

Redefining UN Intervention: Reforming Chapter VII for Sustainable Political Participation

Student ID: 18232695

In 2007 a mother told her daughter: "Don't look up" as two bodies hung quietly from electricity poles in their neighborhood. The daughter, identifying as NM, had lived in Baghdad throughout the entire Iraq War and still, "[doesn't] know who they were" (Dearden, 2016). Following the Iraq War, failed attempts by the United Nations (UN) to establish fair, and democratic political participation, resulted in extreme violence becoming part of everyday life. The sustained conflict in Iraq is but one instance of unintentional negative ramifications, created by UN facilitation of political participation. The UN should reduce its involvement in promoting political participation in unstable nations, with politically and culturally complex environments. Often, UN attempts to democratize unstable nations are hasty and have only prolonged instability and deepened divisions. In politically tumultuous environments, the UN must reform its application of UN Charter Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression. Instead of implementing rapid democratization, the UN should heavily focus on conflict containment, delivering humanitarian aid, and supporting local governmentance initiatives that respect the cultural context and the unique political situation. By reforming Chapter VII to reduce direct UN involvement in political participation, the UN can organically cultivate sustainable self-determination.

After the 2003 U.S.-backed invasion of Iraq, UN Security Council Resolution 1500 established the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and greatly expanded its mission in 2007, with the adoption of Resolution 1770. The mission began by focusing on facilitating political transitions, and assisting in elections (United Nations, 2024). These elections were meant to bring about inclusive governance, but instead, they exacerbated underlying political fragmentation. Genuine reform became difficult as elite factions, such as the majority Shiite faction, grew in power and entrenched the system in corruption. The minority Sunni faction was pushed aside, which led to further cycles of distrust, insurgency, and repression (Mansour & Dodge, 2021). Additionally, the power vacuum created by international involvement has given rise to armed groups such as ISIS, which has further destabilized the region and displaced over one million people (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). The UN's attempt to establish political participation in Iraq demonstrates the complexities of pursuing external democratization efforts in unstable states. Particularly states with unique cultural environments shaping their political spheres.

While intending to foster sustainable participation within Iraq, the UN unintentionally reinforced pre-existing power structures and hindered reform. In October of 2019, protests erupted in Baghdad, and unlike previous demonstrations, the young protestors were not principally seeking the removal of a specific political party or leader, nor were they demanding better opportunities. The problem was that the workings of the system itself were flawed—not that power was in the wrong hands or that corruption was to blame. Protestors concluded that

major political parties had been given too much wealth and power via accessibility to the resources of the Iraqi state (Mansour & Dodge, 2021). By hastily establishing a government structure instead of letting one form organically, inevitably complications occurred, prolonging political disorder (Cordesman, 2023). In the midst of the chaos, NM completed her PhD and became an academic, but she had to flee Iraq after receiving death threats from a Shia militia. "Saddam was a tyrant, but we were all Iraqis and we had a common enemy, but now you are a Sunni or a Shia or a Kurd or an Arab" "They have overthrown one Saddam and now we have lots of Saddams. Iraq has gone from bad to worse" said NM (Dearden, 2016). In the case of Iraq, hasty UN establishment of governance systems widened divisions, converting Iraq's struggles from centralized tyranny to fragmented sectarianism.

The UN has had difficulties promoting democracy in other countries as well. In the DRC attempts to facilitate democracy failed, as it could not effectively coordinate with local forces. The UN was then forced to transition from a peacekeeping mission to a peace enforcement mission that destroyed trust and prolonged conflict—encapsulating the disconnect between oftentimes lofty UN goals and reality (Stoney, 2023). Following a military coup in Haiti, the UN established a mission to return the state to democratic governance; however, poor planning and limited local engagement, has resulted in failed democratic institutions that have contributed to Haiti's impending status as a failed state (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, n.d.). Despite honorable intentions, UN involvement once again led to artificial democratic institutions collapsing under the pressures of reality.

Several patterns have emerged in nations where the UN has achieved success in establishing political participation. In Namibia in the late 1980s, through profound local involvement with the main independence movement , the UN successfully facilitated independence and democratic elections. Additionally, conditions were relatively stable as the UN-supervised elections, which established legitimacy through conscientious planning , and long-term engagement with local stakeholders (United Nations, n.d.-b). Another example is in Timor-Leste, where a well-structured UN peacekeeping mission supported local governance and emphasized national ownership. Instead of solely focusing on election logistics, the UN found success by helping reconstruct state institutions like the police. These triumphs in Namibia and Timor-Leste, demonstrate that sustainable results are produced through consideration for sovereignty and coordination between the UN and national authorities (United Nations, n.d.-a).

In instances of successful establishment of UN democratization, patterns have emerged: contextual stability, local ownership, and a steady ramping up of institution-building. In contradiction, failed missions exhibit that mediation in politically shattered climates, specifically ones which lack stable local control, are doubtful to bear positive results. Instead of forcing governmental systems which are incompatible with the local state of affairs, the UN should shift

its attention to aiding local initiatives and fostering dialogue, as seen in the successful cases of Namibia and Timor-Leste.

In order to prevent the deepening of sectarian divides, cycles of repression, and distrust between the UN and local populations, the UN should reform Chapter VII of the UN Charter. When peaceful solutions break down and there is a peril to international peace and security, Chapter VII permits the Security Council to impose enforcement actions such as sanctions and military interventions (United Nations, 1945). However, when applied indiscriminately in politically unstable climates, adverse political fallout often occurs. Under Chapter VII, interventions have imposed governance systems without sufficient local buy-in, like in Iraq, where political restructuring incited internal fragmentation and marginalized important groups like Sunnis and Kurds (Mansour & Dodge, 2021). Furthermore, countries such as Iraq, DRC, and Haiti demonstrate that Chapter VII interventions often do not pair well with politically unstable climates. Rapidly imposing political participation does not create lasting stability because it fails to address root causes of political and social fragmentation. Repeatedly displacing traditional government structures for the sake of political participation, often only adds to instability. Finally, Chapter VII has enabled power vacuums through reliance on military intervention and external government structures. Worse, the UN's inability to cultivate inclusive governance helped bring about the rise of ISIS, the group rose to power after exploiting the instability stemming from top-down political shifts in Iraq (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). In the DRC, conflict was prolonged when peacekeeping was shifted to peace enforcement, permanently damaging relations between the local community and the UN (Stoney, 2023).

Regularly with catastrophic consequence, Chapter VII guidelines have spurred exceedingly ambitious political projects in unstable nations. Chapter VII ought to be amended to emphasize conflict containment and limit political restructuring thus grounding intervention coordination in reality. UN missions can work towards conflict containment by adjusting focus towards humanitarian relief and ceasefire monitoring. Language should be added to Chapter VII resolutions to inhibit externally imposed political systems, ensuring that UN missions engage in elections or political restructuring only at the request of local stakeholders. Moreover, accountability measures ought to be introduced, which obligate the Security Council to regularly review if interventions have retained local backing. Finally, UN missions have too often rushed into establishing electoral systems and unintentionally prolonged conflict. Instead, Chapter VII should prioritize facilitating dialogue and building local governance capacity. By necessitating long-term engagement with local governance structures, Chapter VII can establish positive models as in the case of the Timor-Leste mission, which affirmed national ownership and built-up state institutions alongside elections.

The UN should evade errors made in Iraq, DRC, and Haiti by advancing humanitarian aid and local initiatives, in place of prematurely promoting self-determination. Rather than continuous implementation of artificial UN governance systems, the suggested alterations to Chapter VII trend towards organic self-determination. These proposed modifications to Chapter

VII could sustainably promote higher levels of political participation in nations that need it the most. Perhaps if these alterations existed at the time of the Iraq War, violent images of unknown souls hanging from telephone poles wouldn't be burned into NM. Maybe NM would not have had to flee her own country years after the end of the war, because militia groups still run rampant and freedom of speech is an afterthought in a world of survival. Since 2003, 251,000 people, 179,000 of which were civilians, died in Iraq from aerial bombardment, IED explosions, suicide bombings, executions and murders alone (Dearden, 2016). The utter devastation left in the country following international intervention will leave scars for generations. Wounds, which might have been avoided, had Chapter VII been modified with the suggestions found in this essay.

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