

HIGHWAYS TO HELL: Road-building in Iraq has increased the violence

Far from promoting peace and economic development, infrastructure investment programmes in conflict zones can have the opposite effect, according to research by **Tamar Gomez**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019. Her study finds that the billion dollar US road-building programme in Iraq has led to more not less violence.

Why has this happened? One reason could be that during the conflict, reconstructed or newly developed roads have become privileged targets for insurgents. Another is that newly built roads also may have increased the mobility of insurgents and thus their efficiency and number of attacks. Finally, road spending may have been subject to the rampant corruption plaguing Iraq, diverting the expected positive effects.

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From 2003 to 2013, over the course of the war in Iraq, the United States invested \$11.9 billion in infrastructure development programmes. The underlying rationale, shared and advocated by international organisations, was that developing infrastructure would further trade, economic growth and overall wellbeing, which would, in turn, participate in reducing violence in war-laden regions.

The results of such programmes have been shown to be inconclusive in previous studies. This study goes a step further and shows that, contrary to the prevalent postulate, infrastructure development programmes can have a direct increasing effect on violence.

To unearth unaccounted-for mechanisms tampering with the bonanza of infrastructure development, the study picks an appropriate context: road-building across Iraq. This choice is appealing for several reasons.

First, within infrastructure development, transport infrastructure and more precisely road-building is ranked high as it is often tasked with winning over local populations and furthering political stabilisation. As a result, in Iraq, \$1.31bn were allocated to transport and communications overall.

Second, looking at transport infrastructures makes it possible to track the physical development of the Iraqi road network using digitalized maps over the period of study.

Third, by focusing on the Iraqi insurgency, which spanned from 2003, with the invasion of US troops, up to 2016, the study captures thoroughly several periods of violence, from the 2006-07 sectarian insurgency to the rise of ISIS in 2012-13. Indeed, the presence of the coalition on Iraqi grounds has fostered a detailed data collection process on both violent events and infrastructure spending and these have been made available with recent archival declassification.

Across the period, there is evidence to support that road-building has an increasing effect on violence. This effect is driven by large roads and highways, and the mediating effect of economic development cannot be asserted as there is a strong correlation between violence and higher GDP.

In other words, the political and military mechanisms linked to road-building overpower the wished-for economic effects. This result raises questions about the economic assumptions related to infrastructure development as well as potentially identifying other mechanisms at play linked to the field and military strategy.

Potential explanations are as follows:

- First, during the conflict, reconstructed or newly developed roads have become privileged targets for insurgents.
- Second, newly built roads also may have increased the mobility of insurgent groups and thus their efficiency and number of attacks.
- Finally, road spending has been subject to the rampant corruption plaguing Iraq, diverting the most expected positive effects of these investments.

These results on road-building are broadly in line with political science research, which has been studying qualitatively the link between state power and road network. They go against the ipse dixit promoted by international organisations and argue for more informed, local-level development spending programmes in conflict-laden countries.

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