A Comparative Analysis of Iran and the United States' State-Building Strategies in Post-Saddam Iraq

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Abstract

The Middle East has been a region marked by profound transformations, consistently hindering the prospects for a sustainable peace that can symbolize the inclusive participation of various groups in power. Both the United States and Iran have shown a keen interest in this region, especially Iraq. Consequently, both countries have endeavored to establish influence in Iraq. Twenty years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, a suitable opportunity presents itself to evaluate state-building strategies in Iraq. Post-Saddam Iraq has been a stage for various actors involved in the state-building project. This article aims to conduct a comparative scientific evaluation of the strategies employed by Iran and the United States. The central question addressed in this study is how Iran and the United States have approached state-building in post-Saddam Iraq and what outcomes have ensued from their respective actions. Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology, the findings of this study reveal that the United States, disregarding the complexities of Iraqi society and leveraging military force, has pursued a top-down or waterfall approach to state-building, resulting in unforeseen consequences. In contrast, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with a thorough understanding of Iraqi society and strong ties to Shia groups, has successfully implemented a more effective bottom-up or base-diffusion model of state-building. Ultimately, the outcomes of Iran's and the United States' state-building efforts in Iraq are comparatively assessed.

Keywords: Iraq, Top-down state-building, Bottom-up state-building, Iran, United States.

Introduction

The Middle East—and particularly the Persian Gulf—has long served as a critical geopolitical and geoeconomic nexus shaping U.S. foreign policy priorities. This region's strategic significance is derived from its vast oil reserves, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the enduring threat of international terrorism, and its proximity to Israel, factors which collectively place it at the heart of global political dynamics. Iraq, endowed with substantial oil wealth and a history marked by antagonism toward Israel, has emerged as a focal point of instability and terrorism, consistently occupying a central position in American strategic calculations.

The 2002 U.S.-led Greater Middle East Initiative[1] framed Iraq as a pivotal state targeted for fundamental political, economic, and socio-cultural restructuring in line with American liberal reforms. Given the entrenched hostilities between the Iraqi regime and the United States, the realization of such transformations was deemed feasible only through regime change. The 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq thus sought to dismantle existing structures and replace them with new military, political, economic, and socio-cultural frameworks—effectively positioning Iraq within the U.S. sphere of influence. Central to these reforms was the establishment of a government amenable to the implementation of U.S.-favored liberal-democratic models.

More than two decades have passed since the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the post-Saddam period has been marked by far-reaching transformations across Iraq and the broader Middle East. The rise of extremist groups such as ISIS, persistent civil unrest, economic and political fragility, evolving regional power dynamics, and the fragmentation of Iraqi society represent key consequences of the regime change. These developments prompt a critical question: to what extent have state-building efforts in Iraq succeeded, and were these efforts primarily driven by internal dynamics or external interventions?

This study employs a descriptive-analytical method, grounded in authoritative academic sources, to evaluate the roles of the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq's post-2003 state-building process. It aims to address the following research question: To what extent—and through which mechanisms—have the United States and Iran influenced state-building in Iraq? The central

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1. The Greater Middle East Initiative was a political strategy proposed by the United States government following the September 11 attacks in 2001.

hypothesis posits that the United States, constrained by a superficial understanding of Iraq's societal complexities and inattentive to its religious, cultural, and ethnic particularities, pursued a top-down approach aimed at imposing a liberal democratic model. In contrast, Iran, with a nuanced appreciation ofr Iraq's post-Saddam realities and leveraging shared religious, cultural, and ethnic affinities, adopted a bottom-up strategy, working through local actors and institutions. This grassroots-based approach enabled Iran to expand its influence effectively and facilitate the rise of a Shia-dominated political order. The paper argues that, despite substantial financial and militaryinvestment by the United States, Iran's model of state-building has been comparatively more successful.

While numerous studies have addressed U.S. and Iranian involvement in post-Saddam Iraq, few offer direct comparative analyses of their respective state-building strategies. For instance, a study published in the IRFA Journal examines the impact of evolving regional security architectures on control mechanisms and containment strategies employed by trans-regional powers. The article situates the post-Saddam U.S. military presence in Iraq within a broader framework of containing Iran, focusing on a four-dimensional containment network encompassing geopolitics, geoeconomics, geoenergy, and geoculture. It notes that the United States allocated over $60 billion to Iraq's reconstruction from 2003 to 2017 (Khalilnejad, 2021, p. 256). Similarly, Asadi (2015), also writing in the IRFA Journal, challenges binary narratives framing Iran-U.S. relations in Iraq as either full cooperation or outright confrontation. Instead, he argues that the two states have engaged in indirect and tactical cooperation amidst deep-rooted strategic rivalry and geopolitical constraints, shaped by the complex post-invasion landscape.

Conceptually, state-building is defined as the process of constructing a governing apparatus that monopolizes the legitimate use of force within a specific territory. A vital aspect of this process is the creation of a national identity among the population, as only then can the state rely on citizen loyalty (Griffiths, 2011: 503). Characteristics of a modern state include the establishment of military and bureaucratic institutions, adherence to standardized and rational procedures rather than hereditary customs, and the focus on citizenship rather than status groups (Bevir, 2007, p. 923). State-building operates at two primary levels: first, primary state-building involves political actors establishing institutions in newly independent or partitioned territories to govern and shape or create national identity. This includes creating

governmental structures, drafting constitutions, and setting up executive and judicial bodies to ensure governance effectiveness. Primary state-building typically occurs after the collapse of authoritarian regimes or colonial rule, also encompassing initial economic development and infrastructure creation.

Second, secondary state-building involves national or international actors seeking to reform and strengthen governmental institutions damaged or destroyed by crises such as civil wars, revolutions, or occupations (Menocal, 2011, p. 1718). Its goal is to rebuild institutions to establish stability and security through extensive reforms enhancing government performance and efficiency. Menocal (2011: 1719) further defines primary state-building as a process whereby a political community seeks to gain or enhance sovereignty and independence by developing institutional capacity, especially in newly independent states or post-authoritarian contexts. Secondary state-building, by contrast, addresses crises of legitimacy and effectiveness, focusing on reconstruction and redesign to overcome structural problems.

A key component of state-building is the formation of the "national state," which derives its legitimacy from the nation inhabiting a territorial unit and exercises sovereignty accordingly (Smith, 1383, p. 23). Thus, nation-state building entails creating a powerful structure representing the will of the nation (Karmazady & Khansari Fard, 2012, p. 141), strengthening national identity through symbols, rituals, and shared values. State-building processes can follow two distinct paths: bottom-up and top-down models.

The bottom-up model, common in Western contexts, aligns geographic borders with identity boundaries, fostering an overarching national identity that legitimizes political institutions through participatory processes. This model emphasizes cultural and social cohesion and democratic participation, whereby citizens actively contribute to state legitimacy and effectiveness.

Conversely, the top-down model—often seen in post-colonial states—posits that the state precedes the nation. Here, the "quasi-state" initiates the creation of a collective identity aligned with territorial boundaries, consolidating central government power to forge national unity through state policies and control over diverse regions (Ghavam & Zarger, 2009, p. 254). This model aims to maintain political stability through centralized governance, often prioritizing state consolidation over participatory legitimacy.

## 1. Historical Context and Strategic Objectives

The relationship between Iraq and the United States has experienced significant fluctuations since World War II. Initially aligned with the Western bloc, Iraq joined the Baghdad Pact. However, the Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq War led to improved relations between Baghdad and Washington. Yet, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent U.S.-led intervention, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, shifted the power dynamics, allowing the United States to exert greater control over Iraq. (Dodge, 2003, p. 27).

In the 1990s, Iraq was subject to international sanctions and military pressure from the United States. Tensions between Iraq and the United States escalated dramatically with the rise of the Bush administration and the 9/11 attacks, culminating in the Second Gulf War, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the subsequent insurgency and sectarian violence in Iraq. The U.S. war in Iraq was a relatively swift conventional conflict that lasted only three weeks. With the fall of Baghdad and the escape of Saddam and his sons, the Ba'athist regime collapsed. However, contrary to initial U.S. expectations, this victory was short-lived. The Americans became entangled in a protracted insurgency involving remnants of the Ba'ath Party and Sunni groups, which gradually escalated. Foreign Sunni fighters, often linked to Al-Qaeda, joined the insurgency, fueling sectarian violence against Iraqi Shiites and complicating the situation.

The conflict intensified year after year, with casualties rising steadily until 2007. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, the United States effectively became the governing power in Iraq for several years, turning the country into an occupied territory. They installed a military governor, but the situation in Iraq deteriorated daily, violence escalated, and anti-American sentiment grew. The following graph illustrates civilian casualties in Iraq from 2003 to 2017.
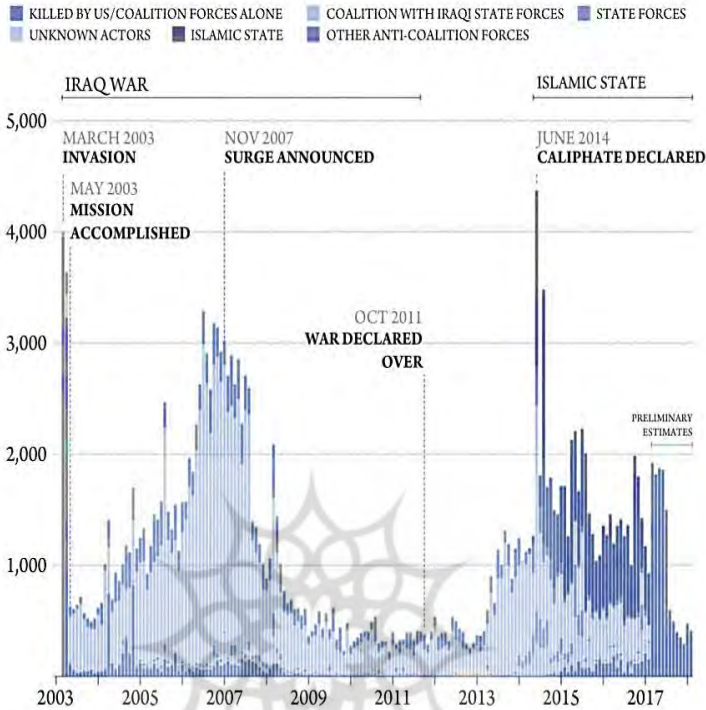
Figure (1): Civilian casualties in Iraq from 2003 to 2017. Data updated from Iraq Body Count (iraqbodycount.org/database).

In an attempt to mitigate the escalating violence, the United States sought to transition power to the Iraqi people through elections. Iraq held national elections on January 30, 2005, though many Sunni groups boycotted the process. The Shia bloc secured 140 seats in the parliament, while the Kurds won 75. Power-sharing arrangements were made, allocating the premiership to the Shia, the presidency to the Kurds, and the speakership of parliament to the Sunni. Despite the significant progress made in state-building through elections and the adoption of a new constitution, violence persisted until November 2007. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded in 2006 that U.S. intervention in Iraq had inadvertently bolstered terrorism and Islamic extremism in the country (Katzman, 2005, p. 5).

In response to the escalating challenges in Iraq, which imposed a significant burden on the United States, the American government

was compelled to reevaluate its military and security strategy. Based on the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton report, a new approach was adopted. This new strategy sought to increase the number of American troops in Iraq, enhance the capabilities of Iraqi forces to establish security and stability, increase Sunni participation in the government, pressure Iran and Syria to reduce support for insurgent groups, prevent foreign intervention in Iraq, and engage in negotiations with Iraq's neighboring countries (O'Leary, 2007, pp. 5-6).

Following the surge of US troops in Iraq, pressure on insurgent groups intensified. American efforts to foster an environment conducive to the participation of Iraqi tribes and clans in the government and political process, coupled with negotiations with Iran and Syria to curtail support for rival groups within Iraq, yielded positive results, leading to a gradual decline in violence. The capacity of insurgent forces in Iraq also waned. With the participation of Sunni and Shia groups in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, al-Qaeda in Iraq became increasingly isolated among the Iraqi people and groups and was effectively marginalized from the Iraqi political scene. However, the US invasion of Iraq had several significant consequences, including:

- During the occupation of Iraq, over 4,415 Americans, 139 British soldiers, and more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians were killed. Hundreds of insurgent attacks were carried out against occupation forces. Contrary to initial American expectations, Iraqis did not greet the invaders with open arms. After expending approximately one trillion dollars, US occupation forces withdrew from Iraq.
- American failure in Iraq plunged the country into its worst economic state since 1950. The Iraqi economy experienced a sharp decline in employment rates, a widening budget deficit, soaring debt, recession, and the collapse of financial and economic centers, particularly evident in September 2003. Many Americans believe that what the US had gained during the Cold War was lost due to the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent defeat.
- Following the military occupation of Iraq, the severe mismanagement by the Americans and the discrepancy between their stated goals of promoting human rights and democracy and their actual actions led to the collapse of Iraq's security and defense structures. Insecurity, fear, anxiety, and instability prevailed in many Iraqi cities (Petersen, 2024: 397-398).

- Furthermore, the environmental consequences of using depleted uranium, which studies have shown to be significantly distributed in Iraqi soil, were catastrophic. The use of prohibited weapons against civilians, including white phosphorus, depleted uranium, and cluster bombs, and the widespread destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage and antiquities to undermine national pride, are grim realities that occurred in Iraq under US occupation.
- The brutality and disgrace of the US military operations in Iraq were so severe that Abdul Basit Turki, the Iraqi Minister of Human Rights who was appointed with US approval, openly criticized US forces for widespread human rights violations in Iraq during a January 2004 session of the High Commission for Human Rights and called for an investigation.
- Perhaps the most significant mistake made by the US in its design of the Iraq occupation, and fundamentally in its design of the Greater Middle East project, was underestimating or ignoring the power, management, and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq and the region. Ultimately, Iran emerged as the most significant obstacle to the US achieving its goals in Iraq, and this is a fact recorded in history.
- A war intended to demonstrate US power revealed more about America's intelligence shortcomings, government incapability, and military limitations. A war aimed at strengthening US global leadership diminished America's reputation. A war intended to make America safer made it weaker.
- The post-occupation dissolution of the Iraqi army and Ba'ath Party by the Americans demonstrated their lack of understanding of the Iraqi situation (Murad Piri et al., 2021, pp. 330-331).

Iran-Iraq relations have experienced significant fluctuations. During Saddam Hussein's era, relations were strained and characterized by the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. In the post-Saddam period, Iran has pursued various strategies to achieve its objectives in Iraq. These strategies include supporting pro-Iranian factions and armed militias, attempting to influence Iraqi political leaders and factional leaders, and fostering economic ties throughout Iraq. Iran's presence in post-Saddam Iraq has been driven by the doctrine of 'responsibility to protect' (Faqihe Abdollahi et al., 2022, p. 95). Many of Iraq's new leaders were either based in Iran during Saddam's rule or received Iranian support, viewing Iran as a benefactor and influential actor in Iraq. However, even those with longstanding ties to Iran have presented themselves as nationalist

defenders of Iraq's interests.

Iran has incorporated Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon into its strategic depth. While prior to 2003, Iran primarily sought to position itself closer to Israel's borders through its presence in Syria and Lebanon, since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has been striving to utilize this strategic depth to deter potential US attacks and to engage the US in a costly and risky endeavor in this region (Keynoush, 2020, p. 100).

Iran has sought to influence the Iraqi government by empowering certain domestic Iraqi militias. These groups have become deeply embedded and powerful within Iraq's formal structures, as evidenced by their second-place finish in the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections. The United States has responded with economic sanctions against Iran, aiming to cripple its economy. A secondary goal of these sanctions has been to reduce financial support to Iraqi militias, a strategy that has been partially successful but has never fully curtailed such support (Eyal Tsir, 2020).

Iran has penetrated Iraqi society through three primary means: 1) Promoting its religious influence and the concept of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist[1]. 2) Positioning itself as the ultimate arbiter in Iraqi political disputes. Iran assists its various allies in ascending to power through Iraq's political processes and subsequently acts as a balancer among them, ultimately serving as a powerful mediator in disputes it often contributes to. 3) Controlling the military activities of Shia militias loyal to Iran as a means of exerting pressure on political actors (Brennan et al., 2013, p. 26).

Thomas Friedman categorizes state failure in the Middle East into two types: "explosive" and "collapse." In the former, external factors play a significant role and have transnational consequences. However, in the latter, external factors are not necessarily required, as state failure can be attributed to internal factors. Friedman argues that the collapse of the Iraqi state was an "explosive" failure (Friedman, 2024).

The United States sought to establish a new political order in the Middle East, and state-building in Iraq was seen as essential to this goal. Iraq's strategic location was considered a necessity for US interests (Mokhtari et al., 2014, p. 184). The United States has a history of various state-building endeavors. The country has employed diverse approaches to governing and stabilizing states. In

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1. Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist is a concept in Shiite Islamic jurisprudence that means rule of the jurisprudent.

Cuba (1898-1902 and 1906-1909), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), and Japan (1945-1952), Washington imposed direct rule. In West Germany (1945-1949), the United States opted for a multilateral approach. In Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and Haiti (1994-1996), Washington quickly transferred power to democratically elected local leaders. In Panama and Haiti, the United States was able to achieve this because legitimate leaders, who had genuinely won elections before the US-led regime change, were already in place (Dlawer, 2021, p. 9).

The United States has employed a relatively similar approach in Syria to the one used in Iraq during the 2024 crisis. In both cases, the US has pursued a top-down state-building strategy, utilizing military force without adequately considering the complex societal dynamics. However, the US military has had a more direct presence in Iraq, while in Syria, state-building has been pursued indirectly through support for local armed groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Omrani et al., 2024, p. 137). Given the experience in Iraq, a similar approach in Syria is unlikely to yield successful state-building outcomes.

Iraq presented the United States with numerous challenges that differed from previous models of American state-building. Before examining these challenges, it is necessary to identify the various types of state-building. State-building in different countries occurs in diverse ways. The type of state-building depends on its origins. The fundamental component upon which state-building is based determines its outcome. If state-building is based on power, it can be divided into top-down and bottom-up models. If it is based on ideology, it can be classified as socialist, communist, Islamist, etc. If it is based on political structure, it can be categorized as authoritarian, democratic, and so forth. Regarding the US model of state-building in post-Saddam Iraq, a power-based approach provides the most appropriate explanation. Based on this factor, the US model of state-building in Iraq was predominantly top-down. The table below evaluates various types of state-building.

Table (1): Types of State-Building According to Different Origins

Examples	Key Characteristics	Type of State-Building Model
Based on Source of Power		
Colonialism, occupation, guided revolutions	Changes imposed by an external force or a small, powerful domestic group	Top-down
People's revolutions, social movements	Changes emerge from widespread participation of the people and civil society.	Bottom-up
Based on Ideology		
Many Western countries	Individual liberty, free market, limited government	Liberal
Former Soviet Union	Equality, social justice, active role of government	Socialist
Islamic Republic of Iran	Based on the values and teachings of a specific religion	Religious
Nazi Germany	National identity and unity of the people	Nationalist
Based on Political Structure		
United States, France	Free elections, multi-party system, rule of law	Democratic
Many dictatorships	Concentration of power in the hands of one person or a small group, limited freedoms	Authoritarian
Russia, some Middle Eastern countries	Combination of democracy and authoritarianism	Hybrid

Source: (Research Findings)

Iran and the US have engaged in a pattern of interaction akin to a 'one-shot game' in the vernacular of game theory. Such a pattern hinders the possibility of either actor achieving ultimate success. The Iran-US game in Iraq is essentially a battle of wills. In this process, both the US and Iran, to sustain their regional and geopolitical rivalry in Iraq, must seek to diminish the other's role through the design and organization of a multidimensional game. The competition between Iran and the US in Iraq necessitates the use of tactical actions that enable each rival actor to mobilize and utilize social, regional, and international forces (Rezvantalab et al., 2024, p. 106). Regarding the US model of state-building in post-Saddam Iraq, a power-based approach provides the most appropriate explanation. Based on this factor, the US model was primarily 'top-down' or 'waterfall.' In this type of state-building, the

'imposition of a model' plays a significant role. Imposed models are typically introduced to countries for two reasons: first, a complete model that can symbolically unite various factions in forming a government does not exist, and indigenous models have relatively equal competitive abilities and cannot outcompete others to gain a relative advantage[1]. Second, either a suitable model does not exist in the country or, if it does, it is not accepted by any group. The experience of US state-building in Iraq demonstrates that, prior to US intervention, Iraq lacked a successful domestic model of state-building. This situation was due to internal weaknesses and the influence of regional and extra-regional factors.

In the waterfall model of state-building, the United States disregarded the social fabric of Iraqi society. By employing military force, the US sought to establish complete dominance over Iraq's geography and subsequently institutionalize state-building as a 'self-regulating mechanism.' While military power was a crucial tool in this process, the long-term sustainability of state-building cannot rely solely on force. The US effectively utilized military power but failed to adequately understand Iraq's societal context and situational dynamics. This oversight resulted in significant costs. The top-down or waterfall model sought to impose a Western model of democracy on a deeply divided Iraq, driven by a perceived threat. This approach, which disregarded Iraq's cultural structures, geographic divisions, religious beliefs, security environment, economic challenges, and societal mosaic, ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The top-down, or waterfall, model of state-building employed by the United States in Iraq aimed to impose a Western-style democracy on a deeply divided nation. This approach was motivated by a perceived threat (Tett, 2019: 14). Disregarding Iraq's complex cultural, geographic, religious, and security structures, as well as its profound economic challenges and societal mosaic, the US sought to forcibly impose Western democracy through military might. This state-building approach proved unsuccessful. The primary reasons for this failure include.

Americans assumed that the imposition of a liberal democracy in Iraq would be welcomed by the Iraqi people (Hinnebusch, 2007:17). However, Iraq is a country with a diverse ethnic and religious composition, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and other groups,

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1. For instance, following Saddam's fall and the resulting power vacuum, various groups, including Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis, vied to impose their preferred model of state-building on Iraqi society. However, due to a relatively equal balance of power, none were able to prevail.

each with unique interests and aspirations. This diversity has led to significant differences in the history and demands of each group. Attempting to impose a uniform policy on all these groups without understanding and respecting these differences has led to widespread discontent and conflict. Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime had a complex and repressive structure, and its downfall created a deep power vacuum in Iraq. Various groups competed to fill this power vacuum, leading to further instability. Iraq also has a long history of internal and external conflicts rooted in historical and ethnic divisions. These conflicts have further complicated the country's political and social situation, posing significant challenges to state-building and the establishment of stability**.**

Western models of democracy do not always align with the unique circumstances of every country. This was particularly evident in the case of Iraq. Adapting these models to local realities and contexts presented significant challenges. Such models often overlook the deep-rooted social and cultural fabrics of societies and fail to fully reflect their specific needs and conditions. Consequently, the implementation of these models can undermine traditional institutions and lead to instability. Traditional institutions that have shaped social and political relations for centuries have been weakened by the introduction of new models without considering local capacities and characteristics. This has eroded public trust in new institutions and contributed to further instability. A rapid process of democratization, without considering necessary infrastructure and preparedness, can lead to weak institutions and corruption. The hasty attempt to implement democracy in Iraq, due to a lack of necessary infrastructure and inadequate preparation, resulted in many negative consequences (Yazdanfam, 1388, p. 154). Widespread corruption in government institutions and their inability to provide effective public services have led to decreased public trust in the government and increased discontent. Furthermore, the rapid pace of democratization did not provide sufficient time to strengthen civil society institutions and develop a democratic culture. Establishing democratic institutions requires a long-term commitment to educating and empowering new generations who can understand and implement democratic values and principles.

A major blunder of the Bush administration in the Iraq War was the dissolution of the Iraqi Army (Mokhtari et al., 1394, p. 197). The disbandment created a significant security vacuum, which armed groups such as Al-Qaeda and later ISIS exploited. This security vacuum led to a surge in terrorist activities and insecurity in

Iraq. The dissolution also resulted in widespread unemployment among former military personnel. Many of these individuals joined armed groups, exacerbating the security problem and negatively impacting the country's social and economic stability. Furthermore, the military institutions that could have played a significant role in maintaining Iraq's security and stability were dismantled (Mokhtari et al., 198). These institutions, with their experience and expertise in addressing security threats, were eliminated, and new structures were established that were inadequate to deal with the security challenges.

The absence of strong and transparent oversight institutions allowed corruption to proliferate in Iraq. A significant portion of the reconstruction funds was squandered due to this corruption, failing to improve the country's condition. This led to a decline in public trust in the government and undermined its legitimacy. Widespread corruption, lack of transparency, and ineffective oversight had a detrimental impact on the country's reconstruction and development efforts, becoming one of the most significant obstacles to state-building in Iraq.

2. Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Iranian State-Building Models

The Islamic Republic of Iran adopted a fundamentally different approach to post-Saddam Iraq compared to the United States. A deep understanding of Iraq's mosaic society, strong cultural ties, a 60% Shia population in Iraq, geographical proximity, and other factors contributed to Iran's success in state-building in Iraq. Unlike the United States' top-down 'waterfall model,' the Islamic Republic of Iran pursued a bottom-up approach to state-building (Darvishi Setalani & Vatankhah, 2018, p. 10).

Following the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, Iran, as a powerful and influential neighbor, played a significant role in the country's developments. Iran's model of state-building in Iraq differed significantly from that of the United States, and this approach was based on the historical, cultural, and religious ties between the two countries. Historical and cultural relations between Iran and Iraq allowed Iran to leverage these deep connections to strengthen its influence. These relations included cultural exchanges, shared literature, and similar customs, which helped Iran to establish strong social and political bonds with Iraq by capitalizing on these ties.

Religiously, both Iran and Iraq have large Shia populations. This

shared religious bond provided a conducive environment for Iran to expand its influence by supporting Shia parties and groups in Iraq. By backing these groups, Iran played a significant role in shaping Iraq's post-Saddam policies. Iran relied more on local institutions and personal relationships with local leaders, in contrast to the US approach, which relied more on military and foreign forces. This approach allowed Iran to increase its influence by utilizing local networks and leveraging existing social structures. Economic development was also a crucial tool for Iran to strengthen its influence in Iraq. By investing in infrastructure and development projects, Iran was able to establish strong economic ties with Iraq, which helped to bolster its political and cultural influence. Iran's military presence in Iraq, through military and logistical support for paramilitary groups, helped to strengthen Iran's position in the country. These groups not only helped maintain local security but also played a significant role in preventing the infiltration of terrorist groups such as ISIS (Moosavian, 1400, p. 287). These factors allowed Iran to implement its unique model of state-building in Iraq, a model based on the use of historical, cultural, religious, and social ties, which differed significantly from the approaches of other countries, especially the United States.

Iran's model of state-building in Iraq can be termed a 'foundation-diffusion' model. In this model, the Islamic Republic of Iran, instead of emphasizing the military element as a vital factor in state-building, focused on cultural, political, historical, economic, ideological, and social infrastructures. Emphasis on each of these sectors led to cooperation in other sectors. Therefore, Iran's model of state-building, with its emphasis on foundational factors and their diffusion to other sectors, implemented a better model in Iraq. One of the fundamental differences between Iran and the United States in the post-Saddam Iraqi state-building process was the nature of the relationship between the two countries and the Iraqi social forces and opposition. While the United States, since 1990 under George H.W. Bush, had virtually no fundamental relationship with the Iraqi opposition and only had a temporary tactical relationship with some Iraqi groups such as the Iraqi National Congress led by Chalabi in the years leading up to 2003, Iran's 'foundation-diffusion' model established a close relationship between Iran and ethnicities (especially Shia) (Marshall, 1401, pp. 108-109).

Following the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, Iran actively supported Iraqi Shia groups. This support included financial and military aid to groups such as the Dawa Party and the Badr

Organization. By providing these groups with necessary resources and equipment, Iran helped them gain greater influence in Iraq's political arena and play a significant role in shaping the country's policies. This approach allowed Iran to gain considerable influence in Iraq through these Shia groups and strengthen its strategic relationships.

In the fight against terrorism, Iran also confronted terrorist groups like ISIS, but its methods differed from those of the United States. While the US relied on the use of military forces and large-scale operations, Iran focused on strengthening popular and Basij forces. By organizing and equipping these forces and providing necessary training, Iran helped them to confront terrorist threats. This approach allowed Iran to strengthen local security without the need for direct military intervention and play an effective role in the fight against terrorism. By utilizing popular and Basij forces, Iran was able to increase its influence in Iraq and help create an extensive network of local forces under Iran's guidance and support. This approach allowed Iran to effectively confront ISIS and other terrorist groups and improve security in controlled areas.

Another dimension of Iran's state-building in Iraq (the foundation-diffusion model) was the development of economic relations. Iran sought to strengthen its economic relations with Iraq by investing in infrastructure and implementing development projects. These economic collaborations, including the construction of power plants, electricity networks, roads, and other projects, not only helped improve Iraq's infrastructure but also allowed Iran to increase its economic presence and, consequently, its political presence in Iraq. These efforts enabled Iran to have greater influence in Iraqi politics and economics and establish stronger ties with the Iraqi government and people.

Another aspect of Iran's state-building policy in Iraq was the emphasis on the country's independence. Iran consistently criticized direct foreign intervention in Iraq's internal affairs and emphasized the need to preserve Iraq's national sovereignty. In Iraq, major policies are influenced by discursive logics rather than internal variables. Therefore, Iran has played a prominent role in determining Iraq's discourses (Devendra, 2021, p. 121). This approach allowed Iran to present itself as a major supporter of Iraq's independence and autonomy. By adopting this position, Iran sought to gain the support of Iraqi political groups and people and strengthen its influence in the country. By emphasizing non-interference by other countries and supporting an independent Iraq,

Iran was able to portray itself as a reliable partner and supporter of Iraq's national sovereignty.

In summary, Iran's efforts to develop economic relations and emphasize Iraq's independence have helped it gain significant influence in Iraq and play a major role in the country's developments. These approaches have allowed Iran to establish stronger relations with Iraq and play a significant role in determining the country's policies and future developments.

Both Iran and the United States envisioned a democratic future for Iraq, but from different perspectives. While Iranians saw this as a major development in their favor (as the Shia majority would come to power), the United States sought to strengthen its influence in Iraq and democratize the country with the aim of containing regime change in Iran and, on a broader scale, in the Middle East. Three weeks before the invasion of Iraq, George Bush put forward the "democracy domino" theory, stating that a new democratic government in Iraq would serve as an inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region (Moosavian, 1400, p. 285). Iranians believe that the United States only recognizes democracies that adopt US policies after coming to power and help the United States in securing its interests. US opposition to democratic governments such as Mossadegh and Salvador Allende in Chile supports this claim. Paul Wolfowitz, the US Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time of the Bush administration, emphasized that Iraq could be the first Arab democracy and have a lasting impact on Syria and its neighbors, and eventually the entire Arab world (Moosavian, 1400, p. 186).

The US war in Iraq incurred a heavy cost in terms of human and financial resources. The initial costs of the war in 2003 were estimated at around $50-60 billion, but ultimately the final cost of the war reached around $2 trillion. The initial 60-day US invasion of Iraq turned into a multi-year war that lasted until 2011. During this time, the US Congress allocated billions of dollars to the Pentagon and military operations. The costs of the war peaked between 2008 and 2014, but with the beginning of the withdrawal of US forces in 2011, the costs related to the war continued (Fitzgerald, 2023).

According to the Pentagon, the costs of the Iraq and Syria wars reached $787 billion by 2022, although this figure did not include military insurance and other loans. The Iraq War resulted in the death of 4,431 US military and civilian personnel and the wounding of 32,000 others. Additionally, over 209,000 Iraqi civilians lost their

lives in the war, and hundreds of thousands faced the consequences of the war, such as water shortages and various diseases. Furthermore, the post-9/11 US wars led to the forced migration of 9.2 million Iraqis and a total of 39 million people (Fitzgerald, 2023). While state-building with the American model was a complete failure for the United States, the situation was completely opposite for Iran, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was able to establish very good relations with this country and, while bringing Shia to power in this country, establish good security and economic relations with this country.

In any case, the main differences between the American and Iranian state-building models can be shown in the following table:

Table (2): Contrasting U.S. and Iranian State-Building Frameworks in Iraq Source: Research Findings

Feature	US State-Building Model	Iranian State-Building Model
Primary Goal	Establishing a multi-party democracy based on Western models	Strengthening Shia influence and establishing a Shia-led government with an Islamic orientation
Approach	Direct military intervention, focus on institution-building and elections	Supporting Shia groups, proxy warfare, strengthening economic ties
Emphasis	Human rights, democracy, free market	Iraqi independence, Shia unity, combating terrorism, resistance economy
Institution Building	Creating electoral, judicial, and security institutions based on Western models	Strengthening religious and paramilitary institutions
Foreign Relations	Forming an international coalition, imposing economic sanctions on Iran	Strengthening ties with the Resistance Axis, reducing dependence on the West
Cultural Perspective	Promoting Western culture and values	Preserving and promoting Shia identity and Islamic values
Short-Term Outcomes	Overthrow of the Ba'athist regime, elections, new institutions	Increased Iranian influence, strengthening of Shia groups, decline of US influence
Long-Term Outcomes	Instability, rise of ISIS, civil war, sectarian	Strengthening the Resistance Axis, growing Iraqi reliance

Feature	US State-Building Model	Iranian State-Building Model
	divisions	on Iran, and expanding Iran's regional influence
Challenges	Cultural resistance, corruption, foreign interference, ethnic and sectarian divisions	Sanctions, international pressure, internal divisions within Iraq, competition with the US

Findings and Conclusion

Post-Saddam state-building in Iraq witnessed two distinct approaches: one by the United States and the other by Iran, each with its own outcomes. The United States, aiming to establish a Western-style, pluralistic democracy, sought to transform Iraq's political structure based on Western democratic principles and values. However, this approach faced significant challenges. Iraqi people's cultural resistance to Western models, widespread corruption in government institutions, and continuous foreign interference were among the factors that led to instability, the rise of ISIS, and civil war. The mismatch between Western models and Iraq's culture and social structure resulted in nothing but instability and insecurity.

In contrast, Iran adopted an approach based on strengthening Shia influence and creating a Shia-centric state. By supporting Iraqi Shia groups, Iran sought to strengthen the Axis of Resistance in the region and expand its political influence. This support included financial and military aid to groups such as the Dawa Party and the Badr Organization, which helped these groups gain greater influence in Iraq's political arena. By utilizing these Shia groups, Iran was able to significantly increase its influence in Iraq and strengthen its strategic relationships. While this approach helped to enhance the political position of Shiites in Iraq, it also led to increased Iraqi dependence on Iran and internal divisions between Shiites and Sunnis. Iraq's economic and political dependence on Iran caused Iraq to be largely influenced by Iranian policies and to lose its full independence in decision-making.

In conclusion, both the US and Iranian approaches faced significant challenges, and neither fully achieved their objectives. State-building in Iraq is a complex and protracted process that requires consideration of multiple factors and international cooperation. Future research should focus on a more detailed examination of the factors influencing the success or failure of state-

building in transitional countries, as well as providing practical solutions to improve the situation in these countries. Only through a thorough and comprehensive analysis of these factors can effective solutions be found to establish stability and progress in Iraq and other similar countries.

In addition to these points, another important aspect of the state-building process in Iraq is the role of local actors and their influence on the country's political and social processes. Various political, religious, and ethnic groups in Iraq have played very important roles in determining the course of state-building. The competition and cooperation of these groups have influenced not only the political process but also Iraq's security and stability. Therefore, a better understanding of internal dynamics and the role of local actors can contribute to a better analysis of the state-building process and finding appropriate solutions. In summary, the experience of state-building in Iraq demonstrates the complexities and numerous challenges faced by transitional countries. This experience emphasizes that each country needs unique solutions tailored to its own cultural, historical, and social conditions. Only by paying attention to these factors and international cooperation can stable and independent governments be established in transitional countries.

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