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Iraq, Fragmentation, and the Global Governance of Inequalities

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ABSTRACT Since the US invaded Iraq, it has been concerned mainly with trying to limit challenges to its power and it has been willing to engage in state wrecking as well as state building in pursuit of that goal in the short term. Equally, opponents of the occupation have also been willing to engage in state wrecking and state building to try to drive the US out. The result has been the fragmentation of political authority and limited state capacity. The US has also been seeking to establish not a sovereign national state but a hierarchical governance state (that is, one which exercises mainly top-down coherent political authority through local, national and transnational public and corporate actors with governance not necessarily channelled through the national level) friendly to US interests. This is part of a wider global process of struggle over the multiple frontiers of inequality between the global North and global South.

Desde que EE.UU. invadió a Iraq, su preocupación principal ha sido el tratar de limitar los retos a su poder y ha estado dispuesto a participar tanto en la destrucción estatal como en la edificación estatal para conseguir esa meta a corto plazo. De la misma manera, los oponentes de la ocupación también han estado dispuestos a involucrarse en la destrucción de estado y la edificación del mismo, para tratar de sacar a los EE.UU. El resultado ha sido la fragmentación de la autoridad política y la limitación de la capacidad estatal. Los EE.UU también han estado buscando establecer no un estado nacional soberano, pero un gobierno jerárquico (eso es, uno que ejercita mayormente la autoridad política coherentemente arriba a abajo a través de actores locales, nacionales y transnacionales corporativos con un gobierno no necesariamente canalizado a través de un nivel nacional) amigo de los intereses de EE.UU. Esto es parte de un proceso global de lucha más amplio sobre las múltiples fronteras desiguales entre el globo norte y el globo sur.

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Post-invasion Iraq has often been referred to as a weak, fragile, failed, or collapsed state (Baker, 2004; Cole, 2005; Dodge, 2007; Reuters, 2007; Rice and Patrick, 2008). Various measures of economic prosperity, political effectiveness and legitimacy, security from violence, and social welfare have been used. By any of these the Iraqi state performs poorly. Seen in isolation, these measures focus on important aspects of state functions. However, the categories of weak state and so on are often framed within assumptions that the lack of performance is mainly due to factors internal to that state and that external intervention or occupation is therefore legitimate and necessary. Hence they can have ideological functions, with the role of global capitalism or the actions of external actors in undermining that state capacity or preventing its establishment obscured (Gruffydd Jones, 2008). Those criticisms cannot be made of the work of scholars such as Juan Cole (2005) and Toby Dodge (2007) who have referred to Iraq as a failed state but whose analyses emphasize the central role of the invasion and occupation plus opposition to it in undermining the Iraqi state. Much of Iraqi state capacity collapsed immediately after the invasion, while US decisions such as the disbanding of the Iraqi army indicated that it would be willing to destroy state capacity that might challenge its ability to build a new Iraqi state that would be compliant to US wishes (Herring and Rangwala, 2006).

State building recommendations regarding Iraq often focus on containment of the threats and disorder that may flow out from its territory; on schemes for ethno-sectarian partition; and on efforts to defeat, co-opt, or marginalize armed and non-armed opponents to the US and its allies, develop the various capacities of the state to function, and perhaps also seek to encourage the emergence of a decentralized federal structure. The model often aspired to is the sovereign national state with coherent political authority including an effective monopoly of legitimized force. However, I argue that these are inadequate characterizations of the problems faced by the Iraqi state, the solutions being pursued, and the character of the state building process itself, even though there is plenty of evidence that the Iraqi state has low levels of functionality. In this article, I argue that the Iraqi state is better understood as one in which there has been state wrecking and fragmentation of political authority, with the US simultaneously pursuing the establishment of a US-friendly hierarchical governance state rather than an Iraqi national sovereign state.

Fragmentation, Governance, and the Multiple Frontiers of Inequality Between the Global North and Global South

In addition to the state wrecking perceived by some in the Bush administration as a short-term necessity, the US has been attempting to establish hierarchical governance in Iraq as part of a worldwide and long-term process of conflict over the multiple frontiers between the global North and global South (Duffield, 2007; Held and Kaya, 2007; Herring, 2008; Herring and Rangwala, 2006). By the global North I mean those who are deeply integrated into advanced
capitalism, wealthy, and on behalf of whom the global South is contained and securitized. The global South is composed of those who consume minimally and who are marginalized, uninsured, policed, and repressed. Northern states are those that are characterized mainly by the features of the global North and Southern states are those composed mainly of the features of the global South. The global North has a major presence in Southern states via those elites who are part of it, and Northern states have substantial parts of their population who are part of the global South and for whom their state, even the United States, is a failed state (Chomsky, 2006). Neither the global North nor the global South is monolithic—there are various and shifting fractions, alliances, perceptions, and factors that prevent this. The central feature of this global system is inequality in many economic, social, and political respects and hence there are multiple frontiers between the winners and losers from those inequalities. This is a continuing and global as well as national process of mutual constitution rather than one that takes place within national borders with an end point of the finished state (Barkawi, 2005; Barkawi and Laffey, 2002, 2006), and struggles to extend or challenge inequality are a defining characteristic of that process.

Neoliberal globalization is producing an overall trend in the North as well as the South towards the transformation of states into governance states as the latest dimension of the struggle over inequality. A governance state exercises coherent political authority through local, national, and transnational public and corporate actors with governance not necessarily channelled through the national level, with coherence being a matter of degree.1 A hierarchical governance state is one which exercises governance in a mainly top-down manner. The worldwide trend towards governance states illustrates the point that rather than state building being a process which Northern states have completed and which Southern states are seeking to emulate, state building is a permanent process of mutual constitution. Central to this trend is a shift from welfare towards neoliberal political economies and indeed a global neoliberal political economy (Jessop, 2002). In welfare political economies, states manage demand and employment, provide welfare rights, and regulate the performance of the market in predominantly national economies. In the neoliberal or competition political economies, competitiveness is promoted through business deregulation and incentives, privatization, reduced state spending, manipulation of the welfare system, and multi-levelled governance. Of course, these are ideal types, and the post-Washington consensus represented a shift in thinking at the end of the 1990s towards strengthening transformed states in order to carry out these tasks including the reshaping of society to remove obstacles to the development of a global competition political economy. The Credit Crunch that began in 2008 is both a crisis and beginning of a new phase of neoliberalism rather than its abandonment: furthermore, neoliberalism may find new opportunities (such as profit from repayment of government borrowing to promote demand) in this time of crisis and change.

The trend towards hierarchical governance states and an associated neoliberal global political economy calls into question the notions that the normal form of the state is a sovereign national one, that current limits to Iraqi national sovereignty are necessarily temporary, and that rebuilding the Iraqi state is bound up with (to be preceded by or to lead to) major improvements in the living standards of most Iraqis. Indeed, the normal form of the state has never been a pure form of sovereign national state. While states have existed that have not had formal empires or exercised neocolonial rule or have managed to mostly avoid being subject to such rule, formal imperialism followed by neocolonialism have been at least as important and probably the dominant state forms in world politics (Barkawi, 2005; Barkawi and Laffey, 2002, 2006). The states exercising imperial and neocolonial power have been shaped by doing so in all spheres, such as the functioning of their economies, population movements, the composition of their armed
forces, and their sense of what the world is and what it means to be a human being with rights and responsibilities. The current transformation is therefore not simply from national sovereign states to neoliberal and globalized governance states: it is more an intensification of the degree of globalization and governance combined with changes in content (such as the evolution of the project of neoliberalization and specific attempts by the US to exercise direct then indirect rule as in Iraq). In 2007, the Iraqi government managed to spend only 28% of its budget, an improvement on 23% in 2005 and 19% in 2006. In the oil sector, spending was effectively nil (0.03%) in 2007 (and was 4% in 2005 and 5% in 2006) (US GAO, 2008, p. 46). These figures indicate that the Iraqi state is a long way from approximating any kind of ideal type of functioning state. However, the project of consolidating the frontiers of global North–South inequality in post-invasion Iraq continues to operate at multiple levels, including its rearticulation to the structures of global finance and trade.

The trend towards hierarchical governance states and a neoliberal global political economy extends into the realm of force as opposed to force being exempted from it as the supposed *sine qua non* of sovereign national statehood (Barkawi, 2005). In 2007–2008, 182,000 private security contractors (118,000 of them Iraqi, 21,000 US, and 43,000 citizens of third countries) from well over 100 companies were operating in Iraq (Elsea and Serafino, 2007; Human Rights First, 2008). In contrast, there were 162,000 US troops in Iraq in April 2008. While private commercial armed forces are not a new phenomenon in world history, they are a new development in modern Iraq. However, the organization of force, while significantly private and often at least partly commercially motivated is fragmented rather than coherent and so not indicative of the consolidation of governance or sovereign state power. The 140,000 peshmerga fighters of the main Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—seem to be more loyal to their individual parties than to the Kurdish regional government and are certainly more loyal to any of them than to the Iraqi national government. The Sunni Arab Awakenings Movement of tribal and neighbourhood militias numbering roughly 105,000 members shows a greater willingness to work with US forces than those of the Iraqi state while the state, dominated by an Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Da’wa Shi’a coalition with the KDP and PUK, has shown itself distinctly reluctant to integrate them, although there was a little movement on this late in 2008. Even the 478,000 trained Iraqi security forces of the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defence, and Counter-Terrorism Bureau in May 2008 are just as likely to be loyal to particular political groupings such as ISCI or the Sadr Movement or particular tribes as to the state. They are in many cases what one might call embedded insurgents, using membership of the security forces to acquire weapons, training, security, and pay while opposing the state and its foreign allies.

Hence there is a mix of fragmentation and governance in relation to armed force in Iraq. The fragmentation is indicated by the lack of agreement on who has authoritative control over force or how such disputes can be resolved. The fragmentation does not play out neatly along ethno-sectarian lines of Sunni Arabs versus Shi’a versus Kurds. Indeed, since September 2007 the primary axes of armed conflict have been among Sunni Arabs (especially the three-sided fight between the Islamic State of Iraqi salafists, the Reform and Jihad Front with more of a nationalist leaning and the Awakenings Movement) and among Shi’a (especially ISCI, usually in the guise of Iraqi security forces, versus the Sadr Movement). However, fragmentation is not total—in particular, the US has managed to establish relations with many different armed actors, private and public, Iraqi and non-Iraqi or overlapping these categories that indicates degrees of governance, often bypassing the Iraqi national government. Furthermore, while the Pentagon...
argues that around 70% of operations are led by Iraqi forces, in June 2008 only 10% of Iraqi units could operate without US assistance (Glanz, 2008; US GAO, 2008, p. 4). Even where transition to ‘Iraqi control’ has officially occurred, the US is involved with planning, logistics, close air support, intelligence, and embedded transition teams (US GAO, 2008, p. 34).

The desire of the US to retain as much control as it could over the use of force was indicated by US pressure on the Iraqi government to agree to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and a related Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) that would give the US considerable autonomy in deciding using force and making arrests within Iraq’s borders without the permission of the Iraqi government. The US goals have been to normalize limitations to Iraqi sovereignty, move towards US-dominated governance, and have this accepted as right and normal in the US and the wider world as well as in Iraq. Peaceful and armed opposition in Iraq to this has been considerable and effective. In June 2008, the US conceded that non-Iraqi private security contractors would no longer have immunity from prosecution in Iraq (Cockburn, 2008). Up to that point, any prosecutions had to be launched in the contractor’s home country, which effectively meant they had impunity. In November 2008 the Iraqi parliament approve a US-Iraqi withdrawal agreement and SFA (US-Iraq, 2008a, 2008b). The withdrawal agreement includes the following among its provisions: all US forces to withdraw from Iraqi cities, villages, and localities no later than 30 June 2009 and withdraw from Iraq completely no later than 31 December 2011; Iraqi territory is not to be used to launch attacks against other countries; US forces must hand over to Iraqi custody within 24 hours any Iraqi they arrest; US forces can only search buildings with Iraqi approval except during combat; and US military personnel to be tried in Iraqi courts for grave crimes if committed outside agreed areas and off duty, with US contractors and their employees to be under the full jurisdiction of Iraqi courts, though the US can request Iraq to waive its jurisdiction. It may be that the US will in the interpretation and application of the agreement regain some ground, but the agreement represents the abandonment of many previous US positions, including withdrawal based on conditions rather than a fixed timetable. The deal reflects increasing Iraqi government confidence that it can survive without US troops and nationalist determination to try to assert Iraqi sovereignty. If anything, the timetable is too slow not only for many Iraqis but for President Barack Obama who said that he anticipated removing all US combat forces from Iraq by Spring 2010, though a residual force might remain for longer. The withdrawal agreement shows that significant reverses for US-dominated governance are possible.

Conclusion

The location of political authority in Iraq is disputed at many levels. This fragmentation is not driven by ethno-sectarian divisions along Sunni Arab, Shi’a, and Kurdish lines: the disputes over political authority are within, cut across, and transcend these identities. Many Iraqi insurgent and militia groups, the Iraqi government, and the US share a common rhetorical position of advocating a sovereign national state for Iraq even as they struggle over its precise characteristics and over who will rule it. There is some political authority at the Iraqi national level and there are desires and demands, including nationalist ones, to strengthen it in various ways. However, much of the struggle is actually for and against the establishment of a US-dominated hierarchical governance state within a neoliberalized global political economy. The US is attempting to secure its own perceived interests in Iraq while providing sufficient benefits to the global North as a whole to shore up, or respond to the decline of, the primacy of the US within it. The prospect of the withdrawal of US forces indicates that US domination is not inevitable
but this does not necessarily mean that Iraq will avoid becoming a hierarchical governance state, which reproduces and reinforces the inequalities that mark the multiple frontiers between the global North and global South.

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Note

1 Graham Harrison (2004) and Mark Duffield (2007) use the term governance states to refer to Southern ones into which Northern actors are integrated to monitor their performance and shape their decisions: in my usage, this is hierarchical governance, as governance is not necessarily top-down. On the contrasting mainly top-down dynamics of unipolar, hegemonic, and imperial relations, see Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright (2007).

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Eric Herring is Reader in International Politics, Department of Politics, University of Bristol. His publications include (co-authored with Glen Rangwala) Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press and London: C. Hurst, 2006).