

CURRENT HISTORY

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“The US and Iraqi governments’ reluctance to accept the designation ‘civil war’ does not alter the reality on the ground.”

Iraq’s Civil War

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“**W**are not in a civil war. Iraq will never be in a civil war. The violence is in decrease and our security ability is increasing. What you see is an atmosphere of reconciliation.” So insisted Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on August 28, 2006. But violent events before and since have brutally contradicted his statement. Iraq is in a civil war.

First, there is the now depressingly familiar Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence between Shiites and Sunnis, which grew to serious levels following the destruction by Sunni extremists of the Shiite shrine of Al-Askariya in Samarra on February 22. In the month of October alone, the United Nations reported that 3,709 Iraqis were killed, largely as a result of sectarian conflict. On November 22, in the deadliest sectarian attack in Baghdad since the US-led invasion, explosions from five car bombs and a mortar shell tore through crowded intersections and marketplaces in the Shiite district of Sadr City, killing more than 200 people and wounding approximately 250.

Sadr City is populated by constituents of the powerful maverick politician Moktada al-Sadr. The inevitable response by Shiites came the following day when gunmen from the Mahdi Army, a powerful militia created by Sadr in 2003, launched a series of attacks on Sunni mosques, including the famous Abu Hanifa Mosque in central Baghdad. Half a dozen Sunnis reportedly were doused in kerosene and set on fire by gunmen while security forces stood by. This cycle of sectarian conflict was well under way when the prime minister insisted there was no civil war.

Second, Iraq has witnessed serious intra-sectarian strife, adding another twist to a situation that has

been described, accurately, as one of complex violence. The past year saw deadly internecine fighting among the Sunnis, between what might be referred to as mainstream (for want of a better word) Iraqi insurgents—that is, nationalists, former Baathists, and tribal militants—and Sunni religious extremists and foreign jihadists associated with Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). And even as Maliki was talking of national reconciliation in late August, firefights were erupting between the Shiite Mahdi militia and Iraqi government forces. The latter forces, largely made up of Shiite personnel, reportedly suffered two dozen deaths in the town of Diwaniya at the hands of Mahdi Army gunmen.

Third, the Sunni insurgency continues. While the prime minister was offering his assurances, that weekend eight US soldiers died at the hands of Sunni insurgents, and there was a brief mutiny of a British-trained Iraqi army unit in a southern province. The troops mutinied because they had been told they were to deploy to Baghdad.

Finally, in addition to the bloodshed between Sunnis and Shiites, within sects, and between insurgents and security forces, a more general but equally calamitous insecurity, including widespread organized crime, has deepened across much of Iraq, including the capital. All of these trends reflect a state of affairs in Iraq that has deteriorated throughout the past year, belying Maliki’s claims of national reconciliation.

Indeed, the level and extent of violence in 2006 were the worst since the 2003 invasion. Hope that their nation can turn things around and advance toward some form of stability and security has all but dissipated among Iraqis, many thousands of whom are voting with their feet and fleeing the country. The height of optimism came in late 2005, when millions of Iraqis went to the polls to elect a new national assembly and a government that promised to put Iraq on the road to reconciliation

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and recovery. This optimism was soon dashed by the rising tide of violence.

Compounding the carnage, as well as the dilemma facing US forces trying to find an exit from Iraq, has been the inability of the new government to deal with the situation. Buffeted by rival ethno-sectarian political groups, the Maliki administration that came into office in the spring of 2006 has proved indecisive, incompetent, and unable to arrest the country's slide into civil war.

THE CONFLICTED INSURGENCY

The local Iraqi insurgent movement, which incorporates nationalists, remnants from the ousted Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, and mainstream Sunni Islamist groups, remains as potent as ever. An increase in US casualties in the fall partly reflected the deployment of American forces into Baghdad in an effort to restore order and security in a capital held hostage to attacks by insurgents and rival communal militias. But attacks against US and Iraqi government forces increased in intensity and frequency throughout 2006. US control over the restive Sunni Anbar province deteriorated significantly in 2006 as a result of a paucity of troops to police the province. And, from the American perspective, the past year has seen worrisome operational advances among the insurgents. They have begun to train and field relatively effective teams of snipers; they are fielding platoon-sized units that can stand and engage US troops in lengthy fire-fights, in contrast to their usual modus operandi of hit-and-run attacks. The strength of the insurgency is underscored by its financial resilience.

The Sunni insurgency does have its share of problems, of which three are critical and unlikely to be resolved soon. First, there are too many groups with their own political agendas; the insurgency continues to lack a unified political vision of what it wants for a post-occupation Iraq. Its weakness in this area is compounded by the fact that even if it were to develop a common political vision or agenda, it would still be limited to the minority Sunni Arab community. Iraq's Kurds and Shiites have their own respective visions, neither of which have much in common with the Sunni insurgents'.

Second, as a result of this political factionalism, the Sunni insurgency is unable to present an effective negotiating strategy vis-à-vis the US-led coalition or the Iraqi government. While some groups are willing to negotiate an end to the insurgency in return for the implementation of certain demands, others remain adamant that they will never negoti-

ate with either US forces or the Iraqi government. Others indicate that they will negotiate only with the real power in the country, the United States. Still others put forward demands that they know will not be accepted.

Third, the insurgency is split organizationally between nationalist groups and the Iraqi and foreign Islamist extremists. Some former Baathists and others have been ambivalent about the strategy promoted by Al Qaeda in Iraq, under the leadership of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi until his death in June, to deliberately target Shiite civilians in order to promote sectarian strife. AQI itself, meanwhile, has had its share of problems, both with its ostensible parent organization Al Qaeda, and with the "mainstream" Iraqi insurgent groups.

Senior Al Qaeda leaders worried about Zarqawi's indiscriminate violence against both Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites, which they regarded as counterproductive. On July 9, 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the lieutenant of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, sent Zarqawi a letter in which he asserted that the overarching strategic goal is the establishment of a caliphate. The jihad in Iraq, he said, has several incremental goals intended to contribute to this ultimate objective: expulsion of the Americans from Iraq; establishment of an Islamic authority or emirate; extension of the jihadist wave to secular countries neighboring Iraq; and extension of the jihad against Israel. Zawahiri pointed out that these intermediate goals require "popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq and the surrounding Muslim countries."

Zawahiri's letter stressed that in the absence of such support the jihadist movement would be crushed. Therefore, the movement must avoid taking actions that the masses do not understand or endorse. With regard to the Shiites, Zawahiri knew he was treading on sensitive ground; he granted that jihadists have a right to defend themselves against the "aggressive" actions of Shiites who cooperated with the occupiers in overthrowing the Baathist regime in exchange for their assumption of power. His letter left no doubt that there is bound to be a collision between the Shiites and the model Sunni state of the future. Nevertheless, he proceeded to ask Zarqawi if it was correct for him to launch a wide-ranging assault on the Shiite community in Iraq, an assault that has raised questions and aversion among the majority of Muslims.

Another senior Al Qaeda operative, Attiyah Abd al-Rahman, wrote Zarqawi a letter in December 2005 strongly urging Zarqawi to cooperate more

with other Sunni insurgent groups. In light of these problems within AQI, it is not surprising that, in January 2006, the jihadists felt compelled to create an umbrella leadership group to help coordinate their activities and gain more support. This group, the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), includes leaders of AQI and smaller jihadist organizations.

THE TRIBES STRIKE BACK

AQI's other problem is its disintegrating relationship with the mainstream Iraqi insurgents. The problems between the two groups began in the spring of 2005 with the bullying and mistreatment of residents in small and remote towns such as Rutba in Anbar province. The inhabitants of most of these towns lacked the wherewithal to oppose the jihadist insurgents. It was only in the town of Al Qaim that locals, led by the Albu Mahal tribe, managed to kick out the jihadists in one of the first large-scale firefights between townspeople and foreign terrorists. (Whenever coalition forces made their rare and fleeting sweeps through these towns, they would disarm the locals and leave them at the mercy of the jihadists.)

However, the falling-out between the natives and the jihadists in these remote areas would most likely have had little strategic significance had relations between AQI and major Sunni tribes in the heart of Anbar province not deteriorated dramatically during the fall of 2005. In October 2005, one of the largest mainstream insurgent groups, the Islamic Army in Iraq, engaged in firefights with the jihadists. In early 2006, the jihadists began to kill tribal sheikhs and clerics, infuriating the townspeople. In the space of one month—January 2006—AQI killed four Ramadi sheikhs who had been working on a peaceful solution to the dire security situation in Ramadi and opposed Al Qaeda's presence in their town.

The killing of 70 Sunnis lining up to join the police force in Ramadi on January 5, 2006, was a major indication of the collapse of the relationship. Tribal leaders and local insurgents vowed to drive Zarqawi's militants out of Anbar. Three Ramadi-based Islamist guerrilla factions that had been financed by Zarqawi broke with him, making it harder for his forces to operate in the city. In February 2006, Sheikh Usamah al-Jadaan of the Karabilah tribe complained bitterly about the

jihadists who he said were killing innocent Iraqis in the markets, schools, mosques, and churches, instead of fighting the occupation. Jadaan was killed a few months later for being so outspoken, but this did not silence the Sunni sheikhs.

Initially, Iraqis had seen Zarqawi as beneficial to the insurgency. Zarqawi had no qualms about claiming credit for bloody attacks; this enabled local insurgent groups to pin the blame on him for the most gruesome incidents. But by mid-2006 he had begun to outlive his usefulness for many within the insurgency, particularly the Sunni tribes. Zarqawi had a big price on his head and was constantly on the run. It would not be surprising if it was disgruntled Sunnis who revealed his whereabouts to the US forces that killed him in an air strike on June 7.

Contrary to expectations that Zarqawi's death would mean the end of the jihadists, AQI returned to the fray with a vengeance. It elected a new leader, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, allegedly a foreigner. He expressed allegiance to the head of the umbrella group,

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the MSC, claimed that he would follow the parent organization to the letter, redoubled his efforts to recruit more members and groups into the MSC, and quickly reached out to other Sunnis. Muhajir was instrumental in the MSC's decision later in 2006 to set up a so-called Islamic emirate in the Sunni areas of the country that the insurgents had supposedly "liberated" from US forces and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. This decision was met with consternation and derision among both mainstream Sunni insurgent organizations and legitimate political groups. They accused the jihadists of trying to split up Iraq like other groups were trying to do (that is, Shiite political parties and the Kurds).

AQI's political efforts under Muhajir have not succeeded in winning the group much adherence among the Sunni tribes of Anbar province. The traditional power of the tribal leaders is threatened by the Al Qaeda "emirs." Some sheikhs have also been repelled by Al Qaeda attacks aimed at Shiites, believing that they are wrong and will ultimately hurt the Sunnis. Another source of confrontation is the fact that AQI has created a burgeoning criminal enterprise that runs everything from black-market gasoline sales to extortion of police and government paychecks from salaried employees in the

province. This has hit people where it matters, and has also caused AQI to run afoul of criminal enterprises run by local Iraqis.

From the spring through the summer of 2006, AQI continued unabated its assassinations and executions of Sunni tribal sheikhs, officials, and clerics. These assassinations, the organization's aggressive recruitment efforts among youth, and the increasingly oppressive jihadist control over small towns like Khaldiya and Haditha, have provoked the Anbar Sunni tribes to cooperate with one another in forming anti-jihadist militias. Tribal leaders have reached out to the government to provide them with arms to fight a mutually loathed enemy. AQI has also found itself engaged in vicious struggles with Baathists and with nationalist insurgent groups such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades.

In recent months, AQI has been slowly but surely squeezed out of sanctuaries in Anbar province as a result of action by both the tribes and American and Iraqi government forces. In particular, AQI has found itself on the receiving end of a Sunni tribal force called the Anbar Salvation Council, which promises to rid the province of foreign terrorists. A number of Al Qaeda leaders and fighters have been killed or captured, including Saudis and Syrians.

US VERSUS THEM

Al Qaeda in Iraq has contributed immensely to making Iraq an unworkable state, to the dramatic decline in intercommunal relations, and to the country's slide into sectarian strife. But the onset of a civil war on top of the insurgency cannot be blamed solely on that organization. The year 2006 was most noteworthy for the dramatic growth of intercommunal violence, which seems to have displaced insurgent violence in its scope and ferocity. While there was the inevitable bloodletting between Kurd and Arab, and Turkmen and Kurd in and around Kirkuk and other areas in the north,

the bigger problem has been a massive increase in Sunni-Shiite violence.

Civil strife in Iraq is largely ethnic and sectarian. But this is not the same as arguing that the various groups are dredging up dormant, ancient hatreds among ethno-sectarian communities and that is why they are fighting. The old theory of "ancient hatreds" to explain ethnic conflict is discredited. Rather, it is more accurate to argue that in the struggle for resources and power—including material benefits (land, money, natural resources), political power (positions in or control of government), and symbolic power (imposition of one's conception of national identity or values on the state)—political leaders in ethnically segmented states mobilize their respective communities by promoting ideologies and values that highlight the dangers posed by opposing ethno-sectarian groups. The result is the promotion of an "us" versus "them" view of the world.

Transition periods in a country's political evolution almost invariably imply serious loss of power, privileges, and patronage, and the possible political marginalization or even elimination of

a particular group. Historically, it has been clear that peoples or groups often fight as fiercely to protect privileges and positions of dominance as they do to try to gain further privileges. After 80 years of political domination and extraordinary privileges, the Sunnis feel that they have lost out in the new Iraq.

The Sunnis' abhorrence of the Shiites is extraordinary; it appears among groups ranging from Sunni Arab nationalists to the obviously anti-Shiite Sunni religious extremists. The distinction between the two groups in their loathing for the Shiites is subtle: Sunni Arab nationalists view many Shiites as a fifth column (*tabour khamis*) for Iran. Sunnis are convinced that some of the leading Shiite political parties and movements have taken over the country in order to undermine it



Into the Abyss?

for Iran's benefit. The religious Sunnis' animosity stems from their view of Shiites as apostates from true Islam and as historical betrayers of the Islamic community of believers.

Despite the mutual suspicions between these two communities, there was little sectarian violence in 2003, the year in which Sunni hegemony over Iraq was displaced by the empowerment of the Shiites. The year 2004 witnessed increased sectarian tensions, particularly as the anti-Shiite jihadists began to make themselves known within the insurgency and to deliberately target the Shi'ite community. But even in 2004 Iraqis could still talk about Sunni-Shiite cooperation against the US-led coalition, particularly in the spring of 2004 at the height of the first Falluja uprising and the first rebellion by Sadr, the anti-coalition Shi'ite cleric, and his ragtag militia, the Mahdi Army. The spring of 2004 constituted the high tide of Sunni-Shiite amity, a time when people from both communities were able to wax lyrical about their joint rebellion against the British in 1920 and to see their rebellious endeavor of 2004 as a repetition of history.

SECTARIAN CLEANSING

Since the fall of 2004, it has been easy to trace the country's slow and inexorable descent into civil conflict. The increase in jihadist suicide bombings, abductions, and executions of Shi'ite civilians and security personnel has driven a massive wedge between the two communities, even though leaders and clerics from both have implored ordinary citizens not to fall into the trap of the extremists. The widening chasm between the two communities was reflected in support among Shi'ites for the US assault on Falluja in November 2004 and the alleged glee with which they welcomed the town's destruction. Meanwhile, the regularity with which Shi'ite civilians were killed by Sunni extremists prompted calls for self-defense and retaliation.

This was only satisfied when the Shi'ites managed to win the elections in January 2005 and to dominate the first elected government headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari. Communal relations have plummeted dramatically since. First, the officially sanctioned emergence of the Shi'ites as the ruling element in Iraq was a massive psychological blow to the Sunnis, whose worst fears

about the Shi'ites bubbled to the surface. Moreover, the fears of a Shi'ite renaissance among the wider Sunni regions of the Middle East stiffened the resolve and bloody-mindedness of the Sunnis in Iraq who, more than ever, believed they constituted the last line of defense against the heterodox Shi'ites. Second, the Shi'ites were able to dominate the security establishment and to pack these institutions with their own personnel. In addition, militias and armed groups associated with Shi'ite political parties in the government were now able to act with impunity. They began to target the Sunni community, a tactic that, in turn, prompted retaliation by the Sunnis and escalated the cycle of violence. By the spring of 2005 the reality of sectarian conflict in Iraq was inescapable, but the situation could not yet be termed a civil war

between the two communities.

The Iraqi-on-Iraqi communal violence that took such a horrendous toll in 2006 was accelerated by the bombing of the

Al-Askariya Mosque, a Shi'ite shrine in the overwhelmingly Sunni city of Samarra, on February 22. In fact, many ordinary Iraqis saw the attack as the opening salvoes of the civil war. The Shi'ites viewed the destruction of the shrine as an attack on their identity. Many responded violently. Dozens of Sunni mosques were assaulted and many Sunnis were killed in an orgy of bloodletting following the attack. The killing continues, unrelenting, today.

US forces have acted as a brake on the slide into full-scale civil war. Some Iraqis argue, however, that it is the very presence of US troops that promotes civil war and perpetuates the Iraqis' inability to deal with their problems. The situation is rendered more bizarre by the fact that there is a seemingly ad hoc legitimization of the foreign occupation among some Sunni Arabs. Feeling threatened, they have requested the presence of US troops to guarantee their safety since they have no confidence in the Iraqi army or in security forces infiltrated by Shi'ite death squads.

Iraqis from the various communities are now seeking succor, support, and security within their own respective communities. People who are not of the same faith or ethnicity are seen as the "Other." Hussein claimed to have wanted to abolish sectarian and ethnic affiliation as an organizing principle, yet he practiced it by promoting

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Sunni Arabs and particularly those from his own area and tribe to key positions. This ethnic nepotism remained barely hidden below the edifice of a nationalist and homogenizing system, which in itself was destructive of the ethnic particularities of the Shiites and the Kurds. The violent climate of post-Hussein Iraq has only deepened the extent to which sectarian and ethnic affiliation continues to be the organizing principle of Iraqi politics.

The impact of the civil war on Iraqi society has been nothing short of catastrophic. The social fabric has frayed and is collapsing. Trust among the various communities—already in short supply because of the style of governance and social controls during Hussein's rule—has collapsed as a result of the Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence. Mixed communities have all but been destroyed by the violence, and ethnic cleansing is rampant. In late October, for example, the neighboring towns of Dhuluiya (largely Sunni) and Balad (largely Shiite) engaged in an orgy of mutual bloodletting prompted by the killing of 17 Shiite laborers from Dhuluiya by Sunni religious extremists. By the time the violence ended, the Sunnis who lived in Balad had fled to the safety of Dhuluiya, and the Shiites in Dhuluiya had fled to the safety of Balad. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have fled mixed neighborhoods to seek safety among their own. Many more Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries, including huge numbers of professionals desperately needed in Iraq.

THE FAILING STATE

The December 2005 national election—in which 77 percent of the electorate, including the Sunni Arabs, voted—was greeted as the dawn of an era of reconciliation. From the vantage point of a year's passage, that perception has proved at best premature. The chasm between the Sunnis and Shiites is reflected in the fact that neither of the Sunni coalitions—the Iraqi Accord Front or the Iraqi National Dialogue Front—would agree to join in an alliance with the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the principal Shiite coalition; this would have given them an absolute majority in the parliament. Indeed, it is not clear that the parties had much in common; and even if they had formed an alliance it is most likely that it would have been caught up in bitter squabbles. It is an undeniable fact that the Sunnis and Shiites see themselves as enemies. Many of the

Shiite parties within the UIA see the Sunni political groups as fronts for the insurgency and the former regime; many Sunni politicians see many of the Shiite officials as fronts for Iran and the perpetrators of death-squad violence against Sunni civilians. Thus, the Sunni political fronts have been more willing to do business with US officials in a bid to slow the seemingly inexorable empowerment of the Shiites.

Maliki, a member of the Shiite Dawa Party and a compromise candidate who was eventually accepted as prime minister, came into office proposing bold new plans to end the insurgency, restore security, abolish the independent militias or integrate them into the regular armed forces, and set the country on the road to stability and recovery. All of these goals came under the rubric of an overall national reconciliation. Americans nodded approvingly.

Many glum and weary Iraqis were convinced that the Maliki government was their country's last chance—that if it did not succeed

over the course of its first year, the 85-year project to maintain Iraq as a nation would finally be doomed.

Unfortunately, none of Maliki's goals has been realized. His "unity" government has proved nothing more than a sectarian carve-up of the ministries. Most of the political parties view the ministries that they have been allocated as vehicles for ethno-sectarian patronage, not the formulation and implementation of policies. Indeed, jockeying for the allocation of ministries occupied much of the new government's energies in the spring of 2006 while the country was collapsing in the face of rising civil strife between Sunnis and Shiites.

Maliki also has failed to make much headway in reducing the insurgency. The hope among Iraqi government officials and the Americans that new Sunni ministers might constitute a channel to the mainstream insurgent groups—and that these could be persuaded to come forth to negotiate, lay down their arms, and join the political process—has been dashed. There have been sporadic contacts and cloak-and-dagger reports of meetings between the government and insurgents. But Maliki cannot get too far ahead of his Shiite constituency, many of whom regard all the insurgent groups as terrorists with whom one cannot negotiate. Most Shiites view the US interest in negotiating with mainstream Sunni insurgent groups as

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around has all but dissipated among Iraqis.*

a means to dilute Shiite power. Meanwhile, many Sunni groups continue to issue communiqués that deny any interest in negotiating with the “puppet” government of Maliki.

THE MILITIA MORASS

The many militias operating in Iraq have proved to be the main sticking point. This is, in fact, one of the most important problems that any Iraqi government will have to deal with, because it goes to the heart of whether the state can maintain a monopoly over the instruments of violence, institutionalize its legitimacy, and establish security and the rule of law. Militias have been a serious issue since at least the spring of 2005. Shiite ministers—above all, Bayan Jabr al-Sulagh, who controlled the Ministry of Interior—argued emphatically that militias had a legitimate role in keeping order alongside the regular security forces. A year later in 2006, militias had become an institutionalized part of the Iraqi political and societal fabric.

Today, Iraqis of all ethno-sectarian backgrounds look to their militias or local forces as their last line of defense in a situation of dire intercommunal violence. Militias associated with Shiite political organizations have behaved with impunity, taking the law into their own hands and rounding up and killing scores of Sunnis in revenge for insurgent attacks. They also have infiltrated the official security forces and used them as fronts for acts of violence. Maliki has declared that all weapons must be in the hands of the state. He has discussed integrating militias into the armed forces or unifying the country's many security agencies into a single force.

Yet Maliki's goals remain unattainable so long as the regular security forces prove incapable of providing nationwide security. Maliki is loath, moreover, to do anything to seriously curtail the militias of Shiite political parties, since these parties control seats in the parliament and are part of his government. In this context, he has shown considerable frustration with American insistence that he bring the largest and most dangerous of the Shiite militias, the Mahdi Army, under control. It is not clear that Maliki has the political or military wherewithal to curtail the power of that militia. Indeed, it is not even clear that the militia's ostensible leader, Sadr, actually controls the entire Mahdi Army. It seems to have grown enormously beyond his or his subordinate commanders' authority.

For several months now, US commanders on the ground in Iraq and high officials in Washington

have been losing faith in the Maliki government, on which they had staked so much in the spring of 2006. They have noted, in particular, his government's failure to root out corruption, to stem the violence, and to take on the brutal militias. The insidious role of the militias is of particular concern to the United States since their provision of local protection to their respective communities and taking the law into their own hands have detracted from the buildup of effective national security forces, a stated condition for withdrawal of US troops.

REMAINING OPTIONS

The failures of the Maliki government have created a deep sense of estrangement between the Iraqi and American sides. Yet both sides know they have a mutual dependence that requires them to work together even as the country slides further and further into the abyss. The Maliki government needs the continued protection of the 140,000 or so US troops in the country to prevent a deterioration into even worse civil war, to give the Iraqi leader some freedom of maneuver vis-à-vis his allies in the government, and to provide security until the Iraqi armed forces are ready to take over.

As for the Americans, despite rumors of plans to remove Maliki and replace him with a strongman or a junta, it is clear that they have little alternative but to stick with him as Washington debates options concerning the future disposition of US forces—a debate rendered more pressing by the November congressional elections that overwhelmingly repudiated the Bush administration's Iraq policy.

Among the formal reviews of military options is a study begun during the fall by the Pentagon. According to Thomas Ricks writing in *The Washington Post*, the Defense Department reviewers have concluded there are three available options, popularly termed “Go Big,” “Go Home,” and “Go Long.” “Go Big” calls for a major increase in the US troop presence to combat the cycle of sectarian and insurgent violence. It is not clear where the United States would get the extra thousands of troops required to wage a classic counterinsurgency campaign, one that would need to be supported by effective Iraqi military forces, of which there are precious few. It is also doubtful whether the American public would support such an effort.

“Go Home” calls for a quick withdrawal of US troops. It has been rejected by the Pentagon group

as likely to push Iraq's already bloody civil war into an even larger conflict that could be followed by the breakup of the country. Army General John P. Abizaid, the top US military commander for the Middle East, reinforced this view when he told the Senate Armed Services Committee in mid-November that the most likely result of immediate troop withdrawal would be an increase in the violence in Iraq. An escalated Iraqi civil war would also have immediate negative regional repercussions, as Iraq's neighbors intervened to support their favored sides and prevent the chaos from spilling into their territories.

"Go Long" is premised on the gradual draw-down of US forces in Iraq while concentrating on a massive long-term expansion of training and advisory efforts to create an effective Iraqi national army and security forces. This option envisions a series of steps that actually begins with a major but temporary increase in the US troop presence to bear more of the burden of combating the violence and to bolster the confidence of the shaky Maliki government. After some months the United States would then radically reduce its combat presence, transition away from bearing the brunt of the counterinsurgency campaign, and turn its attention to a long-term training and advisory program for the Iraqi forces so that they can undertake effective counterinsurgency.

The advantages of the "Go Long" option are that it is the only palatable one left, and it shows the Americans as helping the Iraqis to ultimately help themselves. Its drawbacks include the need for a long-term vision, patience, and the creation of a strong and well-funded cadre of trainers and advisers. The Americans would expect to be engaged in what was once referred to as "foreign internal defense" in Iraq for anywhere between five and ten years in order to create a relatively effective non-

sectarian military that can reduce the intensity of sectarian, insurgent, and terrorist violence.

THE ENDGAME

Calling the mayhem in Iraq "sectarian violence" or even "regional conflict" amounts to euphemism as a means of denial. The US and Iraqi governments' reluctance to accept the designation "civil war" does not alter the reality on the ground. Most analysts and media outlets have now accepted this dismal reality. Appreciating the fact that Iraq is in a civil war represents a necessary first step toward devising realistic policy options for designing an end to the conflict.

Historically, civil wars have ended in a variety of ways. Sometimes they end with power-sharing among the rival communities. But this requires the construction of effective institutions of state and equitable resource-sharing. Sometimes they end with the decisive victory of one side over another. But this is not possible among the various feuding groups in Iraq, unless the United States weighs in on one side against another. And whether the Americans weighed in on the side of the Shiites, the Sunnis, or even the Kurds would almost certainly have dramatic effects that would not be positive for the United States or its interests in the region.

Last but not least, civil wars sometimes end with partition, as various ethno-sectarian groups pull away from each other and form their own regions. Partition, whether occurring chaotically through bloodshed or managed by the United States and the international community, would not be pretty. Moreover, it is not clear that any of Iraq's neighbors want it. Remarkably, despite all the tragic bloodletting among Iraqis, it is also not clear that they would prefer it. Ultimately, though, partition may come to pass in spite of all efforts to prevent it. ■