

**John Siko/Jonah A. Victor: African Security. An Introduction, London: I. B. Tauris, 2020, 266 pp.**

Reviewed by  
Ulf Engel, Leipzig

Books on African peace and security are not exactly in short supply these days. They are coming from two ends: first, with a focus on the changing nature of violent conflict on the continent and, second, with regard to the role of African actors in managing the continent's peace and security issues. This trend can be illustrated by reference to a monograph authored by Stephen A. Emerson and Hussein Solomon[1] and the collection edited by Katharina P. Coleman and Thomas K. Tieku[2], respectively.

*African Security. An Introduction*, written by John Siko and Jonah A. Victor, is designed both as an introductory textbook for students, but also as an orientation for (US) government officials with little area studies background who are moved to a new position where they have to deal with the African continent and its security predicaments. The authors bring rich practical and academic experience to the table. Siko is co-founder and director of Burnham Global, a Dubai-based security consultancy. Prior to this he was in a similar line of business with the London-based Risk Advisory Group (2015–2020). Before that he has worked for some years as political and/or economic officer at US embassies in Pretoria and Cape Town, South Africa, as well as Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Siko has taught

courses on African security and politics at Georgetown University and George Washington University and is the author of *Inside South Africa's Foreign Policy: Diplomacy in Africa from Smuts to Mbeki* – based on his PhD which he has done at the University of South Africa (UNISA).[3] Victor, based in Washington DC, served as an analyst and policy planner on African affairs for the US government, including at the National Security Council, the National Intelligence Council and the Department of Defense. He is an adjunct associate professor at the Center for Security Studies of Georgetown University, Washington DC, and holds a PhD in political science from Pennsylvania State University.

The book is structured into 13 brief chapters (all around 15 pages) and two even shorter reflective interludes – one on the importance of notions of ethnicity, race, tribe and clan based on a classic essentialist perspective which believes in the existences of distinct human 'races' and takes 'ethnicity' as a primordial given; the other on the question 'Is Africa safe to visit?'. In chapter 1 the design of the book is introduced. In chapter 2 'insecurity' before the 1960s is reviewed. The notion of security is rather broad though the authors avoid a conceptual discussion of the term (e.g., narrow 'regime security' vs. broader 'human security', 'traditional' vs. 'non-traditional' security threats etc.) and how this relates to various types of conflict. Chapter 3 aims at providing an overview on key drivers of contemporary conflicts in Africa and a review of 'key' past conflict clusters (which, according to the author's, are Biafra/Nigeria, Eritrea's war for independence from Ethiopia, Sudan's civil wars, Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late

1990s, Congo's wars and the genocide in Rwanda as well as the "collapse" of Somalia). According to Siko and Victor conflict occurs because of a complex combination of resources, ethnic mobilisation, domestic politics (which is framed in terms of the 'neo-patrimonialism' paradigm) and internationalisation of domestic issues. Departing from the traditional divide in African Studies and Middle East Studies to treat the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa separate, in chapter 4 the argument is made for the study of Africa as a whole.

The following two chapters focus more on African agency: armed forces (chap. 5), religious groups and violent religious extremists (chap. 6). The following chapters are following a logic dictated by the personal experience of the authors: 'Understanding Crime and Law Enforcement in Africa' (chap. 7), 'Anticipating and Responding to Military Coups and Mutinies' (chap. 8), 'Anticipating and Mitigating Election Violence' (chap. 9), 'Anticipating and Preparing for Economic Crisis in Africa' (chap. 10), 'Ending and Managing African Conflict' (chap. 11) and 'Tracking External Actors, Influences and Competition in Africa' (chap. 12).

And in the conclusions (chap. 13), Siko and Victor reflect on 'Future Trends in African Security and Policy Options'. The discussion of megatrends, game changes, wildcards and planning proactive responses is an interesting read. Rapid population growth and urbanisation, climate change as well as economic weakness and vulnerability to external shocks are identified as the three main drivers of future conditions. This is pretty much in line with existing security policy scenarios of, for instance, the US National Intelligence Council, the

African Futures project or the EU Institute for Security Studies' assessment (though those are not mentioned).[4]

The authors have tried to cover an immense empirical landscape. The book is very well written, follows a user-friendly approach and certainly is a helpful teaching resource at graduate level (with short, succinct texts and accompanying boxes). Not mentioning the author's classic neo-realist and essentialising epistemology, which is soaked with conceptual Eurocentrism, I will limit my critique to three points: too little attention to historicity, total neglect of the role of Africa's regional economic communities (RECs) and the African Union as well as selective choice of the literature the authors are engaging with. On historicity: Despite the fact that the authors provide a chapter on pre-independence conditions (and every now and then throw in some historical references), the authors rarely reflect historic insights in a systematic manner. Take for instance the short discussion of the high levels of crime in South Africa (p. 87f.). The explanations focus on short- to mid-term explanatory variables but only half-heartedly engage with the history of 300 years of colonialism and apartheid, the emergence of masculine cultures of violence and the traumatisation of generations of South Africans. On AU/RECs: Neither are the authors interrogating collective African security responses in detail, nor are they using any African Union and RECs sources on these issues. Also, the role of the United Nations or the European Union in peace and security is widely disregarded. Nation states' perspectives are prevailing. The lack of engagement with collective security mechanisms concerns all fields: from

early warning to conflict resolution, from diplomatic to military deployment, from civilian means to police. And, finally, on the choice of literature: many authors and their contributions in the field of peace and security in Africa are missing. The works of Cedric de Coning, Linnéa Gelot, the late Jim Hentz, Gilbert M. Khadiagala, Tim Murithi, Cyril Obi, Thomas K. Tieku and many others are absent from the bibliography. Those who are not missing (say, Kwesi Aning), and not quoted with reference to their most important contributions to the debate. In general, the choice of references strongly reflects a perspective from the Global North which is informed by political science views and (US) security community concerns in particular.[5] Media reports are frequently used to support some details. Again, there is at least a bias towards African sources.

#### Notes

- 1 S. A. Emerson/H. Solomon, *African Security in the Twenty-First Century. Challenges and Opportunities*, Manchester 2018.
- 2 K. P. Coleman/T. K. Tieku (eds.), *African Actors in International Security. Shaping Contemporary Norms*, Boulder, CO 2018.
- 3 J. Siko, *Inside South Africa's Foreign Policy: Diplomacy in Africa from Smuts to Mbeki*, London 2014.
- 4 See J. Cilliers et al., *African Futures 2050 Report*, Pretoria/Denver 2011; NIC, Annex to *Global Trends Report: Sub-Saharan Africa. Paradox of Progress*, Washington, DC, 31 January 2017, <https://www.hsdn.org/?view&did=797908> (accessed 29 March 2022); as well as Giovanni Faleg (ed.), *African Futures 2030: Free Trade, Peace and Prosperity* (= EUISS Chaillot Paper; 164), Paris 2021.
- 5 See also the author's book launching event by the Africa Center Atlantic Council, 8 April 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/african-security-in-an-age-of-austerity/> (accessed 29 March 2022).