



Why U.N. Peacekeeping Operations Must Not Become Counterterrorism Missions

Larry Attree, Jordan Street | Friday, Sept. 7, 2018

From Bosnia to Rwanda, United Nations peacekeepers have always faced tough choices that come with operating in complex, dangerous environments. Today, the climate is no less challenging. Record fatalities and injuries

(<https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/org1663.doc.htm>) for U.N. personnel

have increased pressure from some quarters to embolden U.N. peacekeeping operations and political missions with stronger, more aggressive mandates. But recent decisions made by the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, such as a mandate to support a regional, non-U.N. counterterrorism unit in Mali, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, risk plunging blue helmets into the quicksand of unwinnable wars. This short-term thinking poses considerable long-term risks that could destroy U.N. peacekeeping as we know it.

In deciding how it does and doesn't engage in war zones, the U.N. should heed the shortcomings and ongoing failures of counterterrorism campaigns and stabilization interventions from Afghanistan

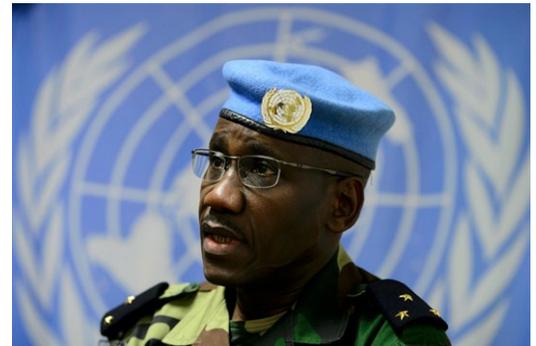
(<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1031-hammering-the-bread-and-the-nail>) and Iraq to Libya, Somalia

(<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1032-barbed-wire-on-our-heads>) and Yemen

(<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1033-blown-back>). Buying further into the doctrine of counterterrorism is not the answer.

The U.N.'s added value in countries torn apart by conflict is to try to support meaningful peace processes, protect human rights and build trust with communities and influential actors. Requiring peacekeepers to support and side with non-U.N. counterterrorism or "stabilization" forces carries huge risks. As U.N. peacekeepers become active protagonists in a conflict on the ground, their potential to play protective, peacemaking roles is radically undermined.

Take Mali, where the U.N.'s credibility, impartiality and space for building peace is being compromised by its active support for military-led counterterrorism campaigns. The U.N.'s Multidimensional Integrated



Senegalese Gen. Amadou Kane, deputy force commander of the U.N. mission in Mali, sits for an interview, Bamako, Mali, June 23, 2018 (Photo by Sean Kilpatrick for Canadian Press via AP Images).

Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>), is tasked with actively deterring attacks from designated “terrorist armed groups,” helping extend the authority of the abusive and unrepentant Malian state, and providing U.N. logistics and intelligence support for two outside counterterrorism operations—the French-led Operation Barkhane

(<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/operations/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-presentation-de-l-operation-barkhane/operation-barkhane>) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/258-force-du-g5-sahel-trouver-sa-place-dans-lembouteillage-securitaire>) fielded by Mali and four neighboring states. All this has painted targets on the backs of U.N. peacekeepers in Mali.

Even when U.N. peace operations simply train, equip and fund national and regional security forces, it can backfire dramatically—especially where these forces are implicated in abuses

(https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_malis_impunity_problem_security_crisis) and aggravating public grievances. In the case of Mali, U.N. investigations have found evidence of widespread extrajudicial killings

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-un/u-n-says-malian-forces-executed-12-civilians-at-a-market-idUSKBN1JM2JZ>) by security forces; several mass graves (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-idUSKBN1AL0Q0>) have also been unearthed. These abuses should prompt a major redesign of the U.N.’s engagement in Mali, but there is no sign of that happening.

It is not just counterterrorism that poses a risk. Embracing the language, objectives and programming of “countering or preventing violent extremism”—the softer, affable cousin of counterterrorism—could have similar consequences for U.N. peacekeepers.

It risks alienating communities (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/shouldnt-you-be-countering-violent-extremism>), disempowering civil society and even worsening conflict, such as in Somalia, where countering or preventing violent extremism is now prominent in the mandate and strategy of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, or UNSOM. However abhorrent the aims and methods of the militant group al-Shabab, if the U.N. embraces a stance that assigns blame to just one party in the ongoing unrest in Somalia, it is much less likely to see and address the grievances that underpin al-Shabab’s strength and support, or to be able to push the Somali government and its allies to improve their human rights record. Abandoning impartiality diminishes the U.N.’s ability to support political dialogue with al-Shabab, which many officials and analysts believe will be needed to end Somalia’s stalemate.

Engaging in counterterrorism and campaigns to counter violent extremism may result in funding for the U.N., but it will come with a heavy cost.

Many U.N. officials also recognize that being too close to abusive parties in a conflict jeopardizes their role in helping communities and pushing for a political resolution. They see the value of safeguarding U.N. independence from warring parties, as demonstrated by the thorough and impartial human rights reporting that has given the U.N. space and credibility in Afghanistan since 2011, when Security Council mandates began requiring the mission to focus on these issues.

Other observers have warned that U.N. involvement in counterterrorism campaigns and efforts to counter or prevent violent extremism exposes its humanitarian and development programs to greater risk of attack. It is clear that some areas of the U.N. system view the moves in this direction as a thoughtless abandonment of neutrality, but there has not been sufficient internal debate to inform a coherent U.N.-wide position on these risks. Although U.N. policies officially urge caution around direct engagement with counterterrorism campaigns and preclude assistance to forces implicated in serious human rights violations, the U.N. is heading down a slippery slope.

As financial constraints (<https://www.undispatch.com/heres-trumps-budget-request-impact-united-nations/>) press the U.N. to prove its worth, engaging in counterterrorism and campaigns to counter violent extremism may get it funding and an opportunity to play an influential role in conflict zones in the short term. But this approach will come with a heavy cost (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1183-united-nations-peace-operations-in-complex-environments-charting-the-right-course>). If peacekeepers actively use force against terrorists, it could feed cycles of violence and revenge that have already aggravated many conflicts for years. Supporting the efforts of abusive militaries is also likely to intensify rather than resolve violence.

Being exposed to terrorist attacks could keep personnel from peacekeeping operations and political missions from engaging with local communities. As a result, the U.N.'s hope (https://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf) of creating more people-centered and field-based peace operations will give way to high-cost, endless stabilization missions. This will run counter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' priority of seeing a surge in "peace diplomacy" (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sgsm18446.doc.htm>) and will slowly erode the ability of the U.N. to act as a mediator.

Yet much of the pressure to move in this more militarized direction comes from the U.N. Security Council, particularly its five permanent members—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China. The need to counter terrorists, however defined, is one of the few things they have been able to agree on in recent years. Other governments that have been powerful champions for peacebuilding, conflict prevention and human rights will need to push back and be more vocal in their support for the maintenance of the U.N.'s impartiality in the most dangerous parts of the world.

But senior U.N. officials cannot simply assign blame to the Security Council. They should warn against mandates that undermine U.N. values and violate procedures such as the Human Rights Due Diligence

Policy (<http://dag.un.org/handle/11176/387416>), and are thus likely to fail.

It is now or never for the U.N.'s leadership and member states to safeguard the U.N.'s role in protecting human rights and building international peace. U.N. support for forces that commit summary executions, fill mass graves and terrorize civilians should raise red flags, yet few member states have publicly expressed their concerns.

The future of U.N. peace operations should instead lie in coherently designed missions focused on impartial human rights monitoring, protection of civilians, relief, development and mediation. Positioning the U.N. to resolve conflicts and address their causes means unequivocally rejecting any role for blue helmets in waging war.

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