

## The Paradox of Civil War

Dr. Stephen Biddle  
Strategic Studies Institute

The danger of civil war in Iraq has gotten much recent attention. Civil war would certainly be a disaster. Paradoxically, though, threatening overt civil war may be the only way out of our current predicament.

Today, we have a covert civil war masquerading as an insurgency against American occupation. The underlying problem in Iraq is a conflict between three main subgroups – Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds – with incompatible goals. Each wants dominance or autonomy; each fears the others' dominance or autonomy. Foreign occupation has surely stimulated nationalist resistance, but the real problem is local: the crucial fault lines divide Iraqis, not Iraqis from Americans. Some Iraqis, however, use opposition to us to further their sectarian aims. Sunni violence forestalls formation of a strong Shiite-dominated central state and carves out a self-defended enclave beyond their rivals' reach. Shiite upstarts like Moqtada al-Sadr use anti-American violence to stoke populist opposition to establishment Shiite leadership. Ironically, American counterinsurgency operations provide cover for each: Americans cannot use an iron fist to annihilate rebels at any cost, hence rebels can survive American counterinsurgency whereas they might not survive a ruthless sectarian enemy, while the chaos of insurgency prevents any one group from assembling a government with the strength to oppress the others. The result is a chronic insurgency aimed significantly at us. This means, though, that the insurgency is not the real problem, and cannot be ended without solving the real problem: the underlying civil conflict among Iraq's ethnic groups.

One resolution to this underlying civil conflict is through negotiated compromise. Models for such ethnic compromise can be found in Belgium, Austria, or other "consociational" governments where constitutional safeguards deny any group its whole aims but ensure safety for all through shared power. But none of Iraq's subgroups are now willing to settle for less than their whole aims.

The other possibility is civil war. This war would be long, brutal, and ruinous, and would do grave damage to American interests in the region. Our policy today is to prevent it at all costs.

Its very brutality and cost, however, is now our strongest real leverage for democracy. Democracy in Iraq requires ethnic compromise, and the most powerful incentive for compromise in Iraq today is the threat of civil war – and especially defeat in civil war – if compromise fails. Civil war would hurt U.S. interests, but defeat in civil warfare would be catastrophic for the Iraqi losers, who would bear the butcher's bill of conflict plus the oppression of a conqueror's rule afterwards. The fear of such a cataclysm may be the only lever strong enough to induce compromise over such high stakes.

Yet today America strives above all to suppress civil conflict, and by putting ourselves in the middle we have, paradoxically, created a safe environment for ethnic obduracy. We do not want a civil war, but as long as we proclaim our commitment to preventing it, we may make a

real political settlement impossible: the cost of guaranteed civil war prevention may be open-ended insurgency.

The solution is not to cut and run, which would surely yield the worst case in short order. But neither is the answer to reassure the parties that we cannot possibly be moved – or that we are permanently neutral among them.

Success may require a tightrope walk in which the threat of civil war is not rendered too remote – and in which none of the parties can be sure America will support them and not their enemies if it comes to civil war, making defeat possible for all. The only way to get a negotiated political compromise may be for America to manipulate, subtly and strategically, the threat of civil war in Iraq.

Can we manage such a feat? Maybe not. It will require a deft performance to avoid both the Scylla of over-reassurance and the Charybdis of abandonment. And our deftness must be matched by Iraqi self-awareness: if they fail to see the perils of defeat in civil warfare, then they may get them no matter how delicate our balancing act. But only a tightrope walk can avoid an endless insurgency. Too great a fear of civil war may make real peace impossible.