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Editor

Fragile Politics

Weak States in the Greater Middle East



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Yemen is deeply political and is much more complex than simply the "jihadis versus the state" model that USAID's strategy—and indeed the drone strikes—rest upon. Fighting AQAP with air strikes, "Special Operations Forces who are as comfortable drinking tea with tribal leaders as raiding a terrorist compound,"⁶² and development initiatives that are perceived to have external security objectives as their primary goal are both strategies that carry risk in the longer term. First, by so explicitly tying development assistance to political and security objectives, the sincerity of purpose required to win "hearts and minds" is probably sacrificed from the outset. Second, by viewing the massive changes underway in Yemeni society as a threat to be contained, USAID enacted a policy to secure the "vulnerable" Yemeni state from its "rebellious" citizens. Perhaps inadvertently, this framing of the crisis made political passivity and stasis the core components of the desired stability; the contradiction and self-serving nature of which risk entrenching a level of anti-Western sentiment that may prove difficult to unmake.

Carried to its logical conclusion, the notion of stabilization that now predominates in Western donor engagement in so-called weak and failing states is based on the implicit notion that changing the political status quo can be threatening, and that long-term developmental change and social cohesion can be engineered through the containment of short-term risks. But state formation is an inherently risk-laden process, in which some coalitions gain power and influence while others lose it. As such, the very notion of stabilization seems to be at odds with the massive upheaval that is inherent to the disorderly and non-linear process of state formation and consolidation.

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INTERVENTIONISM AND THE FEAR OF URBAN AGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

Daniel E. Esser

This chapter investigates "state weakness" as a hegemonic discourse which eclipses state-building through sub-national non-violent collective action in countries in the greater Middle East that are emerging from externally induced regime change. I posit that this eclipse is the result of a level-of-analysis problem grounded in a predominantly statist conceptualization of governance, reiterated most recently by Francis Fukuyama,¹ which operationalizes governance "as a government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not."² This characterization is anchored in global norms rather than local realities. Moreover, conceiving of governance as primarily state-led is also rooted in post-9/11 hegemonic concerns about state weakness and failure, which according to Fukuyama constitute "the single most important problem for international order."³ This conceptualization precludes an appreciation of

¹ Francis Fukuyama, "What Is Governance?" *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* (Early View; no issue/page numbers yet).

² *Ibid.*

³ Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 92.

⁶² Karen DeYoung and Ellen Nakashima, "U.S. Uses Yemeni Web Sites to Counter al-Qaeda Propaganda," *Washington Post*, 24 May 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-hacks-web-sites-of-al-qaeda-affiliate-in-yemen/2012/05/23/gIQAgnOxU_story.html

sub-national dynamics as building blocks for both human security and improved service delivery. It ignores evidence from cities in developing regions in the global South which suggests that a de facto absence of functioning state structures does not automatically translate into anarchy. One year after the US-led regime change in Iraq, Witke posited that “[l]ocal events and dynamics—in city councils and in the provinces—are key to understanding how the US botched its occupation.”⁴

In this chapter, I probe this proposition by first examining how the underlying discourse on statist governance dovetails with an increasingly salient depiction of cities in developing countries as breeding grounds for organized violence and terrorism. I then juxtapose these two converging discourses with an investigation of the extent to which sub-national collective action in cities in Afghanistan and Iraq factored into hegemonic strategies for both war-making and post-invasion state-building. While counterfactual reasoning does not suggest that the consideration of urban dynamics would necessarily have altered post-invasion realities in either of the two countries, it does illustrate how the negation of and, in many cases, active interference with local political agency ultimately limited the options available to both national and international actors in their quest for pacification and stability. At the same time, states like Afghanistan and Iraq have thus not only been failed internationally, as a result of global power politics, but also locally, as their citizens have endured lengthy occupations, resource exploitation, and resurgent violence.

Over a decade ago, the United States and its so-called Coalition of the Willing invaded Iraq based on what former British MP George Galloway termed a “pack of lies.”⁵ Prior to the invasion, the United States and its allies had deployed “resonant language in an effort to mobilize support”⁶ by labeling Iraq a “state which has utterly failed its citizens.”⁷ This recourse to a then

⁴ Christoph Witke, “Castles Built of Sand: US Governance and Exit Strategies in Iraq,” *Middle East Report*, Vol. 34, No. 232 (Fall 2004), <http://www.merip.org/mer/2004/232/castles-built-sand-us-governance-exit-strategies-iraq> (accessed 26 August 2013).

⁵ *The Guardian*, “Galloway defends himself at US Senate,” 17 May 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/may/17/iraqusa> (accessed 26 August 2013).

⁶ Ronald Krebs and Patrick Jackson, “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 35 (2007), 38.

⁷ *The Guardian*, “Full text: Jack Straw’s speech,” 21 February 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/feb/21/foreignpolicyiraq> (accessed 26 August 2013).

already decade-old terminology of state weakness and failure⁸ was designed to help legitimize international aggression despite contemporaneous concerns about “opportunities for a nonviolent solution [...] being missed”⁹ and that “post-Saddam Iraq could, ironically, become a failed state along the lines of pre-2001 Afghanistan.”¹⁰ Indeed, nearly identical language had been employed two years earlier to help justify the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.¹¹ The concepts of state weakness and failure “open[ed] the way to political and even military intervention,”¹² and in concrete terms to “impose US interests on less powerful nations”¹³ based on a “new normative, institutional and operative regime which far transcends the traditional method [of international diplomacy] and which can be used, at least temporarily, to substitute for a collapsed system of governance.”¹⁴

By assigning a label-as-policy, the determination of “state failure” has thus primarily constituted a political (as opposed to analytical) process.¹⁵ Its application has altered the prospects for state sovereignty, especially in the greater Middle East, where US energy and security interests are most acutely at stake. Resulting international invasions are supposed to create opportunities for

⁸ Pinar Bilgin and Adam D. Morton, “Historicising representations of ‘failed states’: beyond the cold-war annexation of the social sciences?” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2002), 55–80.

⁹ Peter Ford, “Is it too late for a popular uprising inside Iraq?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 January 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0127/p14s01-usmi.html> (accessed 26 August 2013).

¹⁰ Philip H. Gordon and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Should the war on terrorism target Iraq?” Analysis Paper #11 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, December 2001).

¹¹ *Boston Globe*, “Making a distinction over Iraq, Kosovo,” 18 December 2003, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2003/12/18/making_a_distinction_over_iraq_kosovo/ (accessed 26 August 2013).

¹² Martin Khour, “Failed States Theory Can Cause Global Anarchy,” 2002, <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/e0125.htm> (accessed 26 August 2013).

¹³ Elliot Ross, “Failed states are a western myth,” *The Guardian*, 28 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/28/failed-states-western-myth-us-interests> (accessed 26 August 2013).

¹⁴ Daniel Thüser, “The ‘failed state’ and international law,” 1999, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57/qout.htm> (accessed 26 August 2013).

¹⁵ Bilgin and Morton (2002); Edward Newman, “Failed States and International Order: Constructing a Post-Westphalian World?” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2009), 421–43; Dan Halvorsen, *States of Disorder: Understanding State Failure and Intervention in the Periphery* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

"jump-starting battered economies, re-introducing the rule of law, and rejuvenating civil society"¹⁶ by way of "strengthen[ing] the capability of the [newly installed government] not only to provide security, eliminate violent conflict and find ways to reconcile conflicting ethnic or religious factions, but also to protect human rights, generate economic opportunities, provide basic services, control corruption, respond effectively to emergencies and combat poverty and inequality."¹⁷ According to this logic, international interventions constitute unprecedented "opportunities" for some of these [invaded] countries to rebuild their societies, economies and politics and to start reforms and restructuring that may have previously proved unattainable.¹⁸ A central concern in this context is the mode of "establish[ing] a sovereign authority capable of enforcing a hegemonic peace upon all the fearfully contending parties."¹⁹ In the light of this line of reasoning, it is essential to understand which societal processes are most promising in terms of producing state legitimacy in post-invasion settings and at which level (or levels) of the political system these processes have most commonly occurred.

Conceptual²⁰ as well as empirical research on the potential of state-building from below in the context of fragile statehood, specifically in the cases of

¹⁶ Robert I. Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair", in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 33.

¹⁷ Dennis A. Rondinelli and John D. Montgomery, "Regime change and nation building: can donors restore governance in post-conflict states?" *Public Administration and Development*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2005), 19.

¹⁸ Reginald H. Green and Ismail I. Ahmed, "Rehabilitation, sustainable peace and development: towards reconceptualization", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999): 189–90.

¹⁹ Barbara F. Walter and Jack Snyder, *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 17; cf. Roland Paris, *At War's End: building peace after civil conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 227; Georg Kluge and Trutz von Trotha, "Roads to Peace: From Small War to Parasovereign Peace in the North of Mali" in Marie-Claire Foblets and Trutz von Trotha, eds., *Healing the Wounds: Essays on the reconstruction of societies after war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 109–43.

²⁰ Sandra L. Maclean, "Contributions from civil society to building peace and democracy", in Ann L. Griffiths, ed., *Building Peace and Democracy in Post-Conflict Societies* (Hullfax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, 1998), 31–50; Bruce Stanley, "City Wars or Cities of Peace: (Re)Integrating the Urban into Conflict Resolution", *Globalization and World Cities Study Group and Network (GAWC) Research Bulletin* 123 (October 2003).

Yemen,²¹ Somalia²² and Sierra Leone,²³ suggest that by virtue of human proximity, resulting density of interaction, and easier access to information, social dynamics in cities are constitutive of state-building as "creative and auto-dynamic [sites] to 'modernise' or reconstitute order beyond the state."²⁴ State institutions are located predominantly in cities,²⁵ and while "a politics of spontaneous conciliation hardly seems plausible at the national level in complex modern states", as Moore²⁶ conceded early on in the case of Tunisian colonial

²¹ See Charles Schmitz's contribution in this volume.

²² Green and Ahmed, "Rehabilitation, sustainable peace and development", Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999), 189–90; Jutta Bakonyi and Ahmed Abdullahi, "Somalia—Land ohne Zentralstaat, aber dennoch funktionsfähig" [Somalia—country without central state, yet capable of functioning], *Entwicklung und ländlicher Raum*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2005), 14–16.

²³ Daniel E. Esser, "When we launched the government's agenda...: aid agencies and local politics in urban Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2012), 397–420.

²⁴ Trutz von Trotha, "Der Aufstieg des Lokalen" [The rise of the local], *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 28/29 (2005), 32–8; cf. Gordana Rabrenovic, "Urban Social Movements" in Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio, eds., *Theories of Urban Politics* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 239–54; Stephen D. N. Graham, "Postmodern city: Towards an urban geopolitics?", *City*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2004), 165–96; Roberto M. Unger, "False Necessity: Antinecessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy", Vol. 2 of *Politics: A Work in Constructive Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 563–4; John Walton, "Urban Conflict and Social Movements in Poor Countries: Theory and Evidence of Collective Action", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1998), 460–81; Iris M. Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference", in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., *The Blackwell City Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1986), 228–36; Barry Hindess, "Actors and Social Relations", in Mark Wordell and Stephen P. Turner, eds., *Social Theory in Transition* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 113–26; Peter C. W. Gutkind, "From the Energy of Despair to the Anger of Despair: The Transition from Social Circulation to Political Consciousness among the Urban Poor in Africa", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1973), 179–98; Joan Nelson, "The Urban Poor: Disruption or Political Integration in Third World Cities?" *World Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1970), 393–414.

²⁵ Daniel E. Esser, "The Political Economy of Post-Invasion Kabul, Afghanistan: Urban Restructuring beyond the North–South Divide", *Urban Studies*, forthcoming (November 2013).

²⁶ Clement H. Moore, "Politics in a Tunisian Village", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 5 (1963), 527–40. I thank Matthew J. Buehler for alerting me to this source, as well as to literature on state consolidation in North Africa.

liberation, smaller units of governance such as towns and municipalities hold promise for spontaneous collective action to be successful. Drawing from a comparative study of Jerusalem, Belfast, Johannesburg, Nicosia, Montreal, Algiers, Mumbai, Beirut, Brussels, and Baghdad, Bollens has proposed that "the city is important in peace-building because it is in the streets and neighborhoods of urban agglomerations that there is the negotiation over, and clarification of, abstract concepts such as democracy, fairness, and tolerance."²⁷

Cities serve as arenas for citizens to encounter realities of the state; they are thus training grounds for the practice of democracy, which in turn renders them sites of state-building via local governance. For instance, recent research on leadership hierarchies in Delhi's contested slums²⁸ shows that over time, "primordial attachments"²⁹ wane in urban settings; as a result, the relative importance and influence of ethnic and interfamilial relationships decrease and are replaced by educational achievement and evolving political-economic networking as primary determinants of slum leadership. More diverse city-based civil societies that emerge from such dynamics are characterized predominantly by informal communal organization, which is often highly effective locally but remains invisible to the international development industry.³⁰

These observations of cities as sites of state-building from below problematize arguments by scholars of the Arab region positing that kinship-based societies appear more prone to experiencing difficulties associated with weak statehood due to inherent tensions between tribal identities rooted in rural areas and centralized power structures in cities.³¹ Notably, their analytical framework, which highlights "the relationship between tribe and state [as] a

²⁷ Scott A. Bollens, "Urban planning and peace building," *Progress in Planning* 66 (2006), 67.

²⁸ Saumitra Jha, Rao Vijayendra, and Michael Woolcock, "Governance in the gullies: democratic responsiveness and leadership in Delhi's slums," *World Development*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2007), 230–46.

²⁹ Clifford Geertz, "The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and politics in the new states," in Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: the quest for modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

³⁰ Willelmijn Verkoren and Mathijs van Leeuwen, "Civil Society in Peacebuilding: Global Discourse, Local Reality," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2013), 159–72.

³¹ Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: the Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Paul Staniland, "Cities on Fire: Social Mobilization, State Policy, and Urban Insurgency," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 12 (2010), 1623–49.

key, at times controlling, element in the process of regime construction and maintenance,"³² has been applied to the case of modernizing Afghanistan as well.³³ While there is no reason to believe that tribal, ethnic, and religious identities have not been important catalysts of political behavior in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq and their urban centers, we should try to understand the specific conditions under which city-based local political agency did or did not take place.

Before we delve into an investigation of actual events, we should first examine why the aforementioned virtues of urban life in the context of contemporary state-building are not the ones foregrounded in contemporary international policy-making on cities. Here, we ought to consider that the narrative of ethno-religious determinism in the Middle East resonates strongly with recent characterizations of cities as battlegrounds of terrorism. Such images of urban-centric low-intensity conflict have been perpetuated by development agencies' warnings against a "dark side" of urban growth driven by mushrooming slums, deteriorating health conditions, and resulting instability.³⁴ The Asian Development Bank (ADB), for instance, has highlighted urban poverty and resulting mass mobilization as "a potentially explosive social and political issue."³⁵ Similarly, the United Nations (UN) attributed urban violence partly to "the combination of a surging youth population, poverty, urbanization and unemployment"³⁶ and emphasized that "urban insecurity is gaining importance on the international stage not only because of terrorist attacks but because of the daily violence that dominates many people's lives—further fuelled by the rapid growth of cities."³⁷ Yet the most acute warning to date in this regard has been uttered by the United Nations-

³² Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, 61.

³³ Hasan K. Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan. The Reign of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979); Richard S. Newell, *The Politics of Afghanistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

³⁴ Cf. Caroline Mosser and Dennis Rodgers, *Change, violence and insecurity in non-conflict situations* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005), v.

³⁵ Asian Development Bank, *Urbanization and Sustainability: Case Studies of Good Practice* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2006), 31.

³⁶ United Nations, "Poverty, Infectious Disease, and Environmental Degradation as Threats to Collective Security: A UN Panel Report," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2005), 595.

³⁷ UNOCHA, "Global: Urban conflict—fighting for resources in the slums," IRIN In-Depth, Nairobi: IRINnews, 8 October 2007, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74687> (accessed 26 August 2013).

led agency for urban development, UN-HABITAT. Its former Executive Director Anna Tibajuta³⁸ went as far as suggesting that “globally rapidly growing slums [constitute] an urban social time bomb that is soon going to explode.”

Rather than leverage the proven ingenuity of urban actors collectively to create and maintain basic systems of service delivery even in the absence of an organizing central state, global policy-makers have thus chosen to focus on cities’ presumed propensity to foment and sustain large-scale insurgencies and violent conflict. This, in turn, has resulted in explicitly anti-sub-national policies and resulting practices in the aftermath of international invasions. Despite their obvious structural and historical differences, the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq provide evidence in support of this diagnosis. In both cases, hegemonic military invasions legitimized a previously selected ruler chosen primarily on the basis of his perceived loyalty to US interests through national ballots while stalling sub-national elections in order to stifle the emergence of a domestic opposition. In striking similarity to other cases of forced regime change during the past decade, “[t]he international community’s priority was the restoration of the state because they saw the conflict as a breakdown of authority at the national level.”³⁹ As a result, political stability rather than multi-party governance promised the greatest returns on the political as well as economic investment of invasion. According to Johnson and Leslie, in the case of Afghanistan,

If the international community imagined a peace agreement, so too it imagined a state: both with what it was (*a terra nullis* on which they could set to work from scratch) and what it should become (a liberal democracy), [thus ignoring] a territory staked out by powerful players who have their feet in the past and their eyes on the future.⁴⁰

In hindsight, “pressing forward with elections without having first begun the process of building these institutional foundations—including a central government with authority beyond Kabul”⁴¹ indeed proved to be “a recipe for

³⁸ Anna Tibajuta, “Schwierige Neue Welt” [Difficult New World], *Internationale Politik*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (2006), 10–14.

³⁹ Sara Hellmüller, “The Power of Perceptions: Localizing International Peacebuilding Approaches,” *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2013), 219.

⁴⁰ Chris Johnson and Johnny Leslie, *Afghanistan—The Mirage of Peace* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 158–9.

⁴¹ Paris, *At War’s End*, 127.

continued instability,” as Paris⁴² had predicted correctly early on in the process. With state-building instrumentalized as a tool for safeguarding regional control and global hegemony, the stakes were stacked against local collective action from the very beginning of both occupations. In Afghanistan as much as in Iraq, any leeway for local actors was feared to exacerbate “centrifugal” dynamics.⁴³ Tribal and religious fault lines in both countries were considered too volatile to allow for genuine democracy to arise. While this concern was clearly not without merit, it reflected general “donor reluctance to support political activities and emancipatory civil society, in settings where peace [and state-]building is all about changing state–society relations,”⁴⁴ and resulted in almost complete disregard of indigenous approaches to state-building from below.

In Afghanistan, calls by Afghan intellectuals to seize the historical momentum for reinventing the “space of governance” as a core function and virtue of cities⁴⁵ therefore went unheard. Kabul was considered too risky an experiment for genuine local democracy; as Giustozzi notes, “[w]hile it may appear odd that the capital of a collapsed state could be the object of much desire, everybody has always been aware that whoever is in control of Kabul will be better positioned to claim international recognition and receive a greater share of power in the event of a settlement.”⁴⁶ Instead, international stakeholders’ efforts focused on rural areas. The resulting National Solidarity Programme’s (NSP) declared purpose was to weaken the link between rural dwellers and traditional local power-holders in order to reorient villages toward the central state (an almost identical scheme had been rolled out unsuccessfully in East Timor).⁴⁷ However, although the NSP arguably increased local decision-making capacity and also, at least in less fervently

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Jonathan Goodhand, “Aiding violence or building peace? The role of international aid in Afghanistan,” in Sultan Barakat, ed., *Reconstructing war-torn societies: Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 52.

⁴⁴ Vertkoren and van Leeuwen, “Civil Society in Peacebuilding,” 164.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Ashraf Ghani, presentation at Chatham House, London, 26 September 2005.

⁴⁶ Antonio Giustozzi, “Respectable warlords? The politics of state-building in post-Taliban Afghanistan,” Crisis States Research Programme working paper 33 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2003), 6–7.

⁴⁷ Tania Hohe, “Developing Local Governance,” in Gerd Junne and Willelmijn Vertkoren, eds., *Postconflict development: meeting new challenges* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005), 62–8.

conservative areas of the country, broadened local participation in the process, Johnson and Leslie have argued that the NSP ultimately served to weaken the central state because of its failure to incentivize and institutionalize accountability.⁴⁸ Funded by donor dollars, the program was never designed to be fiscally sustainable in the first place;⁴⁹ in fact, it undermined the emergence of a capable multi-level state by circumventing provincial- and district-level authorities. All the while, local power hierarchies survived the NSP largely intact, with elders, landowners, and mullahs ranking among the most common electees to village-level NSP councils.⁵⁰

Meanwhile in Afghanistan's urban centers, donors created an artificial layer of local technocrats recruited from the ranks of Afghans returned from exile in Europe and North America and hailed for their "potential in terms of their contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan."⁵¹ Derogatively called "dog washers" (sing. *sag shoy*) by their Afghan subordinates, they had, in the majority of cases, little to no experience in managing governmental affairs. However, their aspirations to partake in the modernization of their homeland coupled with their bilingualism made them perfect collaborators to the international donor community: easy to manipulate and equipped with at least a rudimentary understanding of "Western" processes and customs, their central involvement in the reconstruction efforts "offered important opportunities to recruit expertise and solicit information for development programmes."⁵² Conversely, there was no strategy of political inclusion for lower-level former resistance fighters, despite the fact that such shared experiences constitute a critical condition for political legitimacy in tribal political culture.⁵³ Likewise, former

⁴⁸ Johnson and Leslie, *Afghanistan—The Mirage of Peace*, 189–91.

⁴⁹ Astri Suhcke, "The Limits of Statebuilding: The Role of International Assistance in Afghanistan", paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, 21–24 March 2006.

⁵⁰ Inger W. Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme", Working Paper Series (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August 2004), 58.

⁵¹ Liesl Riddle and Valentina Marano, "Homeland Export and Investment Promotion Agencies: The Case of Afghanistan", in Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, ed., *Diasporas and Development: Exploring the Potential* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 140.

⁵² Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, "Digital diasporas and international development: Afghan-Americans and the reconstruction of Afghanistan", *Public Administration and Development* Vol. 24, No. 5 (2004), 409.

⁵³ David Isby, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland* (New York: Pegasus, 2010), 220.

Communist administrators and politicians were systematically excluded from the country's political reconstruction.⁵⁴

In the subsequent elections for an Afghan Parliament (*Wolesi Jirga*) in September 2005—welcomed by international actors as the "conclusion of the Bonn agreement political transition plan"—partisan candidacies were possible, but considering the troubled history of party politics prior to the Soviet invasion, almost all candidates chose to run on individual tickets backed by ethnic or tribal loyalties.⁵⁵ With 53 percent voter participation, the turnout was markedly lower than during the previous year's presidential election when 75 percent of Afghan voters, according to official statistics, had participated.⁵⁶

The most commonly cited reasons for this reluctance was an oversupply of candidates, including suspected war criminals; an undersupply of information on candidates' programs (where they existed); and, especially among the urban electorate, a general sense of frustration—"a palpable air of disillusionment"⁵⁷ as an ICG report put it—fed by the visibility of and spatial proximity to the riches that the reconstruction process had generated for a small minority.⁵⁸ Provincial councils were elected at the same time as the national parliament, but their responsibilities had been curtailed to "participating in development" and "advising administrators", as the national constitution laid out opaquely in article 138, thus bearing the "risk that a potentially effective mechanism for local government might be forever marginalized."⁵⁹ Deliberate neglect went so far that a reporter of a leading international news agency suggested that candidates had "no idea of their role, responsibility of powers once they [were] elected."⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, during the first meeting of provincial council members for Kabul Province in March 2006, protest against this premediated powerlessness was vociferous. The head of the provincial council explained that in addition to inappropriate meeting facilities—two

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁵ US State Department, "Ambassador Bolton issues statement on situation in Afghanistan", 23 August (Washington, DC: States News Service, 2005).

⁵⁶ BBC News, "Afghan women still suffer abuse", 30 May 2005.

⁵⁷ ICG, "Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work", Crisis Group Asia Report No. 116, 15 May (Kabul: International Crisis Group, 2006), 4.

⁵⁸ Souvik Biswas, "Puzzle of the stay-away voters", Kabul: BBC News, 19 September 2005.

⁵⁹ Amin Tarzi, "What will become of the Provincial Councils?", *Afghanistan Report*, Vol. 4, No. 28 (Prague: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2005).

⁶⁰ BBC News, "Twin bombings kill three in Kabul", 14 November 2005.

rooms for up to thirty delegates in the case of Kabul Province were the norm—there were no provisions to grant members genuine oversight over provincial policies. Furthermore, they had not been given the right to appoint and remove district-level personnel; nor did they have effective control over provincial budgets.⁶¹

Much like Afghanistan, where cities from the 1950s to the early 1970s had served as sites of cautionary democratic experimentation,⁶² Iraq's history is dotted with democratic experiences reaching back to the 1950s⁶³ and, in case of associational life, even farther back into the late nineteenth century.⁶⁴ However, this aspect of Iraqi history was overlooked entirely in the run-up to the US-led invasion in 2003. Instead, policy wonks in Washington, DC and London engaged in an exercise of Orientalism by drawing a direct line between reductionist depictions of ancient Middle Eastern history and contemporary despotism under Saddam Hussein,⁶⁵ arguing that regime change in Iraq would be impossible without foreign intervention and conveniently ignoring the "culture of clandestine dissent and opposition"⁶⁶ that had been prevalent under Saddam Hussein.

Once intervention had occurred, however, it became clear that the occupiers were interested primarily in exerting direct control over Iraqi economic assets "rather than to foster and encourage genuine democratic reform."⁶⁷

⁶¹ IWPR, "Provincial councils demand power," *Afghan Recovery Report 2007*, 19 March (Kabul: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2006).
⁶² Karl-Otto Hondrich, "Verfassungsentwicklung, politische Stabilität und sozialer Wandel. Die Modernisierung des traditionellen politischen Systems in Afghanistan" [Constitutional development, political stability and social change. The modernization of the traditional political system in Afghanistan], yearbook of *Verfassung und Verfassungswirklichkeit*, 1 (Köln: Opladen, 1966), 226; Jan-Heeren Grevenmeyer, *Afghanistan: sozialer Wandel und Staat im 20. Jahrhundert* [Afghanistan: social change and the state in the 20th century] (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1990).

⁶³ Mulsin J. Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), cited in Benjamin Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). I am grateful for Benjamin Isakhan's pointers to helpful additional literature on the Iraq case.

⁶⁴ Eric Davis, "History matters: past as prologue in building democracy in Iraq," *Orbis* 49 (2005), 229–44.

⁶⁵ Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq*, 2012.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁷ Benjamin Isakhan, "The Streets of Iraq: Protests and Democracy after Saddam," in

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Mirroring the fate of Communists in Afghanistan, the purge of Baathists both from formal politics and the military ranks aimed to create a political scene whose ideological pillars were considered acceptable by the occupying forces and conducive to their strategic objectives. Although less widely reviled than former exiles in Afghanistan, Iraqis returning from abroad were similarly installed as advisers and program managers by the occupying forces in an attempt to mobilize them as "resources for reconstruction."⁶⁸

Members of the Iraqi diaspora had, of course, already played a role in helping frame US foreign policy objectives prior to the 2003 invasion. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam's regime, the cultural and language skills of this group were again in high demand. Much like international forces in Afghanistan, the Coalition Provisional Authority of Iraq (CPA) adopted a "greenfield approach" to municipal governance based on virtually no available intelligence on how cities were actually governed under Saddam.⁶⁹ In May 2003, CPA administrator L. Paul Bremer dismissed the members of the Baghdad City Council and declared the establishment of a new council a priority, which would assume an advisory role to the CPA. He contracted an American–Iraqi from an influential Baghdadi family to lead this effort. The project leader "relied initially upon coalition forces to assemble Iraqi citizens for meetings regarding [these] councils."⁷⁰ Although participation in these meetings was usually limited to a few dozen urban dwellers, in late June 2003 the CPA heralded the formation of 88 so-called neighborhood advisory councils, nine district advisory councils, and the new Baghdad Interim City Advisory Council.⁷¹ Despite the latter's powerlessness-by-design—it had only an advisory role to the CPA—Bremer hailed its first meeting as "the resumption of a democratic system for Baghdad."⁷² Preceding

Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell, eds., *The Secret History of Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 203.

⁶⁸ Nina Nyberg-Sorensen, Nicholas Van Hear, and Poul Engberg-Pedersen, *The Migration–Development Nexus: Evidence and Policy Options* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, July 2002), 39.

⁶⁹ Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Samuel Taddesse, "Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq" in Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, ed., *Diasporas and Development: Exploring the Potential* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 77.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷¹ CPA, "Establishment of Baghdad Interim City Advisory Council," 30 June, press release (Baghdad: Coalition Provisional Authority, 2003).

⁷² Quoted in *Seattle Times*, "Despite troubles, US plan for Iraq forges on," 8 July

this coalition-led municipal restructuring in the capital city, local collective action in secondary urban centers unfolded with vigor, "typically [led by] a few courageous men or women who had decided to do something for their communities."⁷³

Instead of articulating ethnicity-based political demands, these spontaneously formed groups sought to address acute public-service shortages in the immediate aftermath of the invasion through "a series of spontaneous elections."⁷⁴ [I]n northern Kurdish cities such as Mosul, in majority Sunni Arab towns like Samarra, in prominent Shia Arab cities such as Hillia and Najaf and in the capital of Baghdad,⁷⁵ Isakhan reports, "religious leaders, tribal elders and secular professionals summoned town hall meetings where representatives were elected and plans were hatched for local reconstruction projects, security operations and the return of basic infrastructure."⁷⁶ Likewise, the *Seattle Times* observed at the time that "city councils have been emerging around Iraq, with councils in Mosul and Basra, among other cities. Fallujah and other cities have mayors, [and] a 22-member city council took its seats in the southern city of Najaf."⁷⁶ Yet these initiatives were "largely being ignored by the Western media."⁷⁷ They also failed to secure approval by the CPA, which feared that emerging local constellations would be politically unwieldy and therefore viewed such agency as a problem rather than as a potential component of a functioning multi-level governance structure.⁷⁸

Hegemonic policy towards democracy promotion emphasized manageability and stability over local accountability and pluralism. This fear of realities on the ground and the resulting focus on forging a national political elite while stifling local politics sent a signal to the various tribal and ethnic factions in the country: in post-2001 Iraq, local power-brokering would at best be challenging and at worst considered part of the growing insurgency movement. This is not to suggest that ensuring ethnic mobilization, which also played out mainly in Iraq's cities, was fueled primarily by the Coalition's dis-

2003, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=20030708&slug=iraq08> (accessed 26 August 2013).

⁷³ Brinkerhoff and Taddesse, "Recruiting from the Diaspora," 81.

⁷⁴ Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq*, 133.

⁷⁵ Isakhan, "The Streets of Iraq," 193.

⁷⁶ *Seattle Times*, "Despite troubles."

⁷⁷ Davis, "History matters."

⁷⁸ Isakhan, "The Streets of Iraq," 194.

trust in local politics. But in conjunction with anti-Baathist policies, this stance amounted to a de facto "strategy of coercive urban governance suiting American ideological preconceptions and Shiite political ambitions."⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the CPA was determined to create municipal governance structures fully dependent on its political support and revoked the results of ad hoc local elections, culminating in a stand-off in Najaf where an Islamic candidate would probably have prevailed.⁸⁰ Where local elections were eventually allowed to go forward, such as in the northern Iraqi cities of Tallafar, Zumar, and Al-Eyaldia a few months later, the new procedure was hardly in compliance with accepted practices of free elections:

Authorities would select a panel of nominees beforehand, then the nominees would vote amongst themselves. Then between Oct. 15 and Oct. 22 [2003], the 187th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) teamed with Iraqi citizens to conduct the first democratic elections held in Iraq since coalition forces have been in the country. The cities of Tallafar, Zumar and Al-Eyaldia in northern Iraq now have the first popularly elected city councils in the country.⁸¹

Such official enthusiasm among the occupying forces did not, however, necessarily imply growing faith that Iraqis would actually succeed. "Democracy remains highly misunderstood among council members," the news source goes on to assert by quoting one of the regiment's officers, echoing the discourse created by Western spin doctors and media pundits prior to the invasion.⁸² In Mosul as well as several other Iraqi cities, a CPA-funded local governance program subsequently facilitated "democracy dialogues" with local dwellers⁸³ without giving them an actual political voice. Soon after, Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Shia cities in the south turned into major post-invasion battlefields between occupying forces and local insurgents. Even where protests remained largely peaceful, such as in the case of Kurdish cities in 2005, cities remained the epicenters of protest and resistance against the occupation.⁸⁴ There is, of course, no ex post facto guarantee that greater initial attention to facilitating city- or neighborhood-level alliances could have prevented the bloodshed. But it is important to point out that this option was

⁷⁹ Stanland, "Cities of Fire," 1638.

⁸⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 437.

⁸¹ US Army News Service, "Democratic elections begin in Iraq," 28 October 2003.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Brinkerhoff and Taddesse, "Recruiting from the Diaspora," 82.

⁸⁴ Isakhan, *Democracy in Iraq*, 138.

never seriously considered. The international state-building machine's reliance on foreign expertise and technical leadership co-opted and instrumentalized potential local political actors to an extent that rendered political activism outside the national context both operationally challenging and potentially suspicious,⁸⁵ thus narrowing the "political spaces"⁸⁶ that are necessary for legitimate representation to emerge.

We have so far focused on tensions between local and international realms of political agency. But the notion of global hegemony compels us also to consider global dimensions of collective action in the context of liberal interventionism and its local impacts. In the face of massive *transnational* collective action—defined as "coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors"⁸⁷—against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the decision by the United States and its allies to focus on minimizing platforms of dissent in the countries that they invaded becomes even more strategically plausible.⁸⁸

This tension between the inability to control collective action at home and the desire to do so in countries under hegemonic control constitutes a fundamental conceptual schism of externally induced regime change and democracy promotion. To some extent, this reflects convictions that well-established democracies can weather more peacefully the dissent resulting from ever more interconnected geographic spaces of political contention. But it calls into question the extent to which there is faith in organically emerging democracies in the global south. As long as statist national governance continues to be portrayed in rosy terms while urban cradles of democratic pluralism are reduced to spaces of latent or acute insurgencies, there is little hope that post-invasion democracy assistance can do much good.

⁸⁵ Athena Vongalis-Macrow, "Rebuilding regimes or rebuilding community? Teachers' agency for social reconstruction in Iraq," *Journal of Peace Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2006), 112.

⁸⁶ Wendy Larner, "C-change? Geographies of crisis," *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2011), 319–35; Pal Anirban, "Political space for the civil society: The work of two community-based organizations in Kolkata," *Habitat International*, 32 (2008), 424–36.

⁸⁷ Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, "Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction," in Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *Transnational Protest and Global Activism: People, Passions, and Power* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 2–3.

⁸⁸ Cf. Anthony F. Lang Jr., "The violence of rules? Rethinking the 2003 war against Iraq," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2007), 273.

Hegemonic policies' flat-out dismissal of cities as sites of concrete state-building dynamics was thus driven by a wariness of local politics. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, city-level experiments on reinventing participatory local governance burgeoned but were either ended by occupying forces or mainstreamed into the latter's imposed political structures. Democracy suppression rather than democracy promotion characterized the early period of both occupations and was justified by a characterization of cities as cradles of instability that threatened the vision of unified national governments as key components of the liberal international order. Yet by denying urban dwellers political space in the early days following the invasion, the US-led occupations created a self-fulfilling prophecy: their fear of political agency in cities eventually rendered cities hotbeds of increasingly violent opposition and infighting. It is against the backdrop of this trend that we need to re-examine discourses on governance performance in the Greater Middle East, as well as in other regions of the global periphery. If indeed "international policies dissolve in local realities," as van der Lijn⁸⁹ acutely summarizes a lost decade in post-2001 Afghanistan, then we must reconsider the possibilities of a different kind of internationally supported state-building, one that puts local priorities, coalitions and institutional legacies first. Although this is likely to be a messy affair, its outcomes will be more viable in the long run than what the current top-down model could ever produce.

⁸⁹ Jair van der Lijn, "Imagi-Nation Building in Illusionistan: Afghanistan, Where Dilemmas Become Dogmas and Models are Perceived to be Reality," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2013), 185.