

Book Review: Justifying Interventions in Africa: (De)Stabilizing Sovereignty in Liberia, Burundi and the Congo

by Blog Admin

July 24, 2013

Analyzing the UN interventions in Liberia, Burundi and the Congo, Nina Wilén poses the question of how one can stabilize a state through external intervention without destabilizing sovereignty. She critically examines the justifications for international and regional interventions through a social constructivist framework. Vladimir Rauta finds a clear and detailed book, of use to students of IR and development studies.



Justifying Interventions in Africa: (De)Stabilizing Sovereignty in Liberia, Burundi and the Congo. Nina Wilén. Palgrave Macmillan. February 2012.

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The study of military intervention precipitates academic anxieties. Even after decades of research, writings on military intervention remind readers of [James Rosenau](#)'s quasi-prophetic words: "the deeper one delves into the literature on intervention, the more incredulous one becomes". Indeed, the more attention that is paid to intervention, the less clear the concept becomes. Studying intervention in the 21st century has seemingly become an adventure of imprecise interrogations that often considers evidence but does not inspire theoretical advancements. However, challenging this pattern of research is [Nina Wilén](#)'s recently published book *Justifying Interventions in Africa: (De)Stabilizing Sovereignty in Liberia, Burundi and the Congo*.

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Ambitious in its aims, the book sets to uncover the relationship between sovereignty, stability and intervention. It understands the relationship between intervention and sovereignty as having a paradoxical effect on stability and it challenges the mainstream assumption that intervention is constructive and beneficial to the reconstructing of sovereignty in a post-conflict setting. The book focuses on the set of justifications for intervention and the interpretations of sovereignty that the rationale for intervention circumvents. More precisely, Wilén unpacks the construction of sovereignty by external actors and questions the effects these processes have on the general stability of a country – or rather three so-called target states: Liberia, Burundi and the Congo. The main question is, thus, how does one "stabilize a state through external intervention without destabilizing its sovereignty?" (p. 179). However, although being straightforward in its intentions, the book is not similar in its analysis and demonstrates, at several points throughout the book, a curious case of compromised aptitude in grasping the intricacies of the intervention-sovereignty-stability triptych.

Before exploring Wilén's adventure with the windmills of intervention, a few clarifications need to be made. To begin with, the book is a well-written and engaging insight into the intervention literature. The international relations perspective is complemented by accurate insertions of international law studies and the result is a comprehensive treatment of the subject. At this stage, a fault of the book is not addressing the indirect modalities of intervention that often constrain the possibilities of direct interventionist behaviour. And from this point of view an analysis or evaluation of the indirect strategy of intervention of proxy warfare could have systematically rounded up the concept of intervention. Secondly, the book's structure is clear, focused and keeps the argument concise and to the point. Moreover, it overlaps with the overall aims, and, more importantly, it is defined by a sense of consistency that actually marks the entire study. And the latter element is crucial when the topic under consideration is far from being at its infancy and has been determining dichotomist paths of understanding.

So, how does then a deeply analytic and laboriously researched book end drawing conclusions that fall short of the complexity of the topic at hand? The main reason for this lack of congruence resides in theoretical entrapment of the argument. Wilén builds a constructivist discourse which becomes the framework for defining sovereignty as the interaction between regional and international interpretative communities under what the author calls the logic of representation. This concept acts as a bridge between the governing structures and the people, and it is through the process of linking these two elements that interventions can be either legitimate or have a destabilizing effort.

Constructivism is neither rigorous nor precise in its capacity to project theoretic analyses. Moreover, the constant preoccupation with the juxtaposition of inter-subjectivities and their role in constructing concepts simply confines reality to subtly imprecise inquiries. But these are caveats that apply to constructivism as a theory of international relations in general. Adopting a theoretical approach implies accepting a degree of conformability to any theoretical imprecision or inaccuracy, and, on that basis, Wilén's study cannot be criticized at this point more than the theory it succumbs to. What can be said, on the other hand, is that the first introductory chapters as well as the ones explaining the choice of theory are predictable, linear and add minimal novelty to the constructivist body of theory (outside some clear connections and links between constructivism and peace-building theory). Wilén's dependability on the chosen theory leaves the reader gasping for air as the pages turn one after another in a didactic and pedagogic fashion.

The already canonical challenge-the-mainstream subtext of constructivism leads Wilén to focus her research on cases that partly fit her argument. This is also problematic in the overall argument of the book, although the book carefully tries to justify the case by highlighting the importance of supporting theory development by relating to the empirical side. The three selected case studies, Liberia, Burundi and the Congo explain her main assumption but leave space for questioning whether the conclusions of the book can be generalized across a wider and more varied number of cases. In all three situations, the focus is on the activity of the United Nations and regional organization as external actors and, thus, her analysis concludes that their activity replaces the role the government and that there is no significant cooperation between the population and the activities carried out. For example, the case of the situation in the Congo accurately follows this logic of reducing sovereignty to the functional indicators of capacity-building and local ownership. The very detailed and accomplished analysis is explained – on the basis of interviews and careful reading of existing research – in the light of theoretical construction and the conclusion is that while these concepts aid to the development of external sovereignty – and transform the reconstruction process in a positive and successful one -, in practice, and, at the local level, they are detrimental. Thus, the Angolan and Zimbabwean led intervention de-stabilized the internal sovereignty because it focused exclusively on the international implications of the process.

The final argument is that there is a disjointed approach to reconstruction and to peace building and, as a result, the immediate consequence is that local participation is kept minimal and peace building stagnates. Moreover, intervention creates a culture of dependency and narrows the adaptability possibilities of the local population. On the whole, Wilén's book stands for an informed and highly researched study that clarifies some aspects of the intricate relationship between sovereignty, stability and intervention. The constructivist methodology, while committing the research to a theoretical direction, narrows down the plurimorphous nature of the concepts at hand and, thus, provides only a very skilfully painted, halved image of reality.

Vladimir Rauta is a first year Ph.D. candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham. His research focuses on the phenomenon of contemporary forms of warfare, namely proxy warfare. As an alternative form of expression of conflict behaviour, proxy wars refer to the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its outcome. Strategy, intervention, civil wars and private military corporations are also topics of interest that overlap with his main research. [Read more reviews by Vladimir.](#)