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UN PEACE OPERATIONS AND COUNTER-TERRORISM - A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

by John Karlsrud

UN PEACE OPERATIONS WERE VEERING FROM PEACEKEEPING TOWARD CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, AND STATED THAT THEY "LACK THE SPECIFIC EQUIPMENT, INTELLIGENCE, LOGISTICS, CAPABILITIES AND SPECIALIZED MILITARY PREPARATION REQUIRED" TO DEAL WITH VIOLENT EXTREMISTS.

During the United Nations General Assembly, U.S. President Barack Obama chaired two summits – the first on **peace operations** on September 28, and one the following day on **counter-terrorism**. His participation in both demonstrated the level of commitment of the U.S., and the American belief that the UN is still relevant to tackling these challenges. The summits have also drawn some attention to the possible convergence between these two policy fields. What are the implications of this convergence? And, are UN peace operations really able to take on counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) tasks?

In this article, I argue that the UN neither will be principally, nor operationally ready to fight terrorist groups, and that coalitions of the willing and regional organizations may be best positioned to take on these tasks. Furthermore, I argue that the increasing focus on CVE, with the attendant resources that are brought to the table, limits the space for more politically oriented approaches. It also risks marginalizing, politicizing and securitizing the peacebuilding, local governance and development agendas.

Counter-terrorism has been high on the international agenda since the 9/11-attacks. In recent years it has been subsumed under the wider and less ominous sounding concept of countering violent extremism (CVE). For many people the two terms amount to the same thing, but the latter is considered more polite in certain circles. At the UN, the CVE agenda is also moving from the margins to center stage.

During 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon participated in a U.S.-arranged CVE **summit**. He warned against a securitized approach to CVE, and outlined a future **prevention agenda** where the main goals must be to better understand the motivations for joining groups such as the Islamic State (IS); avoid using 'terrorism' as a label to eliminate political opposition; and deal with root causes through strengthening governance, the respect for human rights, more accountable institutions, service delivery and political participation.

At the recent Leader's Summit on peacekeeping held during the General Assembly and chaired by U.S. President Barack Obama, UK Prime Minister David Cameron was not the only one **citing terrorism** as a motivating factor for **contributing more troops** and resources to UN peace operations. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda scolded the UN for peaceful coexistence with terrorist groups, while the U.S. Mission to the UN cited the "**jihadist insurgency**" in Mali as an example of a challenge that the UN needed to be better equipped to deal with. U.S. officials have emphasized that America is not outsourcing the so-called "War on Terror" to the UN; **rather it is taking a burden-sharing approach**. On the other hand, the recently released **US presidential memorandum** stressed that the UN will not be able take on "more forceful military interventions that need to be carried out in non-permissive environments". However, Richard Gowan, **Non-Resident Fellow at CIC**, has argued that using UN peace operations to deal with situations of counter-terrorism is one area where the veto powers of the Security Council may be able to agree.

A CHANGING CONTEXT?

A record 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced in 2014. The UNHCR global trends report for 2014, tellingly titled **World at War**, paints a bleak picture with a four-fold increase of people forced to leave their homes due to conflict during the previous four years. While the number of conflicts had been steadily declining for more than a decade, the last few years has witnessed a wave of new conflicts in Libya, Syria, Mali, Yemen and the Central African Republic (CAR). Old conflicts have rekindled, leading to a **tripling of civil conflicts** between 2007 and 2014. The UN is struggling with more 'traditional' protection threats of formidable scale: the **deteriorating situation in CAR**, and in South Sudan, where hundreds of thousands of civilians in danger outside of UN camps are trapped in a civil war that has only increased in brutality and abuse during the **last few months**.

However, it is the arguably new threats of violent extremism and organized crime, combined with these traditional challenges, that are propelling discussions of change at the UN – particularly to its peace operations. Boko Haram, IS, the Al Shabaab and other extremist groups in Libya, Mali, Syria and Yemen have challenged policy-makers and the multilateral system, which is poorly equipped to respond to these violent, but also multifaceted challenges. These groups add to the political complexity and increase the intractable nature of conflict in these countries. Some groups can be talked to, while others have no interest in negotiating with the UN.

In recent years, the UN Security Council has been giving increasingly expansive and robust mandates to UN peace operations. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2013, it authorized a peace enforcement mission that pitted blue helmets against identified rebel groups, tasking the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) to '**neutralize**' these armed groups. This was in clear contradiction of principles guiding UN peacekeeping operations including impartiality, obtaining consent of the main parties, and only using force in self-defence or in defence of the mandate. The UN missions authorized in 2013 and 2014 in Mali and CAR were given mandates to 'stabilise' and 'extend state authority', effectively asking them to confront rebel and extremist groups in Mali as well as sectarian groups in CAR. In the next few years, multidimensional missions to Libya, Yemen and Syria are also possible.

At UN Headquarters, staff only half-jokingly say that the organization has moved from being in the crossfire into the crosshairs, attacked no longer for where they are, but for who they are. The increasing attacks on blue helmets in Darfur, DRC and Mali testify to this impression.

In Mali, the UN mission is equipped with a mandate to extend state authority to the northern parts of the country. Local communities in that region see this as taking sides against them. The mission has thus far suffered a high price: **40 military peacekeepers have been killed** in "malicious acts" since deployment in April 2013. It is difficult to draw a line where pursuit of armed groups behind these attacks turns into a counter-terrorism operation. This is particularly true when such pursuit is backed by a **mandate** "to support the cantonment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of armed groups, as well as the progressive redeployment of the Malian Defence and Security Forces especially in the North of Mali." The UN is not seen as impartial when it supports the extension of the state's authority – perceived as illegitimate in the eyes of the local community in the north – rather than seeking to heal fractured **state-society relations**.

In Somalia, the African Union mission AMISOM has been fighting the Al Shabaab since 2007, at great **human**, political and economic costs. The mission has made important steps forward, but together with the Federal Government of Somalia it is struggling to provide the 'liberated' areas with security, service delivery and a real feeling of a peace dividend. The AU Peace and Security Council has also given a mandate to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to fight the Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and Chad. It has reportedly had **some initial progress** but is not yet fully deployed and operational.

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM MOVES TO CENTER STAGE AT THE UN

Inside the UN Secretariat, a growing number of bodies deal with counter-terrorism and CVE. More are joining the field. The **UN Security-Council Counter-Terrorism Committee**, established by **Security Council resolution 1373** in 2001 in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, provides **guidelines, suggestions for codes and standards** and facilitates **technical assistance** to member states.

In 2005, the Secretary-General established a **Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF)**, endorsed by member states of the UN General Assembly through the **Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy** adopted in 2006. Within CTITF, the **UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)** was established. The Centre received a donation from Saudi-Arabia of $100 million in 2014 to strengthen its "**tools, technologies and methods to confront and eliminate the threat of terrorism**". It is also partially funded by Germany, the UK and the U.S. According to one UN official, the CTITF/UNCCT now accounts for roughly half of the DPA budget and has reached out to the UN mission in Mali, UN agencies and others to develop projects, **in total 31 so far**.

The convergence of the peace operations and counter-terrorism agendas is not only at the rhetorical level. CTITF has been **visiting Mali** and MINUSMA offering funding for activities that align with its narrow objectives. As there has so far been limited scope for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) in Mali to deal with the political dimension, mission creep is a tempting proposition. The generous but very specific funding accumulated by DPA's counter-terrorism/CVE programs could potentially skew priorities. This risks creating supply-driven niche programming at headquarters and in the field, rather than trying to address the larger political problems driving the conflict by an objective analysis of the problems and needs.

The **Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI)** within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has shown keen interest in expanding its activities to help countries prevent and counter violent extremism, even those not hosting an active peace operation. A recent report published by the UN University (UNU) Centre for Policy Research, with the support of the UN DDR section, asks the rhetorical question: **UN DDR in an Era of Violent Extremism: Is It Fit for Purpose?** In the preface of the report, OROLSI's head Assistant Secretary-General Dimitry Titov agrees with the problem statement. He asks how "we can move forward together in exploring DDR and CVE programming", and he agrees with the editors that a new policy merged area of "Demobilization and Disengagement of Violent Extremists" (DDVE) could be the way forward.

The report suggests the UN may need to adapt its guidelines for DDR in order to deal with foreign terrorist fighters, terrorist rehabilitation and involuntary detention. It states that UN peace operations are already moving in such a direction, and acknowledges that this is in contradiction to the aforementioned peacekeeping principles. The report also raises a red flag by noting that such contradiction presents "a host of safety, legal, ethical, operational, and reputational risks to the UN, its staff, Member States, and donors". Despite this, the authors press for a stronger engagement of the UN in these areas. Overall, the unclear division of labor between the UN Secretariat and other departments and agencies, combined with the potential of supply-driven programming, should be of great concern to the UN.

A DIVIDED HOUSE

The **High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report** emphasized the primacy of political solutions. It stated, "there is a clear sense of a widening gap between what is being asked of [UN] peace operations today and what they are able to deliver". Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the former head of UN peacekeeping, argued that robust peacekeeping has to be supported by a **robust political strategy**. However, institutional dynamics can also play a role. Some among the senior officials at the UN argued for the mission in Mali to maintain the 'market share' over and above regional organizations or bilateral deployments. These officials believe the UN has the most competence, has been in the peacekeeping business the longest, and should not be frightened by the challenges and uncertainties on the ground but rather adapt to changing circumstances and not be hindered by outdated principles.

The HIPPO panel **drew a red line against counter-terrorism**. It argued that UN peace operations were veering from peacekeeping toward conflict management, and stated that they "lack the specific equipment, intelligence, logistics, capabilities and specialized military preparation required" to deal with violent extremists. The report emphasized that when deployed in parallel with a counter-terrorism operation, "[t]he UN must in these situations maintain a strict adherence to its impartial commitment to the respect for human rights. When such non-UN forces depart, the UN should not be called upon to assume residual tasks beyond its capability". Aside from the HIPPO panel, others have also **questioned** whether UN peace operations is the right tool for counter-terrorism situations, particularly when not supported by a strong political mandate.

The UN DPKO is today a divided house between those that want UN peace operations to 'evolve' and be 'relevant' to the threats on the ground, and those that stand by the traditional principles of peacekeeping. A UN official told me that those diverging opinions have created a "massive rift in DPKO". On the one hand, some see the core principles of the UN threatened – and by extension, the viability of UN peacekeeping as a tool in the future. On the other hand, others see new areas where the UN can engage and maintain market share, continuing to be relevant to challenges on the ground and to member states that advocate for more

robust peace operations. But the question remains whether the UN in places like Mali is mandated to deal with conflicts that go against the principles of the organization, and whether these conflicts can undermine the long-term support and legitimacy of UN peacekeeping as a tool to help countries emerging from conflict.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

In his leaked 2007 **End of Mission report**, Alvaro de Soto, long time senior UN official and former Special Envoy to the Middle East, condemned the UN and the Secretary-General for limiting the space that the UN established over past decades for engaging with all actors in conflict, including those considered "beyond the pale." De Soto resigned from his post because of the restrictions he was given on engaging with Hamas and Syria. In his report, he warned against establishing a new precedent for UN officials, that of talking only with those actors seen to be in the clear: "Since the late 1980s the UN has become rather adept dealing with groups that most governments can't or won't touch. If this ability is removed we would seriously weaken our hand as a peacemaking tool".

The branding of rebel groups as terrorists can limit the ability of UN Special Envoys and peace operations to engage with these groups. This is part of a general tendency, starting with the "War on Terror", wherein the maneuvering space of the UN has increasingly been limited. This has hampered the ability of the UN to broker peace and prevent conflict. The limits placed on dialogue have been paralleled by an increasing belief in the use of force to solve conflict – with limited results, considering the fall-out of Western engagements in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Arguably, security thinking and terms such as "counter-insurgency" and "counter-terrorism" have replaced **more political approaches to solving conflict**, or seeking to understand and deal with root causes.

The central tenet of the HIPPO report is its emphasis of the primacy of politics. It argues for scaling down the engagement in substantive areas in countries where there is no peace to keep, rather than increasing them. It seems the HIPPO red line drawn against counter-terrorism is already fast receding in the rear view mirror under the pressure of increased engagement in DDR and CVE.

The UN and its lead operations departments such as DPKO should be careful not to rush into providing technical solutions for problems that are deeply political and often rooted in longstanding development challenges. Going forward, the UN and member states need to carefully consider the grave implications of merging peace operations with the agendas of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism. The increasing focus on CVE, with the attendant resources that are brought to the table, can limit the space for more politically-oriented approaches and risks marginalizing, politicizing and securitizing the humanitarian, peacebuilding, local governance and development agendas.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon **will soon be presenting a Plan of Action** on preventing violent extremism, likely before the end of this year. His emphasis on the preventative pillar is a positive sign. However, there is still the danger that existing development and peacebuilding work on facilitating consultation, addressing root causes, strengthening service delivery, rule of law and justice may be rebranded as countering and preventing violent extremism, in order to access new funding streams. E.g. UNDP has years of experience in working in this area under banner of '**community violence reduction**'.

Some commentators argue that the UN may well be asked, **sooner rather than later**, to deploy multidimensional missions with enforcement mandates where it will face terrorism in countries like Libya, Yemen and even Syria. The argument that UN peace

operations are deployed to face situations where there is no peace to keep, and where violent extremists and terrorists are part of the picture, is well taken. So are the many **calls** for more sophisticated capabilities to enable the UN to protect itself against these threats on the ground. However, this should not stop the UN from warning the UN Security Council against prematurely deploying UN peace operations to these situations.

On the ground, missions should carefully consider activities countering violent extremism, bearing in mind the core principles of peacekeeping. While there is a strong need to further strengthen the capability and will of the UN to robustly protect civilians, these tools should not be used to make the UN participate in longer term counter-terrorism operations. Both field and headquarters staff should continue to stand by the values of the organization, and not try to defend its 'market share' of global peace operations.

UN STABILIZATION MISSIONS AND BURDEN-SHARING

There are no easy answers to the challenges that some of today's and most of tomorrow's peace operation theatres will bring. Part of the solution must be to clearly delineate what UN peace operations can and cannot do. The HIPPO report and the follow-up report from the Secretary-General both drew the line against counter-terrorism operations. The recent US **presidential memorandum** on peace operations argues that although UN peace operations in "select and exceptional cases" can be tasked to "conduct offensive military operations against armed groups that act as spoilers outside of a peace process", it adds that UN "peace operations cannot substitute for diplomatic solutions to end a war, nor for more forceful military interventions that need to be carried out in non-permissive environments by individual states or coalitions that possess the will and capacity to do so." The memorandum suggests that UN peace operations can "replace national or coalition military forces in operations once an area has transitioned from an immediate crisis to a more permissive environment." It does not seem to support the kind of co-deployment of a counter-terrorism force and a UN peace operation that we see in Mali.

The HIPPO report declared opposition of UN involvement in counter-terrorism, but it also asked for more clarification on the use of the concept of 'stabilization' in UN peace operations. There are divergent understandings of this term among member states and the UN, ranging from peace enforcement to peacebuilding efforts. But what future role should we expect the UN to have in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen? If the UN Security Council is not able or willing to outsource peace enforcement missions in these countries to other organizations, new options and modus operandi could be considered. In my article The **UN at War**, I commented that the UN quite literally was going green in Mali: troop contributing countries have resisted painting their vehicles and helicopters white, or simply did not care to do so. In my view, the blue helmets and white vehicles should be preserved as a tool that signifies impartiality, consent and limited use of force.

Following these developments to their logical conclusion, one could argue that on its spectrum of operations the UN may need a new tool of stabilization missions. In our forthcoming book, ***UN Peacekeeping Doctrine Towards the Post-Brahimi Era? Adapting to Stabilization, Protection and New Threats***, co-authors Chiyuki Aoi, Cedric de Coning and I argue the UN to consider developing a doctrine for a new category of UN stabilization missions.

A UN stabilization mission would be clearly delineated from other UN peace operations, able to engage in offensive operations for limited durations, but the focus would be more on long-term stability. As such a mission would be seen as partial to the government of the day, it would not necessarily be mandated to mediate between the parties. When developing the doctrine, one would need to also carefully consider the implications of an offensive posture for the routinely substantive tasks of UN peace operations, and

limit these accordingly. The HIPPO report similarly recommended such an approach. A stabilization force would not be using blue helmets and white vehicles, clearly demarcating itself from traditional UN peacekeeping missions. These stabilization missions would allow the UN to take on counter-terrorism tasks for limited durations.

However, while UN stabilization missions may provide a level of legitimacy and funding, a number of disincentives should also be taken into account. In order to sustain fatalities and casualties, participants in these missions are likely to be coalitions of the willing, but under a UN banner. That means adding several new layers of UN accountability and human rights reporting mechanisms. Two current missions, the French **Barkhane** mission in Mali and the **Global Coalition to Counter ISIL**, are currently less burdened by these forms of accountability, or by having to develop and relate to complicated UN rules for contracting and management, or slowing down deployment, construction of new bases and logistics in the field, among a host of other issues. If disregarding the principal issues and focusing on pragmatic challenges, for member states, the question will be whether sufficient incentives exist to undertake these tasks under a UN heading, or whether they should participate in a coalition of the willing outside the UN framework.

Taking into consideration that similar ongoing operations are shouldered by the African Union and sub-regional organizations on the African continent, and that likely future operations of this kind will be in Libya, Yemen and Syria, it may make more sense to undertake such operations in coalitions of the willing. This would give the lead regional organization/group of states the space to decide on a range of issues that might be more constrained in a UN setting. Such missions should be sequenced to not further undermine traditional UN peace operations. Coalitions of the willing, and in some instances regional organizations, will remain the only options with the requisite political will, capabilities, doctrines and staying power to conduct counter-terrorism operations, furnished with a UN mandate. However, with **military solutions enjoying dim prospects**, they need to be paralleled with a long-term political strategy to enjoy any chance of success.

The HIPPO panel recommended that the UN should use the full spectrum of its operations more flexibly to respond to changing needs on the ground. Special political missions, combined with strong mediation, intercommunity dialogue, rule of law and governance components addressing state-society relations from the bottom up, could in many instances more effectively address challenges in fragile states before they erupt. However, the way SPMs are financed, combined with sensitivities about sovereignty and the wish to be seen as doing something, will keep larger-scale state-centric peacekeeping operations as the preferred choice of the Security Council.

To achieve a balance and burden-sharing between the UN and other actors is more important than ever. Here, I have argued that there are principled as well as operational reasons why the UN should not conduct counter-terrorism, and that the UN should carefully consider the implications of bringing significant parts of its core business under a CVE umbrella. In broad terms, the limits of the UN also converge with the disincentives for member states and regional actors for conducting counter-terrorism operations under a UN banner.

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