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## The Challenges Of State-Building in Iraq

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq was a turning point that sparked the Second Gulf War. However; this is not where Iraq's problems began. Iraq was already an unstable nation, due to the combination of various factors. Post-2003, Iraq faced the challenge of state-building. The old regime had imploded, and the Iraqi state needed to be rebuilt. State-building in Iraq was largely a failure. Iraq has a long history of ethnic conflict, which originated from Western interventionism dating back to the post- World War I period. There is a multitude of ethnic groups and religions in Iraq, and foreign powers present in Iraq had little knowledge of these different groups.

The Iraqi state further eroded after the Baathist coup and when Saddam Hussein came into power. Ethnic conflict progressed further, and Iraq became involved in various wars with neighbouring countries. The state started to lose legitimacy following the First Gulf War. Following the onset of the Second Gulf War in 2003, countries such as the United States and Australia became involved in state-building in Iraq. The state-building efforts have been largely unsuccessful. The approach that foreign powers have employed in Iraq with regards to state-building has followed a neoliberal model. The neoliberal model advocates top-down state building, with a focus on rebuilding state institutions, privatizing institutions, and liberalizing trade. This is not the best approach because it does not involve consulting with the general population, and there is no focus on key issues in society. It also has a narrow definition of growth, which is defined as having a high growth in GDP. GDP is not an accurate reflection of standards of living because it only shows numbers, it does not show how that wealth is distributed, or offers any index with regards to quality of life. The state has no autonomy because it is under the control of foreign powers and lacks the ability to make its own decisions about what is best for the state. The US decided they knew what was best for Iraq even though they were poorly informed about the religious, ethnic, and historical context of Iraq. The US has repeatedly made the mistake of imposing the same one-size-fits-all neoliberal model on various nations such as Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, and Haiti. This approach has never been successful because each nation is unique and needs a model that is tailored to its unique context (Hassin & Isakhan 2016). The US and Australia failed at their own objectives in Iraq and Iraq does not meet the conditions for being a stable state. Iraq is an important contemporary case study because it is a good demonstration of how not to build a state. It challenges the widely accepted neoliberal model and exposes the complex realities of state-building. Future state-building efforts can learn from the Iraqi case and try employing a model that is more suited to the needs of the people.

There is a long historical legacy of Western interventionism in the Middle East. It all began following World War I. European powers arbitrarily redrew borders and created new nations in the Middle East, to serve their own interests. Empires such as the former Ottoman and Byzantine Empires were split up and divided into individual countries which became countries now known as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, etc. This is when instability in the Middle East began. Foreign powers such as Britain and France had little knowledge of the Middle East. They were unaware of different religions and ethnic groups in the area, so they drew borders across ethnic lines. In Iraq, there are 3 main ethnoreligious groups. There are the Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds. The country that is now Iraq was made up of 3 former provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The

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three provinces were each home to a different ethnic or religious group. Basra was home to Shia Arabs, Baghdad to Sunni Arabs, and Mosul to Kurds. Sunnis and Shias are the 2 main sects of Islam. Kurds are a separate ethnic group that is not considered Arab, they have their own language and occupy Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous territory that stretches across Iraq and Iran. There are also smaller minority groups in Iraq such as Assyrians, who are Christian, and Yazidis, who are mostly of the Zoroastrian faith and some are Christian (Yazidis are a minority within a minority, they are a sub-group of Kurds, however most Kurds are Muslim). Iraq is certainly not ethnically or religiously homogenous, as not everyone who lives there is Arab or even Muslim. When European forces put these different ethnic groups together, this was the beginning of ethnic conflict in Iraq. Ethnic/religious favoritism was also an issue in Iraq. The Sunni elite was favored by the British, which further perpetuated the ethnic divide.

The ethnic conflict that originated post-WWI was further exacerbated following the Baathist coup in 1968. The Baathist Party engaged in ethnic favoritism and crony capitalism. Oil was the driving force of the political system. The Baathists also engaged in clientelism, using state resources to buy political loyalty. The state sought to control every aspect of society and employed organized violence against its citizens. The state became further unstable as it was losing legitimacy. Iraq was only able to stay legitimate as a state for as long as it had because of the international support it had received during the Iran-Iraq war. However, after losing the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq received international sanctions, causing the people to become even more dependent on the state. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, there were genocides against Shias and Kurds. Shias and Kurds retaliated by starting insurgencies, through suicide bombings and car bombings.

Following the 2003 American invasion, Iraq faced new challenges. Australia was one of the countries that engaged in state-building in Iraq. Their efforts at state-building were dismal. The Australian government stated that their focus in Iraq was on 'supporting agriculture and vulnerable populations' but failed at both of those objectives. Supporting agriculture was a failure because the Australian government trained Ministry of Agriculture personnel but did not work directly with farmers. Farmers are a key stakeholder in agriculture, and change cannot be created by only working with the bureaucrats at the top. The Australian government also failed to support vulnerable populations in Iraq. One of the most vulnerable and stigmatized groups in Iraqi society is disabled people, especially women. Their needs were not addressed in state-building efforts, as they remained stigmatized and facilities remained highly inaccessible to them. Human rights in Iraq reported a decline after Australia trained Iraqi state officials in human rights matters.

The United States was also involved in Iraqi state-building, post-2003, but their efforts have also only had limited success. Iraq was given no autonomy, as the US dominated the state-building process. The relationship between Iraq and the US was paternalistic, with the US stepping in and making decisions on behalf of the Iraqi people without their consent. The US decided the best decision for Iraq was to be a liberal democracy with a free market economy, so they forcibly intervened to make that happen. The US did not engage with key actors or the general population to decide on the best form of government with Iraq, instead, they consulted with a narrow group of Iraqi elites to form the Coalition Provisional Authority. The constitution of 2005 was rejected by the majority of voters but was still enacted. Iraq cannot be considered a democracy if the people lack the freedom to elect their own government. The US forcibly installed their own preferred government through armed incursion. The Iraqi state did not represent the interests of its people, but those of the US. The transitional government was

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unstable because there was no consensus between key groups on how to run it. The structure of the government exacerbated the ethnic divide, as particular politicians only seemed to represent particular ethnic/religious groups. As well, key Sunni religious groups were left out, therefore the transitional government was not truly representative.

The unstable government created a power/security vacuum, as local politicians competing for power, as well as criminal groups and militias, are able to easily exploit weak state institutions. There were also other consequences, such as corruption, high unemployment and inflation rates, dependence on foreign aid, failing public institutions, a weak private sector, and human rights violations. Political, military, and economic power should be divided proportionally among the different groups to reduce conflict.

Both Australia and the United States made the same errors in state-building. They employed a top-down neoliberal model of state-building when states need to be built from the bottom up. The neo-liberal model focuses on rebuilding state institutions and working with government officials. There are some issues with this approach. Governments are only working with the state and private sector, who are the elites of their society and have their own biased agendas. The citizens are the backbone of a state, and foreign governments fail to engage with the local population. There was a lack of focus on important issues in society, there was no public dialogue about key issues such as women's rights, or the role of religion in the state.

New institutions are often fragile, and they will not last if they are imposed by outside forces. The only way to have a strong state is if state-building happens from within. State-building is a long-term process, it needs to happen gradually and will not facilitate a strong state if it is forced rapidly on a state through violent intervention. The new institutions may also struggle to compete for authority with the military and pre-existing institutions. There is an argument among scholars that the democratic transition of a country will be more successful if it is led by moderate local elites. This approach will only work if the transition is not imposed by foreign powers, because these elites tend to be less influential in countries where state-building is externally created. Local politicians should have a place in the country, and not be completely replaced by a foreign-controlled government. The only Iraqi political party that existed in 2003 was the Iraqi Governing Council, which was created by the US. The US was warned by multiple scholars not to implement "top-down, highly centralized 'nation-building' experiments that the Clinton Administration tried unsuccessfully in Haiti, Somalia, Kosovo, and Bosnia. That approach failed in those cases precisely because it ignored the unique political realities on the ground". The US was also more focused on getting rid of Baathists from the government than actual state-building. The 'de-Baathification' of Iraq also further destabilized the state. Not all Baath Party members had actually committed human rights violations or were affiliated with the Hussein regime, yet almost all of them were expelled from government service. Many key institutions such as the military, police, and finance ministry were destabilized because many of their key senior members were from the Baath Party. The new individuals employed by the US to fill the vacant positions were chosen based on political patronage rather than experience and credentials. Foreign parties who intervene in a nation such as Iraq also have little knowledge about the nation and its history and ethnic groups. This knowledge is important because disregarding the historical context of a country and its different ethnic groups can prove disastrous, as it has in the case of Iraq.

Another failure of the neoliberal model is its focus solely on 'growth'. Economic growth is a poor indication of the standard of living of a whole nation because the growth is not distributed

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evenly. Iraq experienced high GDP growth post-2003, yet it was the most poorly performing middle-income country on the Millennium Development Goals.

Iraq still has a long way to go to become a strong state. According to Johanna Forman, state-building should focus on the following key areas: security, governance and participation, social and economic well-being, and justice and reconciliation. Iraq is still deficient in these areas. Another key component of a state that Iraq is missing is the ability to extract revenue from its citizens. In 2008, tax revenue only made up 1% of GDP. A new Iraqi state needs to be built from the bottom up. It is important for the new institutions and government to be agreed upon by all the ethno-religious groups. State institutions need to distribute goods equally among the population. Ethnic tensions should be addressed. Kurdistan should maintain some form of autonomy, but Iraq should have a strong central government rather than separate political parties that cater to different ethnicities. The new constitution and government should sufficiently include all the ethnic groups. The groups should engage in political dialogue. The power of the military should be limited by keeping them under civilian control. Armed groups should be integrated. Security is still not sufficient in Iraq and security measures need to be improved. International actors should still have a role in Iraq, but a more limited role. They could have a role in training and assisting the military and security forces. The Lebanese Taif Accord and Afghan Loya Jirga are examples of models that Iraq should base their own government off of.

State-building in Iraq has been generally unsuccessful. Iraq is a country that faces many challenges, which have not been adequately addressed by state-building efforts. The people of Iraq come from various ethnic groups and religions, which is not something that foreign powers have been largely aware of. The assumption that all Iraqis are Arab and Muslim, and particularly that all Muslims follow the same beliefs, is inaccurate, and it is important to take ethnic differences into account and create a society that fairly represents all of the ethnic and religious groups. The nation of Iraq was first created after World War I and ethnic conflict has been present since then, because the borders were drawn along ethnic lines. The instability in Iraq further escalated in 1968 when the Baathists seized power, and even further during the rule of Saddam Hussein. The Baathists and Hussein exploited ethnic differences and engaged in crony capitalism. Iraq has gone through a series of wars and regime changes over the last several decades and began losing legitimacy as a state.

After the Second Gulf War began in 2003 following the American invasion, Iraq began the transition to a democratic state. The US and Australia were the key powers involved in this transition. The transition has been unsuccessful because it followed a top-down, neoliberal approach. The neoliberal model focuses on rebuilding state institutions and the private sector, but not on enacting change within the state and consulting with the people. The people lack the autonomy to lead their own political transition, as it is being forced on them by foreign actors and local elites. The government is unrepresentative of the people's voices. The government and security situation in Iraq remain unstable. There are some suggestions by scholars for the future direction that state-building in Iraq should take. Some propose the separation into 3 separate states or provinces (Sunni Arab, Shia Arab, and Kurdish), as existed prior to World War I, while others propose that Iraq remain a unified state with a strong centralized government, with Kurdistan maintaining some form of autonomy, while still being part of Iraq and included in the constitution. Whether Iraq remains as one country or separates, state-building needs to be created within the state, and the new state needs to be built from the bottom-up.

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