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Iran, Iraq, and the Politics of Civilization

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Brief Analysis

The concept of the civilizational state helps explain how Iran is challenging the liberal international system and weakening Iraqi sovereignty.

When a part of the Taq Kasra archeological site—also known as Ctesiphon, the capital of the Parthian and Sassanian Persian empires—fell down in Iraq at the beginning of the year, Iran expressed its [readiness to help rebuild it](#).

The renovation was estimated to cost some \$600,000, but the proposed Iranian initiative received a [mixed reception in Iraq](#). While some Iraqis appreciated the potential help to restore Taq Kasra and save this historic building from collapse, [others wondered about the intentions of the offer](#), especially at a time when Iran is under sanctions and the majority of its population is suffering from significant economic hardship.

In the face of many Iraqis' vocal concern over an effort that suggested an implicit Iranian claim over Iraqi territory, Iran eventually dropped the initiative. But the event also highlighted the areas of memory and empire that continue to haunt Iran-Iraq relations and Iran's approach to its western neighbors more broadly. Iran's obsession with its historical status as a civilization is not limited to the current regime. Such rhetoric was also present during the Shah's time, in spite of critical differences between the former and present political regimes. This fact sets the argument that the Iranian civilizational attitude is neither confined to religious or sectarian lines, nor limited to the present moment. Moreover, civilizational thinking can be said to have shaped the specifically Iranian development of Khomeini's velayat-e faqih, which binds religious and state authority.

Many years ago, [Kissinger wondered](#) whether Iran sought to be a nation or a cause. Today, it is more appropriate to ask whether Iran is a nation-state or a [civilizational state](#).

As a part of the [current stage of global politics](#) based on the post-Cold War world, the civilizational state is a loaded concept. With the crises in liberal global hegemony that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, civilizational states pose a challenge and potential alternative to western narratives of governance. The term ‘civilization’ has its own history within Western political discourse that has shaped its political approach; though far from new, it gained currency in the post-cold war era through the works of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. [Huntington believed](#) that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as a global power might bring reactions from other world civilizations. The Western victory over communism paved the path for the emergence of a belief in the West “that its ideology of democratic liberalism had triumphed globally and hence was universally valid.”

Huntington’s “clash” as the format of the relationship between the civilizations drew considerable critique. Others called for promoting a “dialogue of the civilizations,” but if the clash is undesirable in contrast to dialogue, the reality of these two approaches resulted in something different—the emergence of civilizational states.

On paper, the political concepts of state and civilization are in tension. The former pushes for homogeneity and centralization while the latter denotes plurality and lack of a formal center. If previous debates in political science focused on the nature of the relationships between civilizations, the current debates stress on the relationship between the states that make civilization their sources of values and aim at challenging the rules of the international order that the West takes for granted, a theme stressed in [Christopher Coker’s book](#) on the concept.

The framework of a civilizational state has significant potential political cachet among states who identify themselves through this lens. In the leaked version of the 25-year China-Iran cooperation deal, to take one major example, the two countries [emphasized their shared identity as two ancient Asian civilizations](#), demonstrating how the political and the cultural spheres intertwine in civilizational states.

In Iran’s case, the civilization model becomes a direct influence on its expansionist foreign policy, particularly shaping Iranian views on the equality of sovereignty—or lack thereof—among states formed outside of the civilizational model. “The boundaries of civilization are usually more blurred than those of nations, which might create problems for self-proclaiming civilizational states.”

[A civilizational state](#) draws on the centralization of the state and expanse of civilizational memory to promote intervention and expansion through the creation of the zones of influence. Such a state ‘defines itself in terms of its culture and values and not as a mere political state within some specified geographical borders, where people speak one language and belong to the same ethnic group.’ Hence, Iran’s demonstrable aim is to create a regional sphere of influence by utilizing culture, history and beliefs.

These dynamics are all visible in the Iran-Iraq relationship and in Iranian attempts to create spheres of influence writ large. Here, the civilizational state model helps identify what helps drive these efforts ideologically. While Iranian influence in Iraq is often presented as an opposition to U.S. influence, this is only a part of the equation. Iran, as a civilizational state, aims to challenge other powers’ influence in areas it considers under its own influence, but it also has the goal of going further in these areas by remaking the regional space in pre-nation-state style where a regional power exerts hegemony over its neighbors.

The concept of the civilizational state is also beneficial in foreseeing the implications of Iranian efforts. Moreover, it can be used to understand the Iranian political psyche. The duality of grandiosity and victimhood is enshrined within Iranian discourse on its civilizational heritage. The essence of the victimhood discourse is that Iran is great in a general sense, but the current world power structure does not allow Iran to practice this greatness. This is clear in terms like *mostakbirn* (the arrogant), exemplified by the international community, and *mostadafin* (the weakened), which is Iran.

Yet this narrative of victimization is also used to erode neighboring peoples’ citizenship rights and sovereignty. Iraq,

likewise, has a civilizational history through Mesopotamia, but Iraqi elites and the current situation of the state cannot sustainably bring forth this narrative, and it is unlikely to present a viable challenge to Iranian efforts.

At best, what Iran offers to those within its purported sphere of civilizational influence is a call for civilizational plurality on the global level and denial of plurality within the sphere of its claimed civilizational boundaries, especially when a culture or an identity is not compatible with the dominant culture. Moreover, as Christopher Coker argues, “The attack on liberal civilization should be seen for what it is, of course – less an attack on the ideology of globalism or Western exceptionalism than a cynical ploy by the state to reinforce its own cultural credentials in the eyes of its citizens. What is being secured against the West is not civilization as such but the interests of a particular regime.”

In an era of challenge and civilizational discourse, it is vital for the United States to prioritize its support for values such as human rights, women’s rights, minority rights, and a recognition of the plurality of identities within areas in the region Iran considers under its civilizational area of influence, including Iraq. Depriving people of these values under the banner of Iranian civilization goes against the nature of these rights and values. While the Biden administration has vocally stressed the importance of human rights, this narrative is even more important in the age of civilizational discourse as a way to maintain the integrity of those states Iran would like to see subsumed under its own influence. ❖



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