

Rumors of Civil War

Iraq can be saved from civil war--if the United States keeps its nerve.

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WITHIN HOURS OF THE BOMBING of the al-Askariya shrine in Samarra on February 22, the media were filled with warnings that Iraq is sinking into civil war. Of course, almost any insurgency is, in a sense, a civil war, and sectarian violence has marked this insurgency from the very beginning. But the fact is that we are not facing a civil war in Iraq, with large scale military formations fighting one another along ethnic and sectarian lines. Moreover, we can very likely prevent this outcome, and, even better, make real progress toward victory.

What was striking, following the mosque bombing, was the evidence of Iraq's underlying stability in the face of attempts to undermine it. The country's vital institutions seem to have grown strong enough to withstand even the provocation of the bombing of the golden mosque.

In the wake of the bombing, it is true, militias took to the streets, and widespread sectarian violence occurred, killing and wounding many Iraqis. But not a single Iraqi political leader, including the volatile Moktada al-Sadr, endorsed an expansion of the violence. On the contrary, all joined to condemn it, to support government efforts to curtail it, and called on their followers to stop it. The Iraqi army and police were sent out to enforce curfews and stop traffic in many areas. Even in this crisis, they executed their orders, and shut down the great bulk of the violence within several days. Within a fortnight, Sunni leaders who had boycotted discussions aimed at forming a government reentered negotiations, and Iraqi politics--turbulent and nerve-wracking as it is--began again. This is not the performance of a society on the brink of civil war.

The tenacity of the Iraqi army is particularly notable. Iraqi soldiers are granted leave every month to hand-carry their salaries back home, in the absence of a reliable banking system. Especially for Shiites deployed in the Sunni triangle, this is a dangerous undertaking. Yet every month almost every Iraqi soldier "re-ups" by returning to his unit. This fact speaks volumes about the commitment of those soldiers and their professionalism in the face of the current dangers. If the situation began to spiral into real civil war, these Shiite soldiers would simply start deserting in droves, some of them to join up with Shiite militias. They are not doing so.

The continuing sectarian violence is, nevertheless, worrisome, as are the continuing tensions about the future nature and course of the Iraqi government. Together, these may ultimately undermine the foundations of stability. If the violence spreads, or other horrific terrorist attacks occur, the army and police may lose their effectiveness. The power of militias may grow beyond the point where the government and the Iraqi Security Forces can control them. Certainly, there is no basis for complacency. Iraq can still fail, with all the consequences that would follow.

President Bush has declared once again that the United States remains committed to stabilizing a democratic Iraq, and that American forces will stay there as long as necessary. He is right to reassert these commitments. The basic reason the Iraqi Security Forces and police have performed as well as they have is the presence of American troops.

U.S. forces have trained the Iraqis in how to set up checkpoints and search houses. And they have spent many hours teaching them that their loyalty is to the government and not their sect; that they must treat prisoners with respect; that they must behave professionally at all times. The continuing presence of U.S. soldiers is critical to the Iraqis' performance. The Iraqi army is holding together as well as it is because it is backed up and supported, materially and psychologically, by the U.S. Army--and by a sense that the U.S. Army will be there for quite a while to come. It is this simple: No stable and energetic U.S. Army presence--no successful Iraqi army. And without an Iraqi army, expect civil war.

Iraq is at a critical turning point, and U.S. forces are essential to helping the Iraqis get past it. Reducing the U.S. presence in the near future makes no sense, and constantly talking about reducing our forces is counterproductive and enervating. If U.S. force levels are (at least) kept steady while reliable Iraqi forces continue to increase--and the U.S. Army and Marines continue to join with the Iraqis in aggressively fighting the insurgents--the overall level of force that can be brought to bear against the insurgency, and in support of a political process that can hold the country together, will increase. And victory will then be achievable.

We trust President Bush is not going to squander this opportunity just so some congressional Republicans can say in this fall's campaign that the American military role in Iraq is decreasing. We trust that he will not permit his defense secretary to draw down troops when a major rotation occurs next month. After toughing it out through his own reelection campaign in 2004, the president, we trust, will not now capitulate to pressure and throw away the chance to succeed in Iraq.