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REVIEW ESSAY

From Theory to Practice: Assessing the Role and Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping in South Sudan: one year of lessons from under the Blue Beret by Robert B. Munson, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 150 pp. + notes + bibliography + index \$90.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-137-50182-0

Taking sides in peacekeeping: impartiality and the future of the United Nations by Emily Paddon Rhoads, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 213 pp. + bibliography + index £85.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-198-74724-6

Although focusing on different case studies and coming from very different backgrounds, these two books – *Peacekeeping in South Sudan: One year of lessons from under the blue beret* and *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations* – have at least two things in common: they both focus on peacekeeping operations and they both aim at providing a critical look at the role and effectiveness of this specific conflict resolution ‘tool’ of the United Nations (UN). Both Robert Munson and Emily Paddon Rhoads adopt specific approaches and arguments but ultimately both provide us with in-depth and original analyses of the contribution of peacekeeping operations to peace and stability in contemporary conflict contexts.

The starting point for Robert Munson’s book is his own personal and professional experience as a peacekeeper in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in 2014. This is by design: this face is presented and recurrently referred to throughout the book as a fundamental frame for his analysis and contribution. Having first-hand experience as a UN peacekeeper, he presents himself as being in a privileged position to provide a deeper, more in-depth and accurate way of (re)thinking contemporary peacekeeping. He does this by questioning, for example, the specific rationale behind individual states when deciding

to contribute to peacekeeping operations and, more specifically, as an American himself, how US forces perform and support peace operations worldwide.

Furthermore, having been personally and professionally involved in peacekeeping efforts, Munson comes up with a number of related questions about how he could better have comprehended and more effectively contributed to the situation around him. Through a captivating biographic testimony, he takes us on his one-year long journey deployed in South Sudan, presenting his views on the many difficulties, challenges and dilemmas he faced there as a peacekeeping. He highlights the positive contribution of peacekeeping in the world's youngest country, but at the same time notes that it is increasingly unstable, violent and dependent on external peace and stabilisation efforts.

Of particular note are the chapters on the nature of the mission in South Sudan and on the various dimensions and meanings of 'Protection of Civilians' within UN peacekeeping, particularly in UNMISS. Munson offers a critical discussion of the three-level protection strategy adopted by the UN in South Sudan: protection through the political process (reducing/resolving and mitigating violent conflict through conflict resolution and mediation mechanisms); protection from physical violence (reducing the physical threats to civilians through increased military and humanitarian access to populations in need) and establishing a protective environment (increasing the capacity to protect civilians through more structural measures and processes, such as the reinforcement of the security and justice sectors and improving accountability mechanisms) (63). By focusing on this dimension, the author emphasises the crucial importance of avoiding a passive approach to peacekeeping in particularly violent and unstable contexts and instead assuming a comprehensive – and I would add, transversal – human rights dimension to peacekeeping efforts. This comes as particularly relevant at a time when flagrant, gross and systematic human rights violations committed by belligerent parties are among the main challenges faced by UN peacekeeping missions over the last two decades.

To a certain extent, this topic is shared by Emily Paddon Rhoads' book, in that she focuses her analysis on what she refers to as a more assertive liberal form of internationalism that directly affects peacekeeping efforts. According to the author, a shift in understandings of impartiality in peacekeeping mandates somehow dictates that 'peacekeepers are now expected to search for, and then side with, the victims' in conflict settings. This means that more and more 'peacekeepers are, or should be, robust and assertive in carrying out

their increasingly lofty and ambitious mandates' (1). Presented as the first scholarly attempt to critically analyse this change and related implications, the book is organised around two related questions: how impartiality is understood as a norm in UN peacekeeping efforts and what are the practical effects and implications of such an understanding. In order to answer these questions, Rhoads conceptualises impartiality as a 'composite norm' – one that does not stand for itself but is instead open to contestation and dispute – and relies upon a historical narrative of impartiality that shows how there has been a shift in the dominant understanding of impartiality as a norm in UN peacekeeping.

Using the UN Mission in Congo (MONUC) as a case study, Rhoads argues that the transformations in impartiality have had deep implications in terms of the degree of politicisation of UN peacekeeping operations. In the Congo, where the author undertook extensive fieldwork in order to assess the differences in roles and interpretations of peacekeeping mandates by leading mission officials, she concludes that these changes have ultimately converted UN forces into one belligerent party among many others. In such polarised, unstable and insecure settings, actively taking sides, even if it is the victims' side, may undermine the organisation's capacity to maintain its legitimacy and play an active and effective role in promoting peace and stability.

Although Rhoads' analysis provides an insightful, empirically rich and convincing assessment of the implications of such transformations for the UN's future peacekeeping role, it does not always render clear the differences between impartiality and neutrality in the mandates and actions of peacekeepers. Taking sides in conflict-ridden contexts is usually associated with actively siding with one of the belligerent parties, which for the UN compromises its ability to play a role as a legitimate and neutral mediating actor. In this book, however, neutrality is not referred to substantially and so questions can be raised regarding the author's concerns about how impartiality is understood and performed and its implications for peacekeeping efforts. Nevertheless, the ultimate goals of providing more extensive research on peacekeeping as an inherently political and contested phenomenon and the implications of this on the ground are undoubtedly achieved in this book.

Though these two books differ in terms of background and contribution, both provide useful insights into different aspects of UN peacekeeping and present in-depth case

studies of two of the largest, most complex and most important contemporary missions. Reading them together makes exceedingly clear the pressing need to enhance the UN's peacekeeping role and capabilities, particularly when it comes to promoting its effectiveness in fostering longer-term peace and stability in contemporary conflicts. In this regard, these two books bring innovative, if different, insights and contributions and will be of value to both academics and practitioners working in this field.

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