Statebuilding after violent conflict: a review

Conceptual notes

This section engages critically with the growing body of work that focuses on the interdependency of domestic and external (f)actors in processes of political reform. After the collapse of communism that revealed how international factors could prepare the groundwork for the rise of vigorous democratic forces in specific contexts, further attention was paid to exploring whether and how international dynamics may contribute to promoting political change. Furthermore, as a result of various developments such as the massive, multi-strand EU enlargement process in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), academic interest in exploring the interactions between domestic and international actors in processes of institutional change grew rapidly. In particular, scholars focused on the issue of conditionality and external leverage (if not direct intervention) in securing domestic change. This area of research was further stimulated by the various statebuilding interventions that took place in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s. Notwithstanding the increase of studies devoted to this area of research, many questions have remained unanswered. More specifically, under what conditions can we expect external actors to have an impact on domestic politics? How do external and internal actors interact with one another in processes of externally led political reform?

Various strands of the literature have grappled with the study of the external push in processes of domestic change and political reform in recent times, including the literature on post-conflict statebuilding and conditionality.¹ This section briefly reviews these, focusing on...
two overarching themes, namely the analysis of the intertwinements between domestic and external factors and the role of political elites.

Post-conflict statebuilding

Both the failed record of peacebuilding missions in the late 1980s and early 1990s (including Bosnia over the period of 1995 to 1997), and the emergence of complex, “second-generation” external interventions in post-conflict contexts (such as in Bosnia from 1997 onwards, Kosovo, Timor Leste, Afghanistan, and Iraq), gave rise in the late 1990s and early 2000s to a new research agenda within the broader peacebuilding literature that focused on the experiences of externally led statebuilding in post-conflict societies. Three major areas of research within the statebuilding literature are relevant for the purposes of this book. The first area focuses on the weaknesses and strengths of external interventions, with a predisposed focus on the supply/external side but neglecting the two-way dynamics this study aims to explore. Generally, these studies have presented rather pessimistic accounts on the ability of external actors to create or influence the basis of modern states in post-conflict deeply divided societies. Some of the criticism has involved the lack of international resolve and assertiveness; the absence of sufficient resources to undertake such endeavors; and problems of multitargeting and rushed deadlines. As Simon Chesterman has stated in a comparative study of transitional administrations, the most common mistakes of what he calls “benevolent autocracies” is that “the means are inconsistent with the ends, they are frequently inadequate for those ends, and in many situations the means are irrelevant to the ends.” Marina Ottaway and Roland Paris, for their part, have criticized international actors for engaging in overly ambitious democratic reconstruction operations, given the limited resources available. Other studies have pointed to the creation of mechanisms of dependency between international and domestic actors that have turned inimical to building self-sustaining states. All in all, a systematic analysis of how local politics may impact the unfolding of externally driven statebuilding is still lacking.

A second line of research has revolved around the long-term impact of institutions upon the conditions for sustainable peace. Particularly, these studies have explored the impact of externally engineered institutions (such as the electoral system and power-sharing constitutional arrangements such as Dayton) on the outcome of the statebuilding process, and how states become consolidated after intra-state conflict.