

Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East

A constant criticism of the Obama administration is that it has not articulated a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the entirety of the Middle East. On one hand, there is a logic to this complaint. The problems of the Middle East have proliferated and deteriorated in recent years, even by the region's own grim standards. Civil wars are now raging in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, threatening to destabilize the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt. In addition, radical Islamist groups have gained control over territory and populations in Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Iraq, and have made gains in countries as far south as Kenya, Mali, Tanzania, and South Sudan.

On the other hand, the problems of the Middle East have become both so intertwined and acute that it is not clear that the likes of Klemens von Metternich, Otto von Bismarck, and Dean Acheson *combined* could devise a parsimonious strategy for this moment. Add to this the limited appetite of both the American people and the wider international community to tackle the problems of the region, and the absence of an integrated grand strategy becomes more understandable.

Ignoring the larger problems of the region, however—particularly the destabilizing effects of multiple civil wars—is not an option. One cannot deal

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with ISIS or al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria without dealing with the larger regional problems which have given rise to them. If the United States and the international community refuse to do so, then the current civil wars are likely to metastasize, spreading instability and chaos, and undercutting whatever more modest strategy we try to pursue. In the end, the United States will be less secure, not more.

There should be no question that the place to start devising a new U.S. strategy for the Middle East is with its civil wars. In today's Middle East, the greatest threats to U.S. interests come from the civil wars in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Syria, and the risk that these wars could spark new civil wars in Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain, Algeria, and Egypt. Any grand strategy that seeks to stabilize the region and preserve U.S. interests will have to prioritize dealing with these wars first.

The underlying dynamics of the region's civil wars are the same as countless others globally.

The good news is that the civil wars of the Middle East are not *sui generis*. While the details of each are unique, the underlying dynamics are the same as those of countless other civil wars, whether in Muslim or non-Muslim countries. The fact that the Middle East is predominantly Muslim, that it has a Sunni-Shia divide, that it is awash in oil, or has other unique attributes makes little difference. These civil wars have consistently behaved much like other civil wars across the globe over the past century.

These similarities are important because it means that the United States can and should take advantage of a well-developed body of historically-grounded scholarly work on civil wars that tells us much about what causes these wars to break out, what causes them to spread, and what helps end them.¹ This sophisticated and evidence-based research provides a wealth of practical guidance on what the international community can feasibly do (and not do) to help end the violence. Washington should use this treasure trove of pragmatic lessons to determine how best to soothe and perhaps eventually heal the worst breeding grounds for terror and instability in the world today.

What's more, while it is widely assumed that there is nothing an outside power can do to end a civil war—let alone address the underlying problems that produced it—the historical record demonstrates otherwise. Positively shaping somebody else's civil war is never simple, but neither is it impossible. It also doesn't have to be ruinously expensive. The history of civil wars suggests that external intervention can have a dramatic influence on everything from preventing their outbreak to limiting their duration to determining the

manner in which they end. Outside actors have helped bring civil wars to a close, and without genocidal violence. They have even helped prevent civil wars from spreading and triggering other civil wars in nearby states. That is a hopeful record given what the United States needs to accomplish in the Middle East today.

Why Care About Civil Wars?

In general, civil wars create four problems that threaten U.S. interests: civil wars reduce oil production, they provide a safe haven for terrorist groups to organize and spread, they bring potentially hostile new governments to power, and they proliferate—spawning new wars between and within neighboring countries.

When it comes to the Middle East, the United States' first and foremost interest is in oil exports and oil market stability. That may seem outdated at this moment of low oil prices, but the forces which produced the current dip are likely to prove temporary. The overall trends in energy indicate that oil prices will rebound in a matter of years (if not months) and oil will remain the core input of the global economy.² Yet, a country's oil production often plummets as a result of civil war. Despite the presence of 150,000 U.S. troops, Iraqi oil production still fell by 64 percent (from 2.8 million barrels per day to just 1 million bpd) during the 2006–2008 civil war. The 1979 revolution in Iran—a related form of internal strife—caused oil production to fall by 78 percent.³ As a result of its current civil war, Libyan oil production has fallen 92 percent (from 1.6 million bpd to 235,000 bpd).⁴ And while we may want to believe that North American shale deposits and the current surfeit of hydrocarbons have given us “energy independence,” the unavoidable fact remains that our economy is still tied to that of the global economy, making us vulnerable to a new oil price shock.

A second threat to U.S. interests comes from the connection between civil wars and terrorist groups. Civil wars create ungoverned spaces where extremists and terrorist groups can organize, operate, and spread. It is no accident that many of the worst terrorist groups on the planet were born or incubated in civil wars: the PLO, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Tamil Tigers, Lashkar-e Taiba, al-Qaeda, and now ISIS. In the 1980s, al-Qaeda and their constituent groups could not make a dent in Saudi Arabia or Egypt, so they fled to Afghanistan where they thrived within its civil war. They then set up franchises wherever civil wars existed in the Muslim world, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (which became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS). Today, the real terrorist threats from al-Qaeda and its offshoots are entirely located in states facing civil wars of one kind or

another: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Mali. These extremist groups keep trying to gain a foothold in strong states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and elsewhere, but haven't succeeded. Only where there is division, turmoil, and anarchy have they been able to survive, and there they have thrived.

A third threat to U.S. interests is that civil wars, if left to run their own course, often end in a decisive victory for the group best able to employ violence. This means that the most aggressive, violence-prone organization is the one that tends to form a new government, a government likely hostile to the United States and its interests. The Eritrean government that won independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after a 30-year civil war turned around and attacked Yemen in 1995, Ethiopia in 1998, and Djibouti in 2008. The United States has spent years nurturing relationships with Middle Eastern governments to ensure consistent access to oil and to protect U.S. allies in the region. The onset of civil war in any country means that new governments could come to power that are not only brutal, but also openly antagonistic to the United States, its allies, and its interests.

Finally, civil wars tend to create more violence both between neighboring states and within them.⁵ Neighboring states often get dragged into civil wars either because they intervene to help rebels, or because rebels take refuge on their territory, triggering an attack from the neighboring government. Israel and Syria repeatedly came to blows over Lebanon, and the Congolese civil war eventually sucked in seven of its neighbors. In today's Middle East, the intervention of Iran and the Sunni Arab states in the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen threaten violence between them, and excursions by the warring Syrian factions into Lebanon threaten to rekindle civil war there. Lastly, civil wars can create a contagion effect, where the conditions in one civil war (terrorism, refugees, secessionism, radicalization of neighboring populations, economic dislocation, and intervention) move across borders, creating the conditions conducive for civil war next door.⁶ The Middle East is especially vulnerable to this problem given that borders are porous, ethno-sectarian groups span state lines, and governments are mostly weak. None of these historical patterns bode well for U.S. interests.

Ending Civil Wars

Given these threats, any new U.S. strategy toward the Middle East must start with plans to deal with the four civil wars currently raging in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Even beyond the humanitarian tragedies each is producing, these civil wars directly threaten oil supplies, help breed extremist groups, threaten to bring aggressive and antagonistic governments to power, and seem likely to

produce new intrastate and interstate wars. The longer these civil wars continue, the more likely they are to destabilize Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and potentially Kuwait, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

There are two paths that scholars of civil wars have identified to bring an early and permanent end to civil wars. The first is a decisive military victory. The shortest civil wars over the last 70 years have been those in which one side has been able to gain a quick and decisive victory, promptly reestablishing state control under their rule.⁷ These short wars tend to have two things in common: they start either with a successful coup led by former government officials or members of the armed forces (i.e., Bolivia in 1952); or they begin as mass demonstrations in capital cities that swiftly depose the existing government (i.e., the 1979 Iranian Revolution).⁸ Civil wars that lasted a long time tended to be those where neither the government nor its opposition were able to secure a quick victory. Instead, a military stalemate set in where multiple rebel bands and factions, often operating in peripheral areas of the country, proved difficult to defeat.

External powers can help bring about a rapid end to civil wars by providing military assistance to tilt the military balance decisively in favor of one side. They can also help by standing aside and not helping the weaker side in such a contest. In a study of 150 civil wars between 1945 and 1999, Notre Dame Professor Patrick Regan found that when aid was offered exclusively to one side, it created a shorter war than those in which both sides had outside support. For this reason, military assistance generally needs to be offered early in a war in order to be decisive, before the other side can find similar backing.⁹

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While a quick decisive victory is typically the fastest route to ending a civil war, it is not necessarily the best. Outright military victory in a civil war often comes at the price of horrific (even genocidal) levels of violence against the defeated, including their civilian populations.¹⁰ The Hutus in Rwanda and Serbs in Bosnia both nearly won their respective civil wars in 1994 through just such a combination of military conquest and ethnic cleansing. Victorious groups in a civil war sometimes also try to employ their newfound strength against neighboring states, resulting in interstate wars. Moreover, the victors of these wars—generals who launch a coup, mass protesters who demand change, and ruthless dictators—may bring a quicker end to violence but may not be the leaders the United States wants to see in power. This was certainly the case in Iran in 1979 and is the case with Bashar al-Assad today.

The alternative to a military solution is a negotiated settlement. If a quick military victory is impossible (either for political reasons or because no group can win quickly or easily), then civil wars can be brought to an early end if the combatants are willing to sign and implement a comprehensive peace agreement. The civil wars in Bosnia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mozambique, and Cambodia all came to an end this way in the 1990s.

External powers tend to prefer a negotiated settlement because it (a) stops the fighting, reducing the threat of spillover and contagion, (b) avoids post-

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victory reprisals, and (c) prevents one's enemy from gaining full control over the government. Negotiated settlements, however, are not easy to engineer. Historically, a negotiated settlement to a civil war has required three key conditions. The first is that all of the parties to the civil war must believe that they cannot win a military victory. As long as one group believes it can win total control of a state, it has incentives to keep fighting, forcing its adversaries to do the same. The main fighting factions must think they will suffer a

costly military defeat at the hands of their rivals in order to have a powerful incentive to accept a negotiated settlement. It was Croat military victories in 1995 that convinced the Serbs that the U.S.-brokered peace at Dayton was more attractive than defeat.¹¹

Second, the peace agreement must offer all major fighting factions an equitable and sustainable distribution of political power. Multiple scholarly studies have demonstrated that political, military, or territorial power-sharing guarantees are key to convincing factions to sign agreements and stop fighting.¹² The reason for this, once again, has to do with incentives. Warring parties have little reason to stop fighting unless they are given a real stake in any new government. This means that a functional power-sharing arrangement must exist among all of the parties, including compromised elites, and one that includes clear protections for all groups including minorities.

Finally, all of the warring parties need to believe that the terms of the peace agreement will be enforced over time.¹³ This is the trickiest part of a negotiated settlement but also the most important. If fighting factions do not believe that they will continue to have a stake in the new government and receive protection during implementation, they have no incentive to sign an agreement. They will either keep fighting or revert to war as soon as they fear a double-cross. The trick is to determine how to protect factions physically and economically even though they do not enjoy equal strength in numbers, military capabilities, or access to resources.

Who will do the enforcing? In the past, third-party forces have successfully provided security to address this. NATO's forces in Bosnia starting in 1994 (and continuing today under the European Union) or UN peacekeepers in Mozambique between 1992 and 1994 are positive examples. Third-party peacekeepers, however, require a lengthy and potentially costly commitment of personnel over time, something that most countries including the United States are currently reluctant to embrace. The good news is that self-enforcing peace agreements are possible. The key is to give all parties the means to protect themselves should one side renege on the deal. One way to do this is to divide the warring factions into separate independent or politically autonomous territories protected by their own militaries or militias. A second way is to create a professional, indigenous military where power and arms are distributed fairly equally among the different fighting factions. Creating such a military force would allow each party to the civil war to retain some self-defense capabilities, while helping them to hold political leaders accountable.¹⁴

Historically, we know that all of the successful peace processes in the 1990s included detailed plans for thorough military integration.¹⁵ Iraq in 2006–2010 furnishes a useful example of how this can work as well as a guide for what can go wrong. During the first part of this time period, from 2006 to 2008, the conflict in Iraq was primarily an intercommunal civil war—an insurgency existed in the form of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its war against the U.S. military, but in retrospect that was a much smaller part of the problem than the Sunni–Shi'a civil war. The reason that the United States succeeded in ending the civil war in Iraq was because, knowingly or not, we engineered the three key requirements to bring about a negotiated settlement. The United States deployed additional troops and finally made the effort to build a large, apolitical Iraqi military with some modest capabilities. Together, the U.S. and Iraqi forces secured Iraq's cities and countryside. Doing so prevented the Shi'a militias (which were on the brink of victory in Baghdad in early 2007) from continuing to wage their military campaign. Meanwhile, the Sunni tribes had tired of the AQI presence, which usurped the traditional authority of the tribal sheikhs, and were terrified that continued civil war would result in an outright Shi'a military victory—and their own oppression, if not extermination.

One of the most critical elements in the events of 2006–2008 was that the United States went from acting as the enabler (inadvertently and unwittingly) of the Shi'a to acting as the protector of the Sunnis. Under Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the United States then brought the Sunnis back into Iraq's political process and forced the Shi'a (and the Kurds) to agree to a new power-sharing arrangement that guaranteed an equitable division of political power and economic resources as well as protection for all.

Last, the U.S. military presence, even though it was clearly drawing down over time, coupled with the U.S.-backed Iraqi military, reassured all of the Iraqi groups that the terms of the new power-sharing arrangement would be enforced. This enabled the country to begin to knit itself back together again. Where the United States got it wrong in Iraq was in the long-term implementation. The original power-sharing agreement failed after 2011 and civil war resumed in late 2013 because the Iraqi military was not yet well-enough established to help self-enforce political power-sharing without the U.S. role. Instead, once the U.S. military withdrew and U.S. diplomats disengaged in 2010–2011, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki subverted the political independence of the Iraqi military and used it to deprive the Sunnis of their political status, economic resources, and eventually their security. By late 2013, the dominant Shi'a under Maliki faced few constraints to their use and abuse of power, and the Sunnis faced few incentives to remain at peace.

Shutting Down Existing Civil Wars

The scholarly work on civil wars and our experience with Iraq offer both warnings and guidance on how best to stabilize the four Middle Eastern countries currently embroiled in civil wars. Above all, the empirical evidence argues against trying to engineer the complete military victory of any one side in any of these wars. Heavily supporting one side would only encourage other outside states and actors to contribute money and resources to the other side, lengthening the war. In a badly polarized Middle East, enabling the Shi'a to crush the Sunnis in Iraq, or vice versa in Syria, would simply antagonize the opposite side across the region, prolonging existing civil wars and possibly instigating a wider and deeper regional conflict.

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That does not mean that the United States should not seek the defeat of ISIS. Instead, it means that an exclusive focus on defeating ISIS instead of dealing with the larger problem of ongoing civil wars is likely to prove self-defeating because it ignores the conditions that are feeding the instability and extremism in the region. The United States can smash ISIS, but if civil wars continue, then new extremist organizations will simply emerge to replace it. This is exactly what happened with AQL. ISIS's predecessor was virtually extirpated in Iraq by 2011 until the civil war in neighboring Syria provided it with a new refuge and lifeline. Resolve the civil war, however, and the source of ISIS's strength and appeal disappears.

The United States should be serious about creating the conditions for successful negotiated settlements in the most important of these civil wars. In each country, we will need to help create the three key conditions for a successful negotiated settlement (preclude military victory, create an equitable redistribution of political power, ensure its enforceability over time), knowing that we will need to do this with more limited resources than in the past. The United States is highly unlikely to deploy 150,000 ground troops to any of these countries again, so enforcement of any agreement will need to be indigenous and come from the parties involved in the conflict themselves with only limited external support. That is obviously a lot harder than employing large numbers of ground troops, as the United States did in Bosnia as well as Iraq, but it is not impossible. It is also the most reasonable approach to securing U.S. interests given the tools that the United States currently seems willing to employ.

Iraq

The Obama administration's stated strategy for Iraq and Syria is to focus on building apolitical and non-sectarian armies, exactly the kind that could help enforce power-sharing agreements in the future. These make a great deal of sense as long as the United States actually lives up to its rhetoric and helps create carefully designed, well integrated, and professional militaries—something that will require years of commitment. In Iraq, Washington's approach is to employ U.S. advisors to rebuild and depoliticize Iraq's armed forces, and then back them in retaking the lost territories from ISIS. Doing so would help convince the Sunni community that it has no hope of winning a military victory against the Shi'a, creating incentives for them to agree to a power-sharing deal. In addition, the U.S. presence (which will need to remain in some form for years) and the new Iraqi army composed of Shi'a and Sunni soldiers will help convince the more numerous Shi'a that they cannot impose their will by force, as Maliki tried. For their part, the Kurds need to be kept out of the fray, and should they someday opt for independence, they need to be helped in a way that does not reignite conflict between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a Arab communities.

A critical missing piece of this effort, however, is a U.S. diplomatic team to guide, pressure, and cajole Iraq's political leaders to forge a new power-sharing arrangement, as Crocker and company did in 2007–2008. That will almost certainly require some degree of additional U.S. aid—political, military, economic, diplomatic, and technological—both as leverage to engineer such an agreement and to mitigate the compromises each party will have to make to each other. The Sunnis will almost certainly demand some form of loose federation in order to avoid the failure of the last arrangement. This would likely give Sunni and Shi'a a fair amount of political autonomy under a new,

mixed Sunni–Shi’a–Kurd military structure. The creation of a federation supported by a small, but integrated, federal military supplemented by locally recruited (and therefore more ethnically separate) national guard formations would serve to reassure Sunnis that a repeat of Maliki’s misrule could not happen again.¹⁶

In essence, both conditions would allow the less numerous Sunnis to enforce power-sharing themselves, ensuring that this agreement, unlike the last, would be sustainable once U.S. involvement ended. Nevertheless, a residual U.S. military presence of several thousand troops would be required for at least a decade after the defeat of ISIS and the forging of a new power-sharing agreement. This force would be needed to train, vet, and professionalize the Iraqi military while simultaneously acting to reassure all sides that the United States remained committed to enforcing the peace of Iraq. Doing so will be more difficult this time than in 2007–2009 because of the frightening events of 2010–2014, but it is not impossible and it is the United States’ only realistic chance to leave behind a peaceful and secure Iraq.

Syria

The civil war in Syria is quite a bit harder to end for three reasons: (1) the incumbent regime is deeply unpopular and represents only a minority of the population, (2) the opposition is heavily factionalized, and (3) Syria has no history of ethnic/sectarian compromise. In fact, Syria is more similar to Iraq circa 2006 and Lebanon in the depths of its civil war in the 1980s than the post-surge Iraq of today.

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Once again, the administration’s *ostensible* strategy is well in sync with recommendations drawn from the historical record of civil wars.

According to various statements by the President and by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the United States is building a new Syrian opposition army.¹⁷ That army is meant to be apolitical, non-sectarian, and highly integrated, with a conventional hierarchy and the training and backing of the U.S. military. When it is ready, it will attack into Syria under U.S. air power, conquer (liberate) and hold territory against *both* the Assad regime and the various Sunni jihadist groups, and use that territory to expand its ranks and begin to build a new political and economic order. Over time, it should defeat the extremists on both sides—the Assad regime and the Sunni jihadist groups—which should convince the wider communities they represent (Alawite Shi’a and Sunnis, respectively) that a military victory is not possible. Once it is clear that the eventual winner of the war is likely to be the U.S.-

backed opposition army, both major demographic groups (as well as their regional backers: Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) will have a huge incentive to join in a U.S.-led negotiation to produce a new power-sharing arrangement. The result would be an inclusive new government with extensive protections for all minority groups.¹⁸

This strategy is entirely consistent with the scholarly literature on successful bargaining in civil wars and is similar to recent peace processes in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bosnia. In truth, it is the only strategy so far proposed that has any chance of succeeding, given what we know from the accumulated studies of civil war and about what the United States is likely to tolerate. Still, it will not prove easy. It will take a long time and will require a sustained U.S. commitment throughout. Indeed, this last point looms largest as the Obama administration has been slow to implement either the military or political dimensions of its stated strategy for Syria. While one could argue that progress in Syria can and should follow progress in Iraq, waiting too long there will make the Syrian effort far more difficult when the United States finally gets around to it, risks the impact of spillover into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and back into Iraq—which is unlikely to enjoy a post-ISIS stability if ISIS continues to have a sanctuary next door.

Libya

Libya will require a strategy very much like Syria. It too needs a new military force, one that is apolitical and professional, capable of defeating all of the partisan forces and then serving as the kind of strong institution around which a new political system could be organized and enforced. Libya will also require the same kind of power-sharing arrangement to provide an equitable distribution of power and resources among its warring factions (which are primarily geographic—Cyrenaica vs. Tripolitania, Misrata vs. Zintan—although a secular/religious divide is growing on top of these longer-standing divisions). Both a power-sharing arrangement and a strong, professional new military will prove necessary to convince factions that they are better off signing a settlement than continuing to fight.

Both efforts will require a great deal of external effort to succeed. The challenge with Libya is that it is strategically far more important than the attention it has so far received. Not only is Libya rich in oil, but its position next to Egypt, the largest of the Arab states, and Tunisia, the only budding Arab democracy, makes spillover particularly dangerous. However, Libya is not as important to U.S. interests as Iraq (and by association, Syria). Given the extent of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and (in theory) Syria, as well

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as the administration's reluctance to commit to yet another civil war in the Middle East, it seems highly unlikely that the United States would make a similar effort in Libya.

That means that Libya requires Europe's attention and commitment. At some level, that makes a great deal of sense. Europe is far more directly affected by Libya since it wants Libya's oil and trade, and fears an outflow of Libyan refugees from the civil war there. It was not a coincidence that Europe furnished the bulk of the combat aircraft that helped topple Qaddafi in 2011. With the United States preoccupied with Iraq and Syria, it has to be Europe's responsibility to help end the violence in Libya.

The problem is that the Europeans have allowed their militaries to atrophy to virtual impotence, and have shown little willingness or ability to harness their economic and diplomatic resources for difficult, protracted missions like stabilizing and rebuilding Libya. Even though the Europeans would need to furnish the bulk of the combat aircraft, trainers, advisors, weaponry, economic assistance, and diplomatic muscle, it will invariably require some U.S. role, too. Washington will probably have to provide some political leadership, logistical assistance, military command and control, and possibly some advisors as well. None of that will break the bank, and hopefully would be enough to pull the Europeans out of their splendid isolation.

Yemen

Then there is Yemen. From a humanitarian perspective, Yemen deserves no less attention than Iraq, Syria, and Libya. The trouble is that Yemen, by itself, is far less strategically and politically important to the United States and the rest of the world than most countries in the Middle East. Yemen, however, could prove quite dangerous via Saudi Arabia. Here, the problem is that the Saudis are obsessed with Yemen and have found it impossible to resist meddling in Yemeni affairs.

The historical record is fairly clear that it is a mistake to send military and economic aid to the weaker side in a highly unbalanced civil war or to continue to finance factions in wars that appear unwinnable. Both of these strategies are likely to prolong the civil war, increase the chances that it spreads, and create conditions for extremism. As Patrick Regan has shown, no mix of economic or military intervention during a civil war shortens its length unless it is all directed at the stronger side.¹⁹ Outside economic and military aid that is given to multiple sides during a civil war simply serves to lengthen it. Pakistan has been virtually torn apart by its endless intervention in the Afghan civil wars. At a lesser level, the stronger states of Israel and Syria both still suffered significant economic costs and political divisions from their prolonged involvement in the Lebanese civil war.

In Yemen, the problem is that the Saudis continue to back the apparently weaker side in the civil war—the Sunnis, who have lost control of the Yemeni government to Shi'a Houthi forces. The greatest danger to U.S. interests is that the Saudis will keep doubling down in Yemen and in so doing will overstrain themselves politically, militarily, and possibly even economically. The Kingdom cannot afford to sink deeper into a Yemeni quagmire it cannot stabilize on its own. This is especially true given the challenges the Kingdom is likely to face as a result of three recent events: (1) historically low oil prices, (2) exorbitant new financial commitments due to attempts to stave off the Arab Spring, and (3) succession issues surrounding King Abdullah's death.

Yemen will have to be dealt with by continued counterterrorism measures—drones, special forces operations, and covert action, even though such measures are always of limited effectiveness on their own—coupled with a major diplomatic effort to convince the Saudis to refrain from further commitments there lest “doubling down” slide into “all in.”

Preventing New Civil Wars From Starting

As vital as it is for the United States to shut down or even mitigate the four civil wars currently raging, it is equally important for the United States and its allies to prevent others from breaking out. Once again, large empirical studies of past civil wars offer insights into which countries are likely to prove at greatest risk of civil war. Four factors are known to be particularly destabilizing.

One of the most important sources of civil war is poor governance. Historical studies show that the lower the quality of government, the more likely a country is to experience civil war.²⁰ In fact, by almost every measure, bad governance has been associated with both the outbreak and recurrence of civil war.²¹ Governments that provide poor public services to their citizens, rule arbitrarily, and are deeply corrupt are significantly more likely to experience a civil war than those that are predictable, law-abiding, and treat their citizens well. Oil-producing countries and autocracies have the worst rule of law records and receive some of the lowest scores for government effectiveness, making them particularly at risk of civil war.

The question then is: who is likely to rebel in these countries? Once again, large-scale empirical studies reveal that the groups most likely to take up arms are ethnic groups that have been excluded from political power.²² This is especially true if the group recently lost power, if their mobilization capacity is

Four destabilizing factors are present in countries at greatest risk of another civil war breaking out.

high, and if they had experienced conflict in the past. Of course, this is exactly what happened in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and explains why civil wars broke out in each of those states.

The countries, therefore, that are at greatest risk of civil war are those that lock out key identity groups from governments they had once controlled and that govern poorly. Unfortunately, it is hard to find good, inclusive governance in the Middle East. The fledgling Tunisian democracy might be the first. Most of the countries that have (so far) avoided civil war still practice all of the same forms of misrule that put them at risk of revolt by these excluded groups. While Jordan and Lebanon are clearly in danger because of their proximity to the ongoing civil wars, this factor suggests that states like Algeria and autocratic-again Egypt are also vulnerable due to their poor and exclusive governance practices.

A second key factor that puts a country at risk of civil war is a civil war in a neighboring state.²³ Researchers have suggested a number of reasons for this, but the most likely appears to be the destabilizing effect of a large number of refugees. In a study of countries between 1951 and 2001, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Gleditsch, professors at the University of North Texas and the University of Essex, respectively, found that hosting refugees from neighboring states significantly increased the risk of armed conflict. By these measures, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are particularly vulnerable today. When Salehyan and Gleditsch revisited their statistical analysis to compute the predicted risk of civil war on Syria's neighbors, they found that Syrian refugees in Lebanon raised the risk of civil war in Lebanon by 53.88 percent, and in Jordan by 53.51 percent.²⁴

Refugees are likely to increase the risk of civil war for three reasons: (1) nascent militants often use refugee camps as a source of supplies and recruits, (2) refugees disrupt the local economy and put a financial burden on host communities, and (3) refugee flows often upset the ethnic and sectarian balance in their host countries. This suggests that the United States should ensure that refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey are secure, that militants do not use them as staging grounds, and that the host government and international community remain sensitive to the needs of local populations while accommodating refugees.

Weak states are a third destabilizing factor that could allow for the outbreak of civil war. Rebellious groups are opportunistic: they strike when and where they believe they are likely to meet the least resistance. Thus, even if all of the conditions listed above are met—destabilizing refugee groups, ineffective governments that omit key groups—civil wars are still more likely to break out in those countries where governments are also weak. Studies by James Fearon and David Laitin, both professors at Stanford University, and Paul

Collier and Anke Hoeffler, professor and research officer at Oxford, respectively, have found that civil wars are also much more likely to break out in countries with unstable governments and weak state capacity.²⁵ Both of these factors make it more difficult for central governments to control their populations and deter rebellion. Both factors also offer hope to rebel groups that they could eventually win a war. Once again, all of the current civil wars in the Middle East originated in countries where the government had difficulty maintaining its control over the entirety of its territory. In today's Middle East, Lebanon, Egypt, and Algeria are all having difficulty controlling their entire country, leaving them vulnerable to opportunistic uprisings.

The fourth and last significant factor that scholarly studies have tied to the outbreak of civil war is how the government responds to demands for change—is it willing to negotiate? Most governments faced with an organized and aggrieved group could avoid civil war if they were willing to make concessions, even partial concessions, to protesters. Civil wars are significantly more likely to occur when incumbent leaders refuse to negotiate with the group making the demands. This was the case in the spring of 2011 when President Assad refused any political reform in light of popular protests, and when Prime Minister Maliki refused to incorporate Sunnis into government. Had Assad reformed his regime and Maliki abided by the power-sharing arrangements worked out in 2008, Iraq and Syria probably could have avoided their civil wars.

History's Lessons for Today's Civil Wars

The scholarship on civil wars has a lot to say about current and future civil wars in the Middle East. Existing civil wars are the result of the crumbling post-1945 order and the set of autocratic and exclusionary states which it created. The political regimes established after two world wars and decolonization—mostly secular dictatorships and hereditary monarchies—are today being challenged by angry citizens and competing sectarian factions. Few of these autocracies have kept pace with the burgeoning needs and sprinting aspirations of their people in a globalizing Middle East. That failure has weakened the states of the region, leaving them ripe for civil war. To bring these wars to an end will require governments and militaries more effective and inclusive than those of the past. They are also likely to require political reforms that lead to better, more responsive governance.

The scholarship also reveals why a second wave of civil wars is dangerously probable. Almost all of the countries in the Muslim Middle East exhibit one or more of the main risk factors associated with civil war: most are autocratic, fragile states in which one or more identity groups is oppressed by another. Underlying political, economic, and social grievances have been suppressed in

A second wave of regional civil wars is dangerously probable.

some places, masked in others. Many of the most fervent revolutionaries moderated their demands when they saw the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni revolts turn into vicious civil wars.

Yet make no mistake, those grievances remain and the unrest they once spawned will recur. We do not know when and we do not know what form it will take. But it will recur unless the states of

the region take steps to address those grievances. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Saudi Arabia weathered the Arab Spring with only the most meager of protests. As one Saudi put it at the time, “Why don’t we revolt like the Egyptians? Because the Egyptians had Mubarak and we have Abdullah. The Egyptians had to revolt because Mubarak would not help them. We have Abdullah, who helps us.”²⁶

If the Muslim Middle East is to avoid more violence, the only answer is for the remainder of its regimes to reform, to serve their citizens more effectively, and to provide impartial rule of law. That is the best way—the only way—to avoid the violence that otherwise breeds chaos and extremism. That is a simple statement and one that has been articulated repeatedly over the past two decades. It is unquestionably the right answer for the states of the region to avoid further civil wars and internal unrest. It also should serve as a key pillar of any new U.S. grand strategy for the Middle East. But it is wicked hard in practice.

Having come through the searing events of 2011, many of the Arab regimes that survived have concluded that any reform would only encourage greater demands for change that could easily escalate out of control—producing revolts, state collapse, and civil war. They aren’t entirely wrong. Reform that is handled badly—too fast, too slow, too narrow, too wide—can produce exactly that dynamic. No reform at all, however, is a recipe for disaster.

The United States should not avoid the need for political reform simply because it is hard to accomplish. The Middle East is in such bad shape because it is at the beginning, not the end, of a regional movement demanding political change. The more stridently governments resist reform, the more violence will occur. We can try to put off the inevitable, but ignoring the need for real change will mean that change, when it inevitably comes, will produce new civil wars and cause much worse problems for the United States and its allies. We cannot avoid the wider set of underlying economic, political, and social problems that were the ultimate cause of the Arab Spring and the civil wars it inadvertently produced. If we are to avoid more such civil wars, reform is the only realistic alternative to repression and the revolts that inevitably follow.

Notes

1. Christopher Blattman & Edward Miguel, "Civil War," *Journal of Economic Literature* 48, no. 1 (2010): pp. 3-57.
2. See for instance, Gal Luft, "Don't Get Used to Cheap Oil," *The Journal of Energy Security*, December 11, 2014, http://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=564:dont-get-used-to-cheap-oil&catid=126:kr&Itemid=395. Also see the projections of Persian Gulf contributions to global oil production out to 2040 in U.S. Energy Information Administration, *International Energy Outlook 2014*, (Washington, D. C.: EIA, September 2014), p. 31.
3. Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, Revised Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 230; The World Factbook (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency), continually updated, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>; Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 224.
4. Oil production statistics from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Iran," <http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.cfm?iso=IRN>; "Iraq," <http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.cfm?iso=IRQ>; and "Libya," <http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.cfm?iso=LBY>.
5. Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan, and Kenneth Schultz, "Fighting at Home, Fighting Abroad: How Civil Wars Lead to International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 4 (April 2008): pp. 479-506.
6. Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2008): pp. 215-233.
7. See James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars last So Much Longer Than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004), <http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/41/3/275.abstract>.
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10. Roy Licklider, "The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 3 (1995): pp. 681-690.
11. Office of Russian and European Analysis, *Balkan Battlegrounds* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 2002), especially pp. 395-396.
12. Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, (Princeton University Press, 2002); Caroline Hartzell & Matthew Hoddie, "Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Conflict Management," *U.S. Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (April 2003), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1540-5907.00022/full>; Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis," *U.S. Political Science Review*, 94, no. 4 (December 2000), <http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01241/WEB/IMAGES/INTERNAT.PDF>.
13. Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3, (Summer 1997), <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=173189>.

14. See Doyle and Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis."
15. Katherine Glassmyer & Nicholas Sambanis, "Rebel-Military Integration and Civil War Termination," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 3 (May 2008), <http://jpr.sagepub.com/content/45/3/365.abstract>.
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26. Author's interview with Saudi civil society leader, Washington, DC, April 2011.