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**TRANSNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF CIVIL CONFLICTS IN
IRAQ, LEBANON, AND PALESTINE**

Dr. Mahjoob Zweiri

**(Specialist in Iran and Middle East Politics, Center for Strategic Studies,
University of Jordan)**

Andrew E. Johnson

**(Research assistant at Center for Strategic Studies at the
University of Jordan)**

**RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN STUDIES
(RIEAS)**

**# 1, Kalavryton Street, Ano-Kalamaki, Athens, 17456, Greece
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Director

**RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN STUDIES
(RIEAS)**

Postal Address:

1, Kalavryton Street
Ano-Kalamaki
Athens, 17456
Greece
Tel/Fax: + 30 210 9911214
E-mail: rieas@otenet.gr

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Dr. Mahjoob Zweiri

**(Specialist in Iran and Middle East Politics, Center for Strategic Studies,
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Andrew E. Johnson

(Research assistant at Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan)

Abstract

This paper explores the shared soft-security implications of civil war and a political instability in the region. Focus is granted to how these conflicts share similar consequences including refugee crises, rising terrorist sentiment, and finally Sunni-Shiite tensions. Moreover, the analysis examines how these issues affect both neighboring countries in the Middle East, and international players in the region.

Introduction

In his speech,¹ Douglas Alexander, U.K. Secretary of State for International Development, argued that the social and political impacts, although often ignored, represent the most lasting effects of conflict on society. He noted that war costs a country on average \$54 billion dollars, and an average of twenty years of lost development. Among the consequences are a crippled economy, paralyzed infrastructure, deep ethnic and religious divides, political disarray, and internal

discord. These not only destabilize the affected society for decades, but also have serious transnational consequences.

In the Middle East this domino effect is seen in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine. Although each conflict is confined within national borders, each has consequences that are common to all and that resonate throughout the region. These include evolving refugee crises, increased terrorism, and an increase in Sunni-Shiite tensions. If these conflicts fester, their effect upon their neighbors and the region will further destabilize an already fragile region.

Civil Conflict

Whether typed internal political disputes or civil wars,² these conflicts share certain characteristics. The breakdown of law and order has increasingly challenged the control of governments over their internal security. The political elites in all three countries are seriously divided and in (often armed) conflict. Control of territory is also divided and hotly contested. These conflicts have also resulted in refugee crises. The resulting economic and social strain on neighboring countries' infrastructure will continue to have an impact on the Middle East and the world long after all three conflicts have ended. Finally, the role of external powers in each conflict highlights their potential for escalating into regional crisis.

In Palestine Fatah and Hamas currently control Gaza and the West Bank as separate entities, although the violence that erupted in June 2007 has subsided. Although Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has attempted to consolidate power by forming an emergency government led by Salam Fayyad, he is under increasing political pressure to hold elections as soon as possible. To maintain control he must address the needs of the Palestinian people in Gaza, and balance the wide popular support of

Hamas, against the international community's desire to marginalize Hamas as much as possible.

In Lebanon Prime Minister Fouad Siniora struggles for power with Hezbollah. The US has sought to prop-up Siniora's government, while Iran continues to support Hezbollah both politically and military. The United States has also supported Lebanese army forces in confronting the Fatah Al Islam group in the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon. In each case, the desire to limit the reach of Syrian influence in Lebanon is paramount. Suspicions brew that Hezbollah and its political allies, with Syrian backing, may seek to establish an alternative government if talks fail.

Hezbollah continues to engage sympathy and support throughout the region as it trumpets its national resistance against Israel, though the foreign policy agendas of Iran and Syria may be the greater beneficiaries of this.³

In Iraq, society has disintegrated along sectarian lines as the government led by Nouri al-Maliki has failed to bridge divisions. Competition for influence between Iran and the United States is escalating politically as Tehran increases its diplomatic influence with Baghdad.

Refugees

In Iraq the pace of the exodus has increased since the fall of Baghdad. The two million refugees who have fled Iraq into neighboring Syria and Jordan are straining those countries' education, medical, and residential infrastructure. A report⁴ by the UNHCR estimates that nearly 30,000 new refugees pour into Syria monthly, many of them maimed and injured, in addition to the nearly 1.2 million Iraqi refugees already in the country. The Syrian Education Ministry has put all of its elementary schools on

double shifts but still lacks the capacity to handle the influx, leaving a generation of Iraqis without an education. In Jordan, the situation is equally as serious, with an estimated 700,000 Iraqis having crossed the border into the country of only five million. Moreover, Iraqi refugees complicate the country's tenuous security situation, as evidenced by the March 2005 bombings in which Iraqi refugee suicide-bombers targeted three western hotels.

In Lebanon any flare-up of hostilities is likely to induce a large number of refugees to flee similarly to neighboring Jordan and Syria. Out of concern for this eventual likelihood, Syria encouraged all its nationals to leave the country before July 15 2007 for fear that current political inertia could shift to internal violence.⁵ In the event of conflict, observers argue Syria would close its border with Lebanon, which could lead to a potentially problematic humanitarian situation.

Although the Palestinian refugee crisis is not new to the region, its dynamics in the past month have taken a dangerous turn with the isolation of Gaza. In a certain sense, the 1.2 million Palestinians within Gaza are now refugees themselves, disconnected in terms of desperately needed resources. Since its mid-June (2007) takeover, Gaza has been cut off from the rest of the world by Israel, whose policy is to isolate the region as much as possible in the hope of destabilizing Hamas. A spokesman for the Israeli Defense Ministry, Shlomo Dror, had stated,⁶ "We are seeing to it that there will be no hunger or disease, anything beyond that would strengthen Hamas." Beyond humanitarian aid there is no cross border trade; factories, schools, and medical centers are shutdown; fuel shortages are common; and, farmers are unable to harvest their crops.

Terrorism

Without definition of what constitutes terrorism it is difficult to target it. This is especially true in regard to the civil wars in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, in which definitions of resistance and terrorism blend and are highly subjective, as well as dependent upon regional and local perspectives.

The pitfalls in arriving at an accurate assessment of what constitutes terrorism were recently highlighted by the controversy⁷ surrounding French President Nicolas Sarkozy's statements which labeled Hezbollah a terrorist organization, and then a later retraction of these statements and instead arguing that Hezbollah was an integral part of Lebanese politics.

Ultimately Sarkozy's conflicting statements speak directly to the differing perspectives of Hezbollah, and ultimately terrorism, in both Lebanon and the Middle East today. Much of the region considers Hezbollah as a legitimate resistance organization. The resistance label allows Hezbollah to rally support as a home-grown militant cause and paint itself as a marginalized political player. Moreover framing their cause as a resistance, particularly in regard to Israel, resonates throughout the region, though not universally as seen in criticism of Hezbollah by Jordanian King Abdullah and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak who during the 2006 summer war argued that "Arabs and Muslims can't afford to allow an irresponsible and adventurous organization like Hezbollah to drag the region to war" and called Hezbollah's actions precipitating the conflict as "dangerous adventurism"⁸.

Much of the West, excluding the European Union, labels Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. By taking a monolithic approach to Hezbollah it facilitates the internal

Lebanese political process from the outside, as any inroad made by Hezbollah can be characterized within political discourse as a threat to both internal and external stability. This is particularly true in regard to Hezbollah's evolving relationship with Iran which is widely viewed as an extension of growing Iranian influence in the region.

In Iraq too questions related to definitions of terrorism are highly contentious. The ability of the Iraqi government to confront Sunni and Shiite militias in addition to confrontation of Al-Qaeda extremists will continue to be a key factor in the future security of Iraq. Although the United States has sought to downplay sectarian tensions, and instead focus on Al-Qaeda's role in Iraq to rally support for the war at home, it is ultimately these sectarian tensions combined with extremist ideology that threaten the security of civilian non-combatants and the long-term stability of Iraq and its neighbors.

The effects of terrorism in Iraq will also have an increasing impact on the region. The March 2005 attacks launched against western hotels by Iraqi suicide bombers in Amman, Jordan, indicate the domino effect of the conflict upon neighboring countries. Turkey has also become increasingly concerned by Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels along its border with Iraq and has massed nearly 140,000 troops along it in recent months. Turkish concerned over the PKK rebels and recent PKK attacks point to an inevitable confrontation in northern Iraq widely considered as one of the succeeds stories in Iraq Finally, the Al-Qaeda linked terrorist group the "Islamic State in Iraq" threatened Iran⁹ with terror attacks if it does not cease to support Shiite-militias in Iraq within two months.

The consequences of Gaza's isolation speak in particular to the domino effects of civil conflict. According to a July 2007 UN report,¹⁰ nearly 80,000 Palestinians have lost their jobs since the takeover of Gaza. The destabilizing effects upon a society that cannot work, maintain its medical and education infrastructure, or move about freely only further marginalizes Gaza residents, increases crime, and ultimately animosity. Moreover, by isolating Hamas in Gaza the international community only heightens their regional and international appeal. Al-Qaeda deputy Ayman al-Zawahri's recent call for all Muslims to support the organization in Gaza¹¹ clearly seeks to benefit from this widespread sentiment.

Terrorism related to Palestine continues to have a major impact on the region and the world. In recent months political discourse took a new turn when Palestinian President Abbas suggested that Hamas had allowed Al-Qaeda extremists to infiltrate Gaza. Although Hamas has denied these claims, events such as the abduction of BBC journalist Alan Johnston by the Army of Islam and statements by Al-Qaeda deputy Ayman al-Zawahri to rally Muslims to support Hamas, raise real concerns about another round of internationalization of Palestine's civil conflicts.

Shiite Identity

Questions related to Shiite identity, as a political force, are also having an impact on the balance of power throughout the region. The rise of Shiite identity politics is a key aspect of political life in both Lebanon and Iraq, in which Shiites are now in positions of power. Moreover, if emulated in other countries, Shiite identity politics could potentially alter political dynamics of the Middle East and international relations with it, for decades to come.

Identity politics are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East, a region whose borders were drawn by colonial powers within the past century. States were carved out by the European colonial powers with little concern for the, geography or history of ethnic, religious, or tribal identity. During the post-colonial period national identity was a fabrication of ruling elites who sought to control their diverse populations.¹² Today, although the Middle East is still geographically defined by borders, there has been within the past decade a new emerging shift in perceptions of identity, namely Shiite identity, which is being precipitated by the civil conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq, and indirectly by US democracy efforts in the region.

The resurgence of Shiite identity is a natural outcome of the region's historical experience with absolute rule, and Islam. Shiites have been historically disenfranchised by various Middle Eastern regimes for decades. In recent years the shift toward more representative political systems has led to an embrace of religious identity to define their political awakening.

In Iraq, US actions have unwittingly contributed to this process. Seeking to form a cohesive national identity in which Sunni, Shiite, and Kurds are all equally represented has only heightened sectarian divisions. The US attempt under US civil governor Paul Bremmer to institute a demographic quota system for the distribution of seats on the interim council elevated sectarianism, always an important facet of Iraqi society, to a privileged principle of denominational ordering of society through governmental representation.¹³

Shiites, although a 60 percent majority within Iraq, had never reached the status even of a powerful minority. After the fall of Saddam's regime, they sought to establish themselves as the dominant force in Iraqi politics and ultimately target the Sunni-

Baathists whose leaders had previously targeted them. To further enhance their power the main Shiite political parties united under the umbrella of the United Iraqi Alliance, which sought to advance Shiite interests throughout the country.

Although unity among the Iraqi Shiites themselves is tenuous, particularly between Al-Sadr and Prime Minister al-Malaki, the very prospect of contention for power, and for the mantle of Shia legitimacy, between them bodes ill for long term political stability and could end in a violent power struggle. Sectarian violence is already uncontrolled, it also draws in Iran and Sunni Arab regimes.

Tensions related to Shiite identity politics in Lebanon had arisen in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri, which opened up old religious and ethnic wounds between Sunni and Shia within Lebanese society. The calls of the Sunni-Druze-Christian coalition for Syrian troop withdrawal and political disengagement from the country were met with an equally strong response from Lebanese Shiites, lead by Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah, which manifested itself as an opposition to this movement.

Shiite identity politics have already sparked concern among the main Arab-Sunni players in the region including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, who consider the rise of Shiite politics as a threat to stability. In Jordan King Abdullah II has expressed his concerns over the region's shift towards Shiite identity, coining the phrase "Shiite-crescent," and has criticized Iran for stoking these tensions. More ominous, however, were statements by Saudi Arabian King Abdullah, who suggested his country would intervene in Iraq if Shiite insurgents continue targeting Sunni minorities.¹⁴

Although the rise of Shiite identity is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, particularly in a context in which communities throughout the region are achieving a political voice for the first time, when sectarian politics is linked to violent conflict, or assumes a transnational dimension either by mobilizing co-sectarians across national boundaries or bringing in neighboring regimes, it can be highly destabilizing.

Conclusion

As seen in the evolving refugee crises in Jordan and Syria, rising terrorist sentiment throughout the world, and a sharpening of Sunni-Shiite divisions in Iraq and Lebanon, the consequences of these three civil wars have already extended beyond their borders. Resolution of the consequences is no longer a matter merely of ending war and making peace within each nation state. Meaningful stabilization will require more comprehensive attention to the secondary transnational security consequences of these national conflicts.

Notes:

¹ Speech delivered at the Council on Foreign Relations (Washington DC) by Douglas Alexander, Secretary of State for International Development, July 12, 2007.

<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/News/files/Speeches/council-foreign-relations.asp>

² See Zweiri, Mahjoob. "The Smell of Civil Wars in the Middle East," Durham University, October 2006. <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/iranian.studies/The%20Smell%20of%20Civil%20Wars.pdf>

³ "Israel blows hot and cold towards Syria," *Agence France Presse*, July 14, 2007.

⁴ UNHCR Iraq Situation Response, July 2007 update on revised activities report. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=46a4a5522

⁵ Lappin, Yaakov. "Lebanon 'to erupt in one week' Syria calls on citizens to evacuate," July 8, 2007 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3422565,00.html>

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- ⁶ Greenberg, Joel. "Its borders shut, Gaza faces economic ruin," *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2007.
- ⁷ "France: Hezbollah not a terror group," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 13, 2007.
- ⁸ Toameh, Khaled Abu, "Arab world fed up with Hezbollah," *Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2006.
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1150886029284&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>
- ⁹ "Al-Qaeda threatens war against Iran," *Al-Jazeera.net*, July 9, 2007.
- ¹⁰ Erlanger, Steven. "Gaza's Economy, Already Fragile, May Collapse Unless Crossings Are Reopened, U.N. Reports" July 19, 2007.
- ¹¹ " Hamas shuns Al-Qaeda support," *Associated Press*, June 25, 2007.
- ¹² Kumaraswamy, PR, "Who Am I? The Identity Crisis in the Middle East", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2006.
- ¹³ Shabaan, Hussein, "Identity Politics," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 7-13 April 2005, Issue No. 737.
- ¹⁴ The issue of Shiite identity has become significant, particularly in the Gulf. See, Zweiri, Mahjoob and Zahid, Mohammed. "Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity Politics in the Persian Gulf," Research Paper No. 111, Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS), July 2007.

About the Authors

Dr Mahjoob Zweiri, is a Specialist in Iran and Middle East Politics, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan. His New book (with A. Eheshami) is 'Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution' October 2007, I.B. Tauris).

Andrew E. Johnson is a research assistant at Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan.

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