

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Death, Dominance, and State-Building: The US in Iraq and the Future of American Military Intervention. By

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Roger D. Petersen, a distinguished political scientist and professor at MIT known for important publications such as *Resistance and Rebellion* (2001), *Understanding Ethnic Violence* (2002), and *Western Intervention in the Balkans* (2011), has shifted his focus to the Iraq War. His latest work, *Death, Dominance, and State-Building*, offers a meticulous and insightful analysis of the intricate relationship between military intervention, state building, and organized violence.

While unable to fully capture the depth and sophistication of this long and detailed book, this review will emphasize its analytical framework, empirical analysis, and key lessons for future American military interventions. Before examining Petersen's investigation, it is important to note that this analysis is unparalleled in its comprehensive exploration of the Iraq War. While the author may not be a regional expert, his insights into the US intervention in Iraq reveal a profound grasp of local dynamics. Additionally, the book critiques oversimplified narratives and erroneous conclusions often drawn from the war's outcomes, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of military strategy.

The book's central thesis is that military intervention cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, it must be understood by looking at actors' agency in the context of local political and social structures. This implies, as the author explicitly states at the end of the book, that "there are no general laws underlying interventions or insurgency." And it is "a mistake to search for them" (p. 445). Petersen argues that the war in Iraq has been fundamentally shaped by a sectarian and ethnic civil war, with the main objective being the dominance over the Iraqi state. Shia groups, representing the majority, aimed to dominate the central government, a move that was vehemently opposed by the Sunni minority, which resorted to violent resistance. This perspective suggests that the massive violence of 2005 resulted from the Shia electoral victory. The reduction in violence during 2007–2008 reflected the Shia dominance in Baghdad, achieved by ethnically cleansing the city (*homogenization* process). In turn, resentment against the Shia-dominated central government fueled the rapid ascendance of ISIS in Sunni areas. Finally, with the defeat of the Islamic State and the end to the Kurdish prospects for independence, Iraq has become a Shia-dominated state

with Sunni and Kurds playing the role of junior partners. It should be evident by now that Petersen believes that the Iraq war was not one military conflict but rather several interconnected wars.

The book's real contribution does not lie in this narrative but rather in the analytical framework Petersen offers and applies to the war in Iraq. Indeed, one of the outstanding features of his book is the theoretical framework for understanding the several components of complex, violent internal conflicts. The author breaks down the multifaceted nature of state building in Iraq in the context of the US military intervention from 2003 to 2023, noting the tremendous variation in violence over time, by region, and in Baghdad (i.e., one of the decisive battlegrounds of the war). Petersen's approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing the underlying social and political structures that contribute to violence and instability, including emotions, identity, resentment, and mobilization. By detailing how these factors interact with military strategies, Petersen offers readers a sophisticated perspective that challenges one-dimensional narratives about military success and failure. For example, although inextricably linked, Petersen suggests that reduction of violence and state-building are two separate phenomena, concluding that the United States succeeded in quelling violence but failed in building a strong state. Indeed, success in reducing violence from 2008 onwards did not turn into an effective, functional government able to confront the Islamic State.

The book is divided into four distinct sections, each focusing on different stages of the US intervention in Iraq. In the initial section, Petersen establishes a theoretical framework that revolves around three fundamental components: individual roles, mechanisms, and strategies. Notably, he identifies four primary strategies—(1) clear, hold, build (CHB), (2) decapitation, (3) homogenization, and (4) community mobilization—that were employed to trigger specific mechanisms meant to move individuals into desired roles (e.g., from the insurgency to the government-counterinsurgent side). It must be stressed that this section provides both the analytical lenses through which to analyze the Iraq war and offers a valuable tool for understanding similar conflicts in other regions of the world. The second part delves into the period of US military occupation from 2003 to 2011, exploring the dynamics of violence, sectarian conflict, and the challenges of establishing a stable Iraqi state. Petersen's thorough analysis of crucial developments, including the escalation of violence and sectarian cleansing in Baghdad, offers readers a vivid and detailed portrayal of the experiences endured by both military personnel and Iraqi civilians. His exploration of local security failures and community mobilization strategies further supplements the narrative, showing the complexities of governance in a violent environment. The third section continues the narrative

into the postwithdrawal period, analyzing the resurgence of violence and the rise of the Islamic State. This section serves as a critical reminder of the importance of local dynamics and actors' agency, especially their capacity for adaptation. In the concluding section, Petersen distills crucial lessons gained from the US experience in Iraq, while also addressing the political and cultural factors that may impede policymakers from using these insights in future military operations abroad.

His reflections on the prospects of American interventions appear timely and relevant.

The author predicts that the era of large-scale CHB campaigns, with tens of thousands of boots on the ground, is over for the foreseeable future. Instead of adopting CHB operations, the United States will likely use *decapitation* as a key military strategy, while also focusing on community mobilization and using indigenous allies as ground forces. According to Petersen, two combinations of strategies

appear to be the most promising in small wars: "If a fight requires taking back territory, the combination of war-fighting [...] with decapitation technologies can be used to systematically roll back insurgents. If the situation calls for violence management, the combination of community mobilization with decapitation may do the job" (p. 445).

Whether or not readers agree with the author's arguments, they will find his analyses compelling. By providing a nuanced understanding of the Iraq conflict, Petersen sheds light on past mistakes and offers valuable guidance for future military interventions. This book is a testament to the need for informed and thoughtful approaches to state building in the face of violence and instability. Petersen's theoretical framework, narrative, and lessons for future interventions make this book an essential read for scholars, practitioners, and those interested in understanding the complexities of modern conflicts.