

JULY 2013

AARON REESE

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 13

SECTARIAN AND REGIONAL CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST



*Cover Photo: Shattered storefronts, Aleppo, Syria. Photo by James Gordon, Los Angeles, California.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 13 | SECTARIAN AND REGIONAL CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST | REESE | JULY 2013

The first half of 2013 has demonstrated clearly that sectarian conflict is spreading in the Middle East. This conflict is a product of developments over the course of 2012, including Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's consolidation of power and the development of an armed opposition movement in Syria. A turning point, however, came this year with the Syrian opposition's loss of the strategic town of al-Qusayr in early June to regime forces backed by Lebanese Hezbollah. The intervention of this prominent Shi'a militant group has heightened the "sectarianization" of the conflict. Sectarian narratives provide an emotional rallying point for popular mobilization, and are easily leveraged by actors involved in the conflict to achieve their goals. The rise in sectarian violence sponsored by external actors poses an existential threat to these already-fragile states.

State weakness tends to encourage recourse to identities that do not align with the nation-state, such as sect, ethnicity, or tribe, to provide community. Sectarian conflict of the kind now witnessed is thus a symptom of political conflict rather than a cause. Left alone, however, it could become a cause of violence as groups strike preemptively against perceived threats to their communities or pursue revenge. Further violence then creates a vicious cycle of state weakness and perceived illegitimacy, which continues to lead citizens to feel less secure and to identify more with sub- and trans-national groups. Worsening violence and increasing polarization has led fighting to spill over from Syria into Lebanon, for example, as supporters of the Salafist Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir lashed out against Lebanese Army and Hezbollah. Further, the wider consequences of continued fighting, particularly the masses of refugees flooding into Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, will have destabilizing effects as these populations drain state coffers and test the ability of these states to maintain order. These effects will only worsen over time.

In Syria, the Assad regime has played upon the fears of minority groups to rally support. Shi'a militias from outside Syria, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi groups Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah, have defined their role as protecting holy sites like the mosque of Sayyeda Zeinab. On the other hand, Sunni and Salafist militant groups have used anti-Shi'a rhetoric and anti-Iranian sentiment to justify their own actions. With the repeated occurrence of sectarian massacres in Syria, both by pro-Assad militias and Salafist groups, these justifications risk the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The mainstream opposition, in the form of the Supreme Military Council, has defined their role in nationalist terms as a struggle for Syria. Devolution of this fight into communal violence threatens an already beleaguered civilian population.

In Iraq, Maliki's pursuit of power, overtly sectarian rhetoric, and utilization of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) for political ends has reinforced sectarian polarization. The Sunni insurgency against Coalition forces in Iraq was mostly quelled by the promise of political participation. Maliki's political and military targeting of Iraqi Sunnis, however, has fed Sunni perceptions that they are threatened and disenfranchised by the central government. The protest movement that erupted after Maliki's attempt to arrest former Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi has given voice to these concerns, and the deadly ISF raid on the Hawija protest camp only served to demonstrate the threat. Lack of confidence in the Iraqi state has led to diminishing faith in political processes, as evidenced by low voter turnout in some areas for the provincial elections.

The conflict has expanded beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria and has become increasingly regional in scope. Particularly in Syria, a number of external actors, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, have engaged in the fighting either directly or by providing funds or weapons. As a sign of the weakening of the state, Syria's borders have become increasingly porous, facilitating such flows of men and materiel. Displaced persons, too, have been driven across these borders. Iran has put forward an enormous amount of support, deploying advisors and launching a thorough resupply mission to keep its Arab ally afloat. It has also supported sectarian militias entering from Lebanon and Iraq. Lebanon and Iraq themselves have tried to avoid overt engagement, but non-state actors have repeatedly crossed these borders to fight. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have each separately funneled support to opposition groups, in addition to leading media campaigns to bolster regional support for the opposition. Each views the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to support its role as regional powers as well as to deal a blow to rival Iran. Turkey has also become a player, motivated in no small part by more than 500 miles of border that it shares with Syria. The battle for al-Qusayr exemplified the stakes for all these players, who have stepped up their involvement in the battle's aftermath and turned to focus on Aleppo. Intervening states and actors have staked their reputations on the outcome of these conflicts, and it is unlikely that they will back down from such high-profile support.

As sectarian violence spreads into Lebanon and even Egypt, it is clear that the consequences of such conflict will reach far beyond Syria and Iraq. A quick resolution is unlikely, but an increased understanding of the regional scope of these problems is an important step towards addressing them. The U.S. should not follow withdrawal from Iraq with disengagement from the region – productive efforts with regional allies are still possible and will be vital to preventing the further deterioration of an already bad situation. It should be very clear that increasing sectarian polarization and violence is in the interests neither of the U.S. nor its allies.

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 13

SECTARIAN AND REGIONAL CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Aaron Reese

In the early part of 2012, the Institute for the Study of War, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution undertook a war game designed to simulate a worsening of the Syrian conflict and the spillover effects of that crisis on neighboring countries. What was postulated as a hypothetical situation, gamed as occurring from August 2012–April 2013, in fact hewed quite closely to the way in which events eventually unfolded.

In Iraq, raids by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) on Sunni Arabs prompted an increase in anti-government sentiment and attacks on the ISF, while attacks by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) on Shi'a civilians rose. Iraq's provincial elections exacerbated these sectarian frictions. In Syria, the regime of Bashar al-Assad persisted in using military force to quell opposition, which remained resilient except in urban centers. Hezbollah was drawn into the conflict from Lebanon. The pessimistic "hypothetical" scenario posited at the war game in fact foresaw many of the trends of continued violence in Iraq and Syria and spillover from those states leading to a regional conflict.

Just over a year after the war game, the Syrian civil war continues to protract. In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has continued to centralize control around his office and has provoked a prolonged anti-government protest movement in predominantly Sunni Arab areas. Car bombs and summary executions appear to be on the rise in Iraq, suggesting a rise in AQI activity and a remobilization of Shi'a militias. Regional and transnational actors have found arenas in which they can seek to affect the outcome of these conflicts in their favors or compete for influence. Indeed, Syria and Iraq have become the battlefronts in a regional proxy war. For the United States, there appear to be few good options.

Taking a broader view, however, leads to the conclusion that in many ways U.S. regional policy has treated as compartmentalized what are in fact related issues. The drivers of instability in Iraq and Syria have common sources. First, both conflicts are exacerbated by the increased deployment of expressions of sectarian

identity for political ends. There is nothing inherent about conflict between Shi'a and Sunni, and reductive arguments that treat these differences as inevitable or immutable do little to advance an understanding of the situation. Yet these identities work conveniently to create an "us" and "them" to mobilize supporters more easily in politics or in conflict. Sectarian dynamics have been deployed by a variety of actors seeking to draw lines of support and contestation. Both Hezbollah and Shi'a groups in Iraq such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteous or AAH) have used religious shrines in Syria as an emotionally salient rallying cry to supporters. Prominent Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, on the other hand, has called his followers to war against the Syrian government to fight against "continued massacres to kill Sunnis."¹ These identities provide ready means for external actors to justify their involvement using inflammatory rhetoric.

The second driver of instability in both Iraq and Syria is the weakening of state institutions and the attendant decrease in public trust in state institutions. As succinctly stated by F. Gregory Gause, "the salience of sectarianism (and other sub-national identities, like tribalism and regionalism) rises as the power of the state declines."² As the Assad regime has lost capacity, both as a government whose credibility has evaporated in many areas and as a military force worn down by fighting, citizens can no longer rely on the state for protection. In Iraq, an already fractious government has been hampered by corruption and the perception that it fails to represent significant segments of the Iraqi population. The continuation of conflict in these areas may likely feed a vicious cycle in which states weaken while the actors playing upon sub-

national identities grow stronger.

The conflict has expanded beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria and has become increasingly regional in scope. This paper will look at how the Syria and Iraq conflicts have escalated, and how the Syria conflict has spilled over into the region. Numerous regional actors have used this situation to step in and compete to further their interests. Iran in particular has pushed hard against the potential loss of an important regional ally—both by increasing its support and encouragement of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and through the direct assistance, supply, and training of the Assad regime.³ It has committed extensively to a proxy war against its regional rivals, with the goal of maintaining strategic depth and influence with an Arab ally.⁴ The involvement of regional actors using sectarian identity for political purposes and inflaming an unconventional conflict, along with the outright sectarian mobilization currently occurring as of June 2013, represent a deeply troubling sign of things to come.

IRAQ

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Sunni Arabs had very little confidence in the new state. Sectarian identity was, in many ways, institutionalized in the recreation of Iraqi politics after the fall of the prior Baathist regime. Political power (or lack of power) and social dynamics reinforced cleavages around these identities.⁵ Sunni Arabs primarily feared that they would be left out of government, in the same way that the government of Saddam Hussein had left out most Shi'a Arabs. De-Baathification, an attempt to purge Iraqi politics of those who had been active in Hussein's regime, largely targeted Sunnis. It served as a convenient tool by which Shi'a could target political opponents. De-Baathification, along with other issues that would define the nature of the Iraqi state, proved to be highly contentious during the protracted period of negotiations over the writing of a new constitution. The document was ratified by a national referendum, despite "no" votes from overwhelming majorities in Sunni-majority Anbar and Salah ad-Din provinces. This early experience is illustrative of the 'Catch-22' facing Iraq's Sunni Arab minority: there is little belief that the government is

representative or responsive to its needs, which leads them to boycott politics. Boycotting, however, strips that community of what little political influence and patronage it has in the political competition for power and resources.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has used this paradox to his advantage, explicitly pursuing a majoritarian government. Maliki's consolidation of power across the civil and security arenas was highly visible in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2010 parliamentary elections. As Iraq emerged from the 2006 crisis period that saw intense intersectarian violence, non-sectarian parties seemed to have an advantage. The Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiyya) emerged as a viable cross-sectarian contender in national elections, headed by secularist Shi'a leader Ayad Allawi but populated primarily by Sunni Arab political leaders. Political rivals targeted the alliance as a sectarian Sunni coalition before the 2010 parliamentary elections. The Maliki-influenced de-Baathification commission (the Accountability and Justice Commission or AJC) disqualified nearly 500 candidates from running, the vast majority of them Sunnis, although this ruling was later reversed. Iraqiyya managed nevertheless to win the most seats in the elections. Maliki, however, used a favorable ruling by the judiciary to assemble a near-majoritarian government by gathering a larger post-election coalition, leaving Iraqiyya with a handful of positions, many of them ill-defined and lacking in real power. After being outmaneuvered, Iraqiyya "found itself a junior partner in a national unity government that, while paying lip service to the concept of ethnosectarian balance, was dominated by Maliki."⁶ Following his electoral success in 2010, Maliki began consolidating power in earnest, primarily along sectarian lines to reward members of his State of Law Alliance and his Dawa party in particular.

Maliki has shown a willingness to use his position to harass and arrest political rivals.⁷ He established of an alternate chain of command in 2006, coordinated by the extra-constitutional "Office of the Commander in Chief" (OCINC), which has control over elite special forces units and the regional operations commands. This command has given him a great degree of leeway

in deploying military forces without going through the Ministry of Defense. Immediately following the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, Maliki staged a high-profile raid and arrest attempt on Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a prominent Sunni leader, accusing him of terrorism. Hashemi was forced to flee the country and he was sentenced to death in absentia.

Maliki has invested much effort in building a strong premiership, wielding an extensive network of patronage that extends over supposedly independent institutions. He has established a high degree of influence over the judiciary, the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC), the Central Bank of Iraq, and the Integrity Commission. He has stacked these bodies with loyalists, and used favorable rulings to “check his political rivals and shield his political allies.”⁸ Through appointments made without parliamentary approval and rulings by the judiciary in his favor, the Maliki regime increasingly appears to be a Shi’a government that is unresponsive to the needs and demands of Sunni-majority provinces. The political fractures in Iraq’s parliament, along with widespread corruption, have resulted in a body that is unable to check the power-plays emanating from the Prime Minister’s office. Many representatives seldom attend parliament, allowing quorum-preventing boycotts to derail legislation frequently, and Maliki has encouraged a lack of action by encouraging a ruling that laws can only be proposed by his cabinet.⁹ Maliki himself expressed a desire for a “majority [Shi’a] government” in the lead-up to recent provincial elections.¹⁰

Maliki’s consolidation of power has produced a backlash on the part of Iraqi Sunnis who continue to distrust government, and it has sparked a broad Sunni protest movement. Prominent Sunni representatives in government prevaricated on how to respond to Maliki’s moves in 2012, boycotting cabinet meetings and then returning, and launching a failed bid for a no-confidence vote. Maliki pushed too far in his use of security forces against political rivals by raiding the home of Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi in December 2012, igniting a self-identifying Sunni protest movement focused around concerns over targeting of Sunnis.¹¹ This Sunni political countertrend carries with it the possibility for renewed sectarian violence.

Whereas the disparate political representatives of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs in the past have found it difficult to cohere around anything other than their opposition to Maliki, the arrest attempt against the ostensibly moderate, secular, and technocratic Issawi provided a highly visible rallying symbol of Maliki’s sectarian targeting. Many Sunnis have long felt marginalized within Iraq, pointing to poor provision of services and corruption as chief complaints.¹² With Iraqi Sunnis perceiving that security forces were targeting their representatives on sectarian grounds, people turned out in the tens of thousands to protest, setting up camps for six months in the Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala, and more sporadically in Sunni areas of Kirkuk and Baghdad. These protests were a departure from previous demonstrations relating to provision of services in that they focused more on Sunni-specific demands. Among the protestors’ demands were calls to make the judiciary more independent, to end de-Baathification, and to freeze and repeal both Article 4 of the Counterterrorism Law and the use of secret informants to arrest and try suspects.¹³ These demands reflected a deep disbelief that the government was working towards the best interests of the Sunni communities. Saleh al-Mutlaq, the Sunni Deputy Prime Minister whom many saw as co-opted by the Maliki government, was pelted with rocks as he attempted to address protestors in Ramadi, emblematic of popular distaste for collaboration with Maliki.¹⁴

In response to these protests, Maliki has seemed to double-down on a security-first strategy to deal with protestors. In January, rock-throwing protestors in Anbar spurred the ISF to fire on the crowds, killing several protestors.¹⁵ Maliki, along with protest leaders, worked to de-escalate the situation. Maliki delayed the provincial elections in Anbar and Ninewa, citing security concerns, but in doing so exacerbated the impression that he was marginalizing Sunni political representation. The protest camps continued to attract moderate and extremist elements. An ISF raid in April on a protest site in Hawija with a large militant presence resulted in clashes leaving over 200 dead.¹⁶ Maliki followed this move by deploying ISF to other protest sites as well.¹⁷ In response, tribal leaders announced the formation of a “tribal army” to defend Sunni

areas.¹⁸ According to protest leader Qusay al-Zain, the mobilization was intended to “defend the honor, freedom, and dignity of the ‘ahl al-sunna’ [Sunnis] from Maliki and his militias.”¹⁹ Although negotiations between some protestors and political figures have largely prevented the outbreak of out-right conflict, a heightened level of sectarian violence has persisted.

Maliki’s actions to marginalize Sunni leaders has fed into broader a regional narrative about the targeting of Sunnis that cites Syria as well as Iraq. One prominent protest leader, Said al-Lafi, spoke at a meeting in Qatar on May 31, 2013, saying that “our revolution in Iraq is an extension of the one in Syria” and leading a chant that “Sunni blood is one.”²⁰ A feeling of marginalization adds to the appeal of militant organizations such as the neo-Baathist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandiya (JRTN). Attack patterns in Kirkuk and Ninewa provinces in June 2013, as well as targeted killings in Mosul, point to insurgent mobilization against the ISF, particularly federal police, stationed in the area.²¹ Furthermore, the broad spread and high number of attacks bearing the hallmarks of AQI suggests that this group is receiving assistance and funding sufficient to support such sustained and complex activity. Widening activity by Sunni militant groups will tend to encourage a concomitant mobilization of Shi’a militias.

Mobilization of sectarian and ethnic groups

Maliki has stoked sectarian fears of a Baathist resurgence to rally support and prevent Shi’a groups from breaking away.²² His consolidation of power has occurred contemporaneously with the re-emergence of militant Shi’a groups, which he has encouraged. This includes the re-emergence of AAH, a Shi’a militant organization closely affiliated with Iran. AAH has been supportive of Maliki, forming a counterweight to the Sadrist Trend, which has at times broken with the Prime Minister.²³ Although Maliki has not made official pronouncements about the group, he has been friendly with AAH, and its leader, Qais al-Khazali, publicly backed Maliki in the face of a Sadrist push for a no-confidence vote.²⁴ In a sign of their increased legitimacy, members of parliament have appeared at AAH rallies.²⁵

AAH began to mobilize in Baghdad in May 2013, and it has since conducted violent activity. Qais al-Khazali implicitly stated in a May 4 rally that AAH was working with the support of Iran.²⁶ Khazali threatened to pursue those working in conjunction with “regional agendas,” referring implicitly to Saudi Arabian and Qatari support for the Iraqi and Syrian Sunni opposition movements. AAH has followed a strategy similar to that of Lebanese Hezbollah, establishing itself as a militant, political, and social organization all at once.²⁷ As AQI has stepped up its spectacular car-bomb attacks on Shi’a neighborhoods and religious sites, Shi’a militias have remobilized and resumed their previous tactics of assassinations, morality killings, and executions.²⁸ In many cases, these tactics have been directed against other Shi’a groups—there is certainly not a unity of vision, and conflict has not fallen along only sectarian lines. The rivalry between AAH and the Sadrist Trend is a fight for political influence within Iraq.²⁹

AAH has not contained itself to Iraq, however. Fighters from AAH have appeared in Syria as part of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB), fighting on the side of the Assad regime.³⁰ One AAH member, Jaafar Athab, is known to have died in Hama in early 2012, and the leadership of AAH openly confirmed their involvement in the Syrian conflict in April 2013.³¹ Tellingly, they frame their involvement in terms of the protection of the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab in Damascus, a holy site for Shi’a.³² Hezbollah has also framed its involvement in the Syrian conflict in terms of protecting Shi’a holy places, beginning to overtly announce its direct intervention in Syria in May 2013.³³ These groups warn that damage to the shrine could ignite a much broader conflict, specifically invoking the specter of 2006 Iraq, in which the destruction of the Imam al-Askari mosque in Samarra touched off outright sectarian war. Such justifications for involvement have served to draw in foreign fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere on the side of the Syrian government, as they portray threats to a key religious symbol.

Ethnic as well as sectarian tensions threaten the region’s stability. Maliki’s control over the ISF may not be able to prevent a widening cycle of inter-sectarian and inter-ethnic violence. The ISF has also clashed with Kurds

along Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs), spurred by disagreements over security control over Kurdish areas. In particular, Maliki's establishment of the Tigris Operations Command, covering disputed territories that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) wishes to incorporate, touched off a ten-day standoff in November 2012 between the ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga security forces.³⁴ The KRG has pushed assiduously for autonomy in the Iraqi federal system, and relations between Kurds and Arabs have remained fraught in disputed areas. Maliki attempted to use a brigade with a majority of Kurds in leadership and cadre, the 16th Brigade of the 4th Iraqi Army Division (known as the Suleimaniyah Brigade), to retake the town of Suleiman Beg after it was captured by gunmen in the wake of the Hawija crisis. Reluctant to raise ethnic tensions in the area and having already suffered losses from attacks, the unit refused to re-enter the town—negotiations between tribal leaders and the ISF were required to end the standoff.³⁵ As a result of this mutiny, the 16th Brigade was dissolved, with 600 of its officers and personnel referred to courts for “disobeying orders.”³⁶ If they remain where they are and are absorbed into the Peshmerga as has been suggested, it will add to the area of Peshmerga security control.³⁷ With tensions in these areas high, the ISF has not been effective in quelling attacks.

This cycle of political violence is the outcome of a broad failure of all groups in Iraq to cohere around an agreed-upon vision for an Iraqi state. Militant groups such as AQI and JRTN thrive in such environments, a rich recruiting ground among those disenchanting by the political process and feeling threatened. Waves of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) across Iraq since March 2013 have pointed to a sharp rise in AQI activity. With ISF apparently unable to contain the spread of this violence, Shi'a groups have mobilized themselves for defense. Groups that view the conflict through a sectarian lens have no shortage of recent events at which to point in order to mobilize their supporters, and Iraqi civilians pay a heavy price as a result.

SYRIA

Syria's insurgents have become fully fledged participants in a civil war. From its beginnings as a protest movement and then an array of local committees protecting their villages and cities, the armed opposition has evolved into a somewhat more organized rebellion, with brigades operating across multiple fronts and coordinating with each other. Syria has seen a worsening security situation crystallize along distinct battle lines. From the first provincial-level military structures under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the opposition worked to establish control over rural areas and carve out “de facto safe zones.”³⁸ After the failure of the UN-brokered ceasefire from mid-April to mid-May of 2012, rebels captured increasing amounts of territory in the North and in some urban areas before reaching what now appears to be a near-stalemate. Assad had insufficient forces to defeat the opposition decisively in 2012 and focused instead on the areas near Homs. With the June 2013 fall of al-Qusayr to a combined Syrian and Hezbollah effort, the regime appears to have continued targeting this strategic terrain that permits the flow of weapons from Lebanon.³⁹ Assad is transitioning from a counter-insurgency strategy to that of fighting a civil war. Although he no longer has territorial control over the whole state, he seems to believe he can regain it by forcing a decisive battle in Aleppo.

The crisis in Syria carries with it the drivers of regional destabilization. Once Assad lost control over the state within its borders, a number of other actors in the region entered the civil war. Key players have defined their role along sectarian lines as a means of justifying their involvement. Assad has long relied on his Arab nationalist credentials to portray himself as the defender of a secular Syria, including the minority populations of Christians, Druze, and others.⁴⁰ The backing of Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, is due as much to strategic interests as to religious affiliation. Yet as the conflict has protracted, sectarian identification has played an increasing role. Assad has routinely described opponents as “jihadists” and “takfiris [extremist Sunnis]”, suggested rebels' links to al-Qaeda, and warned of dire consequences if the regime should fall.⁴¹ “The regime's message to the Alawi community is simple:

‘If we die, you will die with us.’”⁴² Such warnings serve to draw minority communities closer to the regime for protection.

Rhetoric on both sides of the Syrian conflict refers often to atrocities and sectarian massacres, and such there has been no shortage of such violence on which to draw. This has included massacres of Sunnis by regime militias, and of Alawites and Shi’a by Sunni rebels. Shabiha paramilitaries fighting for the regime have been particularly brutal. Although indiscriminant killing has been a feature of the civil war, reports of massacres such as the one in Houla in May 2012 of 108 people, mostly civilians including women and children, continue to shock. Like Houla, a massacre a month later in Qubair saw the execution-style killings of civilians.⁴³ The visibly sectarian nature of these killings is self-reinforcing. Following government bombardment of their village in June 2012, Sunnis in Latakia voiced their fears that “the Alawites will launch an attack” with one opposition figure saying “the sectarian war is about to start.”⁴⁴ May of 2013 saw yet more massacre in the towns of Bayda and Baniyas, with Alawite gunmen storming a Sunni village and murdering the inhabitants.⁴⁵ In this case, an Alawite religious leader spoke favorably of “cleans[ing] Baniyas of the traitors.”⁴⁶ Whether there is a cold logic to the perpetration of these atrocities, seeking to reinforce support or terrorize populations into submission, the sense of communal threat they create is very real and makes further atrocities more likely—and reconciliation less so.

The opposition, too, has committed atrocities and massacres: “Monthly instances of assassinations, executions, and kidnappings by rebels skyrocketed in February 2012 and doubled again between March and April.”⁴⁷ These include the murders of captured regime soldiers or paramilitaries, and the execution of suspected informants. There have also been killings of Shi’a civilians. In a grisly demonstration, Salafist rebels posted a video online showing the bodies of massacred Shi’a in Hatla.⁴⁸ A militant featured in the video called them “dogs,” and threatened a similar fate for other Shi’a. Kuwaiti cleric Shafi al-Ajmi spoke from Kuwait in support of the attack, calling it retribution for recent fighting in Qusayr.⁴⁹ In May, rebel fighter Khalid al-

Hamad filmed himself cutting out the organs of a deceased regime soldier, justifying it as “eye for an eye” revenge against regime forces.⁵⁰ Religious sites have also been targeted specifically—a recent video purports to show a Shi’a mosque burned down by rebels near Jisr al-Shughor in Aleppo province.⁵¹

Iran has not stood idly by at the prospect of losing an important ally in the region. It has undertaken direct resupply of the Assad regime as well as assisting in training missions. The Iranian regime’s discourse has primarily emphasized the need for security while decrying the intervention of outside powers in the crisis.⁵² At the same time, it has continued training missions for Assad’s Jaysh al-Shaabi militia, and reportedly requested fighters from the Iraqi Shi’a militias AAH and Kata’ib Hezbollah to join in the fighting.⁵³ The death of senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force senior commander Hassan Shateri near Damascus is indicative of the level of commitment to this strategic ally.⁵⁴ This support, particularly the direct intervention of Lebanese Hezbollah, lent increased momentum to the Assad regime that helped it to push opposition forces out of the strategic town of al-Qusayr.⁵⁵

The battle for al-Qusayr represents a significant inflection point in the intensity of sectarian rhetoric from outside of Syria. Increasingly, rhetoric has pushed for sectarian retribution; Sunni scholars in the region have directly blamed Iran and Hezbollah for the turn in discourse.⁵⁶ Saudi cleric Abdulaziz al-Shaikh called in June for the punishment of the “repulsive sectarian group.”⁵⁷ Influential Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has a popular TV show on Al-Jazeera, joined al-Shaikh in calling for jihad in Syria, saying that the Iranians want “continued massacres to kill Sunnis.”⁵⁸ Others have joined in, including two other prominent clerics, Egyptian Salafi Mohammed Hassan and Mohammad Alrefe, who have called jihad an obligation on Muslims and specifically citing the arrival of the “rejectionists” (Shi’a) in the Levant as a turning point.⁵⁹ At the time of writing, this call to jihad is already having an impact. A video posted to YouTube announced the formation in Lebanon of the “Beqaa Battalion” to fight against Hezbollah “following the call for jihad in Syria made by the Ulamas.”⁶⁰ Reports

have also indicated new inflows of foreign fighters from Egypt and Kuwait, motivated by these recent rulings.⁶¹ The sectarian divide in Syria has clearly become part of the discussion, with the Arabic edition of al-Jazeera's site asking in a poll "who is responsible for turning the Syrian revolution into a sectarian crisis?" and providing two possible answers: Shi'a or Sunni. Most respondents answered "Shi'a."⁶²

Not every Sunni cleric has repeated the call to fight in Syria post-Qusayr. Salman al-Ouda, a prominent Saudi cleric, renewed a warning against traveling to Syria, advising Muslims to support the rebels with money but to "leave the Syrian issue to the Syrians."⁶³ The largest coalition of opposition forces, the Supreme Military Command (SMC), is comprised of units of varying levels of religiosity from secularist to Salafist. Their common goal is to remove a dictator that they see as showing a cold willingness to use artillery, airstrikes, and overwhelming force against civilian populations. Among these units, however, money pouring in from the Gulf has disproportionately armed groups deploying religious rhetoric. With security uncertain, and many areas trading hands between brigades or between the opposition and the regime, confidence in the state (or para-state) to provide for daily needs is at a low ebb. After the provincial capital of al-Raqqa was captured in mid-March 2013 by rebel groups, including the Salafist and jihadist groups Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Wahda al-Tahrir al-Islamiyya, and Jabhat Nusra (JN), much attention was paid to the governing institutions that were subsequently established. A sharia court was established to administer Islamic law in the city, but faced large demonstrations in protest and was forced to close.⁶⁴ This demonstrates that even when Syrians cannot turn to the state, they do not automatically accept new forces attempting to impose order.

The conflict in Syria is focused around control over the state, and the broad frame is not a sectarian one. Yet it would be a mistake to ignore the widening activity—whether it is massacres, mobilization, or marketing—by actors in the conflict explicitly self-identifying as sectarian. The actions of minority groups, including the Syrian Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG), are important: how they define the conflict will affect

how the conflict is ultimately resolved. Taking this into account will be important for the international community in monitoring for war crimes, dealing with refugees, and helping to end the violence.

LOSS OF CONTROL OVER BORDERS

A major indicator of state weakness is the increasing opacity of borders – one of the most important functions of the state is to maintain control over who and what enters its territories. Borders in the region have always been porous, especially in the cases of broad swathes of desert that are difficult to control. Particularly in Syria, however, nominal control over borders has become even less clear in the last year. Turkey has openly supported rebel groups with the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime. With rebels controlling areas of the north, the border with Turkey has provided routes for arms and reinforcements to flow to opposition groups. Turkey also provided a route for Russian resupply of the Syrian regime; until Turkey banned civilian overflights by Syrian planes, Turkish airspace may have been used to ferry munitions from Russia bound for Syria.⁶⁵ Violence has crossed this border in the other direction, as well: a Turkish reconnaissance jet was shot down over the Mediterranean by the Syrian military after allegedly crossing into Syrian airspace.⁶⁶ Syrian intelligence has also been accused of links to groups that have detonated bombs in Turkish border towns, possibly as revenge for Turkish involvement.⁶⁷

In both Iraq and Syria, Kurdish areas along the northern borders operate with a high degree of autonomy. In Iraq, through the KRG, the Turkish border provides an important source of trade—although who controls that border (and receives revenue from the goods flowing across it) has been a constant source of dispute.⁶⁸ In Syria, the regime withdrew its forces from most of the Kurdish regions in July 2012, ceding control of that border. Although intra-Kurdish disputes have arisen, Syrian Kurds in this area have pushed for autonomy from, and have clashed with, both the regime and Arab opposition groups.⁶⁹ The recent truce between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and Turkey is a positive step towards reducing Kurdish violence against southeastern Turkey and the Turkish military, with

the withdrawal of thousands of fighters into Iraq.⁷⁰ Yet this movement was taken without consulting the Iraqi government, which ostensibly has oversight over that border, and it strengthens the PKK in Iraq.⁷¹ There has also been cooperation between Kurds in Iraq and Syria, although this cooperation reflects to some extent the internal divisions of Kurdish parties: the PKK has worked with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, while KRG President Massoud Barzani has worked with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria, an alliance of 15 Syrian Kurdish parties.⁷² In short, the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria are developing borders of their own independent of the states in which they are situated, creating opportunities for a greater Kurdistan that are tempered by the political animosity of Kurdish factions and the diplomacy of the Turkish state.

The Lebanese border with Syria has proven equally permeable. Hezbollah has routinely crossed back and forth, using the border to transfer materiel and reinforce regime forces to decisive effect in the June battle for al-Qusayr.⁷³ The Syrian military has fired into Lebanon, attacking the town of Arsal with rockets fired from a helicopter.⁷⁴ Syrian rebels have also launched cross-border rocket attacks, striking across the border into the Hezbollah bastion of Hermel.⁷⁵ Rebel groups have used this border to ferry arms, including weapons smuggled via ship from Libya through the port of Tripoli in northern Lebanon.⁷⁶ The Lebanese Armed Forces remain weak and unable to enforce solid control over the border, especially in areas dominated by Hezbollah.

Syria's southern border with Israel has also seen cross-border violence. Israel has fired missiles into and around Damascus, targeting what it claimed were weapons intended for Hezbollah.⁷⁷ The Israel Defense Force (IDF) also destroyed a Syrian military outpost after coming under fire.⁷⁸ In March 2013, rebels also briefly took as hostages members of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) that is meant to preserve separation between Syria and Israel.⁷⁹ Multiple countries have withdrawn their soldiers from UNDOF in response to the worsening security situation – the force was diminished by the withdrawal of Japanese, Croatian, and Austrian troops, with Austrian troops alone accounting for nearly a third

of the total deployment.⁸⁰ Fighting along the Golan in May and June has increased concerns of spillover and instability—rebel forces briefly captured a border checkpoint in Quneitra before being repelled by regime units.⁸¹ The Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1973, serves as a buffer for Israel against Syria, as the two states never formally signed a peace treaty to end the fighting. Fighting here puts the integrity of this border, maintained by international peacekeeping forces and sovereign nations, at risk.

Along the Syrian border with Iraq, fighters have transited back and forth, and control over border checkpoints has changed hands. Only the southern al-Waleed/at-Tanf crossing remains in regime control after the Abu Kamal/al-Qaim crossing was taken in September 2012 and the Yaarabiya/Rabia crossing in the north was captured on March 2, 2013.⁸² Two days after fleeing the Rabia crossing into Iraq, Syrian troops returning to Syria were ambushed and killed by AQI.⁸³ The loss of overland crossings forced the Assad regime to rely increasingly on cargo flights for resupply, and Iraq has permitted Iranian aircraft to use its airspace to transfer supplies to the Syrian regime.⁸⁴

Jordan has, to some extent, served as a breakwater for violence along Syria's borders; it has not been prone to the same level of clashes as other countries. Concerns over security have led to a U.S. presence in the country, stationing fighter jets and batteries of Patriot missiles for defensive purposes.⁸⁵ Reports indicate that Jordn's border has been used as a crossing point for weapons directed to the opposition, claims that the Jordanian government denies.⁸⁶ Jordan's largest problem, however, is that of legal and illegal crossing points for refugees. Jordan absorbed countless numbers of refugees fleeing violence in Iraq over the course of that country's conflict, and concerns have mounted about the ability of the Hashemite Kingdom to deal with a new influx of Syrians displaced by the ongoing civil war. Jordan is not as wealthy as its nearby Gulf neighbors, and nearly half a million refugees from Syria severely strains its resources—in August 2012 Jordan requested \$700 million in aid, but pledges have not kept up with demand.⁸⁷ Already facing high unemployment, competition over jobs and the depletion of resources, particularly water, threaten

to destabilize Jordan as it struggles to keep up with this expanding population.⁸⁸ These concerns seem to have led to the de facto closure of unofficial crossings from Syria and limits to official crossings in order to slow this flow of migration.⁸⁹

REGIONALIZATION OF CONFLICT

As footage of violence in Syria spread to other Arab countries and around the world in 2011, protests against the Syrian regime began to occur in other Arab capitals, including at Tahrir Square in Cairo. The Arab League put forward plans for ceasefires and dialogues on reform, but after little was accomplished they voted to suspend Syria's membership.⁹⁰ Only Yemen and Lebanon voted against the proposal, while Iraq abstained. At that time, the vote represented a desire to take a position against Assad without inviting foreign military intervention. In many cases, including that of Qatar, these countries had previously warm relations with Syria, which played host to Hamas and was a visible point of resistance to Israel in the region.⁹¹ In the wake of the Arab Spring, however, turning against a dictator had a level of popular appeal.

The security vacuum in Syria has provided a proving ground for armed groups to carry out conflict, with AQI and JN drawing Sunni militants into Syria to fight against the regime. Bill Clinton described Syria as turning into 1980s Afghanistan.⁹² Instead of a fight against a communist government, however, regional powers are backing sectarian groups in a proxy war between Iran and its Gulf rivals. Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular have backed Sunni Islamist rebel groups, which they see as more closely aligned with their ideological and geostrategic interests.⁹³ Religious donors from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have channeled their funds towards the Salafist, jihadist, and conservative elements within the opposition.⁹⁴ The variety of groups making up the armed opposition has provided a plethora of ways for outside funding to make its way to groups inside Syria; some groups have even nominally "split," creating ostensibly separate groups explicitly for the purpose of garnering multiple sources of funding.⁹⁵ Iran, meanwhile, is backing Assad and Hezbollah, ferrying supplies and providing training in order to preserve its strategic anchor in the Levant.⁹⁶ Iraqi AFAB militia

members fighting for the government seem to view the conflict similarly, as a battle against Gulf influence, and have posted images online of themselves stepping on names "Saudi, Qatar, the Gulf" written under a Star of David.⁹⁷ Former president of the Syrian National Coalition Moaz al-Khatib has been particularly vocal about the detrimental effects of Qatari and Saudi aid being channeled to individual groups instead of to the broader coalition of rebels. Khatib's Facebook post on June 13, 2013 accused the Gulf countries of turning the Syria crisis into a fight against the "Iranian bogeyman," ridding themselves of jihadists and fighting Hezbollah at the same time.⁹⁸

In Saudi and Qatari cases, both of these countries have used their widely popular media organizations, Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera respectively, to cover the conflict extensively. Many view this coverage as being heavily tilted in favor of the rebels.⁹⁹ Such highly visible and widespread documentation of the conflict, portraying rebel groups favorably while downplaying reports of extremist groups in Syria, may have helped contribute to the enormous quantity of money funneled from Qatar and Saudi Arabia to a variety of opposition groups. Often, this aid was sent in as part of a competition for influence, which each country holding competing summits for rebel leaders.¹⁰⁰ Although agreements have helped to tighten the coordination of this aid, wealthy individuals have directed money directly to units of choice.¹⁰¹

Unsurprisingly, as the conflict has worsened, regional powers have become increasingly proactive about advancing their interests, be they regional power, stability, or prestige. It is likely that some combination of these interests plays a role for the major three parties involved on the side of the opposition, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Turkey's concerns are for stability along its long border with Syria, and with huge inflows of refugees. It has hosted the Syrian opposition, and provides a strategic point of entry to rebel-controlled parts of Syria. In areas where state control has weakened, as described above, Kurdish groups along the border have also played an increasingly important role. Turkey's peace agreement in May 2013 with the PKK likely serves to reduce the number of problems along its borders to

deal with at one time. This frees up thousands of armed Kurdish militiamen who could theoretically reinforce the PYD in Syria.¹⁰²

Saudi Arabia in particular would like to throw its weight against Iran by fighting Iran's Arab proxies. Former Saudi intelligence head Prince Turki bin Faisal called Iran a "paper tiger, but one with steel claws. I am talking about [Iranian proxy] Hezbollah..." Saudi Arabia has openly stated that it aims to overthrow the Assad regime.¹⁰³ Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar generally support similar entities and seek the same outcome in Syria, the two have competed for power and influence. Action in Syria functions both as a means to demonstrate action to domestic audiences, who see the bloodshed in Syria as emotionally salient, and to demonstrate leadership regionally. This competition caused much stalling before stronger attempts were made at unifying their funding efforts.¹⁰⁴

Although Qatar's relations with Iran have worsened in recent years, it is involved in Syria mainly to increase its regional prestige.¹⁰⁵ Qatar has previously launched a number of high visibility diplomacy efforts, and the tiny state has spent prodigiously to establish itself as a key player in the arena of Arab foreign policy, bringing it into competition with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁶ Qatar has also oriented its support ideologically, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamist groups elsewhere in the region, and providing an office for the Afghan Taliban in Doha. This support has tended to bolster groups under the umbrella of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) over more moderate, secular rebel organizations.¹⁰⁷ The peaceful transfer of power from Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the architect of Qatar's ascent to regional prominence, to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad is unlikely to change Qatari policy dramatically, although it may herald greater cooperation with the Saudis.¹⁰⁸

The position of the United Arab Emirates reflects its role as a trade hub – it has avoided taking a strong stance one way or the other, and has largely offered humanitarian and diplomatic assistance.¹⁰⁹ Bashar al-Assad's sister, Bushra, sought refuge in Dubai with her children, and a number of other regime-linked Syrian

businessmen have fled there as well.¹¹⁰ The U.A.E. has called for a "non-sectarian" solution to the violence, and it has a clear animosity towards Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular—it accuses these groups of seeking to overturn Gulf monarchies.¹¹¹ The U.A.E. will be impacted significantly, however, by the ongoing conflict – stability is better for business, and markets have recently dipped sharply in response to the deteriorating regional situation.¹¹²

The beleaguered Lebanese state would likely prefer not to be involved, as the tensions surrounding the Syrian conflict threaten to exacerbate internal divisions between the very strong Hezbollah and its allies, and the March 14 coalition that opposes it. The LAF does not have the wherewithal to secure its borders and prevent Hezbollah from intervening on the side of the Syrian regime, however. Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict may have cost them support domestically, but they are making up for it with increased recruitment of Shi'a fighters. Clashes inside Lebanon demonstrate the spillover effect of Syrian violence on Lebanon, as supporters of the extremist Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir clashed with LAF troops near Sidon. Assir's headquarters were captured after fighting that left dozens dead, and the LAF lost multiple vehicles.¹¹³ Assir has accused the LAF of helping Hezbollah, and has been a vocal opponent of the Assad regime in Lebanon. Early reports seem to indicate that Hezbollah was indeed involved in the fighting on the side of LAF, and that deployments may have targeted the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh.¹¹⁴

Israel's concerns largely relate to security and stability along its northern border. In particular, Israel has used military force to prevent weapons transfers to Hezbollah. It sees that if Iran loses Syria as a strategic ally and counterweight, Tehran will seek to strengthen Hezbollah, possibly even transferring "game-changing" weapons such as improved missiles and chemical weapons.¹¹⁵ Israel has clearly indicated that it will not hesitate to launch further attacks, including pre-emptive strikes to prevent Hezbollah from gaining these capabilities.

Following Syria's suspension from the Arab League, the barriers to "entry" into the ongoing conflict have been greatly reduced. With very little preventing cross-border movement of men and materiel, the pattern has been one of increasing involvement of other states and actors based in those states. Each actor has pursued its interests differently: Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have made open, official actions towards aiding the rebels. Such official imprimatur encourages private citizens and groups to contribute or participate in their own ways. Further, the seemingly official approval of states such as Egypt will lead to more fighters joining the conflict. Iraq has more openly sided with the Syrian regime, and, with encouragement from the backing of Iran, Shi'a militants and other fighters have entered the conflict to prop up Assad. All of these states and groups are already heavily invested in the outcome. This sunk cost will only encourage deeper involvement in more and more direct ways unless a major shift occurs.

CONCLUSION

Syria and Iraq have become the battlefronts for a regional conflict that is marked by an increase in sectarian rhetoric and violence. Each of the states discussed above has an interest in seeking a resolution to the conflict. The states intervening most actively have staked their reputations on the outcome of the conflict. It will thus be difficult for them to back down from what has become a fight polarized along sectarian lines. Deteriorating security in both Syria and Iraq will tend to reinforce this propensity to dig in their heels. The Syrian conflict in particular is no longer a fight between regime and opposition—it now involves a multitude of state and non-state actors.

There are very few stabilizing trends at this point, assuming that Maliki in Iraq and Assad in Syria continue to pursue the same strategies that have brought the region into crisis. Maliki could make significant concessions on Article 4 of the Counterterrorism Law and make further changes to de-Baathification procedures to appease protestors, and strike a governing bargain with key Sunni figures such as Parliamentary Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi and former Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi after dropping charges against the former. For the Iraqi

crisis to de-escalate, Iraqi Sunnis must have a voice in politics in order to achieve results without resorting to extra-political means; this, however, will require the tempering of their leaders' maximalist demands and increasingly inflammatory rhetoric. Lacking this sense, the insurgency will likely regain both active and passive support. In Syria, Assad could accept a grand bargain that leads to him agreeing not to run in the 2014 presidential elections. The opposition will not agree to any scenario that leaves Assad in power, and hopes of a negotiated settlement appear slim.

Many factors suggest that violence and regional spillover will increase in the coming year. Militia mobilization has led to attack patterns in Iraq reminiscent of 2006, although at a lower level, with waves of VBIEDs exploding on a regular basis throughout the country. Foreign fighters continue to pour into Syria and there is unfettered foreign involvement on both sides. The most dangerous scenario in this context is one in which a proxy conflict becomes a direct war. Although the report itself it is not credible, the mere fact of the wide circulation of rumors that Iran might be sending 4,000 troops to directly fight on the side of Assad's military is illustrative of this concern.¹¹⁶ If Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or other countries that have openly backed the rebels were to send in troops of their own, this would represent the most serious possible escalation of the Syrian conflict: a direct fight between Gulf countries using Syria as the battleground. Such a conflict would be difficult to contain.

More likely seems to be a scenario in which stalemate persists between the two sides of the Syrian conflict. Fighting will continue, but local governance would be administered to maintain the most basic level of functioning in both regime- and rebel-held areas. However, enormous refugee flows into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries will be a continuing source of instability, especially as the conflict protracts longer. Such a protracted conflict will drain the resources of Iran and Hezbollah, but will not lead conclusively to a resolution. Sectarian rhetoric has already escalated, and this is likely to inflame tensions beyond Iraq and Syria: Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and in Bahrain have been engaged in long-running

protest movements since the Arab Spring.

President Clinton's Afghanistan analogy may be extended in another way: one consequence of protracted fighting is a large population of people displaced for extended periods of time. Such populations are in a highly vulnerable position and are prime targets for radicalization. There already appears to be a desire to return to fight, with some refugees reported to have voluntarily repatriating themselves to join in the fighting.¹¹⁷ The level of discontent with possible outcomes means that even if the insurgency ends, a level of limited terrorist activity is possible.

The U.S. must pursue a regional strategy, not just a Syria-centric or Iran-centric strategy. These issues are inter-related, and must be treated as such—along with recognition that the United States is not the only actor interested in or able to pursue a favorable outcome. Sectarian conflict of the kind we are now witnessing is a symptom of a political conflict rather than a cause. Left alone, however, it could become a cause of violence between state- and non-state actors. The situation will only further deteriorate—a vicious cycle of state weakness will continue to lead citizens to identify more along sub- and trans-national lines.

To attempt to counter sectarian rhetoric, the U.S. should openly condemn its use and should encourage allies in the Gulf, along with Turkey and Egypt, to do the same. Insofar as is possible, the U.S. should avoid providing aid and should encourage allies to also avoid providing aid, particularly lethal aid, to groups that openly deploy sectarian justifications for engaging in violence. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been actively involved in supporting rebel groups, as have wealthy individual citizens of these countries. Yet until now coordination between aid providers has been poor, creating a flood of unaccountable funding going to opposition groups of varying levels of acceptability to U.S. interests in the region. This aid should be concentrated in supporting a moderate elements and promoting civil-military relations in areas under rebel control.

In Iraq, the United States has pursued a strategy of responding to security problems by increasing funding and training to the ISF. Counter-intuitively, this impulse

to continue security assistance as the U.S. had before the withdrawal of American troops in 2011 may actually be fanning the flames of violence. Maliki has directed the ISF in a distinctly undemocratic fashion through his alternate chain of command, and has utilized it to pursue political opponents and target protests. Security assistance and other forms of aid represent a powerful source of leverage to encourage Maliki to reach an agreement with his political rivals and to reform the way in which the ISF is deployed in Sunni-majority areas like Anbar and Ninewa.

The battlegrounds around Syria and Iraq appear to be widening rather than contracting, with ever more players drawn in. Political conflicts can be resolved, but once political actors begin to invoke broader ethno-religious identities in their fight, it will be very difficult to defuse these tensions. What begins as a nationalist struggle over political control of a state can wind up calling into question the very legitimacy of the state itself. Although it may appear to be in the short-term interest of regional actors to rally support for their cause by playing up sectarian differences, this threatens the stability of every state in the region with far-reaching consequences.

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