Reinventing Iraq? – strengthening traditional institutions in state-building

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The concept of state-building has been seriously challenged by the realities of international policymaking in cases like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. More recently, American state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq proved faulty. The main rational for state-building in those cases was the assumption that failed states can’t be renovated but need to be fundamentally reconstructed from the scratch. Accordingly the international community tried to apply a number of tools and methods that were not tested in previous cases. Moreover, this was done without sufficient analysis of the long term impact state-building measures had or will have in terms of sustainability. There can be no doubt that the concept of state-building, as practised so far, has failed to produce the desired results.

One of the reasons might well be that too little responsibility has been put on the shoulders of local politicians and too many was carried on those of the international community. Another reason, not thoroughly thought over yet, is the fact that the international community did away with traditional institutions and instruments that were in place in those failed states and that might have a potential not only to sustain a reformed state, but that could sustain reforms better.

The examples of post-war Germany and Japan – often cited as successful US attempts on state-building – might serve as role models. Political institutions in both countries were not newly invented. Instead, institutions existing before both countries had turned to totalitarianism were re-invented and reformed. Thus, the democratic and economic transformation processes took a much smoother pass and had the consent of the citizens. Rather then altering the patterns of international state-building efforts the Obama administration merely aims to find a suitable exit strategy from Iraq.

This paper aims to assess, if the international community can find ways and means to restructure state-building tools and measures in Iraq by strengthening traditional institutions rather than creating new ones.