مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning

Building Democracy and the Challenges Facing State– and Nation–Building in Post–2003 Iraq

A Group of Researchers

Publications of Al–Baidar Center for Studies and Planning

Summary

West Asia is considered one of the regions where countries have not adequately transferred state administration to their people. Among the most significant reasons for this situation are the existence of artificial governments in most countries of West Asia, which emerged following the agreements and understandings after World War I. As a result, there has been a lack of harmony between these governments and the aspirations of their peoples. Accordingly, the geographical map of these countries and the nature of their governments were formed under the direct supervision of foreign powers. For the same reasons, Iraq has faced the problem of national and sectarian discord, as well as the rule of minorities over other groups, which has led to the emergence of unrest and instability. This reality can be discussed by raising the question: What challenges and drawbacks has the nation-building project in post-Saddam Iraq faced?

The prevailing hypothesis is that various internal and external challenges, including the existence of ethnic and religious divisions, the failure to form and consolidate a national identity, and external interventions, have collectively prevented the successful establishment of a state and nation in Iraq.

This article aims to examine the challenges of state- and nation-building in Iraq since 2003, to provide solutions in this regard. This article is descriptive and explanatory, and information and data were collected through library research. The results show that since the fall of Saddam, Iraq has not experienced national solidarity or political stability.

Introduction

The issue of state- and nation-building has preoccupied all countries worldwide. In this context, some Western and European countries have managed to overcome this obstacle, as their states were born from the people and harmonized with them. However, the process of state- and nation-building has faced significant challenges in many parts of the world. As a result, we witness an increase in internal crises, which are then followed by regional and global crises. West Asia is one of the regions where the process of state- and nation-building in its countries has faced more weakness and instability. The implementation of state-building requires standards and conditions that West Asian countries have lacked since their

establishment. Iraq is among those countries that face this obstacle seriously.

The process of modern state- and nation-building in Iraq, as in most countries in West Asia, was shaped following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and according to the designs of the major colonial powers in the region; thus, it became a center for crises and challenges.

Iraq emerged as an independent state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. Its geographical boundaries and the nature of its government were determined under the supervision of foreign powers. The country has witnessed ethnic and sectarian diversity, as well as sectarian rule before 2003, accompanied by oppression, repression, and the silencing of the demands of other groups, which led to further tension and instability in the country.

The absence of democratic institutions in Iraq led to the marginalization of the country, the suppression of the people's demands, and the aspirations of its various social groups. Thus, authoritarianism and repression played a significant role in the failure of the state- and nation-building process in this country. This failure continued even after the American invasion of Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the commencement of Iraq's democratization process.

Thus, the question that arises is: Why does Iraq still face many challenges in this regard, despite the establishment of democracy and the active participation of groups that were previously marginalized? Based on this, the question that seeks an answer is: What are the most significant challenges facing the process of state- and nation-building after the American invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime?

It is worth noting that numerous internal and external challenges have hindered the success of this process. Ethnic and religious divisions still represent an obstacle in this context, as Iraq has not been able to establish and consolidate a shared national identity among its citizens. At the same time, competition among various regional and international countries in Iraq has led to further problems and crises. This study aims to clarify the most significant of these challenges using a descriptive method and the available library information on this subject.

Previous Studies

In an article titled "Analysis of Internal Factors in the Spread of Extremism in West Asia: Iraq as a Model," the authors concluded that the West Asia region, especially in the aftermath of the US military occupation of Iraq, witnessed an increase in the activity of extremist movements.

In studying the factors behind the expansion of these movements, in addition to the regional factors competing with the leading actors in the Middle East at the international level, and the regional powers and the changing US foreign policy agenda in the East, the internal factors of the countries influencing the scene should also be considered (Simper et al., 2015).

In another article titled "The Process of State- and Nation-Building, Formation of National Identity, and Reconstruction in Iraq: Historical Experiences and Future Prospects," the historical problems of Iraq in the process of state- and nation-building were addressed in three areas: state-building, nation-building, and reconstruction of Iraq (Grayaq Zandi, 2010).

Javadani Moghaddam (2009), in his article titled "State- and Nation-Building in West Asia: A Case Study of Iraq," examines the process of state- and nation-building in Iraq, the internal and external challenges and obstacles facing the government in this country, and its measures to address these problems. He also assesses the importance and role of Iran in helping Iraq out of its current crisis and the implications of this for the West Asia region.

In a study titled "The Crisis of State- and Nation-Building and Its Role in the Formation of Religious Fundamentalism in West Asia (Iraq and Syria as Models)," the authors concluded that the incomplete state- and nation-building in West Asia (Iraq and Syria) led to the emergence and development of religious fundamentalism.

The different structures and diversity of ethnicities and religious sects in Iraqi and Syrian societies, and the establishment of the state and nation based on the "Sykes-Picot" agreement in West Asia on the one hand, and on the other hand, the process of nation-building and its result in the accumulation of popular demands in Iraqi and Syrian societies, were research hypotheses considered (Moradzadeh et al., 2016).

In an article titled "Threat or Challenge to State- and Nation-Building," the author believes that factors such as disagreements and conflicting goals and interests among social groups, the absence of a basis for reconciliation and rapprochement between groups, the lack of civil and democratic traditions and power-sharing, the many ambitions of the Sunni minority and its reliance on Arab states to achieve them, and the mentality of the ruling regime in Iraq for decades, all contributed to slowing the process of state-building in Iraq (Nikola, 2011).

Therefore, by studying many internal and external sources, it is clear that there are numerous discussions about state- and nation-building in Iraq. Most of the research conducted is a historical review of this process, or it addresses the problems in this field from a particular perspective. What distinguishes this study is that it attempts to examine the post-Saddam period by evaluating the indicators adopted in state- and nation-building within a scientific framework, rather than relying solely on a purely historical review of the subject.

Theoretical Research

1. What is the State- and Nation-Building Project, and how is it achieved?

State- and nation-building is a form of political system that emerged from the feudal system after the sixteenth century and spread across the world as a new political model. In this type of system, there is a logical relationship between the state, as the highest political authority, and the nation, as the creator of the political system.

In the new system that emerges in state- and nation-building projects as a new political model, the basic premise is that the nation is a human community with many historical and cultural commonalities living within defined political boundaries, referred to as the state. This is why today's national governments are rooted in the nation, which is recognized as the highest form of political organization. Thus, state- and nation-building can be defined as a process in which a logical, two-way relationship exists between the state and the nation.

This mutual relationship arises through culture, symbolic representations, shared historical features, political agendas, common land, and the necessity of its protection. Therefore, the term "state- and nation-building" encompasses two distinct concepts: the state and the nation.

The state and the nation always operate in a dual developmental and foundational relationship, meaning the state requires the nation and its solidarity for its consolidation and continuity. In contrast, the nation relies on the state for development, growth, power consolidation, and the maintenance of a distinct and independent identity. Government-building aims to establish and strengthen the institutions necessary to support long-term political, economic, and social development, including legislative and judicial authorities, as well as executive agencies such as education and transportation (Ghawam & Zargar, 2009, p. 215).

State- and nation-building is a process in which the political community seeks to maintain and enhance its sovereignty and independence by increasing and developing its capabilities at the level of governmental institutions to achieve autonomy. This goal heavily depends on improving social and national solidarity, integration, and political stability, particularly concerning the development of democratic institutions.

The objective of such a process is to continue developing the state (as a strong institutional structure) and the nation (as a unified social structure with a single identity), and to foster growth and convergence between them. From an international perspective (looking in from the outside), the state and the nation appear as a single, cohesive, and indivisible entity; that is, the nation is considered the owner of the state (Zargar, 2007, p. 17).

2. Theories of State- and Nation-Building

State- and nation-building is a process through which the citizens of a society gradually reproduce their shared characteristics within a single national framework. In this process, state-building refers to the organization, definition, and institutionalization of the relationship between the state and its people within various political, economic, social, cultural, and legal structures.

On the other hand, nation-building is a socio-historical process through which a large number of people living in a specific territory acquire a shared historical identity through efforts aimed at dissolving ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and other differences, so that preserving this identity becomes one of their most important life duties.

The process of state- and nation-building enables the formation of an inclusive state encompassing a diverse set of social groups in two ways. The first method is coercion in the process of state- and nation-building, which is emphasized in classical theories of state-building. In this way, power is often seized through the exercise of authority at the highest levels and the establishment of an authoritarian regime that suppresses the desires of various groups or minorities, including the ethnic or religious majority in that country. This method was typically applied in countries under colonial rule, where rulers were appointed according to external dictates. The second method is the liberal approach, which is applied through democratization or consensual democracy (Matlabi & Khan Mohammadi, 2017, p. 202).

2.1 Classical Theories

State- and nation-building are logically understood within the classical framework when almost all of the state's population belongs to a specific ethnic group, and the ethnic characteristics of the state are interconnected. In this type of state- and nation-building, rulers do not derive their power from the people they govern. States based on this system were managed in various forms: personal government, religious government, city-states, oligarchy (minority rule), military state, tribal state, and empire (Nabavi & Douri, 2017, p. 104).

The common denominator among these various forms of government is their authoritarian nature and the fact that they do not represent the people themselves; state- and nation-building was carried out coercively, meaning that control over governance was achieved through military force and violence. Different ethnicities and groups settled within the borders and, in effect, became a single nation. Initially, Western countries witnessed the rise of authoritarian and dictatorial states that were deeply separated from the people (Matlabi & Khan Mohammadi, 2017, p. 201). In absolute governments, sovereignty is applied absolutely over the people. This understanding of sovereignty was raised by thinkers such as Hobbes, Bodin, and Machiavelli. From this perspective, sovereignty is essentially legislative authority, and the most prominent and vital sign of sovereignty is the power to enact law (Matlabi & Khan Mohammadi, 2017, p. 203).

2.2 Modern Theories

The theoretical study of the relationship between the nation and the state dates back to the emergence of developed states and the development of liberal ideas. In classical liberalism, thinkers such as John Locke laid the foundations for this theory based on social contract theory. Later, Bentham, Smith, and Mill conducted further studies, re-examining and analyzing it in depth. Within the framework of liberalism, the state is obligated to meet the demands of its people. It is responsible for removing internal and external obstacles that prevent citizens from exercising their rights and engaging in activities with complete freedom. In return, society respects government policies that align with social demands (Ghawam & Malmir, 2014, p. 161).

In the modern era, there is a general tendency toward plurality and diversity. General sovereignty is based on the sovereignty of the general will, which exists in the modern state and is referred to as the nation. The theory of general sovereignty faced more turmoil during the growth of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was accepted as a rational basis for the new democratic government. Today, governments that do not respect the right of general sovereignty are considered illegitimate and are excluded from modern national democratic government (Matlabi & Khan Mohammadi, 2017, p. 203).

In general, the literature on the modern state- and nation-building project encompasses several stages: consolidating government authority in specific areas, unifying cultural activities through educational systems, promoting and expanding public participation in politics, and strengthening solidarity and national identity through policies that distribute social welfare services. In this context, the state- and nation-building project consists of two dimensions: general governmental authority and the expansion of civil rights for citizens (Aminian & Karimi Qahroudi, 2012, p. 72). In this regard, state- and nation-building involves the establishment and strengthening of institutions necessary to support long-term political, economic, and social development, including legislative authority, the judiciary, and executive administrations, such as education and transportation (Aminian & Karimi Qahroudi, 2012, p. 73).

Thus, the process of state- and nation-building does not rely on coercion as in the classical period, and it is expected that modern states and peoples will respect civil and citizenship rights as much as possible and take the initiative to establish the necessary institutions for the participation of citizens and various ethnic and religious groups.

3. Criteria for Successful State- and Nation-Building

The state- and nation-building project encompasses key factors, including political and military control over a specific territory, defending this land against potential future claims, and creating material welfare and political legitimacy within this territory. If any of these are implemented well, state- and nation-building have been successfully achieved.

3.1 Regional Saturation

The state- and nation-building project requires regional saturation, meaning that there should be no threats directed at it from inside or outside. To overcome these threats, focus must be placed on increasing capacity. Nevertheless, national issues often undermine the regional saturation feature. This feature is considered one of the biggest obstacles to proper state- and nation-building in West Asia (Imamjomehzadeh & Heshmati, 2014, p. 124).

Regional saturation refers to stability within a country's borders, where the government exercises its sovereignty and effective control over its territories. In most West Asian countries, borders were artificially drawn and imposed by foreign powers, disregarding the ethnic identities and histories of the people living in these lands (Nabavi & Douri, 2017, p. 104). These countries are unable to control their borders and therefore resort to considerable violence to achieve stability (Bogdandy and others, 2005: 581).

3.2 National Unity and Solidarity

A strong national identity is only realized within the framework of the highest level of harmony and social solidarity. There is a close relationship between a sense of secure and assured identity on the one hand, and the sense of belonging and expectations that arise from it, which make the individual feel protected and widely supported by a large group in which they participate. The state of solidarity and national unity in most West Asian societies is not at the desired level and usually faces many risks and threats. In some cases, these threats

have reached a level that poses a serious challenge, shaking the foundations of the state and almost leading to its dissolution and disintegration. Demographic and cultural gaps in many of these societies have been drawn along the lines of dangerous ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within local borders; thus, maintaining the unity and integrity of the territory is always a serious threat for them. Iraq is a real example of this crisis, which paved the way for ethnic and religious violence in the country, and has been a cause of violence and conflict for more than a century (Katzman, 2014). The apparent weakness in implementing solidarity and national unity, as well as achieving a shared national identity, is a clear indication of the slowness or delay in the state- and nation-building processes in West Asia in general.

The factor of political and economic stability is one of the most essential criteria in the state- and nation-building project, which the state achieves at the required level through the establishment of successful civil institutions and effective military centers (Mollaei & Azghandi, 2011). The state- and nation-building project is closely linked to the issue of development, to the extent that some view them as one framework. State- and nation-building is not outside the scope of development and progress (Hatneh, 2002, p. 215). Regarding the assessment of political stability and stability criteria in West Asian countries, they are classified as very weak states at the lowest ranks, as they are non-democratic regimes or some are fundamentally authoritarian. From this perspective, it is clear that the gap between the state as the representative of the people and the people as the protector of the state and the source of its legitimacy indicates the level of implementation and development of the state- and nation-building project in these countries.

Achieving development and progress in many countries in West Asia (and especially in most African countries) is heavily dependent on foreign aid. Such countries, without a doubt, are unable to implement the state- and nation-building project and overcome various political and economic crises. Other countries in West Asia have natural resources such as oil and significant economic and financial potential (such as the Gulf states) and can invest these resources in state- and nation-building; however, the experience in oil-rich countries in West Asia has shown that oil wealth has never contributed to the achievement of state- and nation-building, and in fact, it has increased the negative aspects in the country.

The continued dependence of governments in West Asia has led to the use of oil revenues to maintain independence from society, and the authoritarian orientation of these governments has persisted due to the government's sense of self-sufficiency and perceived lack of need. The continued culture of dictatorial politics, absence of law, and authoritarianism has led to the inefficiency of democratic institutions in promoting political and economic development. The failure of elite turnover to manage the country properly (Brennher, 2003, p. 34). Accordingly, the state- and nation-building project in West Asian countries has not been implemented correctly and as required; thus, it can be said that the state- and nation-building movement in West Asia is a slow process that has faced numerous crises and challenges.

4. Obstacles and Challenges to the State- and Nation-Building Project

The proposed indicators and required criteria for implementing the state- and nation-building project, if not correctly applied, will become problems that generate numerous obstacles and challenges to the project.

4.1 Social Fragmentation, Ethnic and Religious Division, and the National Identity Crisis

One of the indicators of state- and nation-building, as well as the emergence of modern state conditions, regardless of whether it is democratic or not, is the spread of national identity. This results in individuals forming a specific nation, belonging to a defined system of governance, rather than relying on ethnic and tribal affiliations. There should be no contradiction between the two (Sardarnia, 2011, p. 37).

Therefore, to create a unified, harmonious, and coherent nation-state, all different groups must achieve cohesion and harmony within the framework of a single nation, so that they perceive themselves as one body and one country.

The definition of the nation in its modern sense, i.e., the cohesion of the nation and the people with each other, has not emerged in West Asia, so that the state arises from the national will, far from ethnic and religious affiliations, and the state itself seeks to achieve national and civil goals and objectives.

4.2 Security and Power Crisis

One of the necessary conditions for establishing and developing a modern government is for the country to possess a strong army that can establish order and security, and to train citizens to adhere to the law. In reality, the modern state cannot be realized without coercive power, as the main task of governments is to maintain order and security above all else (Sardarnia & Hosseini, 2014, p. 53).

4.3 Cultural Performance

Nationalism, as an ideology that manifests within an organizational framework, i.e., national governments, aims to fulfill the necessary function of preserving its cultural identity. However, developments in recent decades in the field of communication and the consequences of postmodernism have come into sharp conflict with the existing culture and cultural activists in the state- and nation-building project. The reasons for this can be summarized as follows:

First, cultural activists interested in the state- and nation-building project in the age of the information revolution and the growing expansion of communications have not withstood the influence of foreign cultures; since satellite channel programs, the Internet, and written discourses are available to the world through visual, audio, and print media, they cast a shadow over national and patriotic cultures, thus ending the cultural monopoly of governments. Second, with the advent of the postmodern era, initiatives have emerged that seek to highlight identity and the authenticity of human nature. One of the cultural features of the current era is a focus on human desires, rather than adhering to societal dictates of what is considered right or wrong. Let us consider the postmodern period as a period of advocacy for identity. The first blow is dealt to the state- and nation-building project, which often relies on an artificial identity (Amirkawsemi, 2010, p. 87). Therefore, if we see today an expansion of ethnic, religious, and nationalist movements, one of the main reasons is the failure of the state- and nation-building project to create unity and cohesion.

4.4 Economic Performance

One of the slogans raised by the state- and nation-building project is comprehensive independence in all fields, especially the economic field.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the nationalization of natural resources in nation-states, so the economic sphere focused on national resources and local production as essential characteristics and pillars of these governments. In this context, in the era of globalization, the expansion of multinational corporations has gradually eroded national sovereignty over local economic activities daily (Amirkawsemi, 2010, p. 88).

In addition to the resources above, other challenges have tightened the grip on such states and contributed to increasing frustration with the management of national governments. For example: the growing phenomenon of terrorism day after day, violence, military aggression, insecurity among members of society, the conflict between the human rights system and the national rights system—which is often in favor of the former—the threat to the unity of the state- and nation-building project through the emergence of ethnic, religious, and cultural movements, especially the new interpretation of the right of nations to self-determination, which has accelerated the process of division in these states.

Furthermore, the emergence of non-governmental organizations and the creation of a global network by these organizations, such as human rights defenders and Amnesty International, as well as environmental advocates, are all manifestations of the context of convergence among states and peoples (Amirkawsemi, 2010, p. 89). The reality is that most of these challenges can be observed in the countries of West Asia, especially Iraq.

State- and Nation-Building in Iraq After Saddam's Rule

In terms of state-building, Iraq is among the countries that have faced many problems, crises, and challenges. In reality, the process of state-building has led to insecurity and instability in the country. This process has its characteristics and features, whether during Saddam's rule, before it, or after. There was no successful state- and nation-building project in this country; if any existed, it was fragile.

Regarding how the state-building process was strengthened in Iraq, it can be said that it was initiated by the United States, based on the American model, which aims to establish a strong government, provide order and security, and subsequently build the nation by establishing democratic institutions and promoting public participation. Until March 2003, Iraq was under a dictatorial regime that subjected anyone who opposed it to imprisonment,

torture, and execution (Pourahmadi & others, 2017:72). Iraq was occupied in 2003. Saddam Hussein was removed based on two justifications: first, Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, and second, to implement the project of Iraq as a model for a democratic Arab state in West Asia. The United States implemented two out of four phases of reconstruction in Iraq: first, improving the troubled situation in Iraq, and then limiting the potential consequences of nuclear weapons proliferation. During this period, the goal was disaster management, the ability to deal with movements and parties, organizing the living conditions of the displaced, and addressing food shortages. In this process, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance played a significant role in Iraq, with General Jay Garner serving as its administrator. With Garner's failure to improve conditions in Baghdad and restore calm, the removal of Ba'ath Party members, and the emergence of Shiite identity in Iraq, Garner and the Iraq Reconstruction Office were dismissed in the second half of May 2003 (Grayaq Zandi, 2010, p. 28).

In general, the system of governance in Iraq changed from 2003 to 2011, that is, from the presence of American forces in Iraq, from a dictatorial regime under Saddam Hussein to a system based on political majority. During this period, and following the ratification of the constitution in 2005, the country witnessed four parliamentary elections in 2005, 2010, 2014, and 2018 (Haji Yousefi & Hossein Zadeh, 2018:36).

At the beginning of the formation of the modern political system in Iraq, a new federal state was established under a modern constitution (federalism), focusing on peaceful coexistence among national and sectarian currents in Iraq, as well as the integration of political currents and groups. However, this ideal situation did not last, as dissatisfaction and conflict increased among various Iraqi groups—Arabs, Kurds, Arab Shiites, Sunnis, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Chaotic disputes emerged beyond the framework of the constitution. These unresolved disputes resurfaced in the second half of 2012, returning Iraq to a period of conflict once again (Katzman, 2015).

After the adoption of the new constitution, Iraq was heading towards a democratic government, only to witness the emergence of Takfiri terrorists affiliated with ISIS, who raised the slogan of returning to the past, creating various problems and crises for Iraq even after the defeat of ISIS, turning the country into an unstable society full of violence and based on

multiple conflicts (Abtahi & Torabi, 2015, p. 73).

With the emergence of ISIS and its control over Mosul province and some Sunni areas in Iraq, we continue to witness a sectarian war between ISIS and its internal allies with regional support on one side, and the Iraqi government, its military forces, and its regional allies on the other (Pourahmadi & others, 2017:79). The disputes between Erbil and Baghdad have prevented the desired integration between the Kurds and Shiites in the face of the threat of extremism and terrorism from extremist Sunni groups supported by Saudi Arabia, as well as from the defunct Ba'ath Party forces. More importantly, there are differences among Sunni leaders and parties in their criticism of the government's performance.

Meanwhile, Sunni areas in Iraq can be considered a suitable environment for the presence and activities of Al-Qaeda initially after 2004, and for ISIS in the second stage after 2014. This approach demonstrates that the composition of ethnicities and tribes from the past to the present has hindered Iraq, following Saddam's rule, from establishing a stable government and, consequently, democratic institutions. The political challenges and differences among Iraqi political groups and the lack of political cohesion and harmony in the country are among the most critical factors that have led to increased internal tensions as well as the rise of ethnic and sectarian conflicts (Haji Yousefi & Hossein Zadeh, 2018:37). Thus, neither the authoritarianism that prevailed in Iraq before the American occupation nor the attempts at democratization in the subsequent period succeeded in satisfying the various groups and parties, nor did they lead to stability in Iraq.

Evaluation of State-Building and Nation-Building Criteria in Iraq

For this purpose, we must examine the indicators of state-nation building, such as territorial saturation, national solidarity and unity, and political stability.

1. Territorial Saturation

In this area, the current Iraqi government, which was formed after the American invasion of Iraq, is considered an extremely weak government that has been unable to acquire the necessary elements of a strong government. One of the most critical components of a good state in any country is the discussion of government effectiveness and its impact; this is something

that the Iraqi state has largely lost. Consequently, the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the freedom of the people have become absent for Iraqi citizens. In recent years, the Iraqi government has exercised sovereignty over only some parts of its territory, losing control over most of its lands—an issue of critical importance for any government. During these years, ISIS controlled parts of Iraqi territory, causing the government to face a significant deficit in the political sphere. In fact, since the American invasion of Iraq, the country has been in a state of chaos, including insurgency, sectarian violence, looting, foreign rebellion, assassinations, and terrorist operations (Fattah 260, 2009); therefore, the government formed in Iraq has not been able to perform its duties in the true sense.

2. Internal Conditions in Iraq: Solidarity, National Unity, and Political Stability

There is a close relationship between the factors of solidarity and national unity on the one hand, and the factors of stability and political steadfastness in a country on the other. In practice, it is challenging to separate these two factors, so we examine them as prominent indicators of the state- and nation-building project.

According to a report by The New York Times on the current situation of the Iraqi economy, the economic crisis in Iraq is so dire that Iraqi citizens are withdrawing their money from banks because they have realized there is no longer enough money in them. The economic situation in Iraq has deteriorated to the extent that hospitals have regressed to pre-1960s conditions, primarily due to sanctions, economic deprivation, and the security and political crises Iraq has faced in the past decade. Nearly 8 million people in Iraq live on government salaries and revenues, and government deficits and insufficient income have severely damaged their livelihoods. There are also concerns that economic crises, along with war, displacement, and tribal hostilities, may lead to widespread social unrest (Dhu al-Faqari and Omrani, 42:1398).

In the field of social welfare, the Iraqi government has been in a much worse position. In terms of health, the Iraqi government has faced a dire situation. The US-led invasion of Iraq led to the closure of 17 ministries (including the Ministry of Health), as occupying forces attacked and destroyed Iraqi hospitals, resulting in health problems (Ghaffari Heshjin et al., 71-81:1389). Iraq's internal issues have caused divisions, instability, and lack of stability in

the country, as many groups, such as the Sunnis, who were deprived of opportunities and felt discriminated against and oppressed, began to view government plans with suspicion (Ghaffari Heshjin et al., 70:1389). Thus, solidarity and national unity in this country are in a weak phase, leading to instability in Iraq (Sami'i Esfahani and Nowruzi Nejad, 112:1392).

Another factor that has contributed to Iraq's instability is international competition. Despite the mention of its most essential manifestations, the competition between Iran and the United States has had an increasing impact on Iraq's internal situation.

Building Democracy and Challenges to State- and Nation-Building in Post-2003 Iraq

This competition has continued since the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq. However, when the United States withdrew its forces from Iraq in 2011, the balance of power shifted in favor of Tehran. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki increasingly relied on Iran to deal with internal opposition, which succumbed to the unrest caused by the Syrian uprising and the civil war in which Iraq became involved.

Due to the weakness of Iraqi security forces caused by corruption, the Iraqi jihadist network was reorganized in Syria and transformed into the Islamic State (ISIS). The organization returned to Iraq in 2014 and gained control of large parts of the country (Fantappie and Vaez, 30 April 2019). US-Iranian relations experienced a breakdown, and the previously coordinated common ground in the fight against ISIS disappeared with the arrival of Adel Abdul Mahdi as Prime Minister in October 2018, following the parliamentary elections in May, after Haider al-Abadi (2019, Fantappie and Vaez, 30 April).

Since May 2019, tensions between the United States and Iran have increased significantly, to the point that US forces assassinated the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in an airstrike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Iran responded to this act by launching missile strikes on US military sites in Iraq. Thus, the United States and Iran seemed on the verge of extensive hostilities, and Iran-backed groups continued to attack US bases in Iraq (2020 Katzman and others, 8 May).

After the assassination of General Soleimani, protests erupted in Iraq, and Iraqi cities faced further tension. These events and demonstrations had a significant impact on Iraqi political divisions. Long-standing tensions in the country have created serious risks among supporters and opponents of Iran within Iraq, as well as among political elites themselves. Social media has exploited these circumstances to capitalize on the tense relations between Iran and the United States (Haddad, 2020, January 9).

In reality, the competition between these states in Iraq, in addition to endangering national solidarity and security, has caused ongoing and widespread instability, which has cost the Iraqi people dearly.

It should be noted that Iran, in countries such as Iraq and Syria, has acted on an official government request to strengthen the existing government, legitimize it, and provide military advice to combat terrorism. Currently, the ongoing tensions between the US and Iran, the decline in oil revenues, the resulting financial pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the terrorist activities of ISIS remnants have created many problems for the Iraqi people. Some Iranian opponents believe that the competition between Iran and the US in Iraq has led to numerous divisions and tensions among the supporters of both countries within Iraq (2020 Blanchard, 17 July). Thus, it is clear that none of the state-building indicators have succeeded in Iraq. As a result, it can be said that the American model of state-building has not been suitable for countries like Iraq.

Today, Iraq has lost complete control over its territory and cannot govern effectively. The level of solidarity and national unity in this country is very low. Therefore, there are fertile grounds for the emergence of sectarian and ethnic conflicts, a trend that is increasing day by day.

The tense internal situation in Iraq has led to increased poverty, corruption, unemployment, and protests against foreign intervention in Iraq's affairs. Large-scale demonstrations have forced the Iraqi government to confront and suppress them.

Political stability and the government's commitment to meeting the people's demands are

not evident in Iraq. There are ongoing protests that lead to the dissolution of the government, and the next government suffers the same fate.

The Greatest Challenge Facing Iraq in State- and Nation-Building Since 2003

The current government has inherited fundamental problems and lacks the necessary infrastructure to form a new Iraq. These problems are partly due to the process of state-nation building in Iraq and partly due to the failed implementation of the American democratic state model in the country, as well as its regional repercussions and interference in Iraq's internal affairs. These problems have created crises and obstacles for the government. The most critical challenges facing the democratic state in Iraq can be divided into internal and external challenges.

1. Internal Challenges

1.1. Ethnic and Religious Divisions in Iraq

Ethnic and religious divisions have had the most significant impact on the country's political landscape. The deepening and activation of these gaps, particularly during periods when they could have been expressed, have led to bloody conflicts and have effectively created a fragmented society based on ethnic and religious lines (Pour Ahmadi et al., 80:1396).

Iraq's ethnic and religious groups are concentrated in almost distinct geographic areas. Iraq has 18 provinces, three of which in the north are inhabited by Sunni Kurds, three in the west and northwest by Sunni Arabs, and nine in the east and south by Shiite Arabs. The majority in Baghdad province are also Shiites.

The provinces of Diyala and Kirkuk also include a mix of all ethnic and religious groups, with none forming an absolute majority in terms of population (Maqsoudi, 87:1382).

1.2. Loss of Power and Sense of Deprivation Among Iraqi Sunnis

Despite the central Iraqi government's efforts to eliminate Baath remnants by forming the De-Baathification Committee, Baathist elements, especially in Sunni areas and with the help of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, tried to extend their influence within the Iraqi army. Therefore, many disturbances have been observed among Sunni groups.

The expulsion of a large number of Sunni officials from government positions and their loss of power and influence in the new Iraqi government pushed them to join extremist groups and carry out sabotage against the central government (Simber and Moradi Kaladre, 59:1394).

In reality, Sunnis who have held power since the formation of the Iraqi government, despite being fewer in number compared to the overall Iraqi population, especially the Shiites, can no longer seize the democratic system to exercise their authority in the Iraqi political structure.

Although Sunnis are a minority in Iraq compared to Shiites, they have held the reins of the state since the first formation of the Iraqi government. Therefore, they cannot tolerate a democratic system that undermines their dominance and provides collective participation for all groups; thus, they prevent, by various means, the formation and progress of the state-building process in Iraq. In this regard, the US's misguided policies in dissolving the army and de-Baathification, most of whom were Iraqi Sunnis, created an unemployment crisis in the country. The angry Sunnis, dissatisfied with their situation, found no recourse but to join armed extremist groups.

1.3. Weak Democratic Culture as an Infrastructure for State-Building

Since the establishment of the Iraqi state in 2003, Iraq has been under authoritarian regimes, with the Baathist regime that came to power in a 1968 military coup containing strong elements of totalitarianism.

On the other hand, internal and external wars, as well as political instability, combined with the prevailing political despotism in the country, have hindered the expansion of civil political culture. Therefore, Iraq lacks experience in working with democratic institutions and mechanisms, as well as in distributing power at both the national and local levels. One of the necessary conditions for a transition to democracy is having a political culture based on values such as tolerance, pluralism, and negotiation.

One of the unfortunate legacies Iraq inherited from the Baathist regime is a culture of fear, pessimism, injustice, and mistrust among ethnic and religious groups (Davis, 31:2015).

In reality, Iraqi society, which has suffered from the effects of colonial rule, the monarchy, Arab nationalism, and fascist revolution, has a very low level of political trust, social tolerance, public support for political freedom, and gender equality. Today in Iraq, those with a share of power work to build their support networks.

Generally, Iraq, like most Third World countries ruled by authoritarian regimes for years, suffers from a dependent and limited culture.

Despite the Iraqi people's awareness of the existence of government and laws, as well as their commitment to them, they do not have an active presence in political affairs, except for limited official participation. This is due to the legacy of previous authoritarian regimes and their effects on the people, which cannot be easily changed. Removing these effects requires more time and socialization, based again on democratic and civil values, as well as other components.

The influence and dominance of non-democratic political culture on the attitudes and behavior of Iraqi elites and political forces is evident, with extremist political and religious rhetoric present in the Iraqi political scene and enjoying a mass social base (Pour Ahmadi et al., 86:1396).

In general, democracy has been established in Iraq under circumstances that lacked the necessary infrastructure and capabilities for this modern phenomenon. Governments that have come to power in Iraq since 2003 have failed to instill democratic values through socialization institutions, such as the family, education, media, higher education, and intellectual authorities, due to numerous political and security problems and crises.

In reality, factors such as the lack of a comprehensive national identity, a group of elites supporting the regime and opposing democracy, the absence of democratic traditions, lack of rule of law, and the absence of necessary prerequisites for organized democracy in Iraq have all led to tensions and conflicts (Zara'an et al., 120:1397).

The reluctance of groups to move toward democratic processes, their inability to resolve disputes within legal frameworks, the continuous increase in group and party demands, and the prioritization of their interests over the national interest have all contributed to plunging

Iraq into a cycle of crises.

1.4. Activities of Terrorist Groups in Iraq

With the American occupation and the spread of US forces in Iraq and the lack of security in the country, terrorist groups (al-Qaeda and ISIS) emerged and turned Iraq into a hub for their criminal activities.

The emergence of al-Qaeda and ISIS in Iraq is a direct result of the American occupation of the country.

These terrorist groups tried to legitimize their activities as legitimate groups with their false slogans and principles, and under the pretext of supporting the Iraqi government and people and combating the American occupation (Mahnaz Zare' Zohmat Kesh, 1063:1391).

Despite the elimination of ISIS in Iraq, its remnants continue to commit crimes through terrorist operations, causing insecurity in Iraqi cities and provinces.

1.5. The Security Crisis in the Structure of the Iraqi State

Another fundamental problem the Iraqi government faces is the security crisis within the context of the country's evolving security structure. Part of this problem is due to the Iraqi government's lack of authority over the past few years, which has exacerbated security problems in Iraq, in addition to the formation of new security structures. On the other hand, the multiplicity of systems and the lack of compromise among political groups have led some internal groups to attempt to overthrow the government (Mahnaz and Zare' Zohmat Kesh, 1062:1391).

2. External Challenges

2.1. The Connection of Iraqi Ethnic Groups with Their Counterparts in Neighboring Countries

The geography inhabited by Iraqi Shiites is connected to the most critical and most significant Shiite geography in Iran. The geography of Iraqi Kurds is adjacent to the Kurds living in Iran, Turkey, and Syria. The three Sunni provinces are adjacent to Sunni areas in Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, developments along the ethnic and religious lines of Iraqi social groups outside the country directly or indirectly affect Iraqi Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in their relationships with each other. The distribution of tribal populations in Iraq's geography, along with the diverse climates in which each of these ethnic and religious groups resides, has led to significant differences in the potential and capabilities of Iraqi ethnic and religious groups.

The imbalance in the economic, political, and geopolitical capabilities of Iraqi social groups, and the relative superiority of Shiites in this regard, has placed these groups in constant competition, deepening social gaps in the country (Zara'an et al., 117:1397).

This issue has made countries like Iran and Turkey sensitive to the problem of the independence demand of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, or the continuous stirring of sectarian strife between Shiites and Sunnis, leading to regional disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia and, consequently, to each country supporting its affiliated groups. The result is increased internal tension in Iraq and a serious threat to the state-building process.

2.2. Power Vacuum and Conflicting Interests Among Regional and International Actors

The power vacuum in Iraq has turned the Iraqi political scene into an arena for regional and international competition and conflicting interests, which has had a devastating impact on the prospects for peace and stability in West Asia.

In general, the power vacuum and the presence of failed governments in West Asia have been factors for chaos and instability, not only at the local level but also at the regional and international levels. In Iraq, at the internal level, the disputes and challenges arising from political rivalries and differences among various groups and parties, including Shiites, Kurds, and Sunnis on one hand, and differences within each group on the other, to fill the power vacuum, have been among the reasons for the spread of tension and unrest in the country.

At the regional level, there is intense competition among influential actors to fill the power vacuum and increase penetration and influence in Iraq. In this context, two groups of such competitions can be seen: first, the competition between Iran and the Arab world, which has provided the possibility for a new round of competition between the two sides, mainly between Iran and others such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, aiming to expand political

and cultural influence. The Arab world's concerns about the expansion of Shiite influence in the region are evident.

Meanwhile, according to national strategies, the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this country at the official invitation of the Iraqi government and with good intentions has helped establish security and protect the country's interests in West Asia.

Second, there is competition within the Arab world, where views differ on how to deal with current issues in Iraq. Currently, the views of Saudi Arabia and Egypt do not align with the level of Syria's influence and role in Iraq (Barzegar, 15:1385).

Meanwhile, Iraq's Arab neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, which sees the formation of a Shiite-dominated democratic system as a weakening factor for Arab Sunnis, its main allies in Iraq, and as increasing Shiite regional power, seek to support Sunni groups and artificially strengthen their role (Mahnaz and Zare' Zohmat Kesh, 1063:1391).

After the fall of Saddam, Saudi Arabia played a dual role in Iraq's political developments. While verbally supporting the new government in Iraq, it closely monitored and watched with great concern the rise of Shiites and Kurds to power in Iraq (Pour Ahmadi et al., 89:1396).

The rise of Shiites in Iraq and the marginalization of Sunnis compared to their previous status have increased Saudi Arabia's concerns about political developments in Iraq. Saudis now believe that the Iraqi political process aims to empower Islamic Shiites rather than Arab Sunnis. Moreover, Arab Sunnis are Saudi Arabia's preferred choice due to their strategic background in Iraq (Asadi, 249:1391).

In general, political developments in Iraq and the transformation of the power structure from a Sunni-dominated state to a predominantly Shiite one have led Saudi Arabia, in its attempts to balance regional power, to support Sunni groups loyal to it in the country. This is to reduce the power of Iran and its allied Shiites in Iraq and challenge the democracy project in Iraq. These dual policies are also pursued by other actors such as Turkey, whose primary manifestation is the fight against ISIS in Iraq. For example, Turkey has deployed its forces around Mosul and supported Sunni Arab groups, causing conflict and political instability in the country and challenging the democratic transformation and state-building process.

Many Iraqi experts and politicians believe that to resolve the Iraqi crisis, the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey must sit at the same table and work together. From their perspective, there is no way out of Iraq's crisis except through an agreement among external powers. In reality, these powers must determine the role and share of each of their affiliated internal Iraqi factions in the state (Zara'an et al., 127:1397).

The affiliation of Iraqi groups and parties with various foreign political entities has turned Iraq into an arena of regional competition, fueling and deepening ethnic and religious divisions, leading to instability at the political, security, and economic levels, and the emergence of many other crises in Iraq (Zara'an et al., 128:1397).

This reality has created serious challenges for the new political process and the new nation-state in this country. Iraq's internal and external problems are interconnected. If Iraq succeeds in building a strong state and achieving internal cohesion and harmony, external competition and intervention in the country will be significantly reduced. The less interference in Iraqi affairs, the greater Iraq's success in internal cohesion and advancing the democratic transformation process for state- and nation-building.

2.3. The Kurdish Issue and Regional Powers

Although the Kurdish issue can be raised within the context of foreign intervention, given its importance, it is better addressed separately. One of the main concerns of the Iraqi government has been that the Kurds have long been worried about the role played by regional countries in the ongoing dynamics between the central government and the Kurdistan Region.

The prevailing conditions in Iraq have provided an opportunity for some neighboring countries, such as Turkey, the United States, and Israel, to exploit the Iraqi government and people and obtain certain advantages through interference in its internal affairs. One of the most significant advantages was the 1975 agreement between Iran and Iraq.

Another significant aspect of the political and military activities in Kurdish areas is that these activities have always been able to create substantial obstacles to economic activities, oil extraction, and export from the country. Nearly half of Iraq's oil production, as well as its gas resources, are currently located in areas inhabited by Kurds. This percentage reached 70%

or perhaps 80% during the Iran-Iraq war. Part of southern oil also passes through pipelines located in Kurdish areas and is transported to the Mediterranean Sea (Judah, 2002:3, 55-63).

Therefore, it must be said that foreign intervention in Iraq is a highly significant issue that slows and weakens the process of building a national state in Iraq due to the weakness of the central government after Saddam's fall.

Conclusion

The nation-building project in West Asia faces more obstacles and challenges than in other parts of the world because most West Asian countries were formed under the dictates of foreign powers, regardless of ethnic, religious, or linguistic contexts.

Iraq has been under authoritarian and military regimes since its inception. After declaring independence, the government was under military rule for a prolonged period, which hindered the establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions and the participation of all groups in power and government administration.

During Saddam Hussein's rule in particular, non-Sunni religious and ethnic groups were severely repressed. Saddam's regime ruled over the Shiite majority, Kurds, and other minorities. Saddam sought to unify the state and territory through military force and Arab nationalist ideology, until the US and British invasion of Iraq in 2003 transformed the country's system into a democratic one, enabling the Shiite majority to take power from other minorities.

The nation-building model in post-Saddam Iraq was based on the American model, where an external factor forms a strong state that maintains order and stability in the country, followed by elections and the formation of institutions.

With the expulsion of US forces from Iraq in 2011, the power vacuum led to rebellion by some Sunni and Salafi groups. Angry Sunnis over the post-Saddam situation caused chaos by joining Salafi and Takfiri groups like ISIS, plunging Iraq and the region into a period of acute crisis and significant challenge.

Iraq continues to struggle with the issue of population heterogeneity and power-sharing. However, the question remains: despite Iraq's move toward democracy after Saddam's fall,

why has the state-building process in Iraq not succeeded, and why has security and stability not prevailed? In reality, violence in Iraq has increased in the post-2003 period compared to the authoritarian era of Saddam Hussein.

The reason can be found in signs of government failure and weakness, such that it cannot confront waves of violence and chaos, lacking the tools, capabilities, and mechanisms for control, except for very little. Such a government will not be able to form the requirements for political and security stability.

In general, in the years following the occupation of Iraq, the state-building project has faced challenges regarding ethnic, national, and sectarian issues and disputes.

Challenging forces, influenced by regional and international actors, have attempted to impact the issue of national identity, thereby expanding Iraq's primary challenges. Meanwhile, according to national strategies, the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this country, at the official invitation of the Iraqi government and with good intentions, has helped establish security and protect its interests in West Asia.

Great powers have always played a negative role in spreading and managing the crisis in Iraq. In general, we can observe a process that creates the foundations and prerequisites for the emergence of crisis and ethnic conflict in a country with great ethnic and sectarian diversity. In such a process, national groups and social forces try to create the prerequisites for rapprochement with extraordinary powers and involve them, which can create ethnic challenges and security conflicts in Iraq.

Planning and organizing the process of building a democratic state in Iraq requires the participation of the Iraqi political elite and the activation of the necessary mechanisms to reach a common agreement based on flexibility, mutual acceptance, and active participation in decision-making. Many of the contradictions occurring on ethnic and national bases can be seen as a reflection of the confrontation between forms of discourse and the foundations of thought among elites who have little desire to accept identity-based mechanisms. Convincing elites must control sectarian and partisan attempts. Democracy cannot be achieved without political stability.

During Saddam's rule, political stability was achieved through the despotism and repression practiced by the Baath Party in the worst forms, whereas now, political stability is achieved through democratic participation. Therefore, it is necessary to build the foundations for the transition from authoritarianism to political involvement.

The structure of power in the Iraqi government requires the establishment of political stability and public order. Thus, the Iraqi government needs to utilize mechanisms that support the foundations necessary to establish a capable authority, foster political stability, and maintain public order throughout the country, thereby addressing economic problems, combating terrorism, and ensuring security and safety. Each of these components can be considered a necessary foundation for building a democratic state. Undoubtedly, achieving these goals is not possible without positive participation from regional countries and major international powers.

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Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning is a non-governmental and non-profit organization established in 2015 and registered with the NGO directorate in the general secretariat of the council of ministers in Baghdad.

The center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies, and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilizes the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The center also seeks to support economic reforms, and sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The center also seeks to support the development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

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