Relationship Advice: The International, The State, The Local, And Why They Just Can't Seem To Make It Work

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A hallmark of the year 2011 was the Arab Spring, a grassroots uprising of citizens against authoritarian governments that had maintained an iron-fisted rule over their people, while simultaneously enjoying the benefits of being legitimized by the international community, who respected the governing rights of these leaders as well as the sovereignty of the states they laid claim to. A fruit seller, in an act of desperation after Tunisian state police confiscated his fruit stands, and thereby confiscated his livelihood, set himself on fire, the only means of recourse he saw against a brutal regime[1]. His actions sparked riots in Tunisia that spread like wildfire, and eventually engulfed the region, with protests breaking out in seventeen different countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa[2]. The Arab Spring has toppled governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and forced many others into a position of weakness.

However, something that the Arab spring has unintentionally highlighted is the tension between international and local conceptions of sovereignty and legitimacy. States that were supported by the international community were overthrown by local elements, and the international community's uncharacteristic unwillingness to involve itself in post-revolution[3] state- and peacebuilding efforts illustrates that the past failures of peace- and statebuilding efforts in fragile states by the international community have taken their toll. The antagonism between local and international conceptions of sovereignty and legitimacy that has been prevalent since the end of World War II has rendered many attempts by the international community to conduct peace- and statebuilding ineffective. The ineffectiveness stems largely from the fact that the international community repeatedly provides overly technocratic solutions to inherently dynamic and localized problems. Not only that, but local actors affected by extranational peace- and statebuilding operations may be legitimate to the people they serve, but too often the struggle to gain international credence and their lack of ownership over state- and peacebuilding that is externally led undermines their claims to legitimacy and sovereignty. This paper contests that the competing principles of sovereignty and legitimacy, and how they are perceived at both the international and local levels, ultimately undermines the ability of the state to achieve either sovereignty or legitimacy, fostering a chaotic existence for its citizens, and evoking chaotic responses from an international community afraid of the ramifications of allowing a "failed state" to exist.

Part of the critique of both state- and peacebuilding traces its roots to the critique of the liberal peace. More recent interpretations of liberal peacebuilding accuse the practice of being exclusionary and incapable of incorporating local elements, i.e. communal leaders, tribal elders, etc., into their institutional mechanisms because of a perceived – often imagined – threats these local elements pose to the current world order. This fear leads to an overly securitized purview of how third parties should approach postconflict reconciliation and rehabilitation efforts[4]. Additionally, peacebuilding and statebuilding run the risk of being incredibly formulaic, or better put, 'peace from IKEA'[5]. The tendency to disregard the local context and the nuances of a conflict, in favor of utilizing pre-packaged peacebuilding approaches, which fall victim to the liberal peace critiques, is one of the most common mistakes of supranational state- and peacebuilding. Perceptive local actors realize that the only means of survival in a peace by IKEA world is to subscribe to Western epistemologies and institutions of peacebuilding, endorsing a bureaucratized version of

peace that may be wholly ineffective for a state that is trying to establish sovereignty and legitimacy at both the international and local levels.

Before delving any further, it is necessary to understand how both peace- and statebuilding will be conceptually used in this paper. Peacebuilding was adopted into the vernacular of the discipline and implementation of peace following the publication of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's "Agenda for Peace". According to Boutrous-Ghali, postconflict peacebuilding is the "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a collapse into conflict."[6] Statebuilding, meanwhile, is a concept with a less concrete definition than peacebuilding. As different entities utilize varying approaches to statebuilding, defining the practice is a difficult task. A 2007 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development definition appears best fit for this research. According to the OECD, statebuilding is conceived as:

"International engagement … concerted, sustained, and focused on building the relationship between state and society, …" by "supporting the legitimacy and accountability of states through [by] addressing issues of democratic governance, human rights, civil society engagement and peacebuilding."[7]

As per these definitions, statebuilding should differ from peacebuilding in that it is more focused on the relationships that support the legitimacy of the state, whereas peacebuilding is more concerned with preventing warring parties from backsliding into further conflict[8].

Despite their obvious differences, sovereignty and legitimacy remain key concepts in statebuilding and peacebuilding. These ideas have not only affected the norms of international intervention methodologies in conflict scenarios, but negatively, they have served as conceptual hindrances to each other in creating and implementing post-conflict reconstruction. The question of whether sovereignty or legitimacy takes precedence often lies at the heart of dilemmas that plague Western led state- and peacebuilding efforts in many modern postconflict operations[9]. The co-dependent nature of sovereignty and legitimacy in postconflict situations can evolve into a leeching relationship. Actors at the state level end up seeking to establish sovereignty, but often experience difficulties doing so based upon the competing visions of their citizens and the international community, while simultaneously attempting to sustain their claims to legitimacy, again per the competing visions of the people they seek to rule, and the supranational forces at work.

Pressure from the international community, especially the United States, following World War II, forced colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, Belgium and others to cede their holdings and make way for sovereign states. The groundswell of anti-colonialism is reflected in the United Nations' General Assembly Resolution 1514, which enumerated its conviction

"… that the continued existence of colonialism prevents the development of international economic cooperation, impedes the social, cultural and economic development, of dependent peoples and militates against the United Nations ideal of universal peace, …"[10]

But the post-colonial era opened the gap for what former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah called "neo-colonialism." Nkrumah viewed neo-colonialism as a new type of exploitation, in which a state "has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty,"[11] but the resources of foreign investors become means of enmeshment in a donor-client system, rather than being utilized for the purpose of raising a nation to the status of sovereignty perceived as legitimate both by the nation it rules and by the international community[12]. With the colonial history of Western entities thrusting bureaucratic principles and institutional mechanisms upon "states" that were, unlike in the case of India, ill-prepared to take ownership and operation of these institutions, it is not difficult to see how neo-colonialism, taking the form of varied Western institutions such as foreign direct investment, domestic outsourcing, and even state- and peacebuilding, was able to emerge in former colonies and tamper with their respective courses towards true sovereignty, and bids for legitimacy.

The widening gap, or 'sovereignty gap'[13] that emerged between developed and under-developed states since the end of World War II forced the post-war global powers to open the political sphere for self-determination for soon to

be ex-colonial entities claiming autonomy, and 'development entitlements of impoverished countries'[14]. British Indian serves as a prime example of colonial statebuilding evolved into a successful bid for independent sovereignty. Bringing with them Western concepts of statehood, centralized government, bureaucracy, and more, "The British gradually but decisively defined power in political terms and located it in a sovereign, central state."[15] The British approach to India also enabled the Indian people to feel as if they were invested in India as a state, and not just in their local communities or their wider principalities. Utilizing language, civil service, military service, and other Western institutions, the British were able to help the Indian people carve out a unified political space that citizens were involved in and were able to claim as their own[16]. When the time for independence came in 1947, by most accounts, the Indian subcontinent was ready to break from its colonial overlord and take up the reigns of statehood per the norms of the international community. India, however, is a unique example, and it is important to note that debate still remains as to whether this imposition of Western concepts of sovereignty and governance served India well, or burdened it with a system too complex and too large to manage once the British exited as imperial powers[17]. The era following the Second World War was one that came to be marked by former colonies such as India dismantling the yoke of empire and seeking recognition as an independent and sovereign entity.

The issue of legitimacy also weighs heavy in postconflict reconstruction, especially externally led efforts. It is often the case that in collapsed states, substate groups, through various activities that protect and enhance the lives of those they represent, are able to legitimize themselves at the local political level. Local legitimacy rarely, though, translates to international legitimacy, as the supranational community is averse to aligning itself with local groups out of fear of exacerbating political tensions. And while this could be the case, the act of nonalignment is often more harmful than helpful to those seeking to establish legitimate state sovereignty[18]. Juxtaposed to the international community's inability to accept the legitimacy of a state lie questions concerning how the state should be defined and who or what holds the power to legitimize it. These questions arise from notions of statehood and state legitimacy held by those at the local level, whose idea of what the state is and how it is legitimized as the rightful governing institution often differ from the perceived notions of the supranational community. The overriding belief of the international community is that to have a peaceful world, states must organize themselves according to liberal-democratic principles[19]. And yet, international norms and institutions such as rule of law, respect for humanitarian rights, free and open elections etc., may not translate as legitimizing activities, let alone democratically legitimizing, in the eyes of the local[20]. In theory, the sharing of values and norms will diminish the likelihood of conflict both between liberal-democratic states and within liberal-democratic states. But the issue of legitimacy calls into inquiry the norms of sovereignty that sustain the liberal-democratic peace theory. Territorial and governmental legitimacy, begging the question of why the state has been defined in the manner that is has, and by whose authority is it done, can often lead to the clash of norms between the international community and locals affected by these perceptions[21]. Caught in between these two opposing forces is the state, or, as is often the case, the semblance of the state.

The inherent tension between domestic and international legitimacy is at the forefront of issues faced by states emerging from violent conflict. The idea of what constitutes a state, and specifically, the institutional framework required for that state to be accepted according to international "norms", often finds itself at odds with local conceptions of what the role of the state should be. This dilemma is aggravated in cases where international investment, (investment here referring to time, resources, intervention operations, etc.), is at a high level, and the stakes of the burgeoning state falling once again into chaos are too high for the international community to allow the state to reconstruct itself on its own terms[22]. This was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia (1990) there existed multiple substate groups[23] in the region of Bosnia all claiming legitimacy and seeking to carve out a territory they could call their own. The international community, fearful of the seemingly more perilous consequences of letting the former Yugoslavia break even further apart than it already had as well as the potential pitfalls of choosing a side in the conflict, instead decided to recognize the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a multiethnic state surrounded by highly homogenized states. This action served as a catalyst that drove Serbia, Croatia and the new Bosnia and Herzegovina into a deadly conflict that, nearly 20 years after formal violence ended, is still seething beneath the surface of the country's many ethnic groups[24]. The fragile peace established by the Dayton Accords became a perfect illustration of the tension between sovereignty and legitimacy. The state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, accepted as a sovereign entity by the international community, was rendered weak by the ethnic divisions codified by the Western-driven Dayton Accords[25]. Instead of emerging from the war

as a strong, centralized unit, Bosnia became the weak head of a state that contained two federated sub-states within its borders, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, the latter of which, an ethnically Serb majority entity, has occasionally utilized the threat of referendum to break away from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join its neighbor Serbia, to further weaken the sovereign state.

The consternation between sovereignty and legitimacy is inherently also evident of the stress between security and development. The interconnectedness and interdependencies of these concepts makes for a "complicated, contingent, and context-dependent" relationship[26]. One illustration of this tension, compounded by the complexities of the international community's state- and peacebuilding operations norms, is the United States' civil and military mission in Afghanistan initiated following September 11. In this case, U.S. strategy rested largely on implementing political, economic and law enforcement actions meant to help Afghanistan evolve into a state that could withstand the threat of terrorist opposition. These actions took shape in the form of U.S. civilian and military personnel taking on key functions of government as a means of expediting the peace- and statebuilding process in Afghanistan. However, this action proved detrimental to building up the state, as U.S. and Coalition involvement ultimately de-legitimized the Afghan civil service and military sectors by doing their job for them, as opposed to working with Afghans and teaching them how to manage the burgeoning state[27].

But, it would be foolish to name international actors as the sole culprits in de-legitimizing budding governments and undermining their sovereignty. Blame also lies with local actors who are able to utilize weak state institutions and low levels of legitimacy for their own benefit. The romanticized local is not always a benign figure, and "… it is a mistake to heed calls for sovereignty that may be thinly veiled justifications for the further looting of the national treasury."[28] Malicious figures throughout history who have experienced the luxury of sovereignty legitimized by the international community have include Charles Taylor of Liberia, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, and Chile's Augusto Pinochet. And devious intentions are not limited to national leaders – individuals at the lowest levels of society have over and over again succumbed to the circumstances of their situation, and exploited the fragile state they live in for the purpose of either benefit or, merely, survival.

McGovern outlined four weaknesses that are built-in to the prevailing technocratic models of intervention, the most widely utilized method of state- and peacebuilding. They are that interventions are too short, with those spearheading campaigns maintaining concrete time frames in mind that are unrealistic in practice; that the repeated failures of previous disarmament campaigns have perpetuated the untruth that demobilization efforts are a fool's errand; and that external intervention, while it has a generally good track record of safeguarding the state in question from a total submission to malicious actors in the security and economic sectors is often left vulnerable, and resources are exploited by opposition forces, profiteers, or even at times, actors within the government being propped up by international interveners and / or investors[29]. Another weakness is overall dearth of fiscal and physical resources allocated to a state emerging from conflict by extranational entities seeking to rebuild capacity within the state. Research has shown that if international entities double the expenditure levels they currently allocate for postconflict statebuilding, it would reduce the risk of the state falling back into war from 40% to 31%[30]. These weaknesses, the literature points out, can be generalized into a simple idea: that the international community, in regards to state- and peacebuilding, has commitment issues. The failures of past peace- and statebuilding missions loom over great power states and international bodies such as the UN like skeletons in a very dark closet. It is apparent that a re-evaluation of the relationships established and sustained by state- and peacebuilding efforts of extranational entities needs to be re-evaluated, re-worked, and re-invigorated in order to better serve the needs of postconflict fragile states.

While the academic community has been thorough in highlighting the flaws of statebuilding and peacebuilding methodology as it is executed by the international community, this author believes scholars have yet to make any real progress in examining the shortcomings of these operations at the national level. Two flaws that are immediately apparent are: (1) that a state's need to be "accepted" by the international community in terms of sovereignty and legitimacy often divert resources away from the activities necessary for postconflict statebuilding, and (2) Western mechanisms and institutions of both peacebuilding and statebuilding deny citizens the right to become investors in both their personal and national futures, undermining the legitimacy of the state. In December 2005, UN General Assembly Resolution 60/180 was passed to create the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. A key tenant of

the resolution refers national ownership,

"*Affirming* the primary responsibility of national and transitional Governments and authorities of countries emerging from conflict or at risk of relapsing into conflict, where they are established, in identifying their priorities and strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding, with a view to ensuring national ownership,"[31]

And yet, national ownership is often overridden by the will of the international community. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the semblance of a state that is Somalia.

The history of international involvement in Somalia is long, and ripe with examples of failure at international, state, and local levels. Part of the post-Cold War trend of extranational intervention for the purpose of strengthening national and civil capacities[32], Somalia first experienced UN-sanctioned humanitarian intervention in April 1992 in the form of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I)[33]. UNOSOM I was followed up with the U.S.-led United Task Force (UNITAF)[34], furthering the reach of extranational forces within Somalia. But local resistance in the form of widespread violence, crime, and terrorism made international efforts in Somalia too dangerous[35], best exemplified by the "Black Hawk Down" incident in Mogadishu, that lead to a drawback of forces and international disengagement with the extremely fragile state.

The widespread chaos throughout Somalia, despite the presence of international forces, revealed a state that was ill-prepared to govern, let alone lead the nation through reconstruction efforts. Success ultimately rested on international involvement, specifically, constructive international partnerships and investment in the political, economic and security sectors. A more coherent and aggressive international strategy may have changed the game in Somalia, but this did not happen. Instead, the international community's fear of commitment took hold[36], and a policy of avoidance was widely adhered to by interested parties[37]. Since UNITAF withdrew from Somalia, intervention efforts have been sparse and poorly implemented. However, the international community's willingness to address Somalia in the same overly technocratic manner as it has in past cases of state- and peacebuilding has not diminished, and the two pitfalls of extranational peace- and statebuilding this paper brought to light are clearly evident in Somalia.

The first critique this paper outlines, that national and local actors attempts to legitimize their sovereignty on the international scale has diverted resources that could have been used for peacebuilding is evident even as recently as two weeks ago. As of 2008, over twelve international conferences seeking to find a way to revive the state have been held, all of them ultimately ending in failure, as Somalia is still in chaos[38]. On 23 February 2012, a summit on the future of Somalia was held in London; approximately 40 governments were represented, several international organizations such as the World Bank, the Arab League, and the African Union took part, and representatives from the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, as well as leaders of substate entities such as Somaliland participated in the conference[39]. Despite the widespread participation, and inclusion of previously ignored entities such as Somalia's Arab neighboring states, there were doubts going into the summit that the meeting would do nothing more than remind the world community of the political and social challenges that Somalia faces[40]. And by many accounts, the London Conference failed to do anything more than simply reiterate the challenges Somalia has faced for the past 20 years, and also neglected to make any substantive changes in the way that peace- and statebuilding efforts are approached by extranational entities.

The international community's overall failure to adopt a nuanced view of intra-Somali politics, and specifically, continued refusal to recognize the legitimacy of entities such as Somaliland and Puntland that have led localized peacebuilding efforts with relative success in the regions feeds into the second critique of this paper: that Western mechanisms and institutions of both peacebuilding and statebuilding deny citizens the right to become investors in both their personal and national futures. For the extranational forces, the purpose of peace- and statebuilding efforts is almost always support to the central government, a central government that Somalis view as "an instrument of accumulation and domination, enriching and empowering those who control it and exploiting and harassing the rest of the population."[41] Clan loyalty takes precedence over loyalty to the central state, and repeated bad experiences with centralized statehood has left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Somali people[42]. External actors have failed to accept that sub-state entities may have better solutions for not only their regions, but others in Somalia. The

international community's myopic focus on the central state has stifled the ability of localized models of peacebuilding to be transferred to regions that are still plagued by chaos. Endorsement of a central government that lacks local legitimacy simultaneously excludes Somalis from claiming ownership of any peace. Lack of ownership instigates lack of investment, and if citizens aren't invested in their government, then there is no reason for them to view it as the legitimate governing body.

What the international community needs is a dose of reality and a bit of retrospection. By comprehensively and honestly re-evaluating the numerous examples of failed endeavors in peace- and statebuilding, it may be possible to change the trajectory of efforts in ways that do not exacerbate, but instead support bids for sovereignty and legitimacy, both according to local perspective and per the norms of the international rules of order. Opening up the political space for local participating and engagement would also be incredibly beneficial to helping the international community rebrand its state- and peacebuilding efforts. It is definitely a riskier game, but, as demonstrated in the case of Somalia, engaging regional and localized entities of governance would be more beneficial to the Somali people, rather than just the state. Finally, moving away from traditionally, overly technocratic approaches to peacebuilding will ultimately make way for local state- and peacebuilding efforts that may be more effective. While this paper is aware of the potential pitfalls of putting faith into what is the often overly romanticized local, the societal contexts present in conflict scenarios have been ignored for too long, and incorporating grassroots peace- and statebuilding efforts would only help the international community legitimize its efforts in the eyes of the people. Critical analysis is required at all levels, and competing notions of sovereignty and legitimacy must be accommodating in order to render any state- and peacebuilding efforts productive. Indicators that a change in approach is underway in the international community, but for now, we the academic community must wait to see if action is taken to ameliorate the strain between sovereignty and legitimacy.

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[2] Activity related to the Arab Spring was reported in: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, (Source: "Arab Spring: an interactive timeline of Middle East protests," The Guardian Online, accessed 07 March 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline). The intensity of the protests and the responses by the central governments varied widely.

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[7] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations," April 2007, http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf, accessed 04 March 2012.

[8] This paper uses the terms interchangeably as a tongue-in-cheek nod to the conflation of these two concepts.

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[12] *Ibid.,* 1965.

[13] Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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[15] Sunil Khilani, *The Idea of India*. London: Penguin Books, 1997, 21.

[16] Francis Fukuyama, 2006.

[17] Khilani, 1997.

[18] William Reno, "Bottom-Up Statebuilding?" in *Building States to Build Peace*, edited by Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, 143-62. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2008.

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[20] Katia Papagianni, "Participation and State Legitimation," in *Building States to Build Peace*, edited by Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, 334-61. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008.

[21] Christopher Clapham, *Africa in the international system: The politics of state survival* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[22] Papagianni, 2008.

[23] Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Muslims (Bosnjaks) to name the most prominent.

[24] Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*. Amonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

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[29] *Ibid.,* 2008.

[30] Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Mars Soderborn, "Post-Conflict Risks" (working paper, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University, Oxford, August 2006.)

[31] UN General Assembly, Resolution 60/180, "The Peacebuilding Commission," 30 December 2005, http://www.un.org/sa/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/180, accessed 04 March 2012.

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[36] Fukuyama, 2006.

[37] Dianae F. Orentilcher, *That Someone Guilty Be Punished: The Impact of the ICTY on Bosnia.* New York: Open Society Justice Initiative and International Center for Transitional Justice, 2010.

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