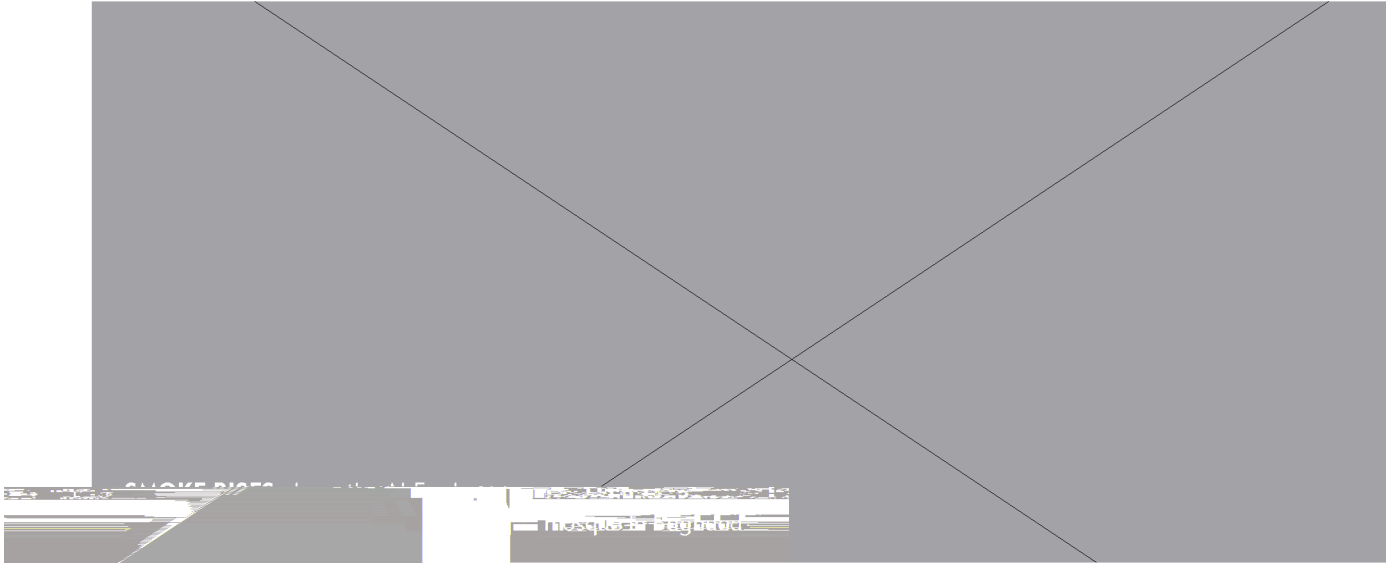


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COMMENT

ke Europe circa World War I.

The Middle East looks li

A War to Start All Wars

BY NIALL FERGUSON

The United States invaded Iraq in April 2003 for multiple reasons, but the most ambitious was a desire to remake a whole region. The Middle East, it was argued, was full of political and economic underachievers, driven to violence by a Muslim/Arab inferiority complex. Replacing Saddam Hussein with an exemplary democracy would begin a domino effect, spreading American values to Iraq's mostly undemocratic neighbors.

Oh dear. Iraq is now in the midst of a civil war—already one of the world's biggest since 1945, with the kind of escalating tit-for-tat killings and ethnic cleansing that can last for years, even decades. Debate currently centers on how quickly the United States can wind down its involvement in Iraq and on whether neighboring countries can be persuaded to help stabilize it.

But what if it is Iraq that destabilizes its neighbors? The irony is that America's ill-executed intervention may yet remake the Middle East. But not quite in the way neoconservatives intended.

The critical question today is whether the current civil war could spread beyond Iraq's borders, engulfing its neighbors or sparking a regional war. Realists—not least James Baker, co-chair of the Iraq Study Group—have an interest in arguing that it could. In seeking to enlist the assistance of Iraq's neighbors, specifically Syria and Iran, the United States would be appealing to their self-interest, not their altruism. Fear of contagion is why these long-standing foes of the United States might be willing to help stop the slaughter in Iraq.

Iraq, after all, is not the only Middle Eastern state to have a mixed population of Sunnis, Shias, and other religious groups.

There are substantial but not overwhelming numbers of Shias in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen, to say nothing of Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. Even predominantly Shiite Iran has its Sunni minority, among them the persecuted Ahwazi Arabs, who live in the strategically vital southwestern province of Khuzestan.

So how likely is the scenario of a regional civil war, beginning in Iraq but eventually extending right across the greater Middle East? One obvious parallel is with central Africa in the 1990s. In Rwanda in 1994, extremists from the Hutu majority attempted to exterminate the country's Tutsi minority. In response, an army of Tutsi exiles then invaded from Uganda and drove the Hutu killers (and many other Hutus) across the border into Congo and Tanzania.

Soon nearly all of Congo's neighbors had become embroiled in a monstrous orgy of violence. Altogether, it has been estimated that between 1998 and 2000, as many as 3.3 million people lost their lives in central Africa's Great War, the majority from starvation or disease as the entire region plunged into anarchy.

Admittedly, not all civil wars metastasize in this way. At around the same time as the genocide in Rwanda, a war raged between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in various parts of a disintegrating Yugoslavia. But there was never much danger that this war would be spread throughout the Balkans. This was not just because

by high levels of ethnic heterogeneity. Consequently, the transition from empire to the nation-states of the post-WWI era proved painful in the extreme.

Two minorities were especially ill-placed in the new order of the 1920s: the Germans and the Jews. The former fought back against their minority status in places like Czechoslovakia and Poland and, under the leadership of a messianic Austrian, temporarily created a Greater German Empire. The latter were among that bloodthirsty empire's principal victims. Only with the expulsion of the Germans from Central and Eastern Europe and the creation of truly homogeneous

states of the region were ruled by either feudal monarchs or fascist strongmen. And a new empire—which preferred to be known as a superpower—generally helped keep these rulers in place, and the region static, if only to keep another superpower at bay.

Only in our time, then, has the Middle East reached the stage that Central and Eastern Europe reached after the First World War, at least in some respects. Only now are countries like Iraq and Lebanon experimenting with democracy. The lesson of European history is that this experiment is a highly dangerous one, particularly at times of economic volatility and chronic insecurity, and particularly where tribes and peoples are mixed up geographically, both within and across borders. The minorities fear—with good reason—the tyranny of the majorities. People vote their ethnicity, not their pocketbook or ideology. And even before the votes are counted, the shooting begins.

What will the United States do if Iraq's neighbors fail to contain the ethnic conflict that is now consuming Iraq? The simple answer would be to leave the people to kill and displace one another until ethnic homogeneity has been established in the various states. That has effectively been American policy in central Africa. The trouble, of course, is that Iraq matters more than Rwanda, economically and strategically. Does anyone seriously believe that a regional conflagration would leave Israel and Saudi Arabia—America's most important allies in the Middle East—unscathed?

Ask a different question. Did anyone seriously believe that a war in Central and Eastern Europe in 1939 would leave Britain and France unaffected? The really sobering lesson of the twentieth century is that some civil wars can grow into more than just regional wars. If the stakes are high enough, they have the potential to become world wars too. ❧

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of Western military intervention. It was because Yugoslavia's neighbors—Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Romania—were far less combustible than Yugoslavia. More or less ethnically homogeneous in each case, they never seemed remotely likely to go the way of Bosnia, the worst-affected of the former Yugoslavian republics. The Balkan War of the 1990s was much smaller than the central African wars. The most exhaustive database that has been compiled of all those killed and missing in Bosnia—including members of all ethnic groups—contains fewer than 100,000 names.

Yet this can hardly be regarded as an encouraging story as far as Iraq is concerned. For the ethnic homogeneity of Yugoslavia's neighbors was no accident of history. It was a direct consequence of the prolonged and bloody wars of the first half of the twentieth century, which had already destroyed most of the ethnic diversity of the Central and Eastern European countries.

Sixty years ago, Central and Eastern Europe was entering the final phase of a succession of wars and civil wars that originated with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Before 1914, the Habsburg lands had been characterized

but Soviet-controlled nation-states was peace restored. It is no coincidence that the one country that remained both heterogeneous and independent—Yugoslavia—was, in the 1990s, the scene of Europe's last great ethnic conflict.

The aftermath of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire (also dealt its death blow during World War I) has taken a different, more protracted course. The Turks did not submit to the breakup of empire as readily as the Austrians. Having already murdered the Armenian Christians under the Young Turk regime, they expelled the Orthodox Greeks from Asia Minor and consolidated their Turkish nation-state (albeit retaining a few troublesome minorities like the Kurds, to whom they granted minimal concessions).

But the rest of what had been the Ottoman Empire did not immediately adopt the model of the nation-state, as Europe had done. Instead, the victors of the First World War established "mandates" (de facto colonies) in the losers' former possessions—Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria. Independence did not come to most of the Middle East until after 1945, and it was seldom accompanied by democracy (Israel being the exception). Instead the multiethnic

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