Reconstructing Iraq: Iraq State-building, Nation-building, and Violence.

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Abstract:

The article argues that the failure of post-conflict reconstruction is directly linked to scholars' lack of attention to the difference between state-building and nation-building as two distinct activities requiring separate, though often connected policies.

The prominent reconstruction failures of cases such as Iraq and Afghanistan as well as others start long before preliminary plans are drawn. The dominant trend within state-building is the lack of pre-conflict planning which eventuates into subsequent uncoordinated post-conflict preparation that yields little constructive results. Lack of pre-conflict planning may involve lack of awareness of the complexity and often interlaced sources of conflict or inadequate security forces on the ground. Because of such tendencies there are more 'failed' cases than successful ones, where the post World War II examples of Japan and Germany are widely viewed as the epitome of successful reconstruction. Yet for various complex reasons the success of these two cases have been near impossible to replicate. The urgent question is why has it been so difficult to replicate the successes of these cases?

Scholars have failed to understand where the inconsistencies that plague state-building activities start. For instance Michael Barnett (2006:89) argues that the reconstruction of post-conflict societies has evolved to entail 'liberal peacebuilding,' to such an extent those leading such missions have often repeated the mistakes of attempting to first develop a strong society that could counteract the arbitrary use of state power in the future. Barnett goes so far as to argue that the state-building donor community desires a minimal state, with a strong civil society that would balance state authority. Barnett moves on to present what he calls republican peacebuilding as the answer to the failures mentioned above. Such a process would entail institution building that would promote legitimacy and stability when/as society begins to transfer their consent to such institutions. Barnett's study embodies several problems endemic in state-building literature. Firstly he fails to recognize that reconstruction processes involve a high level of state-building rather than nation-building as he

suggests above. Secondly, if reconstruction processes were to entail building a strong nation, through civil society development for instance, would it not naturally lead to a bottom-up form of democracy building which some (Carens 1993) have suggested are the most stable forms of democracy building? Instead Barnett argues for a top-down form of democracy development, failing to recognize the level of resentment that local communities feel at outsiders imposing foreign forms of political institutions. Finally, he involuntarily juxtaposes nation-building with state-building viewing them as essentially non complimentary practices.

Scholars and policymakers need to differentiate the distinction between state-building and nation-building as dissimilar, though interconnected, activities requiring distinct policies as part of the wider reconstruction process. Indeed if the empirical reconstruction of post World War II Japan and Germany is simplified into this state-building and nation-building divide, the policy and planning mistakes of some of the more recent cases become apparent. The success of Japan and Germany lie in the fact that the reconstruction process in these two cases directly revolved around rebuilding the *state* and its relevant institutions along liberal democratic values. There was indeed little need for nation-building because both states entailed fairly homogonous nations within their state borders. The process therefore entailed reconstructing appropriate democratic institutional frameworks that would supplement state capacity. There was little requirement to rebuild a nation of people because of the inherent homogeneity of both states and because the nature of the conflict that led to Western nations reconstructing these states did not involve internal civil, ethnic and sectarian conflict. Additionally, in contrast to the majority of other reconstruction cases, Japan and Germany were on the one hand relatively economically developed and on the other hand had been thoroughly defeated by the allied forces leading to a level of compliance that has rarely existed in subsequent cases.

These cases point to two particular themes: that some cases may require an emphasis on rebuilding the nation rather than the state and vice versa based on the specifics of the case; and that more importantly nation-building as a distinct and separate activity needs to be involved in state reconstruction and should indeed accommodate that process. Yet there is a consistent failure to see the distinction in the reconstruction process as concerning two elements- on one level there needs to be horizontal

reconstruction of communities that in some instances had suffered decades of internal strife; while on the other hand there needs to be a simultaneous vertical line of institution and capacity building within the state. Therefore the question is not so much that of defining such activities as either state-building or nation-building but that in fact such practices involves *both*. Experts in this field need to recognize and establish distinct policies that aim to reconstruct a nation as well as processes that aim to strengthen state capacity precisely because the failure of such states entails structural weaknesses on both levels.

This failure, however, has been supplemented by leading authorities in the field who are concerned with defining the reconstruction of weak and failing states as either state-building or nation-building. James Dobbins et al, through the notable think-tank Rand Corporation's various publications (2003, 2005, 2007), as well as political economist professor Frances Fukuyama, denote this discipline as nation-building. Wang (2005), Jenkins and Plowden (2006), Donini, Niland, Wermester (2004) all concur with this labeling. In contrast Chesterman (2004), Belloni (2007), Paris and Sisk (2009), Herring and Rangwala (2006) as well as Zaum (2007) label this discipline as state-building. Only a handful such as Fukuyama, Zuam and Chesterman have made any attempt to differentiate the two terms through a critical analysis of the difference between state and nation.

In complete contrast, the United Nations has often labeled such activities as peace-building which serves to highlight the general lack of consensus in the field. However, considering some of the more colossal failures witnessed in the operation theater it is no longer adequate to allow the two (three including U.N's preference for the term peace-building) terms to assume synonymity. Indeed it is essential that the two terms are analyzed and viewed as totally distinct though associated activities.

The propensity to equate state-building with nation-building as synonymous concepts ensures that state-building takes precedence over nation-building activities and is essentially seen to encompass the latter. This further suggests that state-building literature is fraught with the misconception that state-building will inevitably lead to nation-building. However, rebuilding a state does not necessarily imply the development of a sense of nationalism or nationhood. The reconstruction process in

Iraq involved activities tailored towards reconstructing the 'state,' rather than the 'nation,' which inadvertently left many of the initial sources of conflict (such as ethnic strife, religious and sectarian insecurities, claims to the oil rich city of Kirkuk, war and authoritarianism) in place.

The U.S. led state-building process entailed plans to develop a free-market economy, establishing rule of law, ascertaining security, democracy-building and imposing transitional administrators; essentially state-building practices that are designed to establish the institutional and foundational elements of 'stateness'. In contrast there are often relatively little activities that are aimed towards nation-building. Nation-building often entail reconciliatory processes involving public trials of war criminals and truth and reconciliation commissions that are aimed towards addressing some of the collective psychological and emotional pain within the nation. De-ba'athification and the public trials of war criminals including Saddam Hussein were some of the more prominent examples of nation-building in Iraq. It is important to note, however, that such activities are rarely ever defined as actions that are aimed toward rebuilding the nation. They are often seen as part of the collective process of reconstruction with little insight into the difference in rebuilding a state and rebuilding a nation.

The study of cultures and its associated semiotics provide great insight into the political culture and history of a nation. It is therefore essential that nation-building entails a greater level of study for such reconstruction missions. The United States focus on reconstructing a strong democratic state entailed a strong emphasis on reconstructing the state with a lack of clarity to the cultural, religious and historical complexities of Iraq. A notable omission was their inability to identify significant actors and individuals who could influence the reconstruction process. The preeminence of stateness ensures that state-building donor community attempts to focus on actors who contribute to developing a stable state in the aftermath of conflict. Ahamad Chalabi was widely viewed as one such actor during the lead up to the 2003 war in Iraq. His involvement in the Iraqi National Congress (INC) and his close relations with key neoconservative figures in the Bush administration made him a favored post-conflict figure in the post-Saddam Iraqi state (Kolowski 2005). Other notable figures included Iyad Allawi and Nouri Al-Malaki. Their endorsement and backing by the United State revolved around their anti-Saddam and anti-Ba'ath

activities as well as their general endorsement of secular democratic rhetoric during their exile from Iraq (Ghareeb and Dougherty 2004:113). Some scholars have adamantly argued that "the transfer of power to elected institutions must always be regarded as the goal of a reconstruction process, but the participation of local actors in the transition process is crucial." (De Brabandere 2009). Despite this, key figures within Iraq such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-sadr were however given little analytical attention and received even less endorsement or support in the initial reconstruction stages because for the most part they did not fall in line with the official semiotics and rhetoric of the donor community's state-centric expectations. The al-Sadr family had been active opponents of the Saddam regime and had suffered great loss for their activism. Considered as the 'intellectual godfathers of Iran's Islamic constitution' (Dekmejian 1995:123) Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was the leading figure behind the establishment of the D'awa party that actively opposed the Ba'athist regime. His political and economic writings produced the ideological foundation of the party and marked Al-Sadr as a powerful political figure (Bengio 1998:99). Al-Sadr was also heavily influential in causing a 'Shia Renaissance' in the 1960's. It is arguable that considering the emphasis on the secular democratic discourse surrounding the state-building paradigm that it is not remarkable that such actors were excluded from the post-conflict reconstruction agendas in Iraq despite the fact that they had been active proponents of the regime.

However, the lack of attention that these actors received points to the endemic problem of adequate nation-building processes that is heavily subject to the ownership of the reconstruction process by local actors (Foulk 2007). Sachedina (2006) has noted that the state-building processes in Afghanistan and Iraq has failed to take into account the importance of religious values and norms in contributing to democratic development and reconstruction. Indeed the concept of religion is shied away from precisely because religion tends to contain exclusionary modes of citizenship that counteracts the nation and state-building behavior of the donor community. The lack of attention to the complex relationship between rebuilding state institutions and rebuilding some semblance of nationhood in Iraq led to the rise of religious actors who filled the power vacuum. Indeed the process of social control shifted from the state towards the religious centers of Iraq, where the traditional values of the state in retaining an army, mobilizing society, the establishment of judicial rule and collecting

taxes were redirected and re-established through these religious actors effectively acting as what William Reno would dub a shadow state, which serves to challenge the generally accepted notion that religious actors are limited within the confines of civil society activism (Wardak, Zaman, Nawabi 2007, Borchgrevink 2007). Funke and Solomon (2002) argue that local actors who assume leadership of shadow states tend to profit personally from institutional weakness of the state and through corrupt means gain extensive personal wealth at the cost of a weakened society. What is presented here by religious actors has been a different case where local leaders have used religion as a source of solidarity and nationalism so as to keep the Iraqi state from disintegrating. Religious actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani played a far more complex role, directly contributing to the nation-building and state-building process in Iraq through civil society activism, mobilization of the masses into supporting or opposing the reconstruction, providing aid, donations as well as guidance, advice and fatwa's to refrain from violence, retaliation as well as to participate in democratic processes. Though the relationship between 'public violence' and religious ideologies are also perceptible in Iraq it is also highly plausible that these actors could serve as a source of self produced solidarity, legitimacy and nation-building. As Glazier (2009:66) notes the process of involving actors at the local level has led to a successful cooperative relationship between the Coalition forces and Sunni tribal leaders and Sheiks.

The state-centric reconstruction process has traditionally been concerned with the issue of legitimacy, which is increasingly being viewed as problematic particularly in Islamic states. The role of religion in state-building practices has received little attention, despite the fact that some of the more recent missions have been conducted in some of the most religious states. The omission is linked to various normative assumptions surrounding issues such as secularism and state-building precedence over nation-building and hence a general disregard towards culture and traditions of recipient states. Where religion has attracted attention, the discourse has revolved around the empirical concept of religious violence, fundamentalism and its various impacts as a motivational tool behind political behavior (Glazier 2009).

Ultimately any form of post-Saddam Iraqi governance will entail some elements of Islamic jurisdiction and laws. Various religious actors have increasingly and

successfully advocated such a measure. Yet the reconstruction process and the resurgence movement have been viewed as a general vindication of Islams' inherently violent roots (Spencer 2007, Akbar 2002). This paper in contrast argues that the use of religious violence in Iraq is linked to legitimacy building and is indeed part and parcel of a successful reconstruction process where the Shia and Sunni communities attempt to forge their own sense of social consensus regarding which form of Islam the end state should adopt. In other words they are engaged in nation-building. As Barnett (2006) notes that the concept of legitimacy is fluid and culture specific so that legitimacy in accordance with Western states may directly conflict with local notions surrounding legitimacy. The question is how conceivable or stable will a newly reconstructed state be if the donor community does not take into account the expectations of Islamic communities as is the case in Iraq, in so far as that religion does not only provide moral guidance but also serve as the founding values that underpin governance?

On another level the sectarian violence that ensued is indicative of the unstable political communities that have been joined together through the penmanship of colonialism. Scholars have attempted to view religious and sectarian violence in Iraq through a study of religious content, in containing values that could be attributed to the reality of political violence often used in connecting that inherent call for violence with real political situations (Glazier 2009). Yet such analyses are limited because they attribute fault to the religion itself, when it is conceivable that any religion could be directed towards violence based on the content of Holy Scriptures. Rather these manifestations of religious and sectarian violence are more readily connected to inherent difficulties of state formation where different groups and communities attempt to forge often competing schismatic national identities. As Cole (2004) argues "nationalism is made not only by unity but by conflict, by struggles and compromises" (n.p.).

Indeed the processes of state formation in Europe have produced a similar relationship between violence and state-building (Holden 2004, Glete 2002), where "nationalist sentiments relate to a myth of origins supplying a psychological focus for the unity of the political community; but any interpretation of origins that has concrete reference to the past is likely to stimulate as much tension as harmony, because of the diversity

of cultural differences characteristically involved" (Giddons 273). Likewise, Rear (2008) argues that the initial stage of violence that erupts during reconstruction missions is similar to the initial state development processes of Western Europe. The violence that erupted between Sunni and Shia militants is considered to be part of an 'empirical process of state-building', and in fact is a necessary aspect of state reconstruction where post-colonial remnants of conflict are addressed through this violence as a method of attempting to develop an "organic political unity"(Dawisha 2008: 253). Other scholars have extended this argument further and have noted the necessity of these forms of violence, where the linkage between ethnic violence and the state-building process suggests that interference with that violence also interferes with the state-building process. In so doing, it not only perpetuates state weakness or possibly state failure and collapse, it also poses a fundamental challenge to the continuity of the state's system and its state-centric premise" (Rear 2008).

As some scholars (Sachadina 2002) have noted the 'disestablishment' of Islam will only serve to destabilize the already fragile state further and will severely challenge the post-Saddam Iraqi state. Cole's (2004) analysis of the sectarian violence and the influx of external jihadists into Iraq reflects this logic. He notes that the inwardly projected sectarian violence does not displace Iraqi nationalism, but rather "[s]ectarian groupings in the country do not see their religious identities as superseding their national ones", suggesting that the violence experienced in Iraq is not endemic of an inevitable fracturing of Iraq but rather is more closely in line with the attempt to forge a national identity however violently and bloody that process may be.

The dilemma for the donor community lies in the conflict of interest that naturally arises when the recipient society demands a post-conflict governance that is aligned with their traditional and customary historical values, in this case Islamic Sharia law; and their own interests which corresponds more readily with liberal democratic norms that unmistakably entails a secular state construct. This predisposition is symptomatic of the state-building vs. nation-building partition where secular actors that have adopted the democratic rhetoric of the state-building community have been given prominence precisely because they are deemed to contribute to the institution building process that is central to the state-centric reconstruction model. The voice of religious

actors have therefore been silenced or at best ignored because they often pose painful questions to the processes of institution, legitimacy and capacity building practices of the state-centric model.

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