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From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism

John Karlsrud 

Department of Peace, Conflict and Development, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War, international interventions have increasingly been deployed to deal with internal conflict. Liberal peacebuilding has been a guiding concept for many of these interventions, in particular those deployed by the UN. This article argues that liberal peacebuilding is waning in importance, both as a guiding concept and in practice. After long engagements in Afghanistan and the enduring effects of the financial crisis, Western states are shifting their strategy from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization and counterterrorism. In Africa, regional ad hoc coalitions set up to fight terrorists and other armed groups are on the rise, and progressively included in UN peacekeeping operations. To examine these shifts more closely, the article focuses on the crisis in Mali since 2012 and the growing Western security presence in neighbouring Niger. The article concludes that the turn from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization and counterterrorism is likely to be counterproductive, as it will lead to more oppressive governments and more disillusioned people joining the ranks of opposition and terrorist groups, as well as undermine the UN in general and UN peace operations in particular.

KEYWORDS Counterterrorism; liberal peacebuilding; peacekeeping; stabilization; United Nations

We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.
Donald Trump addressing troops at Fort Myer, 21 August 2017.

Introduction

Liberal peacebuilding may be on its way to the scrapyard of history. After being a popular concept as well as practice in the international security

CONTACT John Karlsrud  jka@nupi.no

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agenda after the end of the Cold War,¹ international interventions are scaled down in ambitions, with a shift towards stabilization and counterterrorism, both in discourse and in practice. The US and its Western allies are turning to a blend of stabilization and counterterrorism through global and regional partners. As an example, the United Nations (UN) has progressively been fielding ‘stabilization missions’² and the Security Council has been giving increasingly robust mandates to field missions.³

The growing emphasis on stabilization and counterterrorism, rather than liberal peacebuilding, reflects two key trends. First, liberal peacebuilding has been more difficult than anticipated, fraught with challenges and confronted with a continuing difficulty of understanding local politics and dynamics.⁴ Second, host states have more frequently resisted liberal interventions and have pressed for mandates that more closely align with the self-interest of authoritarian governments. There has been a surge of regional ad hoc coalitions set up to fight terrorists and other armed groups, and they are frequently included in UN peacekeeping operations, undermining the latter’s impartiality and legitimacy. Western militaries are moving their strategic emphasis from peacebuilding and counter-insurgency interventions to stabilization and counterterrorism, and this is also reflected in their policies vis-à-vis UN peacekeeping operations.

A better understanding of the changes in international interventions, and in particular UN peacekeeping operations, can provide a prism for understanding larger shifts in global politics. The year 2016 saw the Brexit vote in Europe and Donald Trump ascending to power in the US. However, rather than marking the start of the end of liberal values, as touted by many commentators,⁵ these events inscribe themselves into a longer trajectory that started years earlier. This article argues that examining member-state policies and mandates guiding UN peacekeeping operations since the beginning of the millennium, and how they have been changing, can provide a lens through which to understand how global security politics are changing.

¹In the document *Agenda for Peace*, peacebuilding was defined by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali as ‘action[s] to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict’, UN, *Agenda for Peace*, para. 21. Boutros Boutros-Ghali limited his definition to the post-conflict phase, but I will here apply this definition to the entire conflict cycle, as conflicts most often do not follow a linear development. The term ‘peacekeeping’ will be used for the narrower subset of peacekeeping operations within the larger practice of peacebuilding.

²The UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti was the first that had ‘stabilization’ included in its name in 2004. This was followed by UN peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2010), Mali (2013) and the Central African Republic (2014). The UN High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations noted that ‘[t]he term “stabilization” has a wide range of interpretations, and the Panel believes the usage of that term by the United Nations requires clarification’, UN, *A/70/95–S/2015/446*, 44.

³See e.g. Rhoads, *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping*; and Karlsrud, *The UN at War?*

⁴See e.g. Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*.

⁵See e.g. Walt, ‘The Collapse of the Liberal World Order’; and Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*.

The article draws upon a comprehensive review of policy documents, and field interviews conducted during two longer research stays in New York in 2015, as well as several subsequent field trips to New York and field work in Mali in February 2017. The remainder of the article is organized in three sections. The first section describes a reorientation of the international security agenda towards stabilization and counterterrorism, and how regional ad hoc coalitions, often included in UN peacekeeping operations, is an increasingly popular tool to fight armed opposition and terrorist groups. To examine these shifts more closely, the second section focuses on international interventions in the crisis in Mali since 2012 and the growing Western presence in neighbouring Niger. In conclusion, the article argues that the shift towards stabilization and counterterrorism will lead to more oppressive governments fomenting political unrest and encouraging recruitment to terrorist groups.

Liberal Peacebuilding Under Pressure

During the 1990s and 2000s, the understanding and conceptualization of peacebuilding were developed and expanded based on liberal values. But the track record after close to three decades – from Bosnia in the early 1990s to South Sudan today – has been decidedly mixed. As noted in the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations released in 2015, UN peacekeeping operations have progressively been given a conflict management role – without sufficient political support for mediating a solution or capabilities or troops sufficient to protect the mission or civilians under threat.⁶ UN peacekeeping operations are state-centric, often at the detriment of strengthening service delivery, representation and inclusion at local levels – key elements of a long-term peacebuilding strategy.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, a shift in priorities has occurred where the protection of civilians (PoC) has replaced liberal peacebuilding as the main rationale for UN peacekeeping operations, and where institution building and other peacebuilding activities have been subsumed into one of the three pillars of the UN PoC doctrine. The result has been less intrusive UN peacekeeping operations with more limited goals, a shorter-term outlook and more reactive approach to security incidents, all to the detriment of implementing a long-term people-centric strategy to address the root causes of security challenges.

A number of developments have put liberal peacebuilding under pressure on national, regional and global levels. Neighbouring states are progressively taking part in UN peacekeeping operations, increasing the likelihood of partiality, and ad hoc regional coalitions are often deployed as part of, or in parallel with, UN peacekeeping operations. Concurrently, the centre of gravity in

⁶UN, A/70/95–S/2015/446.

US military doctrine has moved towards counterterrorism, with knock-on effects for allied countries. The US and its Western allies have also been central in moving violent extremism and counterterrorism to the centre of the agenda of international organizations such as the UN and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The remainder of this section is structured in two sub-sections. First, I show how there is a reorientation of military strategy towards more short-term stabilization and counterterrorism goals with limited scope. Second, I highlight the impact of a surge of ad hoc coalitions in Africa, leading to greater accommodation of host states' interests.

Changing Operational and Doctrinal Paradigms

Activities that fall under stabilization and counterterrorism represent a powerful challenge to the peacebuilding paradigm, both in discourse and practice. Many of them could and have also been labelled as peacebuilding.⁷ Under US President George Bush Jr., coalitions of the willing invaded Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the Global War on Terror. In 2005, the Bush administration sought a new and less divisive path, and changed its rhetoric from fighting a Global War on Terror to a 'Struggle against Violent Extremism' (SAVE).⁸ This approach has proved more effective, and the preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) agenda has gained considerable strength. In December 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued his *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.⁹ In the plan, the terms 'extremism', 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' were used interchangeably.¹⁰ The move from terrorism to violent extremism also implies a broader set of tools to deal with these threats. Together this has coalesced into a broad agenda for counterterrorism (CT) and PCVE, undergirded by the legitimacy that the UN, as the only global multilateral body, confers.

UN peacekeeping operations have traditionally enjoyed wide international legitimacy, but are more and more perceived as partial in conflicts in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mali. The legitimacy of the UN can also be an asset when trying to widen the scope to include PCVE and CT activities. As the main international norm- and standard-setter, the development of comprehensive guidance on CT and PCVE by the UN lends further support to these agendas, and opens the possibility for stronger engagement by various UN tools, including its peacekeeping operations.

⁷This has led to considerable confusion on what liberal peacebuilding actually is, and how liberal it is. See e.g. Joshi, Lee, and Mac Ginty, "Just How Liberal Is the Liberal Peace?"

⁸See e.g. Fox, "Gwot is History."

⁹UN, A/70/674.

¹⁰Modirzadeh, "If It's Broke."

Donors are pouring money into PCVE programmes and funding mechanisms,¹¹ and international organizations such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) are relabelling old programmes and establishing new ones that compete for this funding.¹² Similarly, member states and international organizations are developing strategies for PCVE.¹³

A notable change occurred in 2016, when the OECD agreed that funding that has been contributed to the prevention of violent extremism – a very wide category – should become reportable as overseas development assistance (ODA).¹⁴ This risks undermining ‘both the volume and impartiality of aid’.¹⁵ Previously, the OECD guidelines stated that ‘activities combatting terrorism are not reportable as ODA, as they generally target perceived threats to donor, as much as to recipient countries, rather than focusing on the economic and social development of the recipient’.¹⁶ The shift means that donors can use ODA funding for security-related activities aimed at supporting governments with training and equipment, including governments that often have poor governance and human rights records.

The European Union (EU) has integrated its counterterrorism activities within the broader remit of the Instrument for Stability and Peace, and funding for counterterrorism activities has increased significantly from an average of EUR 4 million per year in the 2007–2013 period to EUR 18 million per year in the following period, 2014–2020.¹⁷

US President Barack Obama continued the Global War on Terror initiated by President Bush, but with a significant change in strategy. The large engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan were scaled back and exchanged for a new and more limited strategy where drone strikes, US special forces, and funding and training of local troops have been the main ingredients. Obama intensified the drone strike campaigns, not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but across Africa and the Middle East, in countries such as Mali, Niger, Somalia and Yemen.

Reflecting this shift, the US military has moved its strategic emphasis from population-centric to enemy-centric warfare. This represents a lowering of ambitions from addressing the root causes of violent conflict, such as lack

¹¹Examples include: Saudi Arabia’s donation of USD 100 million to the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) in 2014, then a part of the Department for Political Affairs; the establishment of a pooled funding mechanism to address local drivers of violent extremism called the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) in 2014, receiving about USD 34 million until 2016; and USAID’s CVE programme. See UNCCT, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Donates”; GCERF, “BM.05/DOC.03”; and USAID, “Countering Violent Extremism.”

¹²UNDP, *Preventing and Responding*.

¹³See e.g. US Department of State and USAID, *Department of State & USAID Joint Strategy*. For an overview of European Union policies and strategies, see European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, “Overview of the EU’s Policy”; OSCE, *Preventing Terrorism*; and UN, *A/70/674*. In the UN Plan of Action, the terms ‘extremism’, ‘violent extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ are used interchangeably.

¹⁴OECD, *Converged Statistical Reporting Directives*. See also OECD, *The Scope and Nature of 2016*.

¹⁵Daley, “Redefining ODA.”

¹⁶OECD, *Converged Statistical Reporting Directives*.

¹⁷CTMORSE, “IcSP: Countering Terrorism.”

of legitimacy, participation and inclusion, to focusing instead on the use of force to kill or capture enemy targets.¹⁸ While the counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy, drawing lessons from the first stage of engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, of course also included the latter objectives, operations were conducted under the credo of ‘clear, hold and build’, and there was more emphasis given to addressing root causes. This was reflected in the establishment in 2008 of what was intended to be a 4450-man strong Civilian Response Corps (CRC) at the US Department of State that was intended to help build institutional capacity in countries moving from conflict to stability.¹⁹ However, just as the CRC was established, COIN and personnel-intensive operations in the field were waning in popularity.²⁰ At its height in 2011, three years after it was established, the CRC thus only deployed 68 people,²¹ and already in 2010 it was converted into ‘a more flexible and cost-effective Expert Corps’ of significantly lower scope and size.²² According to Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, ‘the United States and its allies have lost the appetite for long-term occupation’ and they advise moving away from counter-insurgency and instead focusing on ‘military raids’.²³

The largely influential US counterterrorism doctrine, developed during the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and gradually replacing the counter-insurgency doctrine as the centre of gravity of US military thinking, focuses on the F3EAD process (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyse and Disseminate) intended to identify, target and kill or capture so-called high-value targets.²⁴ Glenn Voelz argues that US doctrine has moved into an era of individualized warfare, ‘defeating networks and individual combatants rather than formations’.²⁵ The doctrine is driven by a wish to limit the engagements and risks that the US military is exposed to, as well as by technological advances in the use of surveillance, drone and munitions technology.²⁶ The number of US special forces deployed in Africa has risen from 1% in 2006 to 17% in 2016 (1700 special forces troops in 2016).²⁷ Including other forces, the US has 6000 troops in Africa, with, for example, 800 deployed to Niger, and special operations forces carrying out raids in countries such as Chad, Cameroon, Libya, Mali and Somalia, with logistical support from private subcontractors to limit

¹⁸US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3–26: Counterterrorism*.

¹⁹Serafino, “Peacekeeping and Stabilization Missions Abroad.”

²⁰When President Obama took office, he started his presidency with a surge in Afghanistan, deploying an additional 17,000 troops, but this was followed by a steady downsizing of the military contingents in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

²¹Serafino, “Peacekeeping and Stabilization Missions Abroad,” 14.

²²US Department of State, *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, xiv. The CRC vanished from the organizational table of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) after 2012.

²³Inbar and Shamir, “What after Counter-Insurgency,” 1428.

²⁴US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3–26: Counterterrorism*, V-3.

²⁵Voelz, “The Individualization of American Warfare,” 99.

²⁶For a succinct account of this development, see Lindsay, “Reinventing the Revolution.”

²⁷Turse, “The Next Niger.”

risk exposure.²⁸ The result is ‘an expanding shadow war of targeted killings’, largely outside of media coverage and political accountability.²⁹ General Donald C. Bolduc, the head of the US Special Operations Command in Africa, has estimated that at any given time it conducts ‘96 activities in 20 countries’.³⁰

In parallel to this development in doctrine and operations, President Barack Obama intensified pressures on bilateral and multilateral partners to take on a greater burden of what they deemed global security challenges. The US has pushed member states for stronger engagement in UN peacekeeping operations, and for these to be more ‘relevant’ to today’s challenges. The US engagement has so far paid off – the summit on peace operations chaired by President Obama during the General Assembly in 2015 resulted in pledges from 49 member states, with a notable increase in troops from Western states.³¹ On the same day as the summit, the US also released a presidential memorandum on ‘United States Support to United Nations Peace Operations’, the first of its kind since 1994.³² The memorandum detailed increasing global risks, such as a growing number of countries that might serve as safe havens for terrorists and violent extremists, and the potential for large flows of the internally displaced and refugees, and argued for strengthening ‘international response mechanisms that enable the burden to be shared globally’.³³

The new US policy on UN peace operations was hailed by UN peacekeeping experts as a renewed commitment to UN peacekeeping. However, on closer scrutiny, the paper follows a long line of thinking where the UN is seen as a useful burden-sharing tool – a proxy in other words – to engage in low-intensity conflicts.³⁴ Bruce Jones, a director at the Brookings Institute, put it bluntly: ‘[t]he right way to think about international peacekeeping is as a tool for sharing the burden of “manning the outer perimeter”’.³⁵ The practice and discourse of using proxies to engage in low-intensity conflicts hails back to the support to dictators in diverse locales in the developing world and the ‘Reagan doctrine’ of the latter part of the Cold War, supporting rebel groups to fight communist governments.³⁶ The more recent use of similar language is telling. In the post-liberal era, UN peacekeeping is one of several proxy tools for the US.

²⁸Moore, “US Military Logistics”; and Moore and Walker, “Tracing the US Military’s Presence.”

²⁹See e.g. Niva, “Disappearing Violence,” 185.

³⁰Turse, “The War You’ve Never Heard Of.”

³¹For a summary of the pledges, see Global Peace Operations Review, “Leaders’ Summit on Peacekeeping.”

³²The White House, *United States Support*.

³³*Ibid.*, 1.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Jones, “United Nations Peacekeeping”. Jones was one of the original members of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations nominated by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to review peacekeeping in 2014, but he pulled out at an early stage.

³⁶Blank et al., *Low-Intensity Conflict*, 114.

US President Donald Trump has continued to engage militarily when necessary to protect national interests. However, judging from the policies outlined so far, the Trump presidency will be marked by an even more transactional relationship with multilateral organizations and an abandonment of the active promotion of liberal values such as democracy, civil rights, protection of civilians³⁷ and the rule of law.³⁸ As an example, US lawmakers are planning to devolve more authority to the field under the so-called ‘status-based targeting’ system for suspected terrorists, meaning troops will be able to use lethal force against a suspected member of a terrorist organization even if that person does not pose an immediate threat.³⁹

Including Regional ad Hoc Coalitions in UN Peacekeeping Operations

The formation of ad hoc regional coalitions mandated to fight terrorists and other armed groups is another expanding feature of the international security landscape that in several instances has been closely interlinked with the move towards giving UN peacekeeping operations stabilization and counterterrorism tasks. Assertive host governments have wanted closer alignment of the mandate of the UN peace operation in question with national objectives – wanting the UN to support the suppression of armed groups and making the UN a de facto party to the conflict. As an example, the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) was reinforced with a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) and given a peace enforcement mandate. The FIB was an initiative by the South African Development Community, but the funding, estimated at USD 100 million, was not forthcoming from the contributing countries. After intense political pressure, the UN Security Council mandated the inclusion of an FIB in MONUSCO in March 2013.⁴⁰ The FIB was initially successful in fighting the M23 rebel group, but political support from the sending countries of South Africa and Tanzania waned when the FIB was asked by the mission leadership to take on other armed groups, including the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR).⁴¹

In Mali, the host government has, together with its neighbours, pressed for a similar intervention brigade to be either included in, or receive significant support from, the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In 2014, after MINUSMA had suffered high losses, Mali asked for the establishment of ‘a rapid intervention force capable of effectively combating terrorists’,⁴²

³⁷The Trump administration has loosened rules to prevent civilian casualties in Iraq, Somalia and Syria, and is conducting a policy review on whether to remove rules to prevent civilian casualties implemented by the Obama administration in 2013. Savage and Schmitt, “Trump Eases Combat Rules.”

³⁸See e.g. Bremmer and Kupchan, *Top Risks 2017*.

³⁹Demirjian, “U.S. Will Expand Counterterrorism.”

⁴⁰UN, *S/RES/2098*.

⁴¹ISS, “Kinshasa Government Attacks.”

⁴²Security Council Report, “Informal Interactive Dialogue.”

but the request was not approved by the Security Council. Instead, Mali and its neighbours have formed the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), a counterterrorism force composed of troops from the region, initiated in 2014⁴³ with French support to fight terrorist organizations in the Sahel. In June 2017, the Security Council welcomed the deployment of a 5000-strong FC-G5S.⁴⁴ In October that year, the UN outlined four possible options for further support, involving various levels of logistical and medical support, information-sharing and the application of various compliance frameworks – most importantly the human rights due diligence policy.⁴⁵ The emphasis on the human rights due diligence framework shows there are lingering concerns about the increasingly close cooperation between UN peacekeeping operations and ad hoc stabilization and counterterrorism coalitions. The FC-G5S seems to be an attractive partner: a donor conference in Paris on 23 February 2018 brought a total of USD 509 million in pledges for the force.⁴⁶ Financial and capacity-building support to the FC-G5S and engagement by Western allies like Norway in Mali and Niger is seen as part of the global ‘burden-sharing’ of security challenges between the US and its allies.⁴⁷

For weak states reeling after years of conflict, international interventions provide a possible ally in the fight to remain in power. The participation of neighbouring states in UN peacekeeping operations was previously considered a red line, as their troops were more likely to be partial, and tended to be seen as such by local populations. nevertheless, there is a growing trend that troops in UN peacekeeping operations are supplied by neighbouring states.⁴⁸ For these states, the inclusion of regional ad hoc coalitions in UN peacekeeping operations is an attractive option, as it provides logistical and medical support, higher reimbursement for troops and is bestowed with the legitimacy that a UN peacekeeping operation with a protection of civilians mandate can provide.⁴⁹

The Peacebuilding Pendulum

‘The world is changing, and United Nations peacekeeping operations must change with it if they are to remain an indispensable and effective tool in promoting international peace and security’, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asserted on 31 October 2014, when he announced the establishment of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.⁵⁰ The fight to remain

⁴³G5 Sahel, “Communiqué final.”

⁴⁴UN, *S/RES/2359*.

⁴⁵UN, *S/2017/869*.

⁴⁶de Carbonnel and Emmott, “Donors Pledge.”

⁴⁷Interview with Norwegian official, Ministry of Defence, 5 February 2018.

⁴⁸For the case of Mali, I will detail this development more closely later in the article.

⁴⁹Karlsrud, “Are UN Peacekeeping Missions.”

⁵⁰Ki-moon, “Secretary-General’s statement.”

relevant to what is perceived as changing needs is central to understanding the waning popularity of liberal peacebuilding, conceptually and in practice.

Under the Clinton and Bush Jr. presidencies, there was a hubristic belief in the US ability to effect democratic and institutional change in countries emerging from conflict. However, when examining Western interventions over the last decade, there is a discernible lowering of ambitions. During the Obama presidency the US reverted from ‘overreach’ in Iraq – trying to build a liberal state by tearing it down first – to more limited ambitions, shoring up authoritarian leaders and conducting targeted strikes on suspected terrorists.

From Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism

Stabilization has been a progressively recurring concept in UN circles since the beginning of the 2000s. The concept was first employed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1996 to 2004, and the UN Security Council introduced the term ‘stabilization’ in the latter year in the name of the UN mission to Haiti. Since 2009, three more missions have had stabilization included in their mission names – MONUSCO in the DRC (2010), MINUSMA in Mali (2013) and the UN Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA, 2014). In the same period, there has been an exponential growth in the use of the concept of stabilization in Security Council meetings and documents, largely driven by the three penholders, France, the UK and the US, who have ‘uploaded’ ‘their conceptualisations of stabilization into UN intervention frameworks’.⁵¹

Figure 1 This has led to a growing gap between what UN peacekeeping operations are asked to do, and what they are capable of, as noted, for example, by the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.⁵² However, the gap between expectations and what UN peacekeeping operations are able to deliver is not solely created by a lack of performance, poor management and lack of capabilities, but is also the result of the continued tendency of the Security Council to not match mandates with means, and to give to UN peacekeeping operations tasks they are not, and will not be, suited to accomplish. Such operations are deployed to more difficult theatres and given more robust mandates, including stabilization and enforcement tasks to prop up illegitimate governments, in some instances veering towards counterterrorism.⁵³

The turn towards more illiberal forms of support, in the shape of counter-insurgency and counterterrorism support, to the detriment of development

⁵¹Curran and Holtom, “Resonating, Rejecting, Reinterpreting.”

⁵²UN, *A/70/95-S/2015/446*.

⁵³Karlsrud, “Towards UN Counter-Terrorism Operations.”

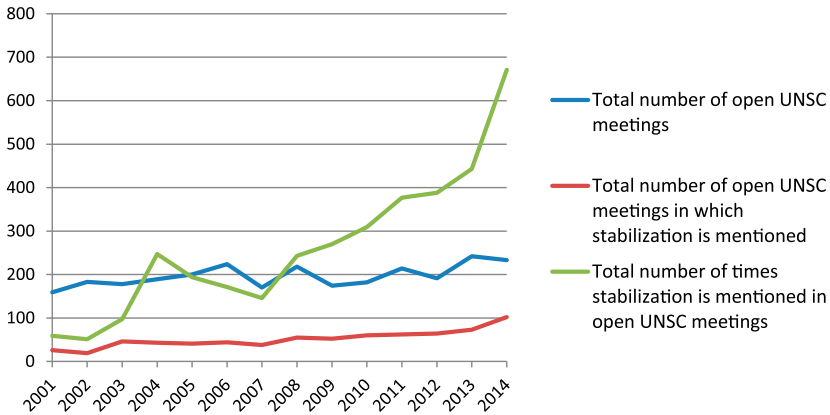


Figure 1. Frequency of the use of the word ‘stabilization’ in UN Security Council open meetings, 2001–2014.

Note: The figure is developed based on data contained in *ibid.*

and peacebuilding programmes, is often portrayed as more effective and relevant to the current needs of the states concerned. However, by primarily providing military support to suppress what is defined as security threats, states like the US and France are not addressing root causes like weak and corrupt governance, marginalization and lack of social cohesion.

Andrew Boutton argues that personalist autocratic governments with weak institutional capacity – a common denominator for many of the world’s most conflict-affected states – are becoming counterterrorism ‘racketeers’, and seek to perpetuate rather than solve the counterterrorism problem, as they are dependent on the rents provided to buy and maintain loyalties from opposing groups and train and equip coup-proofing forces. As a perverse result, Boutton finds that ‘higher average US aid levels to personalist regimes leads to more terrorist attacks – especially anti-US attacks – in a given year’.⁵⁴ This is linked to the way aid is given: the US and other partners are willing to turn a blind eye to human rights violations as long as the country in question is a partner in the Global War on Terror, as they have invested considerable resources in the status quo.⁵⁵

The Sahel Security Traffic Jam

A study of the situation in Mali and Niger is helpful to better understanding these changes. Mali was long portrayed as a good example of development aid

⁵⁴Boutton, “Of Terrorism and Revenue,” 21. A similar argument is made by Conway Eddington, arguing that the US is, ‘to a certain extent, engaged in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy ... manufacturing enemies for itself’. Eddington, “Precision-Strike Technology,” 79.

⁵⁵Kfir, “Organised Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel.”

by Western donors. Nevertheless, the Tuaregs in the north were marginalized and under-represented and at various intervals armed rebellions were staged by the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). During the spring of 2012, the MNLA took control of northern Mali together with the jihadist groups al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the Ansar Dine ('defenders of the faith'). When the Islamists side-lined the MNLA and started to move south towards the capital, Bamako, France intervened with Operation Serval in early 2013 (converted into a regional operation called Barkhane on 1 August 2014). However, France premised the intervention on a swift deployment of MINUSMA, while the transfer of authority took place only six months later, in June 2013, arguably reducing 'the chances of [French] troops becoming mired in a long and bloody insurgency'.⁵⁶ MINUSMA has since become one of the deadliest UN peacekeeping operations on record, suffering 104 fatalities due to 'malicious acts' from its inception on 1 July 2013 to 30 April 2018.⁵⁷ The MINUSMA mandate could be interpreted as giving wide latitude for counterterrorism activities, also in terms of using lethal violence.⁵⁸ It is mandated 'to enhance early warning, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats, ... engaging in direct operations pursuant only to serious and credible threats'.⁵⁹

The parallel deployment of counterterrorism operations Barkhane and the FC-G5S have already been mentioned, but MINUSMA is also marked by an exceptionally strong participation by states from the region who were also first deployed as part of a counterterrorism operation. By the end of February 2018, a total of 13,532 uniformed personnel were deployed in MINUSMA.⁶⁰ Of these, 66% hailed from West and Central Africa.⁶¹ Part of the explanation for this regional participation is the rehatting of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) on 1 July 2013, a short-lived counterterrorism operation mandated by the African Union at the end of 2012. The African troops were joined by Western troops, who sought to update UN peacekeeping by drawing upon their experiences with stabilization operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also UN headquarters pressed for innovation to be better equipped to face what was euphemistically called the 'new threats of the twenty-first century', and

⁵⁶Chivvis, *The French War*, 16.

⁵⁷UN, "(4) Fatalities."

⁵⁸UN, *S/RES/2098*; and Karlsrud, "Towards UN Counter-Terrorism Operations."

⁵⁹UN, *S/RES/2295*.

⁶⁰UN, "Summary of Contributions."

⁶¹Ibid. When calculating this percentage, I included Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. I did not include Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar or Tunisia. Although Chad is not a neighbouring country, it is part of the Group of Five Sahel together with Mali.

termed MINUSMA a ‘laboratory for UN peacekeeping’.⁶² MINUSMA was thus the first UN peacekeeping operation that had been deployed with a dedicated intelligence unit – the All-source Information Fusion Analysis Unit (ASIFU), only staffed by European troops and modelled on experiences from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) special operations forces (SOF) Fusion Cell (SOFFC).⁶³ The ASIFU was provided with raw data by dedicated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) companies deployed by Germany in Gao (which replaced the Dutch ISR company in 2017) and Sweden in Bamako.

The robust mandate, the inclusion of African and Western troops with counter-insurgency and counterterrorism experience into MINUSMA, and the parallel deployment with Barkhane and the FC-G5S, have arguably had an impact on the understanding and execution of the mandate, and even on the legal status of its personnel. The mission has been developing ‘targeting packs’ on groups and individuals considered a threat to the mission. A 2015 UN lessons-learned study of ASIFU warned that:

given that the sharing of information with Operation Barkhane may have political implications, it would seem that decisions on whether or not to share information should be taken at the political level, i.e. by senior mission leadership and informed by UN policy, rather than by the ASIFU Commanders.⁶⁴

Said differently, the practice of sharing targeting packs that could lead to targeting operations by Barkhane could have serious operational, political and legal implications for the UN. The study warned that through such a practice, MINUSMA may be ‘perceived as a party to the conflict’,⁶⁵ and if this happened, ‘MINUSMA military personnel would lose their protected status and thereby become lawful targets under [international humanitarian law]’.⁶⁶

In neighbouring Niger, the engagement by Western countries is also expanding. As the crisis started to unfold in Mali, the US government shifted its policies from containment to targeted strikes against suspected terrorist targets in the region, with drone bases in Niamey and Agadez in Niger.⁶⁷ The continued and increasing jihadist threat in the Sahel has given momentum to increased military cooperation between Western powers, in particular France and the US, and their African counterparts. In Niamey, this comes clearly into view as France and the US have developed drone

⁶²Former head of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) Hervé Ladsous, in an interview with RFI Afrique, my translation. RFI Afrique, « Mali. »

⁶³UN, *Lesson Learned Report*, 3. The ASIFU was discontinued and merged with the U2 branch of the military component in 2017.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶Khalil, “Peacekeeping Missions as Parties to Conflicts”. Although the brief was written in her personal capacity, it should be noted that Khalil at the time was a Senior Legal Officer in the Office of the Legal Counsel, UN Office of Legal Affairs, dealing with, inter alia, peacekeeping, sanctions and counterterrorism regimes. See also Karlsrud, “Towards UN Counter-Terrorism Operations.”

⁶⁷Miller and Whitlock, “White House Secret Meetings Examine Al-Qaeda Threat in North Africa”; The White House, “Letter from the President”; and Kfir, “Organised Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel.”

facilities in a joint compound.⁶⁸ Another USD 110 million drone base is under development further north,⁶⁹ in the town of Agadez, known to be a main transit point for migrants and a market town for the Tuaregs. The base will enable drone operations with the new MQ-9 drone (larger and new cousins of the Predator drone) ‘against seven [US Department of Defense]-designated foreign terrorist organizations’ in the region.⁷⁰ The base ‘aligns persistent ISR to current and emerging threats over Niger & Chad, supports French regionalization and extends range to cover south Libya & Nigeria’.⁷¹ With these developments, ‘Niger is becoming, after Djibouti, the second most important country for U.S. military counterterrorism operations on the continent’.⁷²

Italy has decided to send almost 500 troops to northern Niger to train local troops and ultimately stem migration.⁷³ Germany has also established a presence in Niger, first and foremost to function as a logistics base for its 650-strong engagement in MINUSMA in neighbouring Mali, but also to support Niger with equipment and expertise.⁷⁴ Other Western allies are also following suit: Norway established a Status of Forces Agreement with Niger in 2018, preparing the ground for special forces that would operate alongside US and French forces to undertake ‘military capacity building’.⁷⁵ Similarly, and as previously mentioned, the French have converted Serval into Barkhane, a 3500-strong counterterrorism operation based out of N’Djamena in Chad, covering Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, equipped with special operations forces, Reaper drones, attack planes and helicopters.⁷⁶

The multiple and militarized responses to the challenges in Mali and Niger, and more widely in the Sahel, are not responding to the root causes of conflict and are exacerbating the problems these countries are facing.⁷⁷ After MINUSMA’s deployment, the security situation has steadily worsened, and ‘attacks have spread to the centre of the country, particularly the Mopti region at the centre of Mali which previously was considered stable’.⁷⁸ These engagements are part of a wider global trend towards stabilization and counterterrorism, requiring fewer troops on the ground, but also making host governments “largely immune from pressure to improve their repressive treatment of citizens and political opponents” due to their status as reliable partners in the “war on terror”.⁷⁹

⁶⁸Moore and Walker, “Tracing the US Military’s Presence.”

⁶⁹Penney, “Drones in the Sahara.”

⁷⁰USAFRICOM, “Agadez South Airfield.”

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Turse, “U.S. Military.”

⁷³Kington, “Italy Sends 500 Troops.”

⁷⁴Mamane, “Niger Says Germany.”

⁷⁵Norwegian Cabinet, “Offisielt fra statsråd 9. februar 2018.”

⁷⁶France, Ministry of Defence [Ministère de la Défense], « Opération Barkhane. »

⁷⁷Marchal, “Military (Mis)adventures in Mali”; and Kfir, “Organised Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel.”

⁷⁸UN, S/2016/498, 11. See also International Crisis Group, *Central Mali*.

⁷⁹Reeve and Pelter, *From New Frontier*, 27, cited in Moore and Walker, “Tracing the US Military’s Presence,” 705. Double and single quotation marks in the original.

Conclusion

In the post-Cold War period, the international community has progressively deployed international peace operations to manage internal conflict. Peace operations have been deployed by the UN, EU and NATO with expanding mandates to build liberal peace with the ambition to create stable, inclusive and representative governments. However, the actual implementation of these peacebuilding agendas has repeatedly fallen short of their ambitions, and while current reviews continue to deepen the scope and ambition of UN and other peacekeeping operations, member states are pushing for more instrumental policies. Swelling migration flows and the threats of terrorism and violent extremism have sharpened the attention of European policy makers to the potential role of UN peacekeeping operations and regional ad hoc coalitions as potential proxies that can help shore up European security. Also, in a climate of financial austerity, these states are pursuing ‘good enough’ solutions rather than realizing what may seem as lofty liberal ideals. This means strengthened support to illegitimate governments and considering using the UN to fight terrorism in the Sahel and elsewhere.

The article has examined the confluence of several strategic shifts, together forming a ‘perfect storm’ against liberal peacebuilding. Liberal interventionism reached a peak during the eras of Presidents Clinton and Bush Jr. However, the pendulum has now swung back, and ‘stabilization’ and ‘counterterrorism’ have replaced ‘peacebuilding’ as key operative terms in policy discussions. There is increased funding for counterterrorism tasks and activities, moving peacebuilding actors to reorient and relabel their programmes and activities. Geopolitically, there is a growing alignment between Western and African countries and other powers like China around the goal of stability, rather than liberal peacebuilding.

However, evidence suggests that the turn toward stabilization and counterterrorism may be counterproductive, leading to greater division, recruitment to terrorist and other armed groups, and feeding a cycle of violence. Morten Bøås has convincingly argued for a more nuanced understanding of the complex and shifting relationships between criminal, religious, terrorist and other formal and informal networks. If not, states and other actors risk developing misguided policies based on a simplistic understanding of these fluid relationships and the reasons for people taking up arms against international interveners.⁸⁰

The current trend is that interventions are being undertaken under a veneer of liberal values, such as the UN mission in Mali. However, underneath this veneer, there is a return to the Cold War proxy and strong man policies, and less pressure for reforms that could increase the legitimacy and inclusiveness of conflict-affected states. The increasingly militaristic approaches by

⁸⁰Bøås, “Crime, Coping, and Resistance.”

national as well as international actors, with a turn from liberal peacebuilding to stabilization and counterterrorism as the main narratives, are likely to lead to more oppressive governments, and more disillusioned people joining the ranks of opposition and terrorist groups. For the UN, the turn towards stabilization and counterterrorism is undermining the legitimacy of the organization and its work in mediation and humanitarian domains, and in particular UN peace operations, and the role of UN peace operations as a central tool in the international peace and security toolbox.

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About the Author

Dr *John Karlsrud* is Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), and earned his PhD at the University of Warwick. John has published widely on peacekeeping, peacebuilding and humanitarian issues. He has been a Visiting Fulbright Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation at NYU and a Visiting Fellow at the International Peace Institute. He has worked in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Chad and Palestine (West Bank), and conducted field research and shorter missions to Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Ukraine.

ORCID

John Karlsrud  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8409-1098>

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