

Conflict & Security

Averting Catastrophe in the Middle East

Susan Braden

There are three seemingly independent forces brewing in the Middle East today whose confluence, if mismanaged, could have devastating consequences for the people in the region and U.S. security interests. They are the failure of the U.S. military invasion of Iraq to stabilize the country, the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and growing fissures between Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza, and the mushrooming of radical groups across the region that claim to have links to al-Qaeda.

Individually, each of these developments presents its own set of serious challenges. Together, they have the potential to create a humanitarian catastrophe that destabilizes the region for years to come. Rather than relying on coincidence and good luck to weather the storm, it would be wiser for the United States to avert potential disaster by changing course.

The Iraqi Displacement Crisis. Iraq is all but a failed state. *Foreign Policy* magazine (July/August 2007) ranks Iraq next to Sudan as the second most unstable country in the world.¹ The UN estimates that, out of a total population of nearly thirty million people, more than two million are displaced within Iraq and another two million have fled to neighboring countries. This population migration is the largest in the Middle East since the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948 and is likely to grow. The flight has already significantly changed the demographic landscape of Iraq.

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The principle reason for the displacement is the ongoing violence and insecurity inside Iraq. According to a joint study by the Brookings Institution and Bern University, the violence in Iraq is fracturing the nation beyond the central government's control. Southern Iraq is turning into Shi'a fiefdoms, while the west is becoming a Sunni mini-state, and the Kurds are establishing their de facto independence in the north. The Bush administration's military surge is also becoming a factor in the displacement, according to a variety of studies. These studies show that while the troop buildup has improved security in certain areas, it has brought new fighting to other areas, and sectarian violence continues to drive Iraqis from their homes.²

Along with seeking security, migration data suggests that millions of people are leaving their homes in search of water, electricity, schooling, and jobs. According to an Oxfam study published in July 2007, Iraqis are suffering from a growing lack of food, shelter, water and sanitation, healthcare, education, and employment. The study notes that 43 percent of Iraq's population is living in absolute poverty, earning less than \$1 a day, and over half the population is now without work. While 70 percent of the country lacks access to adequate supplies of water, 90 percent of the country's hospitals are without basic medical or surgical supplies, and child malnutrition rates have risen from 19 percent before the U.S. intervention in 2003 to 28 percent currently.³ There is also evidence that a cholera epidemic in northern Iraq is spreading. Cases are appearing in Baghdad because much of the city's water supply is no longer chlorinated. The country's ability to import chlorine dried up after insurgents began using it in bomb attacks.

To date, the U.S. government has been slow to recognize the significance of the humanitarian crisis. When the U.S. Congress established benchmarks for gauging the success or failure of the U.S. military surge, for example, it did not include measurements of displacement and voluntary returns, even though they are strong indicators of a country's relative security. The U.S. government also has never used its influence over the government of Iraq to insist that it use some of its estimated \$37 billion dollar national income to confront the growing humanitarian crisis in Iraq and provide financial assistance to other governments in the region who are addressing the issue when Iraqis cross their borders.⁴

In so far as the U.S. government has sought to manage the displacement issue, it has done so by seeking to reduce the violence in Iraq, and by providing money—\$153 million in 2007—for Iraqi refugee assistance and resettling Iraqis in the United States.⁵ There are several problems with this strategy. First, the U.S. military cannot reduce the violence enough to either keep people from fleeing or get them to return in significant numbers. As a September 2007 report by the General Accountability Office noted, while there have been fewer attacks against U.S. forces since the surge, the number of attacks against Iraqi civilians remains unchanged and the capability of the Iraqi security services has not improved.⁶

Another problem with the current plan is that the countries neighboring Iraq cannot take in all the refugees without risking instability for themselves. Of the estimated 2.3 million people who have left Iraq, approximately 1.2 million are allegedly in Syria, 350,000–750,000 in Jordan, 40,000 in

Lebanon, 100,000 in Egypt, 54,000 in Iran, and 200,000 in the Gulf States. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that an additional 50,000 people are fleeing the country every month.⁷ If the UN numbers are correct, this means that Iraqis now make up 8 percent of Syria's population and as much as 10 percent of Jordan's population. They are concentrated in poor, urban communities within Amman and Damascus that are already suffering from inadequate infrastructure, education, health, and social services. While the initial influx of Iraqis in 2006 had enough resources to cover their needs, new arrivals are poorer, and spend their scarce financial resources on food and rent over health care and edu-

community is increasingly concerned that Iraqi refugees who do not have valid residency papers are being systematically arrested and jailed. They are not being treated as people escaping violence and trying to save their lives, but as illegal immigrants trying to find a job.

Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria are not party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and do not view the Iraqis as refugees. They have allowed the Iraqis across their borders on temporary visitor visas that do not provide them access to basic services or the right to work. As a result, many Iraqi families are in legal limbo, with visas that have already expired or are set to do so soon. In addition, women and children are being pushed into unsafe and dangerous work, includ-

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cation. The result is that the prices of food, oil, and rent have increased dramatically within Jordan and Syria, while the Iraqi refugees' needs for healthcare, schooling, and employment are largely unmet. As a consequence, many displaced Iraqis feel disenfranchised and marginalized, while host government populations are resentful of the burden they have been made to carry.

Less is known about the situation for Iraqis in Lebanon. The Lebanese government and humanitarian groups have been more preoccupied with the fallout from the bombing of the Palestinian refugee camp and the consequent displacement of 30,000 Palestinians last summer. However, the humanitarian

ing the sex trade, because they cannot work legally, have run out of resources, and are less likely to be caught by authorities than the male heads of household.

The governments of Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria have closed their borders to additional Iraqis and are reluctant to grant those already within their borders legal protection for a variety of reasons. First, they are concerned about rising demographic tensions created by such a huge influx of people intermixing with local populations who also lack adequate basic services. Syria, for example, does not have enough schools to accommodate all the displaced Iraqi children and Jordan is already double shifting with morning and afternoon shifts to accommodate

Jordan school kids. Second, they worry that Iraqi sectarian tensions will spill into their countries as Sunnis and Shiites settle old scores and Iraq's sectarian organizations move into host country capitol cities.⁸ Finally, the host governments are concerned that any Iraqi allowed across their borders will stay forever. Like the millions of Palestinian refugees who came decades ago and have yet to return because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, so the host governments fear that Iraq will never be stabilized enough for this new influx of refugees to return home.

It was a step in the right direction to send the Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, Ellen Sauerbrey, to Jordan and Syria in March 2007 to review the efforts of international agencies and non-governmental organizations working to help the refugees. The provision of \$153 million in humanitarian assistance to displaced Iraqis in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon was also a significant gesture. The scale of the crisis nevertheless continues to dwarf the response. A lot more attention and funding are needed to meet the critical needs of the growing number of displaced Iraqis and ease the rising tensions in the countries hosting them.⁹ A robust resettlement program outside the region would help, though it is hard for the United States to encourage other countries to open their borders to Iraqi refugees when it has taken in so few. While the United States pledged to admit 7,000 refugees in 2007, it has only admitted 1,135 thus far.

If a political solution for Iraq is not found soon and the refugee flow continues without new places for fleeing Iraqis to go, the most logical next development will be the establishment of camps inside

Iraq at huge expense to the international community and risk to the Iraqi people. A political solution to the conflict must be found in order to relieve the destabilizing pressure that the inflow of desperate Iraqis is imposing on Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. New measures are also needed to avoid the establishment of internal displacement protection camps in Iraq on the scale of those in Darfur, Sudan.

Managing the Breakup of Iraq.

The United States cannot prevent the breakup of Iraq along religious and ethnic lines anymore than it could have prevented the partition of the former Yugoslavia after 1991. In Iraq's case, there is likely to be a Sunni-dominated state in the western part of the country, a Kurdish state in the north, and a Shiite-dominated state in the south. As the joint Brookings-Bern University study indicates, ethnic self-segregation is already occurring.

The Yugoslav civil wars were extremely bloody, more so than any other conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. Iraq's partition is likely to be as difficult. However, had the conflicts that allowed for the creation of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia not been contained within the recognized borders of an existing state (Yugoslavia), they could have been more violent. At the same time, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia may have been less violent had the international community accepted the inevitable at the outset and sought to manage the country's demise under mandated international supervision.

With the Yugoslav example in mind, the Bush administration should cease seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable

and begin preparing for the breakup of Iraq by negotiating a role for the UN in overseeing the split up as well as engaging in careful consultations with the countries bordering Iraq. Recent efforts by the administration to give the UN a mediation role in Iraq and develop a regional forum for discussion with the countries bordering Iraq are a positive sign. However, the talks should not focus on how to unite Iraq's rival factions or convince Iraq's neighbors to withdraw support from their preferred religious and ethnic groups through the back door.¹⁰ Rather, they should focus on dividing Iraq into three separate entities as peacefully as possible, an initiative that would likely involve a continued U.S. military presence possibly folded into a UN peacekeeping force. As was true of Yugoslavia after Tito, the current Iraqi central government cannot function because the forces dividing the country are stronger than the forces that held it together during the dictatorial reign of Saddam Hussein. Free of Saddam's grip, Iraqi politicians are now more loyal to their sect, clan, tribe, and region than they are to the idea of Iraq as a nation-state.¹¹

Radicalism in Iraq and Middle East Interconnectedness. The prospects for a negotiated settlement of the Iraqi conflict are linked to the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the growth of Islamic militancy. While America's major allies in the region—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan—are sympathetic with its plight in Iraq, they are not inclined to become active participants in a negotiated solution so long as the United States shows so little interest in the plight of the Palestinians, which is of greater concern to their citizens and

an issue around which extremist groups can rally. Current U.S.-Israeli policy has turned Gaza into a prison for the 1.2 million people who live there, and into a potential haven for terrorist groups, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Army of Islam, which kidnapped BBC journalist Alan Johnston last summer in Gaza.

After Israel pulled its settlements out of the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas won the parliamentary elections in January 2006, both Israel and the United States chose not to test Hamas's ability to transform itself from a terrorist group into a ruling body capable of responsible governance. Instead, they have tried to squeeze the Palestinians into revolting against Hamas by shutting Gaza off almost entirely from normal trade and travel with the world. Israel and the United States also inadvertently promoted the breakup of West Bank/Gaza by arming Fatah against Hamas in the hopes that it would win a military showdown.¹² When the opposite occurred in June 2007 and Hamas took over Gaza militarily, Israel and the Bush administration did not abandon the strategy. They continue to squeeze Gaza's civilian population and Hamas, while bolstering President Abbas and Fatah in the West Bank with increased assistance and promises of putting the peace process back on track.¹³ This was a risky strategy with a huge potential to backfire.

The paradox facing the current administration is that the more the United States and Israel seek to isolate Hamas and bolster Abbas, the more they risk strengthening Hamas and weakening Abbas as the leader of the Palestinian people and symbol of the Palestinian nation. They also increase the potential for an all out civil war breaking out

amongst the Palestinians that could spill over into neighboring countries and allow for increased terrorist activity with the breakdown of law and order. From the Gazans' perspective, Abbas is now a "collaborator" and the United States and Israel, not Hamas, are responsible for their plight. Because of the border closings, Gaza is losing \$1 million a day and 75,000 private sector employees have lost their jobs as factories cannot import raw materials or export final goods. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, even with U.S. assistance, Abbas is likely to have trouble delivering what Palestinians want most: more security, less corruption, and better governance.¹⁴

tion in the West Bank and Gaza to deliver on the terms of an agreement.

The four-month long confrontation last summer between the Lebanese military and Fatah al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camp illustrates best how three issues—the conflict in Iraq, the lack of a meaningful Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the growth of radical groups—could come together into a "perfect storm." From May through August 2007, the Lebanese army bombed the camp in an effort to dislodge Fatah al-Islam, a group of Islamic militants of various Arab nationalities, some of whom fought in Iraq and had ties to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former

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The United States needs to pursue a more robust diplomatic effort to get the peace process back on track and secure a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire in the West Bank and Gaza. The lack of a meaningful peace process undermines the stability of not only West Bank/Gaza and Israel, but of the entire region. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to occur during the Bush administration's remaining time in office. With record low approval ratings, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert cannot offer meaningful concessions to the Palestinians. Similarly, President Bush is in no position to pressure him, given his rising unpopularity. Even if the Israelis were able to make meaningful concessions, it is unclear whether President Abbas represents enough of the Palestinian popula-

leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. While the Lebanese army ultimately put down the insurgents, there was initial concern that Fatah al-Islam would succeed in taking advantage of the Palestinians' plight and a weak Lebanese government to reignite the Lebanese civil war. Had the Palestinians in all of Lebanon's eleven refugee camps risen up in support of Fatah al-Islam, it is unlikely that the government would have been able to put the uprising down and it could have spread to West Bank/Gaza, Syria and Jordan, one-half of whose population is Palestinian. Fatah al-Islam failed because it miscalculated by thinking that it had the support of the Palestinians in Lebanon's refugee camps. What happened instead is that the Palestinians and the usually divided Lebanese electorate supported the

Lebanese military's handling of the situation.

On the one hand, the camp confrontation demonstrated how a radical group can potentially take advantage of the Palestinian or Iraqi refugee crisis to foster a larger conflict in a region populated by relatively weak governments. According to a report by the UN Secretary General issued on 24 October 2007, "the threat from al-Qaeda-inspired militias in Palestinian refugee camps remains undiminished" despite the Lebanese military's successful defeat of Fatah al-Islam. On the other hand, the incident demonstrated how catastrophe can be averted when a government gains the support of the affected population before its cause becomes linked to that of al-Qaeda or other radical groups.¹⁷

Avoiding Catastrophe by Changing Course. A "perfect storm" in the Middle East could well involve a situation where Iraq, West Bank/Gaza, and Lebanon all simultaneously descend into full scale civil war with hugely destabilizing consequences for the region. The spark setting events in motion might be a non-state actor—for example, Fatah al-Islam, Hamas, Hezbollah or the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)—that may or may not be supported by a state actor such as Syria or Iran. This non-state actor could stimulate an uprising in one country that evolves into a civil war and causes other countries to become engaged. Israel might, for example, launch a military attack against Hamas in Gaza or Hezbollah in Lebanon, who are indirectly supported by Syria and Iran. The result might well be that Lebanon and or West Bank/Gaza slip into a civil war with ramifications for Jordan and the potential that Israel could find itself

simultaneously engaged militarily in Gaza, Lebanon, and possibly even Syria because of that country's activities in Lebanon. Depending on how Jordan played the situation, moreover, it could find itself facing significant domestic unrest by its Palestinian refugee population and possibly even its Iraqi one. Likewise, if the PKK were to foster a major Turkish incursion into Northern Iraq, the result might be a full scale war between Turkey and Iraq's Kurdish population in northern Iraq, the only place in the country where there is currently a modicum of stability, while Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites continue to fight amongst each other in the rest of the country with material assistance and advice from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

If Iraq were to descend into full-scale civil war, several possibilities arise, all of which would cause enormous population dislocation within and outside Iraq. According to one scenario, the war is contained within Iraq's existing borders but continues for years, ending only after the immediate parties become too war-weary and decide to settle. In the second scenario, a protracted civil war spills over to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, causing one or all of their governments to fall. Still, a third scenario predicts that one of the immediate parties to the conflict wins a conclusive military victory and thereby presents one or more of Iraq's neighbors with its least preferred alternative. Iran fears a permanent U.S. military presence in Iraq and the establishment of an anti-Iran, Sunni-dominated regime in Baghdad that causes the country's Shia population to flee en masse. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States fear the creation of a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Lebanon and Syria through Iraq and Iran that would in turn cause the

country's Sunni population to flee.

Whatever the scenario, the violence, instability, and population dislocation created by the combination of these circumstances have the potential to permanently alter the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The United States and the UN, therefore, must draft a comprehensive strategy to secure the immediate break up of Iraq under the supervision of the international community. The strategy should be negotiated with Iraq and the bordering countries. It should take

into account the fact that there are fifty thousand people fleeing Iraq every month and direct significantly more money to helping Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon accommodate the refugees they have taken in while seeking commitment from other countries to take in Iraqi refugees. Finally, the United States and Israel must realize that the best way to promote a negotiated settlement of the Iraq conflict and to assuage the growing radicalism in the region is by settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

NOTES

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4 At a UNHCR sponsored conference held in Geneva in April 2007, the Government of Iraq pledged \$25 million for Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan, but as of November 2007 has yet to disburse the funds.

5 <http://amman.usembassy.gov/User/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsId=1304>.

6 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/09/20070914.html> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/07/20070712.html>

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7 Sabrina Tavernise, "Jordan Yields Poverty and Pain For the Well-Off Fleeing Iraq," *New York Times*, August 10, 2007, Sec. A

8 *Ibid.*

Hugh Nylor, "1.4 Million Iraqis Push Syria to Edge," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 August 2007, Sec. A, p.10.

9 Due to complicated relations with the Govern-

ment of Syria, it has been difficult for Western governments to give money directly to Syria. As of November 2007, the only contributions to the Government of Syria have come from the EU and have totaled only \$4 million.

10 Collum Lynch and Robin Wright, "US Seeks UN Help With Talks on Iraq," *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2007, Sec A, p 1,8.

11 The primary arguments against a three state solution are that it would not work in Baghdad, home to about one-fourth of Iraq's population because it is not religiously or ethnically homogeneous. In addition, the Sunnis would oppose a three-state solution because they might be denied access to Iraq's oil riches, which are concentrated in the north and south.

12 See transcript of former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel interview with NPR's Morning Edition (16 June, 2007) on U.S. support for the arming and training of Fatah through Jordan and Egypt. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=11103540>.

13 See Special Briefing by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, June 18, 2007. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/06/86750.htm>.

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16 Alia Ibrahim and Ellen Knickmeyer, "Lebanese Military Threatens to Renew Assault on Camp," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2007, Sec. A, p.17.

17 Bill Marsh, "What Surrounds the Iraqi Tinderbox," *New York Times*.