
The On–Again, Off–Again State-Building Cycles in Iraq

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This paper examines the interruptive cycles of the American-led state-building mission in Iraq since 2003. I argue that America's renewed efforts, highlighted in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS), can be utilized to resume an effective state-building process that takes into account the mistakes of the first attempt, which lasted from 2003 to 2011, although the U.S. project of state-building in Iraq has historically lacked sustainability both in timing and allocation of resources.

The paper draws on Ronald Paris and Timothy Sisk's two chapters in *The Dilemmas of State-building: Confronting the Contradictions of Post War Peace Operations*.¹ The authors provide a toolkit that helps produce a cohesive state-building strategy. This toolkit is deployed here as a useful road map to untangle the complexities and challenges of the state-building mission in Iraq. I also take into account additional literature relating to the implementation of state-building in Iraq, the new American intervention helping Iraqis to fight ISIS, and the current political, social, and regional situation in Iraq, which includes the current multi-layered proxy wars in the Middle East.

Part I focuses on Iraq's political and social context before the war in 2003, as well as the wrong decisions made by successive American administrations regarding the state-building process from 2003 to 2011. Using Paris and Sisk's concepts of "contradicting problems" and "dilemma analysis,"

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this section also explains how the American efforts to rebuild the state of Iraq were based on American, rather than Iraqi, interests and timetables. Similarly, the first few sections discuss how American domestic politics, instead of shared American and Iraqi long-term strategic interests, shaped the perplexing process of state-building.

Part II and the conclusion investigate how the new American strategy to fight ISIS in Iraq represents an opportunity to resume the state-building process that was interrupted in 2011, and why this new effort is poised to yield a successful outcome.

PART I: THE NATURE OF THE IRAQI POLITICAL SYSTEM BEFORE 2003

Due to the international economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in retaliation for its invasion of Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq became a fragile state. At the time of the U.S. invasion, however, it was not a completely failed one.² Iraq was still a sovereign state, with government institutions able to deliver standard public goods to its people. The Iraqi borders were secured against the threat of terrorist infiltration; there was no regional military intervention inside Iraq. Basic civil services and bureaucracies continued to provide services.

Domestic conditions were therefore relatively stable. Iraq had a strong security apparatus that was able to secure its borders against terrorists and regional interventions. The Iraqi police system was brutal, but the Iraqi people understood and believed in the capability of the system.³ While the economy was in peril as a result of the embargo, corruption was minimal, and oil output was about 2.8 million barrels per day.⁴ While the national sphere lacked political and civil society activities, security and stability were maintained.⁵

At the time, Iraq's problems were more social and political in nature than related to security or destabilization. Government institutions functioned, but social and political freedoms were confined and restricted. Additionally, the political structure lacked diversity and inclusiveness—a growing problem in Iraq, especially after the uprisings in the south and north that followed Saddam Hussein's defeat in 1991.⁶

In 1991, UN Resolution S/RES/688 imposed a protective no-fly zone on the northern and southern parts of Iraq. Accordingly, the three governorates of Erbil, Sulaimaniya, and Dahuk in the north officially surfaced as the Kurdistan Region, and created a semi-autonomous government body that utilized this unique opportunity to the fullest. In 1992, the Kurdistan Region elected its legislative body, the Kurdistan Parliament, and formed

its first government cabinet. The UN agencies started to work (in limited forms) with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after signing the Oil-for-Food program agreement with the Iraqi government in 1996. The Kurdish *peshmerga*, or militia, faced their Iraqi army counterparts northwards of the 36th parallel latitude, but there were no clashes or full-fledged wars inside the country.

While the north was developing into a self-ruled regional government, the southern Shiite region was still under the brutal oppression of Saddam's dictatorship, with a growing number of Shia armed groups building their capabilities across the border in Iran.⁷

For the Sunnis, the December 1995 to May 1996 uprising against Saddam was the first time they faced the regime openly. Saddam executed one hundred Iraqi officers from the Al Anbar governorate who were famous for their leadership during the war with Iran. Saddam also sent forces to ambush the revolt waged by the officers' tribal leaders and relatives.⁸

In this context of a broken political system and a confined society, but a relatively stable, functioning government bureaucracy, the United States entered Iraq in 2003 and toppled the dictatorship of Saddam.

The Unique Case of State-Building in Iraq: Wrong Decisions and Lasting Implications

The process of state-building in Iraq involved several aspects that distinguished it from previous state-building missions implemented in Central Asia, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

First, the mission in Iraq did not start in the aftermath of a civil war and peace agreement, or because of regime change executed by the Iraqi people. Instead, the United States
 launched state-building efforts after a quick military operation that toppled a brutal dictatorship, and brought the whole country under American control in less than a month.⁹

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Moreover, the eruption of the Sunni insurgency, sectarian violence, and terrorists' attacks forced this ambitious state-building mission to a halt. This situation pushed the United States
 to introduce peace-building to its mission in Iraq. While peace-building was not a goal of the American occupation, it was deployed as a tactic in reaction

to the astounding challenges facing the state-building project. For example, the hasty peace agreements reached after the two military operations in Fallujah in April 2004 and November 2004 were ad-hoc, tactical peace-building attempts that failed to hold, and resulted in bloodier conflicts. Both agreements collapsed very quickly, and led to more aggressive clashes with the Sunni insurgencies and terrorist groups.

The second aspect that made the state-building process in a country as big as Iraq unique was that the mission was not an internationally coordinated effort. Instead, European and other key international players viewed much of the war in Iraq, the regime change policy, and the state-building mission as a primarily American project, and were unwilling to help in major ways in the state-building process.¹⁰

For example, the role of the United Nations took a backseat to American policies in Iraq. The head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) was regarded among Iraqi politicians and people as part of the American embassy personnel in Baghdad,¹¹ evidenced by an increased number of attacks against the UN Mission. In 2004, the then head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, AbuMus'ab El Zarqawi, launched his operation in Iraq with three bombs. The first was against the UN, the second against the Jordanian Embassy, and the third against Shiites. El Zarqawi's message was that he was attacking American projects and allies in Iraq.¹² After UN Mission headquarters in Baghdad were destroyed by a truck bomb that killed twenty people, including the UN envoy Sergio de Mello, in August 2003, the UN Mission relocated its offices to the heavily fortified Green Zone (the most common name for the International Zone of Baghdad, and the governmental center of the Coalition Provisional Authority). The truck bomb attack was one of the deadliest attacks ever directed against the UN.¹³

Third, the American experiment in Iraq—including development efforts, humanitarian assistance, and capacity building programs—has been strongly linked to, and based on, calculations of American domestic politics. These political calculations were, in many cases, self-defeating. For example, after the United States decided to cut its funding for UNESCO when the organization voted to accept Palestine as a full member, the results were drastic:

[The] impact on the organization was immediate. The United States pays 22 percent of the budget of all UN agencies. So the vote meant that the American contribution of about USD 80 million...toward UNESCO's general budget of USD 643 million for 2011 was stopped... American extra-budgetary financing of USD 2 million and

USD 3 million a year for specific projects supported by Washington, particularly those in Iraq, was also halted.¹⁴

This action affected a wide range of UNESCO programs in Iraq, including capacity building programs, the Iraqi judiciary and media.¹⁵

However, the state-building process in Iraq has also demonstrated the truth of the conventional understanding about the essence of state-building operations. This understanding, as explained by Christopher Cramer and Jonathan Goodhand, holds that because “neither peace nor economic development will hold without a centralized, credible and effective state, the emergence of such a state is a political problem more than a technical problem, and that it will depend on a monopolization of force by the state.”¹⁶

Therefore, America’s failure to restore a legitimate government, and successive ill-advised peace-building tactics, led to the disintegration of Iraq—especially its governance, as well as socio-economic relations among its various ethnicities, and religious communities.

The Process of State-building in Iraq: Contradicting Problems and Dilemma Analysis

This section utilizes Paris and Sisk’s framework of core-contradicting problems that are embedded in most state-building operations, and links them to the authors’ five core dilemmas to present the challenges of the state-building mission in Iraq:¹⁷

- 1. Quick intervention is used to foster self-government, but,**
- 2. International control is required to establish local ownership**

The inherent contradictions of a state-building mission that is initiated by the international community to foster self-government, yet keeps the international community in control of the establishment of local ownership, are linked with two dilemmas: the size of the footprint, and the participation of locals. The size of the intervention usually reflects, “i) the size of the international presence, ii) the breadth of tasks that external actors take on, and iii) the assertiveness of the external actors in pursuing these tasks.”¹⁸

The American policy that drove its military operation was based on the notion that the mission of regime change and democratization of Iraq was going to be quick, with a light footprint in 2003.¹⁹ However, the size of the intervention was changed to a heavy footprint between 2006-2009, due to the deteriorating situation in both the security and governance

sectors. By 2010, the size of the intervention was changed again to a light footprint, leading to a complete exit in 2011.²⁰ This fluctuating status of the American troops revealed the lack of a long-term political commitment in Iraq. Iraqi politicians and regional states also perceived American troop levels as a politicized issue.

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The perceived lack of commitment by the United States opened doors for intensive regional and proxy conflicts to establish themselves in Iraq, and eventually led to a negative regional intervention by three regional powers: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. The U.S. policy of conducting a decisive short-term mission in Iraq originally assumed that the United States would hand over the country quickly to a group of Iraqi opposition leaders—who were partial to American interests and values—to form a capable and legitimate government.²¹

The United States, under pressure from its domestic politics, wanted to leave Iraq as soon as possible, and practiced an intrusive policy to expedite elections, formulate a government, and write the constitution. This led to the creation of a condition of “perceived legitimacy,” instead of real legitimacy, as well as a sectarian governing structure, instead of an inclusive political structure. Given that Iraq has three distinct populations—Sunnis, Shiites, and the Kurds—all with deep historical grievances, and the lack of trust among them, this formula was doomed to fail.

By 2012, even the Kurds, who had a strategic alliance with the Shiites, felt alienated by Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki’s government. As Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Region, explained, “the people of Kurdistan have waited six years for promises that have not been delivered and agreements that have not been honored. The constitution is breached on a daily basis, and the same individual holds the powers of prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, defense minister, chief of intelligence, and interior minister. The central bank may soon be under his purview as well.”²²

By the time of the Iraqi national election in 2014, only individuals with Maliki’s patronage were in power, controlling most of the Iraqi government agencies. The Sunni areas, on the other hand, were under siege by ISIS, and the Kurds were in a severe financial crisis because of Maliki’s decision to cut their share of the national budget.²³

3. Universal values are promoted as a remedy for local problems

Prior to 2003, there had been no real political and civil participation by the Iraqi people in the public sphere. This heavily affected the political culture in Iraq. There were no political parties or civil society organizations. Indeed, Iraqi culture did not practice the notion of politics, compromise, or peaceful means to advance political demands. For three decades under dictatorship, opposition parties were considered traitors to the regime, and the regime cracked down on several important Iraqi political parties who opposed Saddam's dictatorship, leaving a vacuum in the Iraqi political space. At the time of the 2003 war, Iraqis were accustomed to a dictatorial government that stripped their rights to voice their concerns, and that did not account for them when making policy decisions.

In addition, the Iraqi politicians leading the transitional process toward democracy did not give up the mentality of opposition, and treated the constituencies of their counterparts as enemies. In this context of zero-sum politics in Iraq, the United States launched its ambitious intervention, swiftly applying liberal values of win-win politics and liberal inclusiveness. It naïvely sought to promote an inclusive government and a unified state through successive "technical" yet "ineffective" elections, and a constitution in which the most important articles of decentralization and power-sharing were not implemented.

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The state-building operation in Iraq failed to balance liberal principles with an understanding of the governance environment and local traditions. Therefore, while the technical steps of democracy—elections and writing the constitution—were on schedule, individual political actions to consolidate power and exclude perceived political adversaries were still the norm in Iraq, exploiting these technically democratic processes. Maliki's ability to stay in power for two terms, combining technically democratic processes with sectarian politics, provides a clear example of this exploitation.

4. State-building requires both a clean break with the past and a reaffirmation of history

As Paris and Sisk explain, "moving from war to peace entails continuity as well as change."²⁴ The essential continuity required in Iraq was

the maintenance of the bureaucratic agencies, especially those providing standard public goods and security. However, the state-building mission in Iraq disregarded the need for this continuity.

The state-building operation, in a clear attempt to break with the legacy of Iraq as a militarized society, equated the pacification of the Iraqi society with the early demilitarization of the state. Thus, state-building efforts started with the fatal mistake of dissolving the Iraqi army and police system, leaving hundreds of thousands of young Iraqi men angry and

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unemployed.²⁵ Consequently, not long after that decision, non-state Sunni armed groups began to patrol Baghdad, waging a well-organized insurgency, destabilizing the country, and bringing the state-building project to a halt.

Instead of demilitarizing Iraq, the complete break with the past through the dissolution of the Iraqi army actually contributed significantly to the remilitarization of the Iraqi society.

The attempt at demilitarization and unintended remilitarization hindered the state-building mission in such a significant way that it has still not recovered.

5. Short-term imperatives often conflict with long-term objectives

The United States' short-term political calculations, dictated by its domestic politics, affected the process of state-building in Iraq. The United States ran the state-building mission in Iraq based on four-year election campaign promises, between both Republican and Democratic administrations, but the mission of state-building needed long-term strategic commitments that did not change with the change in administrations. Short-term imperatives played a crucial role in deploying ineffective and reactionary peace-building policies such as appeasing the militias and potential spoilers just to maintain the perception of a controlled and stable environment.

The American withdrawal in 2011 is a clear example of a short-term imperative that proved to be self-defeating; the exit strategy implemented by the Obama administration was not just a military withdrawal, but also a disengagement policy from all aspects of the state-building mission in Iraq.²⁶ Both the American embassy in Baghdad and USAID suffered massive budget cuts, which represent the limited scope of the American mission in Iraq after 2011. One senior official told the *Washington Post*

that “Congress is pushing for a smaller embassy with an eye toward cutting some of its \$6 billion budget, and I don’t want to say we miscalculated, but we initially built a plan based on two things that have not played out as well as we had hoped. One was the politics [in Iraq], and the other was security.”²⁷

The short-term imperatives of domestic politics that dictated a complete disengagement have affected many vital programs for the state-building mission in Iraq. Disarmament,
 demobilization, and reintegration
Disarmament,
 (DDR) programs, along with broader *demobilization, and*
 security reform, are all long-term *reintegration programs,*
 commitments and processes, yet they *along with broader security*
 were interrupted by the U.S. decision *reform, are all long-term*
 to disengage and exit.²⁸ This produced *commitments and processes,*
 a weak security sector in a context of *yet they were interrupted*
 aggressive sectarian politics. Hence, *by the U.S. decision to*
 by the end of 2010, Maliki’s sectarian *disengage and exit.*
 government had become the main
 source of coercive power against the
 Iraqi population.²⁹

In brief, the American administration acted on an “exit strategy” that was based on timetables instead of achieving strategic objectives.³⁰

PART II: THE WAY FORWARD: FIGHTING ISIS AS AN ON-AGAIN STATE-BUILDING MISSION IN IRAQ

Iraq’s Security Dilemma

Iraq has faced a new security dilemma since June 10, 2014, which is the most dangerous threat to the structure of Iraq as a unified state since Al-Qaeda in Iraq.³¹ In the weeks after June 10, ISIS was able to capture one third of Iraq’s territory in 48 hours.³² The terrorist organization is currently occupying Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq with a population of about two million. ISIS is also occupying large parts of Nineveh, Salahddin, Al Anbar, Kirkuk, and Diyala governorates, which leave about 4 million Iraqis under direct rule or indirect threat from ISIS. With a strong presence barely 50 kilometers from Baghdad, ISIS is a real threat to government institutions in the Green Zone.³³

Capturing advanced American equipment and weapons from four

Iraqi divisions, and advanced Russian weapons from the 17th division of the Syrian Army, ISIS is better equipped than the Kurdish peshmerga forces, which are the only unified and coherent forces left in Iraq.

Iraq's Political Process

During this grim security situation, Iraq was going through yet another protracted political process to form a government after a national election was held on April 30, 2014.³⁵ Following the 2010 elections, during which it took nine long and painful months to form a new government, there were expectations among people in Iraq that the government formation process in 2014 would fail, especially with ISIS announcing its own state in Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq.³⁶

It was in this environment that the United States decided to intervene in Iraq by helping the Kurdistan Region push back the ISIS offensive against Erbil, the Kurdish capital. The American airstrikes changed ISIS's military calculations, and continue to help rebalance the capacity of the peshmerga forces against the heavily-equipped terrorist organization.

American airstrikes and assistance in Erbil changed the political calculations of the Iraqi Shiites. The Shiites realized that if they maintained their nominee, Maliki, for the position of prime minister, they would lose their grip on power and the political capital to govern Iraq.³⁷ The United States, in its first bold move since 2011, made it clear that it would only intervene and help the Iraqi forces if a new government was formed within the constitutional timetable, and the new government was inclusive, incorporating the Sunnis and receiving the approval of the Kurds.³⁸

The Shiite political parties sidelined Maliki and put forward a new prime minister, Hayder El Abadi, on September 7, 2014, through a dramatic process that demonstrated how Iraq had been slipping toward a new dictatorship under Maliki.³⁹ Abadi was commissioned by a dramatic process that spoke volumes about Maliki's control of Iraq's security apparatus: American security forces escorted Abadi secretly to one of the presidential palaces, where it oversaw a commissioning ceremony that involved only the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, the Iraqi president, and Abadi. Maliki, the divisive sectarian figure, was ousted, giving the country a new start in its fight against terrorism—and, to some extent, reviving the project of state-building in Iraq.

Forming the government was another challenging task that the Iraqi politicians had to overcome in order to secure American help to defeat ISIS. Hence, politicians patched together a government cabinet within the constitutional timetables. However, the two powerful positions of the

Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior were left vacant, with the understanding that the Sunnis would fill the position of the Minister of Defense, while the Shiites would take the Ministry of Interior.⁴⁰

Since 2003, these two positions have always gone to the Sunnis and Shiites, but that was only on paper. Maliki managed, since 2010, to leave these two positions vacant, or fill them with political surrogates as acting ministers. In the meantime, he continued to consolidate the ultimate power of decision-making in these ministries. Thus, the new approach to fill these positions with technocratic, non-sectarian figures is an important part of the solution for Iraq's broken political system.⁴¹

Currently, the political situation is less tense, but it is still at a critical point. The security situation is on its highest alert, but with the help of the American airstrikes, ISIS is less willing to wage new large offensives inside Iraq.⁴²

Renewed American State-Building Mission in Iraq

The new American intervention is both military and political, and it is a crucial effort to save the state-building mission in Iraq. Although a government formulated upon conditions set by the Americans is a clear sign of the “dependency dilemma,” this new American effort is the only real solution to prevent the breaking up of Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines. The United States’ unilateral intervention has changed to an international intervention, where the European Union—especially France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—as well as
Canada are leading major humanitarian assistance efforts to help the masses of refugees in the Kurdistan Region. The international intervention also shares the United States’ view that forming an inclusive Iraqi government is necessary. This new international cooperation among various partners is important to reviving a long-term state-building mission in Iraq, instead of a unilateral short-term intervention.

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The current U.S. intervention is different from its first incarnation in three ways. First, it reflects a strong political commitment with a light footprint. Second, it considers regional dynamics. Third, it benefits from a change in the domestic politics of Iraq.

A strong political commitment, yet a light footprint: this new factor is

important, because it reflects both an international commitment to help, and a step forward to contain the dependency dilemma. By fighting ISIS, and by including all Iraqi populations in this fight, Iraqis will revive their sense of responsibility to protect and save their own cities. At the same time, the political process needs a renewed international commitment in order to protect the implementation of the new political agreement reached among the Shiites, Sunnis, and the Kurds to form an inclusive government, and to revive Kurdish and Sunni roles in the politics of Iraq.

Regional context: during the U.S. effort to rebuild Iraq, policymaking and implementation plans did not account for regional dynamics, in which Iraq is part of a “regional conflict complex.” In other words,

“strategies of reproduction adopted by states play themselves out beyond national borders. Nation- and state-building in one country...may derive benefits from violence, economic interest and state disarray in another...”⁴³

Iran is a very good example of such regional calculations. The United States did not account for Iranian influence in its initial policy discussions and planning regarding state-building in Iraq. The American administration did not put forward mechanisms to contain the Iranian ambitions in Iraq; on the contrary, the United States was oblivious to the Iranian initial projects in Iraq. Because the United States did not plan to contain Iran, the Iranian government was able to intervene heavily, and on all levels, to the extent that they emerged as the sole player in Iraq. Due to the international effort to prevent the Iranians from acquiring nuclear capability, the United States and the European countries turned a blind eye to the strong Iranian sphere of influence in Iraq.

The international intervention to fight ISIS, and to revive the state-building project in Iraq, deals with the regional conflict complex in a better manner. The intervention includes the Saudis, the Gulf States, the Turks, and the Jordanians, and fighting ISIS is perceived as a regional effort.⁴⁴ While this alliance is yet to materialize in an effective practical sense, initiating conversations among these various regional players is an important step in stabilizing the Middle East. The Iranian factor still remains, but it is vital to limit Iran’s negative engagement in the politics of Iraq before incorporating the Iranian government in any new regional initiative.

The change in the domestic politics of Iraq: the most important factor to maintain peace, implement development programs, and create a viable open-market economy is the presence of a legitimate, independent, and capable government—something that Iraqi politics has lacked since the

1960s. The ISIS presence in Iraq led the Shiites to recognize the blow-back from their sectarian politics, the Sunnis to understand the threats ISIS poses to their security, and the Kurds to give the project of a federal Iraq a new chance. This understanding can solve the participation and local ownership dilemma, and indicates a process that will ultimately lead to an inclusive, legitimate government, which is the most important factor in solving Iraq's current problems.

CONCLUSION

State-building is a perplexing and long-term commitment, with methods and tools that are still evolving. In a few cases, stabilization and work towards a functioning government are in progress, but as in many other interventions, state-building operations have stumbled, or have completely faltered.

The case of state-building in Iraq is a clear illustration of one such faltered effort. The United States operated on tactical maneuvers, instead of strategic objectives, to manage the complex issues of state-building in a complex country such as Iraq. As Cordesman and Khazai explain,

“the post-conflict moment, such as it is, is not simply one in which we stand back, take stock of the destruction and undoing, and go about re-building. It is, instead, a different phase in the long-term process of resolving state-building tensions. War and its post-war legacy are very much part of that process.”⁴⁵

Iraq is poised to be by far the most complex operation in modern state-building missions. The analysis of the contradicting problems and dilemma analysis of the state-building mission in Iraq shows that the United States started with a series of wrong decisions and actions in the early stages of the mission, from which the state-building process in Iraq has yet to recover. Among these missteps was the dissolving of the Iraqi army, pushing for technical democracy—elections and writing a constitution—instead of committing to an evolving democratic process, and substituting short-term domestic political calculations for long-term commitments.

The analysis also shows that one of the most important problems of the American state-building mission in Iraq was that peace-building did not constitute an integral part of the overall strategy. Instead, peace-building was a reactionary policy used by the United States to counter the unintended consequences of implementing an ill-advised state-building mission. Thus, instead of using peace-building as a goal, the United States deployed

it as a tactic between 2007-2009 to extinguish what were then perceived as temporal problems in separated areas of Iraq.

The new intervention in Iraq, led by the United States along with the international community, presents an opportunity to resume America's earlier state-building mission in Iraq. In its new intervention, with the threat of ISIS in mind, the United States and the international commu-

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nity have finally adopted a strategy that incorporates both state-building and peace-building. The initial steps of this new intervention represent a strategy that is based on two paradigms. First, peace-building: fixing the political structure, pushing to form an inclusive legitimate government, ensuring the participation of all the Iraqi components in the political process. Second, state-building: building a capable secu-

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 rity apparatus to maintain stability and security amidst a volatile crisis, keeping the working bureaucratic institutions to provide basic urgent public goods. In the short-term, this new strategy will help mitigate Iraq's internal conflicts, which in the long-term will help provide the necessary fundamentals required for a successful state-building process. *f*

ENDNOTES

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