If Nation-Building is Out, Can Peace-Building Be In?

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Weakly governed or conflict-ridden lands have invited external intervention throughout history, but the delegitimation of empire and concomitant development of international institutions over the past century have transformed what is expected and tolerated from external actors in these situations. Powerful states have experimented with various forms of post-war and in-war “nation building,” but their track record is discouraging and public tolerance for these projects has diminished. In the past two decades the United Nations has carved out a unique vocation in “peace building,” but its efforts to formalize this mission institutionally, most notably through creation of a Peacebuilding Commission, are sputtering amid familiar problems of overlapping responsibilities, scarce resources, and the international community’s fitful attention span. Can this emerging system be rationalized?

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