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Civil War Isn't Coming - It's Here [1]

Amman, Jordan

Incipient civil war. The phrase has been repeated over and over since former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft used it in a speech last week to the New America Foundation. "The Iraqi elections, rather than turning out to be a promising turning point, have the great potential for deepening the conflict," he said, according to the Washington Post.

The extensive media coverage of Scowcroft's comments got me to thinking about the term "civil war". For all the talk of the danger that one may break out in the coming months, I think a good case can be made that Iraq is already well into its civil war – and, arguably, has been for nearly a year.

When does a civil war begin? How do you define it? Establishing a starting point is often easier in retrospect. A conflict's beginnings are rarely as clear cut as the Confederate shelling of Fort Sumter. Pinning down the exact moment when insurgency, banditry, incipient rebellion or general lawlessness hit their tipping point and metastasize into organized conflict is often best done with the benefit of hindsight.

Eleven years ago this month I spent a week in Algiers. The security situation throughout the country was rapidly going to hell, and though we of the foreign media were there to cover a national reconciliation conference it was becoming next to impossible for foreigners to move around the capital. At one point I even bumped into two young western women in the hotel bar. They told me they worked for the United Nations and were based in Algiers. The UN, they said, put them up in the hotel every other weekend because the city had become so dangerous that the hotel's gardens (which were surrounded by high walls) were now the only place where it was safe for a westerner to get some fresh air.

Over lunch and breakfast and dinner our small group of correspondents spent a great deal of time discussing civil wars – how they start and, more importantly how one recognizes that they have started. We concluded that Algeria was not yet in the midst of a civil war, though it was getting seriously close.

With a decade of hindsight, almost everyone who keeps track of these things now agrees that Algeria, by January 1994, was well into its civil war.

Last summer in Baghdad I had conversations eerily similar to the ones I'd had in Algiers a decade earlier. As time passes I'm more and more convinced that the first half of April 2004 may, eventually, come to be seen as the date when Iraq's civil war began. It's difficult today to remember just how quickly things deteriorated that spring. As late as mid-February, when I was still working at Al-Iraqiyah television, my friends and I would think nothing about walking out through one of the Green Zone's checkpoints and catching a taxi to the Kurdish-run liquor store a half-mile away where we bought beer and scotch. Seven weeks later such a trip was

unthinkable for a westerner, and it has remained so ever since. The killing of four American security contractors as they passed through Fallujah at the beginning of April touched off a spiral of violence that has rarely slackened in the months since. Those four deaths did not start the conflict, but they increasingly appear to have been a tipping point of sorts. It is a measure of just how bad things have become that in media circles the summer and fall of 2003 are now seen as a golden moment when Iraq was, relatively speaking, safe.

As old friends and new acquaintances have passed through Amman this week en route to Baghdad I've detected a degree of tension one rarely sees among war correspondents. It's not a good sign – and only reinforces my growing belief that the elections are not going to touch off a civil war. They are merely going to move it to a new phase.

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