COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

CONTINGENCY PLANNING MEMORANDUM NO. 2

Reversal in Iraq

Stephen Biddle

May 2009

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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which today's mostly positive trends in Iraq could be reversed with significant implications for the United States. This memorandum will examine several such contingencies, assess their consequences for U.S. interests, and consider the policy options to reduce their likelihood and mitigate their impact should they occur. It concludes with a set of recommendations for the United States.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTINGENCY

Iraq today is in the early stages of a negotiated end to an intense ethnosectarian civil war. Transitions from civil warfare to peace and reconciliation are notoriously volatile and uncertain. Some succeed, but others collapse into renewed fighting. Of twenty-three such settlements between 1940 and 1992, ten—or almost half—failed within five years of the original cease-fire. And the Iraqi transition may be more fragile than most. Four interrelated scenarios could plausibly derail the prospects for peace in the short to medium term (next six to twelve months):

Renewed Sectarian Violence

The cease-fires that ended large-scale civil violence in Iraq are especially fragile because they are radically decentralized: there are over two hundred separate parties to local, bilateral agreements that were reached mostly between individual factions of former combatants and the U.S. military. These parties include the mostly Sunni Sons of Iraq (SOI) groups (many of whom are essentially former insurgents), and a variety of erstwhile Shiite militias (especially Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi); the Iraqi government was rarely an explicit partner in the negotiations. The result is a patchwork quilt in which former rivals, who retain their weapons, their organizations, and often their leaders, coexist uneasily in close proximity under the terms of deals reached with local U.S. military authorities over the course of 2007.

Renewed sectarian violence remains a serious threat in this environment. Parties to intense ethnosectarian warfare do not just forget the mass violence of the past overnight. Rarely can they simply live together without fear in the immediate aftermath, and the cease-fires' decentralized nature creates many independent actors and many potential flashpoints for violence among wary and distrustful former combatants.

With over two hundred separate participant parties, some will surely stretch the terms of their agreements to see what they can get away with; some will be simple criminals or exploitative opportunists; most will be suspicious of others' intentions. Even innocent activity by former enemies can easily be misread as threatening, risking preemptive or retaliatory violence in self-defense. The net result is literally dozens to hundreds of possible opportunites for greed, miscalculation, misperception, fear, or accident among armed, wary former combatants to spark local violence. And local violence creates an incentive for retaliation, which creates an incentive for counterretaliation, risking an escalatory spiral that can pull in neighboring actors and threaten systemic collapse of today's cease-fires nationally. Less than two years ago, Iraq was convulsed by sectarian warfare; the combina-

tion of recent memory and a complex patchwork quilt of armed former combatants under such conditions poses an inherent risk of renewed violence.

This does not make renewed warfare inevitable or today's cease-fires a mere breathing spell, however. These cease-fires reflect a fundamental shift in the parties' interest calculus following Sunni defeat by Shiite militias in 2006 and the U.S. surge of 2007—the combatants stood down because the underlying strategic reality of Iraq changed to make this the superior course, and objective military conditions continue to favor cease-fire over open warfare. This gives Iraq an important chance for sustainable stability. But a chance is not a guarantee, and the decentralized nature of the stand-down creates a danger of catalytic violence even when cease-fire is in the objective interest of most actors. Today's apparent sectarian calm cannot safely be assumed to be permanent, and policy choices by the U.S. and the government of Iraq could be important in determining whether the risk of renewed sectarian violence is realized.

Reversion to Dictatorship

The decentralized nature of today's cease-fires provides an ideal opportunity for a prospective dictator to accumulate power by "salami slicing"—essentially picking off isolated rivals one at a time under the cover of "law enforcement." This enables a would-be dictator to keep the threat to the others apparently low at any given time, exploit the collective action problems inherent in such a large, diverse array of players, and perhaps disarm enough rivals and amass enough power to defeat the others by the time they can come together in response. Whether Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would be tempted to do this can only be speculated. Maliki is clearly interested in consolidating Iraqi government power and authority. This may be due to a benign desire for a pluralist, constitutional democracy with a monopoly of legitimate force under the law. But it may also be due to a malign desire for dictatorial power in an authoritarian state. Washington probably cannot know Maliki's real intentions—indeed he may not yet know himself. It is entirely plausible that he is now opportunistically testing the waters while reevaluating his goals along the way in light of the results at each stage. But even a well-intentioned prime minister who knows the region's political history must surely be considering the possibilities, at least: if he does not seek dictatorial powers himself, others may, and finishing second in a race to seize power could be fatal.

An Iraqi dictatorship would obviously be undesirable. But a bigger problem would be a failed attempt. Overreach or miscalculation that galvanizes Sunni opposition could easily rekindle large scale violence. Maliki has already undertaken several rounds of crackdowns against individual SOI groups and their leaders over the last year, justifying the action as law enforcement activity to police misbehavior by isolated bad actors. Maliki is astute enough to begin with the worst of the SOIs, enabling benign interpretations by the United States and a degree of support or at least tolerance from Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I). But other SOI leaders are clearly concerned that darker motives are at work, and they would be fools not to worry. A plausible interpretation of the recent uptick in terrorist violence is that some Sunni SOI leaders are trying to send a message to Maliki—and the United States—that there are costs in threatening their interests or abandoning them to their fates.[1] Perhaps Maliki can modulate his crackdowns to prevent nontargeted SOIs (or Shiite militias, who face similar incentives) from returning to large-scale violence. But the complexity of the situation, coupled with growing unease among remaining SOIs who face greater danger as their peers are whittled away,

creates a serious risk that Maliki could miscalculate or overreach, driving the survivors into open violence in self-defense.

Kurdish-Arab Conflict

While Kurdish-Arab tensions could erupt into violence and escalate for several reasons, the contested nature of Kirkuk is clearly the most dangerous. Kirkuk's economic importance, its history of forced resettlement and thus disputed property rights, and its location on the fault line of Kurdish expansionism and Arab resistance make it a natural flash point. And the Kurdish Pesh Merga militia's legal status encourages Kurds to use it to defend disputed claims in ways that put it in close proximity with government forces of mostly Arab makeup under conditions of high tension and low trust.

Both the Kurds and the Iraqi government are now holding to uncompromising positions and using a threat of violence to coerce the other into concessions; even if neither actually intends to use force, this tense game of chicken could easily result in unintended escalation under such conditions. Arab-Kurdish violence over Kirkuk, moreover, could catalyze wider fighting elsewhere. Turkey would fear the implications of Kurdish control over Kirkuk for separatist sentiments in Kurdistan and southern Turkey, and could well intervene to prevent this. And Arab-Kurdish conflict works to the advantage of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Iraq's most violent internal faction. AQI has been exploiting local Sunni fears of Kurdish overlordship in Mosul to enable AQI terrorist cells there to survive against U.S. and Iraq government pressure—Mosul's Sunni Arabs see AQI coethnics as allies against the Kurds, and they distrust a Shiite-controlled government to respect their interests, hence some have sheltered AQI in ways that Sunnis elsewhere had mostly ceased to do by late 2007. An outbreak of violence over Kirkuk could lead other Sunnis along the Arab-Kurdish fault line to rely on AQI for defense, which could expand its base of operations and lead to a spillover beyond Iraq's north as the group regains strength and freedom of operation.

Spillover from Israeli-Iranian Conflict

An escalation of Israeli-Iranian tensions over Iran's nuclear program could also precipitate renewed conflict in Iraq. Many believe that Israel could attempt a preemptive attack on Iranian nuclear facilities if Tel Aviv concludes that only this could deny Iran the bomb. If so, Iran would probably treat the United States as complicit and retaliate against U.S. interests globally. Among these interests are U.S. military and civilian personnel in Iraq. Iran is reported to have built and retained a large covert paramilitary and intelligence infrastructure in Iraq partly in order to hold at risk U.S. targets there; if so, these hostages could be struck in the event of an Israeli attack. In addition to direct attacks on Americans by Iranian agents in Iraq, Iran could conclude that an American-allied Iraqi government had become intolerable. This could lead to Iranian pressure on client militias within Iraq to return to active violence as a means of imposing costs on the U.S. and preventing the use of a stable Iraq as a base for American action against Iran. The result could easily be a wider war in which horizontal escalation by Iran dragged Iraq into the conflict.

Warning and Indicators

An Israeli attack on Iran would provide clear warning of prospective major violence in Iraq. Most of the threats above, however, would provide few unambiguous indicators. Escalatory spirals originat-

ing in local violence, for example, could be hard to distinguish in their early stages from mere crime or isolated last-gasp attacks from a defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq or militia. Escalation could stem from innocent error or misperception, in which case there would be no actual malign intent to be observed early on. Retaliation would be more dangerous than initial action in this model, and a widening extent and increasing severity of retaliatory violence would signal hazard. But it could be difficult to distinguish a real systemic threat from a limited, local problem until the violence had become severe and possibly irreversible.

CONSEQUENCES FOR U.S. INTERESTS

A return to major violence would jeopardize the long-term U.S. objectives of creating a relatively peaceful, politically integrated, and democratic Iraq that is neither a source of instability in the region nor a danger to U.S. national security. In the shorter term, the United States would be principally concerned with limiting the threat to its remaining forces in Iraq while at the same time dampening the potential for unrestrained civil conflict. The failure to do so could be extraordinary costly to the people of Iraq. To date, perhaps 100,000 to 200,000 civilians have died in Iraq with far worse still possible if history is any guide. For example, in Rwanda, over 10 percent of the population died in the 1994 civil war and associated genocide; in Liberia, over 7 percent were killed in civil warfare between 1989 and 2003; in Bosnia, the civil war killed 2 percent of the population. Comparable results in Iraq would imply a death toll of 600,000 to more than two million. Given its role in precipitating the war in Iraq, the United States would bear special responsibility for such a catastrophe in ways it did not in Rwanda, Liberia, or Bosnia.

Another immediate concern would be to prevent resurgent violence in Iraq from metastasizing into a larger regional conflict that embroils neighboring countries. Again, history is not encouraging: of the 142 civil wars fought between 1944 and 1999, forty-eight saw major military intervention by the regular armed forces of neighboring states at some point in the fighting. In Lebanon, for example, civil warfare eventually brought Syrian and Israeli state intervention. In Congo, the recent civil war became a region-wide conflagration involving eight foreign state militaries and causing over 5.4 million fatalities to date. Iraq is hardly immune from such perils. Statistical analysis controlling for major features of Iraq and its neighbors and using the available empirical record of civil warfare since World War II suggests a perhaps 25 to 40 percent probability that two or more of Iraq's neighbors could intervene in a rekindled Iraqi war that lasted another five to ten years.[2] Of course, this is not a guarantee that a return to violence in Iraq would engulf the region. But given the potential consequences, the odds are daunting all the same.

While renewed warfare within Iraq's borders is bad enough, a regional conflict in the heart of the Persian Gulf would represent a far greater threat to U.S. interests. It would risk a major disruption of world oil markets at a time of exceptional global economic fragility; it would likely derail any immediate (and possibly long-term) prospect for Israeli-Palestinian peace; and—depending on the circumstances—it could precipitate or reignite several other simmering conflicts in the region that have only a tangential relationship to Iraq, notably those between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and between Israel and Iran. The likelihood of such events destabilizing other Arab states, some of which are important U.S. allies or partners for a variety of endeavors, can also not be discounted. All of this, moreover, would put immense strain

on U.S. relations with its European allies, Russia, and China, as well as shed doubt on the UN's ability to manage international peace and security at a critical time in its evolution.

U.S. OPTIONS FOR REDUCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF RENEWED VIOLENCE

For some contingencies, U.S. policy can significantly reduce the risk at moderate cost. In particular, the United States can make an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear targets much less likely by denying use of Iraqi airspace to Israeli aircraft. For most threats, however, U.S. options are either less powerful, more costly, or both.

The United States' lowest cost options are to use nonmilitary political leverage with the Maliki government or other Iraqi actors to discourage them from overreaching against internal rivals. Washington can sponsor or oppose UN resolutions of interest to the Iraqi government, for example. It can influence the terms of international financial or commercial relationships for Iraq. It can reinforce or withhold training, mentoring, and assistance to Iraqi government ministries. It can extend or refuse political recognition or support for opposition or leadership figures. It can offer or deny access to Iraqi political figures for White House, congressional, or international meetings. Any of these can be used to provide sticks and carrots to shape Maliki's (or other Iraqis') behavior in more benign directions. The scale of the leverage available, however, is a function of the scale of U.S. involvement and the Iraqis' need for it. And both of these are in systematic decline. When the United States provided billions of dollars of direct economic aid, the threat to withhold it was a potentially powerful lever if used this way (it rarely was). Now, with no meaningful aid transfers in prospect, this lever is largely off the table. U.S. political support or status provision is of questionable value to officials in a society where the United States is so unpopular, and even if U.S. support were suddenly valued, it is far from clear that the value of such symbolic gestures could outweigh the potentially existential stakes Iraqis see in internal conflict.

Perhaps the most needed form of U.S. nonmilitary assistance is mentoring and technical advice in public service delivery, where the Iraqi government lags badly and where the political benefits to Iraqi leadership of improvement are perhaps greatest. But for this reason, to withhold such assistance would also impose greater costs on the United States by endangering improvements needed for stability. And the form of service delivery most valued by Iraqi politicians is likely to be sectarian and factional in distribution; if the United States insists on fair and nonsectarian distribution of services, the perceived value of U.S. assistance, and thus its influence, goes down.

Such leverage can, and should, be used where possible. But its likely impact has important limits. In general, where Iraqis see their survival at stake, their willingness to change behaviors for modest economic or political proffers will be limited. And the risk of renewed violence by definition involves serious security stakes for Iraqis.

More costly options would be to use military assistance as leverage: the United States could, for example, offer to reinforce or threaten to withhold training, advising, mentoring, intelligence, logistical, or fire support assistance to the Iraqi security forces (ISF). Of course, Washington hopes that the Iraqi army and police will be a stabilizing force in Iraq; hence, reducing assistance to them has real costs to the United States. And the influence afforded by such levers is diminishing as the ISF matures and grows less dependent on Washington. The ISF's actual need for U.S. support is still sub-

stantial, but Iraqis' *perceptions* are what matter for leverage, and Maliki in particular seems increasingly persuaded that the ISF is now a tool he can use without U.S. help or permission if need be.

The most effective tool is also the most costly: the U.S. combat presence in Iraq. A critical distinction between civil war settlements that persist and those that collapse into renewed violence is the presence of outside peacekeepers. Outsiders play a crucial role in damping escalatory spirals, discouraging adventurism and the violation of cease-fire terms (whether by the government or its rivals), and moderating the intercommunal fears that fuel violence. Without them, it is very hard for wary, armed, mutually distrustful former combatants to avoid retaliation for inevitable provocations and local incidents; with outside peacekeepers, the odds of short-term retaliatory spirals diminish while the parties gradually adjust their expectations of one another. In Iraq today, the United States is the only party that can play this role. And in fact, this is exactly what most of the U.S. military presence in Iraq is now doing: if one looks in detail at the mission structure for the typical U.S. brigade in Iraq, it amounts to classical peacekeeping duties much like those performed by international forces in Bosnia or Kosovo. This is a powerful contributor to stability in Iraq—with sufficient U.S. troops in place, the prospects for stability warrant guarded optimism given the parties' underlying strategic self-interest in cease-fire.

But U.S. military peacekeeping is also a very expensive tool. Not only does a thinly stretched U.S. military need the troops elsewhere, but the politics of retaining substantial U.S. combat forces in Iraq pose difficult dilemmas for Americans and Iraqis alike. Gradual U.S. withdrawals are possible while maintaining an adequate peacekeeping presence, but the ideal pace of withdrawal would be slower than that implied either by the president's announced policy (which calls for withdrawal of U.S. combat forces by October 2010), or, especially, the U.S.-Iraqi Status of Forces Agreement (which requires the withdrawal of *all* U.S. forces, combat and otherwise, by December 2011). In the Balkans, for example, the large peacekeeping forces initially deployed to stabilize ethnic civil war settlements were slowly drawn down by about 50 percent within four years of the cease-fires in Bosnia and Kosovo without a resumption of violence; a comparable withdrawal trajectory for Iraq would leave 50,000 to 70,000 U.S. troops in Iraq by the 2011 deadline for total U.S. withdrawal in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Neither the SOFA nor the president's announced timetable is immutable—both are subject to renegotiation or redesign if the parties mutually agree. But neither agreement would be easy to change, and change would impose real strain on the U.S. military.

U.S. OPTIONS FOR MITIGATING THE CONSEQUENCES OF RENEWED VIOLENCE

If large-scale violence does return to Iraq, the priority would shift to containment of the renewed conflict within Iraq's borders—a second surge to reestablish stability once lost is not a plausible option. A return to violence in Iraq would signal that the original surge strategy had failed; political support for a second, smaller, lower-potential escalation at that point would be negligible. A policy of "conditions-based" withdrawal that would halt drawdowns in the event of instability is likewise unpromising. If violence has returned, simply halting further withdrawals at a level that had already proven insufficient would be unlikely to work. Troop reductions in Iraq are thus a one-way ticket: once gone, units are unlikely to return, and if a diminished presence proves insufficient, the better response is *faster* drawdowns in response to evident failure rather than the reverse.

Options for containment include establishing a contact group to facilitate regional diplomacy and improve transparency; offering aid to ameliorate refugee problems in neighboring states; and restricting arms transfers to Iraq's neighbors. Such measures could help reduce the neighbors' incentives and capacity to intervene. Their sufficiency is unclear, however, given the pressures that have caused so many other civil wars to spread, and some would have countervailing effects on other priorities (arms transfer restrictions, for example, might conflict with regional strategies for countering Iranian influence). They nevertheless warrant consideration for adoption in the event of renewed violence.

The United States could also strive to reduce the economic consequences of oil supply disruption resulting from the war's possible spread. Expansion of the strategic petroleum reserve, aggressive conservation measures, or accelerated development of alternative energy sources, for example, would all have some benefit in limiting the damage from a wider war in the Gulf—and many constitute sound public policies anyway. To do more than moderate the damage at the margin, however, such measures would need sweeping adoption well in advance of a wider war, which could pose major political challenges.

Some have proposed other possibilities, including a withdrawal of U.S. forces to Iraq's borders (to stanch refugee outflows or weapon inflows); redeployment of U.S. forces to defend Kurdistan; or withdrawal to Kuwait or other neighboring states while transitioning to a mission of countering any al-Qaeda terrorist havens that might emerge within an Iraq immersed in civil warfare. Each faces serious difficulties. A residual U.S. presence at the border, for example, would expose U.S. forces to casualties without ending the fighting. A U.S. withdrawal from central Iraq into Kurdistan would be seen by Turkey as enabling Kurdish terrorism unless the United States took responsibility for clearing out PKK havens in northern Iraq, a job that could prove difficult, costly, and put Washington at odds with its Kurdish hosts. Such a posture would also pose complicated implications for potential Kurdish-Arab disputes over Kirkuk by repositioning U.S. forces to one side of an escalating conflict; perhaps Washington could restrain Kurdish ambitions from such a position, but it could just as easily be chain-ganged into emerging violence. A counterterror posture from distant bases would face major challenges in finding targets for standoff attack: U.S. effectiveness against AQI in 2007–2008 was greatly facilitated by U.S. presence on the ground among the population. Nor is it likely that AQI could find much of a haven in a wartime Iraq for attacking the distant United States anyway—they would surely have their hands full surviving an existential war against the much more proximate Shiite enemy. And any policy that moved a meaningful U.S. military presence to the edges of a brutal Iraqi civil war would remind many of 1991, when American forces stood by in Kuwait while Saddam crushed the Shiite rebellion; the politics of such images could well be difficult to sustain as Iraq burns down within arm's reach of a bystander U.S. military.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Renewed violence in Iraq is not inevitable, but it is a serious risk. If it happens, vital U.S. national interests would be threatened, and it is far from clear whether available options for mitigating the consequences would suffice, certainly without expending considerable resources at potentially great cost. A vigorous preventive strategy is clearly preferable, therefore. The most effective option for prevention is to go slow in drawing down the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Measures to maximize U.S. leverage on important Iraqi leaders—especially Maliki—can be helpful in steering Iraqis away from

confrontation and violence, but U.S. leverage is a function of U.S. presence. With a meaningful military presence to stabilize an extremely decentralized and still-fragile system of cease-fires, the United States may enjoy sufficient leverage to preserve the peace. Without it, other means may well fall short.

To slow the U.S. withdrawal timetable will be difficult—and it could be impossible if the Iraqis oppose this. Iraq is a sovereign nation with whom the United States has negotiated a SOFA that obliges the United States to leave by 2011. If the Iraqis choose to enforce these terms, the United States has no choice but to comply, and should do so. But any international agreement can be renegotiated if the parties wish, and there may be reason to suspect that Iraqis could be open to renegotiating this one some time between now and 2011. The current SOFA was written under the pressure of a looming provincial election in which Iraqi officials faced powerful domestic partisan political incentives to demonstrate their credentials as opponents of an unpopular U.S. occupation. The result was a competition among Iraqis to be seen as driving a harder bargain than their rivals and to insist on greater restrictions and earlier withdrawals. With these election-year incentives behind them, Iraqi officials' attitudes may change. Conditions on the ground may also change. Indeed, the Iraqi government itself may change: there are national elections scheduled for 2010 in Iraq. It is thus impossible to know for now what Iraqi attitudes toward the SOFA will be in 2011. Again, if Iraqis want the United States to leave quickly then it must. But the United States should remain open to the prospect of renegotiating a slower withdrawal, and this prospect warrants quiet exploration behind the scenes well in advance of the 2011 deadline.

Of course, a slower drawdown would pose important costs on the United States, too—both in military and financial terms, and politically for an administration that campaigned on a promise of rapid withdrawal from Iraq. But failure in Iraq has major costs of its own, both for Americans and for Iraqis. On balance, paying the cost of a slower withdrawal, while expensive, may ultimately be the cheaper approach.

Mission Statement of the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by

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– Building networks with international organizations and institutions to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.

– Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.

Endnotes

1. The actual bombers are surely AQI rather than SOI members. But the underlying responsibility is likelier to lie with the latter. AQI has been unable to foment violence at this level in central Iraq for over a year, because Sunnis—and especially the SOIs— denied them the necessary support. The fact that AQI is now able to do things it could not for the last year is strongly suggestive of broader support and, especially, a signaling campaign by Sunnis that their interests must be respected.
2. This analysis is documented in Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Stephen Long, "Civil War Intervention and the Problem of Iraq," presented to the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Boston, August 29, 2008; updated April 20, 2009.