

Reassessing Neoliberal Economic Reform in Post Conflict Societies: Operation Iraqi Freedom

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Introduction

Liberalism has been the dominant political philosophy existing within the international system after the end of the Cold War. International governing bodies, such as the United Nation, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, adopted liberal ideology in development policy, as competing political ideologies were no longer considered viable in the international system. International organizations, including major financial institutions, adopted this ideology and implemented these principles through structural adjustment programs in order to assist developing countries in the reconstruction of their economies. In the West, former United States President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher formally institutionalized these political and economic philosophies during their political tenure. Prime Minister Thatcher famously declared, “There Is No Alternative,” in reference to this twin system of democracy and capitalism.¹ Presently, this ideology still dominates both discourse and policy in the international system.

Neoliberalism, an extension of liberalism, is an ideology requiring free markets and democracy as a necessity to develop a free and prosperous state. Neoliberalism favors the privatization of state owned entities, eliminating or cutting funds allocated to social programs, reform in labor sectors, and values healthy competition to increase economic growth.² Adherence to this ideology is believed to

¹ Tod Lindberg, *Iron Logic*, World Affairs, Winter 2009.

² David Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2005.

result in lifting the economies of developing countries while simultaneously opening them to foreign investment and trade.

The neoliberal framework, when applied to the US-led invasion of Iraq, illuminates the United States strategy of opening Iraqi markets to trade and foreign investment, while moving the Iraqi economy towards capitalism. The U.S. economic reform strategy is twofold: affecting policy in both the labor and welfare sectors. These reforms, implemented by the Coalition Provisional Authority immediately after the occupation, will be discussed as they are attributed with exacerbating the fragile state of the situation during the attempted reconstruction phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This paper argues that the failure of the U.S. to phase these policies in overtime and include the local population during the reconstruction process resulted in the protraction of the conflict. Iraq serves as an example as to why it is necessary to reassess neoliberal economic reform in a post conflict society. Iraq, along with the many unsuccessful peacebuilding missions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century illustrate that while liberalism emerged from the cold war victorious, the immediate injection of neoliberal economic principles and their effects on peacebuilding efforts must be further evaluated.

Literature Review

After a review of relevant literature in the field, an ideological shift becomes apparent after the Cold War. The Cold War was a unique period of ideological warfare in the twentieth century and injection of the liberal ideology by the West was utilized to prevent the spread of communism in developing countries during this period of time.³

It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that liberalism emerged as the dominant ideology in the international system. In turn, international governing and financial institutions adopted liberal ideology in reconstruction and peacebuilding missions, as it is believed that spreading free markets and democracy is necessary to lift the economies of developing countries and open them to foreign investment and

³ David Harvey, 2005.

trade. Doyle's⁴ review of this process suggests that, historically, democracies do not engage in warfare with each other. The emergence of liberalism as the dominant ideology in the international system is believed to give way to an era of peace. It becomes clear as to why there is a motivation to transition governments to democracy, as it is in the best interest of Western powers.

However, Kaldor has suggested that the end of the Cold War has brought about a new set of unforeseen challenges for the West. As a noticeable increase in the prevalence of intrastate conflict has occurred⁵; Kaldor has concluded that the cold war has given way to the development of what she coined *new wars*. Fought with Kalashnikovs, mortars, and RPGs, and typically occurring in failed or failing states, *new wars* are conducted by actors both "global and local, public and private." It is common to see political entrepreneurs emerge using identity politics to manipulate factions for gain. This is a contributing factor to other important and troubling aspects of intrastate conflicts: civilian casualties, massive human rights violations, and possibly genocide.

However, the implementation of liberal reform by the West and international governing and financial institutions in post war conflict can be disadvantageous, if not detrimental, in these types of conflict. Paris points to the United Nations peacekeeping track record to support this view; the injection of liberal policies in the 13 post cold war missions can be described as rather unsuccessful. Paris claims that this post war strategy may have even exacerbated underlying social tension, such as in the case of Rwanda.^{6*} Implementing reforms, which are

⁴ Michael Doyle, Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Policy, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*: I/ II: 12, 1983.

⁵ Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars*, 1999.

⁶ Roland Paris, *At War's End*, 2004.

* According to Paris, the international donor community coerced Habyarimana to hold free and fair election by threatening to withdraw financial support. The World Bank assisted in the implementation of structural adjustment packages (SAPs) and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) oversaw military reform and humanitarian tasks. The country underwent liberalization of both the economic and government sectors. Liberalization of the media allowed for the Hums to spread message of ethnic superiority via publications and radio and power sharing resulted in Hutus fearing the loss of power, so paradoxically, political liberalization was actually a catalyst for the genocide. Also, the presence of international development organizations resulted in what Paris refers to as "antidemocratic" and "virulently anti-Tutsi" local

based on the principles of competition, in a post conflict society with pre-existing ethnic or religious tensions has proven to be rather disastrous. Paris does suggest that institutionalization before liberalization (IBL) will more likely assist in the stabilizing a post conflict society.

While there is no perfected peacebuilding template for post-cold war conflicts, aforementioned scholars have suggested methods which at times can be consistent or conflicting. Iraq, which will be explored, seems to have become another post-cold war conflict initially marred by democratic and marketization policies. Although the opportune time to quell the violence in Iraq has passed, an evaluation of the post invasion phase of the conflict can give insight into future peacebuilding efforts.

U.S. Neoliberal Economic Reform in Iraq

In this section, the neoliberal economic reforms, both external and internal, implemented by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) immediately after the invasion of Iraq will be discussed in depth. First, the external economic reforms will be touched upon as they were quite beneficial financially for foreign investors. Secondly, it will be argued that the internal reforms, both to the labor and welfare sectors, were not only disadvantageous, but also detrimental to local Iraqi recovery. These policies alienated the local population and did not foster a sense of local ownership over the peacebuilding process.

As mentioned, reforms were put into practice that involved internal and external neoliberal economic reform. The CPA immediately applied external neoliberal economic policies, which included policies that opened Iraq's markets to foreign investment and trade.⁷ Looney lists the key reforms that were implemented after the fall of Baghdad by the Coalition Provisional Authority⁸:

NGOs. Lastly, the economic reform policies resulted in an increase in healthcare and education fees, in combination with a decrease in wages, may have contributed to the mobilization of Rwandans during the genocide.

⁷ Eric Herring, Neoliberalism Versus Peacebuilding in Iraq, *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*, 2008.

⁸ Robert Looney, Postwar Iraq's Financial System: Building from Scratch, *Middle East Policy*, 12:1 2005.

1. Investors (except for all-important oil production and refining) would be allowed 100-percent ownership of Iraqi assets, full repatriation of profits and equal legal standing with local firms.
2. Foreign banks would be welcome to establish operations immediately or to purchase equity shares in existing Iraqi financial institutions.
3. Income and corporate taxes would be capped at 15 percent.
4. Tariffs would be reduced to a universal 5-percent rate, with none imposed on food, drugs, books or other humanitarian imports.
5. Although no precise timetable was set, Iraq's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), except the oil sector, were to be privatized (although the method of privatization was not specified).

The extent to which these reforms benefited foreign investors is underscored in an *Economist* article entitled, "Let's all go to the Yard Sale."⁹ This article opened with the statement, "If it all works out, Iraq will be a capitalist's dream," referring to the economic reforms as being representative of "...the kind of wish-list that foreign investors and donor agencies dream of for developing markets. Investors in any field, except for all-important oil production and refining, would be allowed 100% ownership of Iraqi assets, full repatriation of profits, and equal legal standing with local firms." Essentially, these reforms were intended to sell off Iraqi assets, completely excluding local business owned by Iraqis, and to include complete privatization of state-owned enterprises. Furthermore, this process was not closely evaluated and was reinforced by the Iraq Study Group report.

The Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan panel appointed by U.S. Congress, strategized a new framework to redirect the peacebuilding

⁹ "Let's All go to a Yard Sale," *Economist*, September, 2003.

strategy after the U.S. invasion.¹⁰ The 2006 ISG report calls for a holistic approach including suggestions of national reconciliation, police reform, and diplomacy on both the regional and international level.¹¹ However, the ISG report also advocates for a continuation of the policies of reducing government subsidies. The report states, “The Iraqi government has (also) made progress in meeting benchmarks set by the International Monetary Fund. Most prominently, subsidies have been reduced.¹²” The ISG continued to support neoliberal economic reforms in Iraq, even as the conditions continue to deteriorate throughout the conflict.

Woodward¹³ reports how the cutting of government subsidies affects the local population, quoting the Iraqi Trade Minister Abdul Falah al-Sudany, “This means that...five items (will be distributed): Sugar, flour, rice, milk and cooking oil, which is cut in half from the ten items a significant portion of the Iraqi population rely on.” Trade Minister Abdul Falah al-Sudany shed light on how these economic reforms were experienced by Iraqis; Policies were put into place which resulted in high unemployment with no reliable system acting as a safety net during this period of transition.

The deteriorating conditions resulted in the U.N. launch of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI).¹⁴ The UNAMI report states that five years after the U.S. - led occupation of Iraq, approximately four million Iraqis are in need of food and 40% of the population does not have access to clean drinking water.¹⁵

¹⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*, 2007.

¹¹ United States Institute of Peace., Iraq Study Group “The Iraq Study Group Report”

<[http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/#init/tabs=em ail% 2Cpost/charset=utf-8/style=default/publisher=e2bcf7dc -325c-4829-991667710ce244f1/linkfg=%23000098/sessionID=1237832365459.9446](http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/#init/tabs=em ail%2Cpost/charset=utf-8/style=default/publisher=e2bcf7dc-325c-4829-991667710ce244f1/linkfg=%23000098/sessionID=1237832365459.9446)>.

¹² United States Institute of Peace., Iraq Study Group “The Iraq Study Group Report.”

¹³ Woodward, Robert, “Iraq Must Cut Food Rations in 2008 – Trade Minister.” *Reuters*. <[http://www.Reuters.com/article/africaCrisis/ idUSL06528476](http://www.Reuters.com/article/africaCrisis/idUSL06528476)>.

¹⁴ United Nations “United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (September 2008).” <<http://www.uniraq.org/>>.

¹⁵ United Nations “United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (September 2008).”

While taking on many issues, UNAMI has designed a multi-million dollar project uniting NGOs and other humanitarian actors to attempt to resolve these public health issues.

It is visible how subsidy elimination can be detrimental to the local community, particularly during conflict. The effect of the reducing government subsidy programs is highlighted in a 2004 International Crisis Group report entitled, “Reconstructing Iraq.” The ICG conducted on the ground interviews with local Iraqi’s regarding their experiences after the invasion. The ICG¹⁶ report found that:

“...the sale, at heavily subsidized prices, of fertilizers and pesticides also came to a halt with the fall of the Baathist regime. Lacking such necessary items, farmers saw plots turn into wastelands, while disease and severe salinity destroyed many of the crops they still managed to grow. A number of farmers sought alternative jobs in urban areas, where unemployment already was taking its toll.”

It becomes evident that these policies are not sensitive to the environment of a post-conflict society and seem to have weakened an already fragile state. The welfare reforms in conjunction with the reforms to the labor sector, which will be discussed shortly, created an environment that restricted previously relied upon government subsidies without a functioning state to facilitate growth and production.

As mentioned, the internal economic reforms extended into the labor sector as well. The Coalition Provisional Authority repealed Saddam’s policies and implemented neoliberal economic reforms. Interestingly however, the CPA continued to enforce Hussein’s 1987 law which prohibited the formation of labor unions.¹⁷ This labor law is consistent with neoliberal ideology, as Schwartz explains, because labor unions resulted in wages being raised and high standards for

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

¹⁷ David Bacon, Saddam’s Labor Laws Live On. *The Progressive*. December 2003.

working conditions, and, in turn, can potentially limit profit for employers.¹⁸ So, by restricting organized labor, non union contractors can be hired. Third country nationals were imported, worked for less, and effectively undermined the Iraqi workforce.

Within the labor sector, foreign contractors and investors played a more significant role than local Iraqi's, as discussed previously. Lacher points out that, "Iraqi state-owned enterprises – that is, all companies of significance – were barred from bidding for contracts paid for by US funds.¹⁹" The policy reforms in this post-invasion environment assisted in deterioration of the situation on the ground. Skyrocketing rates of unemployment, limited government subsidies, coupled with reforms preventing participating in the reconstruction process, resulted in growing anti-U.S. sentiment and failure in the peacebuilding process.

Schwartz comments on the policies which prevented Iraqi's from participating in the post-conflict reconstruction process, "state-owned enterprises were to be demobilized, prevented from participating either in repairing facilities damaged during the invasion or in any of the initially ambitious reconstruction projects the USA commissioned. This policy was so strict that state-owned enterprises with specific expertise in Iraqi electrical, sanitation and water purification systems were forbidden from obtaining subcontracts from the MNCs (Multinational Corporation) placed in charge of rejuvenating the country's infrastructure.²⁰" The report produced by the ICG attributed the growing resistance movement against U.S. with easily mobilized young men due to mass unemployment in Iraq.²¹

¹⁸ Michael Schwartz, *Neoliberalism on Crack: Cities Under Siege in Iraq*, *City*, 11:1, 2007.

¹⁹ Wolfram Lacher, *Iraq: Exception to, or epitome of Contemporary Post – Conflict Reconstruction?* *International Peacekeeping*, 14:2, 2007.

²⁰ Michael Schwartz, 2007.

²¹ International Crisis Group, "Iraq."

USAID,²² an “independent federal government agency that receives overall foreign policy guidance from the Secretary of State,” promotes the vision of privatization in their strategic plans. Their report continues to support privatization, “The Government of Iraq will continue to receive support in the privatization of state-owned assets, a delicate but essential move to increase the role of the private sector in Iraq’s economic growth.²³” The privatization of previously state-owned business, that is 150 of the 200 previously owned state entities, were sold off.²⁴ In combination with USAID ending government subsidies, all contributed to a significant decrease in standard of living of Iraqi civilians.

According to Iraq Study Group, the population was left disenfranchised, with the unemployment rate of between 20%-60%, dependent upon location,²⁵ and the CPA’s refusal to repeal Saddam Hussein’s anti-union labor policy. Additionally, the local population was denied subsidies in an undeveloped economy that lacks opportunity. Iraqi economy is capable of growth as it has skilled laborers, oil wealth, and a strong agriculture industry;²⁶ however the local Iraqi’s were not utilized in the reconstruction process. It becomes clear how the immediate neoliberalization of the Iraqi economy resulted in further destabilization of the already fragile state of Iraq.

The reforms implemented by the aforementioned agencies have been discussed as being consistent with neoliberal ideology in post-war reconstruction. The effects of these policies in Iraq are now evident, however they aren’t unexpected. Richmond²⁷ argues that this

²² United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “USAID/Iraq Transition Strategy Plan (2006–2008).”

²³ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “USAID/Iraq Transition Strategy Plan (2006–2008).”

²⁴ Michael Schwartz, 2007.

²⁵ United States Institute of Peace., Iraq Study Group “The Iraq Study Group Report.”

²⁶ Khalid Mustafa Medani, State Building in Reverse: The Neo-Liberal "Reconstruction" of Iraq. *Middle East Report*. 2004: 232.

²⁷ Oliver Richmond, Welfare and the Civil Peace: Poverty with Rights? Whose Peace? *Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*. 2008.

approach results in a *neoliberal marketization* as it does not allow for individuals to take part in the reconstruction process, essentially giving ownership over the peacebuilding process taking place in their society. Richmond also finds that the neoliberal culture of peacebuilding can allow a space for welfare policies. He suggests that these policies could be both short-term and assist in the development of stable polities. These programs create of a relationship between the local, state, and international levels during the peacebuilding process.²⁸ More importantly, they foster a sense of local ownership over the reconstruction process. Given this perspective, the next section will look into alternatives to the immediate neoliberalization of the Iraqi economy after the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Alternatives

The United States strategy of capitalist reconstruction in Iraq has been brought to light through an examination of the neoliberal economic reforms implemented by the CPA immediately after the United States invasion of Iraq. While the local population has experienced consequences due to the internal economic reforms, self-sustaining growth could have been possible through local ownership of the reconstruction process. In this section, the suggestions of the International Crisis Group and scholars whom recognize this important aspect in post conflict societies will be explored in this section.

Ben-Meir²⁹ puts forth the suggestion that Iraq should own the process of reconstruction, arguing:

... Iraq's central government can increase its chances of survival and utility by supporting reconstruction programs that are driven in their design, implementation, and evaluation by local communities. Participatory decentralization with support from the

²⁸ Oliver Richmond, 2008.

²⁹ Yossef Ben-Meir, 2008.

national government will create a frame of reference for local communities and provinces to find a way to connect to the central government that may be acceptable even in the long-term because local self-sustaining peacebuilding and is critical of international or foreign influence in developing countries.³⁰

This approach is advocated by International Crisis Group Report³¹ as well as Roland Paris³² whose observations on peacebuilding missions were discussed earlier. Communities within a state are affected differently by the conflict and will have needs that differ from another community located elsewhere. An approach that targets the needs specific to the area may be beneficial in post cold war climate.

Next, the Reconstructing Iraq report published by the International Crisis Group,³³ an “independent, non-partisan, source of analysis and advice to governments on the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict” sights failures during the reconstruction in Iraq. The ICG attributed failure during this phase to a lack of planning, limited Iraqi input, the United States government pushing deadlines, ideology, and importantly, failure in the economic realm.³⁴

Direct recommendations are made to the Iraqi Interim Government to improve the socioeconomic situation in Iraq. The ICG suggests postponing the privatization of state-owned companies until the market stabilizes, and providing these state-owned companies with funds and resources.

In the labor realm, the ICG report advises supporting unionizing and preferential treatment for Iraqi contractors over foreign contractors. Also, the CPA proposes establishing an official order requiring that foreign contractors employ a certain percentage of Iraqis and provide farmers with government subsidized necessities.³⁵ Neoliberal economic policies can increase economic

³⁰ Yossef Ben-Meir, 2008.

³¹ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

³² Roland Paris, 2004.

³³ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

³⁴ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

³⁵ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

growth, so phasing policies once there is stability and over time, can ease some of the unintended consequences of the peacebuilding process.

The ICG report summarizes points for change: “The cost of insufficient local involvement and consultation was several-fold: mistaken priorities, a disconnect between Iraqi aspirations and rebuilding efforts, and a lost opportunity to empower Iraqis, reform their institutions and, more generally, strengthen local capacity.³⁶” The ICG is essentially points out the consequences of *neoliberal marketization*.³⁷

It is clear how the Coalition Provisional Authority’s reduction of state subsidies to the locals was damaging to the overall reconstruction process. Offe³⁸ discusses the importance of state assistance in a post conflict society, “...the welfare state is based on the recognition of the formal role of labor unions both in collective bargaining and the formation of public policy. Both of these structural components of the welfare state are considered to limit and mitigate class conflict, to balance the asymmetrical power relation of labor and capital, and thus to overcome the condition of disruptive struggle and contradictions that was the most prominent feature of pre-welfare-state, or liberal, capitalism.³⁹” Offe captures why state assistance is necessary during peacebuilding when referring to the ‘disruptive struggle,’ which was experienced by Iraqis and explained in the previous section.

He goes further in describing the welfare programs as a necessary ‘economic and political stabilizer’ in countries recovering from conflict. The programs such as state subsidies are capable of assisting in the regeneration of growth and preventing recessions.⁴⁰ Offe seem to not consider the “welfare state” to be alone a factor

³⁶ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

³⁷ Oliver Richmond, 2008.

³⁸ Offe, Claus (1981) Some Contradictions of the Modern Welfare State. *Praxis International*. 3:1981.

³⁹ Claus Offe, 1981.

⁴⁰ Claus Offe, 1981.

that would mitigate issues in post conflict societies, but rather attributes welfare programs as an instrument which reduces struggle and class conflict in these developing societies.⁴¹

Lastly, Roland Paris⁴² offered important insight in his 2004 book “At War’s End,” in his analyses of the effects of marketization in post conflict societies. While he draws the distinction between post conflict reconstruction in states recovering from civil conflict and those that have been invaded by external powers, his investigation into the effects of marketization are not to be dismissed. He looks at the fourteen major peacebuilding missions and determines that there must be institutionalization before liberalization (IBL) to offset the detrimental effects that accompany liberalization and marketization during the attempted peacebuilding process. As discussed, marketization injects unemployment and competition into a society which does not have the faculties to deal with these unintended consequences. In a state that may have class struggle and underlying ethnic tension, this can be disastrous to the peacebuilding process. The consequences that marketization has on a society, which is once again evident in the case of Iraq, can be divisive during the reconstruction process and has resulted in this conflicts becoming protracted.

Ben-Meir,⁴³ the International Crisis Group,⁴⁴ Offe,⁴⁵ and Paris⁴⁶ offer interesting insight into the dilemma of implementing neoliberal economic policies in a post conflict society. However, these recommendations were not taken into consideration by the Bush Administration as the economic condition deteriorated over time. Recommendations to implement neoliberal economic policies gradually, incorporate local Iraqis in the reconstruction process, and provide government subsidies were suggested as they are found to ease the transition process and mitigate socioeconomic struggle in a post conflict society.

⁴¹ Claus Offe, 1981.

⁴² Roland Paris, 2004.

⁴³ Yossef Ben-Meir, 2008.

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, “Iraq.”

⁴⁵ Claus Offe, 1981.

⁴⁶ Roland Paris, 2004.

Conclusion

Liberalism emerged as the dominant ideology in the international system after the Cold War and remained unchallenged throughout the rest of the twentieth century. International governing bodies, such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization adopted liberal ideology in development policy, as competing political ideologies were no longer considered viable in the international system. However, the United States invasion of Iraq illuminates that principles of this ideology must be reassessed as they are not conducive to sustained growth immediately after conflict.

While neoliberal economic reforms can be beneficial in economies that are more stable, the immediate effect of the neoliberalization to the Iraqi economy has been detrimental to Iraq's civil society. The immediate benefits of these reforms did not outweigh the resulting consequences for the U.S.-led Coalition forces and the Iraqi population alike. Richmond's *neoliberal marketization* of peace and shed light on how this strategy does not allow for 'engagement with the agents and subjects of this peace'⁴⁷ and negatively affects the delicate relationship between the local, state, and international levels during the peacebuilding process.⁴⁸ This culture of peacebuilding has proven ineffective during the post invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Recent polling suggests that the U.S.-led Coalition forces must adjust their strategies for reconstruction in Iraq. The Iraq Study Group reports that, "79 percent of Iraqis have a 'mostly negative' view of the influence that the United States has in their country. Sixty-one percent of Iraqis approve of attacks on U.S.-led forces."⁴⁹ Polling close to this phase of the conflict depicts the need to reassess the immediate implementation of economic policies in a post conflict society. Gradually implementing neoliberal economic policies, while

⁴⁷ Oliver Richmond, 2008.

⁴⁸ Oliver Richmond, 2008.

⁴⁹ United States Institute of Peace., Iraq Study Group "The Iraq Study Group Report."

including the local population, can decrease resistance and ease tension during a period of transition. The United States failure to phase-in neoliberal economic policies overtime and include the local population during the reconstruction process is suggested to have been factor in the conflict becoming protracted.

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