Keeping the Lid On

Daniel Byman & Kenneth Pollack

IF THE surge fails, it is imperative that the United States have a plan for containing the Iraqi civil war. As painful as it may be to admit that the U.S. effort to bring peace and stability to Iraq has failed, our new priority must become preventing the Iraqi conflict from spilling over and destabilizing neighboring states. This will not be easy. In fact, the history of states trying to contain the “spillover” from civil wars suggests that it will be very hard for the United States to do so. But planning now may allow the United States to mitigate spillover’s worst effects.

What Spillover Means

THE COLLAPSE of Iraq into all-out civil war would mean more than just a humanitarian tragedy that could easily claim hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives and produce millions of refugees. Such a conflict is unlikely to contain itself. In other similar cases of all-out civil war the resulting spillover has fostered terrorism, created refugee flows that can destabilize the entire neighborhood, radicalized the populations of surrounding states and even sparked civil wars in other, neighboring states or transformed domestic strife into regional war.

Terrorists frequently find a home in states in civil war, as Al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan. However, civil wars just as often breed new terrorist groups—Hizballah, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat of Algeria, and the Tamil Tigers were all born of civil wars. Many such groups start by focusing on local targets but then shift to international attacks—starting with those they believe are aiding their enemies in the civil war. This process is already underway in Iraq; the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan were organized from Iraqi territory. Iraq-based groups are also inspiring others to emulate their targets and tactics. As they regularly do in Iraq, jihadist terrorists have tried to strike Saudi Arabia’s oil infrastructure, a switch from the jihadists’ past avoidance of oil targets. Moreover, their Improvised Explosive Device technologies are showing up in Afghanistan.1 Suicide bombing, heretofore largely unknown in Afghanistan, is also now a regular occurrence, with the Iraq struggle providing a model to jihadists in Al-Qaeda’s former home.

In turn, an ongoing civil war can con-

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tribute to the radicalization of populations in neighboring countries. Already, the war has heightened Shi'a-Sunni tension throughout the Middle East. In March 2006, after Sunni jihadists bombed the Shi'i Askariya Shrine in the northern Iraqi city of Samarra, over 100,000 Bahraini Shi'a took to the streets in anger. Bahraini Shi'a are simultaneously horrified at the suffering of their co-religionists in Iraq and emboldened by their political successes. As one Bahraini Shi'a politician noted, “Whenever things in Iraq go haywire, it reflects here.”

And as Iraq descends into further violence, the numbers of refugees will likely increase exponentially. Iraq has already generated roughly two million refugees with another one million internally displaced. These represent large groupings of embittered people who can serve as a ready recruiting pool for armed groups still waging the civil war. And as the wars in Africa's Great Lakes region show, foreign countries where refugees find shelter can become caught up in the civil war. At times, the refugees simply bring the war with them: The fighters mingle with non-combatant refugees and launch attacks back in their home countries, while those who drove them out continue the fight against the refugees in their new bases. Neighboring governments may try to defend refugees on their soil from attacks by their enemies or at times exploit the refugees as a proxy for the governments’ own ambitions. Moreover, large refugee flows can overstrain the economies and even change the demographic balances of small or weak neighboring states, upsetting what is often a delicate political balance.

Then there is the “demonstration effect” caused when a civil war involves one group seeking separation or independence as the solution to its problems. Sometimes, other groups in similar circumstances (either in the state in civil war or in neighboring countries) 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—and in both of the latter cases Serb enclaves within both countries sought to secede from the seceding state and join with Serbia.

All the problems created by these and 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 and the Iranians in Afghanistan, or to end (or respond to) the radicalization of its own population as Syria did in Lebanon. These interventions usually turn out badly for all involved. Iraq is already seeing both actual intervention and threats of intervention. Iran has hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of intelligence and paramilitary personnel in Iraq and is arming an array of Iraqi groups. Leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have all threatened interventions of their own, both to mollify domestic sentiment and to counter what they see as unchecked Iranian gains from Tehran’s intervention.

What Can We Do—or Avoid Doing?

If Iraq spirals into an all-out civil war, the United States will have its work cut out attempting to prevent spillover from destabilizing the region and threatening key governments, particularly Saudi Arabia. Not being prepared to quickly fall back to a containment posture will lead to an ad hoc approach that will involve many avoidable mistakes and missed opportunities.

One of the most difficult challenges for the United States will be simply to not make a bad situation worse. Many of the policy options being discussed for Iraq, however, have the potential not only to fail, but to further undermine U.S. interests.

In this respect, Washington should not try to pick “winners.” The temptation for the United States to try to aid one Iraqi faction against another in an effort to manage such a civil war from within is enormous. In Washington, such management may seem like playing a clever game of chess. Unfortunately, the historical reality often proves very different. Proxies frequently 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.

Once an internal conflict has metastasized into all-out civil war, military leadership often proves to be a crucial variable in determining which faction prevails (sooner or later). However, it is extremely difficult to know a priori who the great military commanders are. We know about Moqtada Sadr and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim but very little about the field commanders of either the Mahdi Army or the Badr Organization, to name only the two best-known Iraqi militias. And in some cases we don’t even know the relevant militias, let alone their leaders.

Moreover, many communities are divided, fighting against one another more than against their supposed enemies. Commentators often speak of “the Shi’a” or “the Sunnis” as if they were discussing the Confederates or the Roundheads. In fact, Iraq’s Shi’a population is fragmented among dozens of militias, many of which hate and fight one another as much as they hate and fight the Sunnis. It is an important element in the chaos of the country today—and one attested to by recent battles in Amarah, where Mahdi Army forces squared off against the Badr Brigade, and Diwaniyah, where Mahdi Army forces fought Iraq’s Shi’a-dominated security services, as well as the nightly bloodshed in Basra—all of which is Shi’a-on-Shi’a. Thus Iraq’s Shi’a may go the way of the Palestinians or the various Lebanese factions, who generally killed more of their own than of their declared enemies. What is true for the Shi’a is just as true for the Sunnis.

A second specific problem for the United States in trying to pick (or create) a winner in an Iraqi civil war is the question of how America would support its choice. Say we choose the Shi’a: All of the Shi’a militias are strongly anti-American and some are closely tied to Iran, and none of Iraq’s Sunni neighbors (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan or Turkey) would help us to engineer a Shi’a militia conquest of Iraq. The Sunni neighbors would be glad to help us support a Sunni militia gain control of the country, but most of these militias are closely aligned with Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and other salafi jihadi groups—the principal target of the U.S. War on Terror—certainly an unpalatable choice.

And whichever group the United States chooses to support would have to slaughter large numbers of people to prevail and establish control over the country—especially true in the case of the Sunni Arabs, who make up no more than 20 percent of the population.

This is why some argue that the solution to civil war is partition—as Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) and John Owen IV, among others, have argued in these pages. The basic problem with pursuing any version of partition today in Iraq is that it is probably impossible to do so without either causing an all-out civil war or deploying the hundreds of thousands of American and other first-world troops whose absence has been the first-order problem preventing reconstruction from succeeding. Other than the Kurds, few Iraqis—whether political leaders, militia commanders or ordinary citizens—want their country divided. And many of those who are fleeing their homes are not merely peacefully resettling in a more ethnically homogeneous region, but are joining vicious sectarian militias like the Mahdi Army in hope of regaining their homes, or at least extracting revenge on whoever drove them out.

Nor is it clear that a move to partition would result in the neat division of Iraq into

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three smaller states, as many of its advocates seem to assume. As noted above, the Sunnis and the Shi'a are highly divided and are likely to fight amongst themselves, leading to regular war within the communities and a probable fracturing of power in areas where they predominate. Many militia leaders, particularly the Sadrists, have made clear that they intend to fight for all of the land they believe is “theirs”, which seems to include considerable land that the Sunnis consider “theirs.” Baghdad is one area of contention between Sunnis and Shi’a, but many other major cities are also home to multiple communities. Some of Iraq’s oil also lies in areas that are not peopled exclusively by one group.

The partition model most observers seem to have in mind is the former Yugoslavia. There, however, years of fighting preceded the partition, clarifying the relative balance of power of the parties involved and reducing the number of ethnic enclaves through brutal “ethnic cleansing.” These bloody battles helped convince many Yugoslavs that making compromises might actually be preferable to additional rounds of slaughter. These perhaps most important of all, the communities had a degree of unity and clear leaders—Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, for example—who could command their followers to stop the fighting. Nuri al-Maliki and other Iraqi leaders cannot issue similar orders even if they wanted to. Iraq’s civil war is just not yet “ripe” for a solution like partition, and therefore to impose it upon Iraq would require a far greater military commitment by the United States than the present one—closer to the troop-to-population ratio required to police the Bosnia partition, where the conflict actually was ripe for solution when Richard Holbrooke sat down at the negotiating table in Dayton.

In the end, after years of bloodshed and ethnic cleansing, a massive civil war in Iraq may eventually create conditions for a stable partition. And the United States should be prepared for this possibility. However, a major U.S. effort to enact partition today would be likely to trigger the massacres and ethnic cleansing the United States seeks to avert.

But beyond the “don’ts”, the United States must also consider other steps to minimize spillover. All of these options are difficult and carry their own sets of costs as well as benefits. For each choice, policymakers must recognize and accept the trade-offs if we are to go forward.

Some costs are relatively straightforward—but will require the United States to spend much more in aid and technical assistance to shore up allies in the region who are absorbing the brunt of spillover. This could make a considerable difference to Bahrain and Jordan. Although it is often lumped in with the other Arab Gulf states, Bahrain’s standard of living cannot compare to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or the UAE’s because its hydrocarbon production is a fraction of theirs. While it does receive considerable subsidies from its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council members, Bahrain is still the poor relation of the Gulf, and the country is already feeling the heat from radicalization of its majority Shi’a population from Iraq. Bahrain is also particularly vulnerable to anti-Americanism because it has been a reliable U.S. ally and hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Jordan is a small, poor country already overburdened by its long-standing Palestinian refugee population, and trying to absorb hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees as well could be the straw that breaks the back of the Hashemite monarchy. Large numbers of additional refugees at the very least will strain Jordan’s already weak economy. They may also bring the Iraq War with them, increasing violence in Jordan itself and perhaps polarizing the population. Economic assistance to both countries could help dampen internal problems there derived from, or exacerbated by, all-out civil war in Iraq. In addition, both need help in policing refugee camps and ensuring a robust counter-terrorism capacity.

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Keeping the Lid On
The Refugee Challenge

Indeed, one of the most pressing issues is dealing with the refugee question—not only because of its negative impact on stability within Iraq but also the dangers posed to neighboring states. Because of our moral responsibility for the suffering in Iraq, many will want the United States to try to "do something." Strategic necessity should reinforce our moral obligations.

One approach that will inevitably be suggested will be to create safe havens in Iraq's cities. If the surge fails, however, this would be a mistake. The various United Nations forays into Bosnia in the 1990s should remind us of how difficult such a strategy would be and how easily it could turn into a disaster. As the tragic experience of Bosnia demonstrates, Iraqi cities would require huge numbers of troops to keep them safe. In fact, this was the principle behind the first Baghdad security plan, which kicked off in the summer of 2006. That plan sought to increase security in the capital as the first step toward a gradual strategy of stabilizing the country and enabling reconstruction. It eventually failed because Washington did not provide adequate numbers of American and properly trained Iraqi troops (as well as the political and economic support to lock in the security gains) to make the capital safe. Violence in Iraq's population centers cannot be controlled on the cheap and would require substantial commitments of both men and material, as the latest (and much larger) Baghdad security plan is already demonstrating.

At the very least, the United States should provide technical assistance to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to help them ensure that refugee camps do not become insurgent operating bases. Whenever possible, camps should be set up far from the borders. Policing is essential. In her study of refugee-linked conflicts around the world, Sarah Lischer contends that host governments must aggressively ensure that warlords do not run the camps and refugees are disarmed. For many regional states, however, management skills and military capacity are weak. U.S. aid can help bolster this.

Another option might be to create a system of buffer zones coupled with large refugee-collection points or safe havens ("catch basins") on Iraq's periphery. The safe havens themselves would be located on major roads, preferably near airstrips along Iraq's borders—the principal routes that refugees would take to flee the country—with a good logistical infrastructure in place to house, feed and protect tens or even hundreds of thousands of refugees. The idea would be to create positive incentives to persuade Iraqis not to leave their country by giving them a better alternative. This would help reduce the problem of refugees radicalizing neighboring states. The catch basins could also mitigate other important spillover effects by hindering or preventing attacks back into Iraq by militia groups, inhibiting insurgents from crossing both to and from Iraq, as well as simultaneously deterring (or preventing) the armed forces of most of Iraq's neighbors from intervening in an Iraqi civil war. The catch basins would also serve as military launch points to collect intelligence against various terrorist groups inside Iraq (particularly Al-Qaeda) and mount strikes against them whenever possible or desirable.

Nevertheless, such potential benefits would likely come at a high price and would also entail significant risks. Disarming refugees and pacifying refugee camps is a politically and logistically onerous task that would require the continued presence of large numbers of U.S. troops in the country for many years. Otherwise, these catch basins could easily become militia bases or be subjected to reprisal attacks. In addition,
catch basins could not be set up along the Iranian border for political and logistical reasons. Thus, alone they could not solve this part of the problem and could even be construed as turning over Iraq to Iranian influence by preventing neighboring states from intervening to counter Tehran. Finally, the catch basins could be a public relations nightmare for the United States, as U.S. forces would be perceived as standing by impassively while the slaughter in Iraq continues only kilometers away.

A final option would be to resettle refugees from Iraq outside the region, including in the United States. This could greatly reduce the strain on Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and other regional states. But neither Europeans nor Americans are eager to embrace Iraqi refugees, whose fate so far has stirred little compassion in either area. But if the situation deteriorates further, many Iraqis, like many South Vietnamese, compromised by their close association with the U.S. administration in Iraq, will need to be extracted.

No matter what course of action the United States chooses, there will be costs.

Managing Additional Options to Spillover

No matter what happens in Iraq, an overriding U.S. national interest will be to limit the ability of terrorists to use Iraq as a haven for attacks outside the country, especially directed against the United States. The best way to do that will be to retain assets (airpower, 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. Washington would need to continue to make intelligence collection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever such a facility was identified, whether Shi’a or Sunni, American forces would move in quickly to destroy it. When possible, the United States would work with various factions in Iraq that share our goals regarding the local terrorist presence. These same factions, however, would want U.S. money and support for their own political agendas, and many of them would be involved in brutal actions of their own.

Some have argued that this would therefore limit the U.S. involvement in “internal” Iraqi matters and allow the United States to remain neutral in the civil war. However, many of the jihadist groups with an anti-U.S. agenda are intimately tied to various Sunni factions in the civil war: the United States cannot go after the jihadists without being perceived as taking sides in the civil war. Moreover, even this more “limited” focus would not remove the U.S. military presence from the region. If such strike forces were launched from bases in Iraq’s neighbors, they would upset the local population and likely face limits on their ability to operate in Iraq by the host governments. This was exactly the set of problems the United States encountered during the 1990s, which led Washington to eliminate some of its military facilities in the region after the invasion of Iraq.

On the other hand, if the United States were to leave a (smaller) residual military presence in Iraq only to try to hold down the terrorism problem without the political entanglements created by mounting strikes from Iraq’s neighbors, this too will have negative repercussions for the terrorism threat. It will allow the salafi jihadists to continue to use this as a recruiting tool, although the diminished presence of U.S. troops will make this slightly harder. It will also mean that American troops will continue to be targets of terrorist attacks, although redeploying them from Iraq’s urban areas to the periphery would diminish the threat from current levels. Thus, if such bases were retained only to deal with the terrorism problem they could incur many of the costs of the catch basins approach for much less of its potential benefit.

Finally, the United States will have to
recognize the military limits of what can be accomplished. Terrorism in Iraq has flourished despite the presence of 140,000 U.S. troops: It is absurd to expect that fewer troops could accomplish more. The hope is to reduce the frequency of attacks and the scale of the training and other activities, but our expectations must, by necessity, be modest.

And we need to prepare for things going wrong. One would be the possibility of a disruption in the oil supply. Since 9/11, Sunni jihadists have shown a growing interest in attacking the world’s oil infrastructure and have attempted several strikes on it, including in Saudi Arabia. Iraq is already a victim to almost daily attacks on its oil infrastructure. If Iraq becomes even more of a haven for Sunni jihadi terrorists, it is likely that they will plot against the regional oil infrastructure and conduct additional attacks on parts of the Iraqi oil infrastructure outside their control.

The economic impact of such attacks could be considerable. A further reduction in Iraqi oil production would drive prices higher, given how tight world oil markets already are today. Of far greater concern, however, is the risk of attacks on Saudi Arabian production and transit facilities. Disruptions in the Saudi supply could send prices soaring. Even the greater risk of attacks would lead to an increased instability premium on oil, further increasing its price.

We will not be able to say that we have not been warned. This is one area where what we do outside of Iraq—building up the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in order to reduce the impact of price spikes on U.S. consumers, developing contingency plans under the aegis of the International Energy Agency so that leading oil-consuming countries can better manage the risk of disruptions—can enhance our freedom of action (and perhaps in turn reduce incentives to attack oil-production and transit facilities).

A Kurdish decision to secede from Iraq could provoke another crisis, especially if (as seems likely) Turkey, Iran and Syria move to oppose this. Because of the ease with which secessionism can spread, the number of groups in the Persian Gulf that could easily fall prey to such thinking and the determination of Iraq’s neighbors to prevent this, it will be necessary for the United States to persuade the Iraqi Kurds not to declare their independence anytime soon. Iraq’s Kurds (and all of the Kurds of the region) deserve independence, but this should only come as part of a legal process under conditions of peace and stability. In practice, however, Kurdistan must be managed as if it were independent—as if it were one of Iraq’s neighbors. The Kurds are likely to share the same problems as Iraq’s neighbors in terms of refugees flowing their way, terrorist groups striking out against them (and using their territory to conduct strikes) and the radicalization of their population.

The Kurds should be asked to police their own borders to minimize other spill-over problems. In particular, the United States should press Iraq’s Kurds to cooperate with Turkey to stop the militant Kurdistan Workers Party from using Iraqi Kurdistan as a rear base for its operations. Consequently, the United States will have to help the Kurds deal with their own problems of spillover from the civil war in the rest of the country and convince the Kurds not to “intervene” in the rest of Iraq. That will mean helping them deal with their refugee problems, giving them considerable economic assistance to minimize the radicalization of their own population and likely providing them with security guarantees to deter either Iran or Turkey from attacking them. One U.S. red line for Iran ought to be no attacks, covert or overt, on the Kurds.

Indeed, preventing Iran from intervening, especially given how much it has already intruded on Iraqi affairs, could be the biggest headache of all. Given Iran’s immense interests in Iraq, some level of intervention is inevitable. For Tehran (and probably for Damascus too), the United States and its allies will likely have to lay
down "red lines" regarding what is absolutely impermissible. This is especially the case should the United States choose to employ catch basins because of the logistical and political impossibility of creating them along the Iranian border—therefore requiring Washington to limit Iranian intervention in other ways. The most obvious red lines would include sending uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq, laying claim to Iraqi territory, pumping Iraqi oil or inciting Iraqi groups to secede from the country.

The United States and its allies will also have to lay out what they will do to Iran if it crosses any of those red lines. Economic sanctions would be one possible reaction, but this is only likely to be effective if the United States has the full cooperation of the EU—if not Russia, China, Japan and India as well. On its own, the United States could employ punitive military operations, either to make Iran pay an unacceptable price for one-time infractions (and so try to deter them from additional breaches) or to convince them to halt an ongoing violation of one or more red lines. Certainly the United States has the military power to inflict tremendous damage on Iran for short or long periods of time; however, the Iranians probably will keep their intervention covert to avoid providing Washington with a clear provocation. In addition, all of this will take place in the context of either a resolution of or ongoing crisis over Iran's nuclear program, either of which could add enormous complications to America's willingness to use force against Iran to deter or punish it for intervening in Iraq.

**An Uncertain Endgame**

The recommendations above—and others we laid out in a larger, earlier study—are not a panacea. If the surge fails and Iraq descends into all-out civil war, the United States will have to choose between bad options and worse ones. Moreover, these measures are simply designed to contain a civil war in Iraq, not shut it down. There is no endgame inherent in these options. Instead, the United States will have to weave a web around Iraq and hold it in place to contain the worst of the spillover at an acceptable cost while waiting for the conflict to burn itself out enough to make less costly solutions (potentially including some form of partition) possible.

How we got to this point in Iraq is an issue for historians (and perhaps for voters in 2008); what matters now is how we move forward and prepare for the enormous risks an Iraqi civil war poses for this critical region. As we prepare, we must remember that Iraq's descent into the abyss does not relieve us of our responsibilities: Dealing with the problems of spillover is likely to be costly, painful and bloody. But ignoring the risks could be even more dangerous.

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