frustrated ambitions. Much as Croatia's Franjo Tudjman and Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic may have felt the need to intervene in the Bosnian civil war to protect their ethnic brothers, it seems clear that a more important motive for both was to carve up Bosnia between them.

Many states attempt to influence the course of a civil war by providing money, weapons and other support to one side. In effect, they use their intelligence services to create proxies who can fight the war for them. But states find that proxies are rarely able to secure their interests, typically leading them to escalate to open intervention. Both Israel and Syria employed proxies in Lebanon, for example, but found them inadequate, prompting their own invasions.

Pakistan is one of the few countries to succeed in using a proxy force (the Taliban) to secure its interests in a civil war. However, the nation's support of these radical Islamists encouraged the explosion of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan itself -- increasing the number of armed groups operating from Pakistan and creating networks for drugs and weapons to fuel the conflict. Today, Pakistan is a basket case, and much of the reason lies in its costly effort to prevail in the Afghan civil war.

Covert foreign intervention is proceeding apace in Iraq, with Iran leading the way. U.S. military and Iraqi sources think 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 if necessary. Iran has set up an extensive

network of safe houses, arms caches, communications channels and proxy fighters, and will be well-positioned to pursue its interests in a full-blown civil war. The Sunni powers of Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are frightened by Iran's growing influence and presence in Iraq and have been scrambling to catch up.

Turkey may be the most likely country to overtly intervene in Iraq. Turkish leaders fear both the spillover of Turkish secessionism and the possibility that Iraq is becoming a haven for the PKK. Turkey has already massed troops on its southern border, and officials are threatening to intervene.

What's more, none of Iraq's neighbors thinks that it can afford to have the country fall into the hands of the other side. An Iranian "victory" would put the nation's forces in the heartland of the Arab world, bordering Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Syria; several of these states poured tens of billions of dollars into Saddam Hussein's military to prevent just such an occurrence in the 1980s. Similarly, a Sunni Arab victory (backed by the Jordanians, Kuwaitis and Saudis) would put radical Sunni fundamentalists on Iran's doorstep -- a nightmare scenario for Tehran.

Add in, too, each country's interest in preventing its rivals from capturing Iraq's oil resources. If these states are unable to achieve their goals through clandestine intervention, they will have a powerful incentive to launch a conventional invasion.

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Much as Americans may want to believe that the United States can just walk away from Iraq should it slide into all-out civil war, the threat of spillover from such a conflict throughout the Middle East means it can't. Instead, Washington will have to devise strategies to deal with refugees, minimize terrorist attacks emanating from Iraq, dampen the anger in neighboring populations caused by the conflict, prevent secession fever and keep Iraq's neighbors from intervening. The odds of success are poor, but, nonetheless, we have to try.

Providing Support

The United States, along with its Asian and European allies, will have to make a major effort to persuade Iraq's neighbors not to intervene in its civil war. Economic aid should be part of such an effort, but will not suffice. For Jordan and Saudi Arabia, it may require an effort to reinvigorate Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, thereby addressing one of their major concerns -- an effort made all the more important and complex in light of the recent conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. For Iran and Syria, it may be a clear (but not cost-free) path toward acceptance back into the international community.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait would be extremely difficult for the United States to coerce, and the best Washington might do is to convince them that their intervention is unnecessary because the United States and its allies will take great pains to keep Iran from meddling, which will be one of Riyadh's greatest worries.

When it comes to foreign intervention, Iran is the biggest headache of all. Given its immense interests in Iraq, some involvement is inevitable. For Tehran, and probably for Damascus, the United States and its allies probably will have to put down red lines regarding what is absolutely impermissible -- such as sending uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq or claiming Iraqi territory. Washington and its allies will also have to lay out what they will do if Iran crosses any of those red lines. Economic sanctions would be one possibility, but they could be effective only if the European Union, China, India and Russia all cooperate. On its own, the United States could employ punitive military operations, either to make Iran pay an unacceptable price for one-time infractions or to persuade it to halt ongoing violations of one or more red lines.

Don't Pick Winners

From Washington, it is tempting to consider ways to play one Iraqi faction against another in an effort to manage the civil war from within. The experiences of other powers, however, suggest how difficult this is. The Soviet Union tried to prop up President Najibullah when it left Afghanistan, and Israel used various Maronite militias as its proxies in Lebanon, but they all proved ineffective. Syria tried to use the Palestine Liberation Army to secure its interests in Lebanon, but its failure forced Damascus to invade instead. Washington tried to use a proxy force and intervene directly in Somalia, with equally disastrous results.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine a priori who will prevail in a civil war. The victor is rarely a key player in the country beforehand. Hezbollah did not exist in Lebanon at the start of the civil war there, nor did the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In Iraq, it is not clear which proxy would be the most effective militarily. Many communities are divided, fighting against one another more than against their supposed enemies. Iraq's Shiites may go the way of the Palestinians or the various Lebanese factions, who generally killed more of their own than of their declared enemies.

Manage the Kurds

Should chaos engulf Iraq, the Kurds will understandably want out, but this risks inspiring secessionists elsewhere in Iraq and throughout the region. In return for the Kurds agreeing to postpone formal secession, Washington should offer them extensive economic aid, assistance with refugees and security assurances (perhaps backed by U.S. troops) -- as well as promising support for their eventual independence when Iraq is more stable.

Buffer the Borders

One of Washington's hardest tasks would be to prevent the flow of dangerous people across Iraq's borders in either direction -- refugees, militias, foreign invaders and terrorists.

One option might be to create a system of buffer zones and refugee collection points inside Iraq staffed by U.S. and other coalition personnel. These collection points would be located on major roads, preferably near airstrips along Iraq's border -- thus on the principal routes that refugees would take to flee, providing a good logistical infrastructure to house, feed and otherwise care for tens or hundreds of thousands of refugees. Iraqi refugees would be gathered at these points and held there. In addition, coalition military forces would defend the refugee camps against attack, pacify and disarm them, and patrol large swaths of Iraqi territory nearby.

These zones would serve as "catch basins" for Iraqis fleeing the fighting, offering a secure place to stay within the nation's borders and thus preventing them from destabilizing neighboring countries. At the same time, they would serve as buffers between Iraq and its neighbors, preventing other forms of spillover -- such as militia movements, refugee flows out of Iraq and invasions into Iraq.

The catch-basin concept, while potentially useful, faces at least one big problem: Iran. Unlike Iraq's borders with Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Syria, the Iranian border is too long and has too many crossing points for it to be policed effectively by smaller numbers of coalition troops. Iran will never allow the United States the access across its territory, let alone logistical support, that would be necessary to make catch-basins along the Iran-Iraq border realistic. Thus, this scheme could make it look as though the United States was turning Iraq over to the Iranians, with the catch-basins effectively preventing intervention by Iraq's Sunni neighbors while doing nothing to deter Iran. For this reason, the United States's clear red lines to Iran about not intervening (at least overtly) would have to be enforced assiduously.

Perhaps most important, the catch-basin proposal requires Americans to endure significant long-term costs -- both in blood and treasure -- in Iraq. The United States would still need to deploy tens of

thousands of troops to the nation (albeit on its periphery), as well as supplies to feed and care for hundreds of thousands of refugees. The United States would still occupy parts of Iraq, and the U.S. presence would remain a recruiting poster for the jihadist movement. Finally, all of these costs would have to be endured for as long as the war rages; recall that refugees from the wars in Afghanistan lived away from their homes for more than 20 years.

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No country in recent history has successfully managed the spillovers from a full-blown civil war; in fact, most attempts have failed miserably. Syria spent at least eight years trying to end the Lebanese civil war before the 1989 Taif accords and the 1991 Persian Gulf War gave it the opportunity to finally do so. Israel's 1982 invasion was also a bid to end the Lebanese civil war after its previous efforts to contain it had failed, and when this also failed, Jerusalem tried to go back to managing spillover. By 2000, it was clear that this was again ineffective and so Israel pulled out of Lebanon altogether.

Withdrawing from Lebanon was smart for Israel for many reasons, but it did not end its Lebanon problem -- as the latest conflict showed all too clearly. In the Balkans, the United States and its NATO allies realized that it was impossible to manage the Bosnian or Kosovar civil wars and so in both cases they employed coercion -- including the deployment of massive ground forces -- to bring them to an end.

That point is critical: Ending an all-out civil war typically requires overwhelming military power to nail down a political settlement. It took 30,000 British troops to bring the Irish civil war to an end, 45,000 Syrian troops to conclude the Lebanese civil war, 50,000 NATO troops to stop the Bosnian civil war, and 60,000 to do the job in Kosovo. Considering Iraq's much larger population, it probably would require 450,000 troops to quash an all-out civil war there. Such an effort would require a commitment of enormous military and economic resources, far in excess of what the United States has already put forth.

How Iraq got to this point is now an issue for historians (and perhaps for voters in 2008); what matters today is how to move forward and prepare for the tremendous risks an Iraqi civil war poses for this critical region. The outbreak of a large-scale civil conflict would not relieve us of our responsibilities in Iraq; in fact, it could multiply them. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, one should never assume that the situation can't get worse. It always can -- and usually does.

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