Sustainable Security

Addressing the underlying drivers of global insecurity

UN Peacekeeping and Counter-Terrorism

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There are strong calls to give UN peacekeeping operations more robust mandates to engage in counter terrorism tasks. But the idea of UN peacekeepers conducting counter-terrorism operations is not without its problems.

Terrorist attacks have been increasing rapidly over the last decade. According to the Global Terrorism Index (http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf), 29,376 people were killed in terrorist attacks in 2015. This was the second deadliest year after 2014, when 32,765 people were killed. The spike in 2014 and decline in 2015 is largely a result of the rise and subsequent weakening of Boko Haram and the Islamic State (IS).

Fatigue after long engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq and the continued impact of the financial crisis has significantly dampened the interest in new out-of-area operations among Western member states. At the same time, the threats of terrorism and migration remain at the top of the foreign policy agenda. It is in this environment that policy makers are turning to the UN, to see what role it can play in the global security burden-sharing. This means a more transactional relationship with the UN, not necessarily considering the longer-term impact of undermining its impartiality and legitimacy.

UN peacekeeping operations have, during the last decade, been deployed to protect civilians in increasingly unstable conflicts, most often without a peace to keep. However, although the conflicts have been asymmetrical in nature, armed groups have seldom perceived the UN as a party to the conflict, and pursued a strategy of strategic targeting of its troops, police and civilians.

The Case of Mali

In March 2012, a coalition of rebel and Islamist groups took control of the north of Mali in the wake of a coup. On April 6, 2012, the rebels proclaimed the independence of the 'Republic of Azawad' and the imposition of sharia law in northern Mali. 412,000 persons had fled (http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/894) their homes and had become internally displaced or moved across the border to Mauritania, the Niger and Burkina Faso. By Novembe 2012, Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had taken control of Timbuktu and Tessalit, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) had taken control of Douentza, Gao, Menaka, Ansongo and Gourma, and Kidal was under the control of the Islamist group Ansar Dine ("defenders of

Image credit: MINUSMA/Flickr. (https://www.flickr.com/photos/minusma/16662649642/in/photolist-roqrdN-eXwkfZ-m8Mc82-eCE4bA-ie3zU1-eyVkXv-eyYPFU-qDCYDw-eZnfst-ie3pTi-nXAhpQ-qGFX1e-ftDBcC-ifHfLf-eyRKHp-fiWdwH-eNG1qG-eNGc7f-q5waw7-eqV4D5-eJHeJu-eNG7HU-oXXUVL-r9MPzR-eNuPPa-fhX7Vm-fto9RM-p78JSi-ekZNd7-eNG32u-q4MwYy-Rw1CdQ-r72eUQ-faSUju-eQ8FSe-ekUgC4-kGAUym-eyQYkx-ruGbLo-hEWcDn-fshi8Z-euH2d4-joCG4c-p792qj-qmacdx-i8255B-eKLE8u-i824V8-eNuSba-RWfbeQ)

the faith").

The Islamists and rebel groups were quickly conquered and fled to the far north of Mali after a short and swift intervention in the beginning of 2013 by the French *Opération Serval*, in cooperation with the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). To avoid being stuck in a long and bloody counterinsurgency, the French had pushed for a swift handover to the UN.

On 1 July 2013, AFISMA handed over authority to the UN multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali (http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/) (MINUSMA). However, the Islamist groups have proven resilient and the operation has been struggling to deploy and implement its mandate. From its inception in 2013 until 31 January 2017, it has endured 72 fatalities due to hostile actions, including suicide attacks, mortar attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The mission has been given increasingly robust mandates, and its most recent mandate (https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2295(2016)) ordered the mission to "…to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk, notably in the North and Centre of Mali, and, in this regard, to enhance early warning, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats…".

The mission is actively supporting counter-terrorism actions (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2016.1268907), as it has been preparing "targeting packs" and has been informally sharing information with the French parallel counter-terrorism operation *Barkhane* (the French follow-on mission from *Serval*). This follows a trend towards peace enforcement (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2015.976016) that started with MONUSCO, where the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is now being mandated to "neutralize" identified rebel groups (http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2098.pdf).

Future missions may be deployed to Libya, Syria and Yemen – countries that are also marked by asymmetric conflict and violent religious extremism. Against this backdrop, many member states are now arguing that UN peacekeeping operations need to reform to not only deal better with the challenges it faces in Mali, but also in future operations.

The high-level panel on peace operations, nominated by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, strongly underscored that UN peacekeeping operations should not undertake "counter-terrorism operations" (http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf). However, the report left the back-door open, insofar as it argued that "UN peacekeeping missions, due to their composition and character, are not suited to engage in military counter-terrorism operations. They lack the specific equipment, intelligence, logistics, capabilities and specialized military preparation required, among other aspects." Disregarding the principled arguments against moving UN peacekeeping in such a direction, this could indeed be read as a list of areas where reform is needed to enable UN peacekeeping to take on counter-terrorism tasks.

A Desirable Shift?

But what may the consequences be of taking UN peacekeeping operations in such a direction? First, UN peacekeeping missions are not likely to be able to perform counter-terrorism tasks in a satisfactory manner, militarily speaking. They are composed of troops from many different countries, and although they should provide a military deterrent against armed groups, they are not likely to be able to protect themselves against asymmetric attacks. Even small attacks can lead to the withdrawal of troops by troop-contributing countries, as most of these do not have the political interest needed to be able to sustain losses. The exception to this are neighbouring countries, as these may have a political interest in the conflict, but precisely because of this fact they may also be interested to use force only against some and not all parties that threaten the peace.

The UN has been strongly criticised (https://oios.un.org/resources/ga_report/a-68-787-dpko.pdf) for not taking action to protect civilians, and the continued inaction has been used as an argument to make the UN more robust, as well as able to take on counter-terrorism tasks. However, this argument confuses the ability of the UN to protect civilians with counter-terrorism. In Mali, the mission is much busier protecting itself than protecting civilians. In fact, the recruitment to the terrorist groups is increasingly moving south in the country, as local populations are not experiencing a peace dividend or improving levels of participation and inclusion after the deployment of MINUSMA. Rather, they are experiencing a government that is continuing to marginalize significant groups of the population such as the Tuaregs in the North and the Fulani (also known as Peul) in the central regions of the country, and employ draconian counter-terrorism tactics (https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/1610_Waging-Peace.pdf).

The inclusion of neighbouring countries' troops in UN peacekeeping missions was previously considered a red line. As seen with the example of MINUSMA, as well as UN peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan (to mention a few), this principle has fallen by the wayside. Taken together with the move towards UN peacekeeping missions taking on counter-terrorism tasks, this shows a trend towards a more partial UN in these situations, which may increasingly be rendered unable to play its vital good offices and humanitarian roles, and be a UN for all the people, not only the government of the day. The UN and member states should reverse this trend, and make sure that UN peacekeeping operations can serve in their most effective way – as a tool to keep the peace while institutions, service delivery and an inclusive and participatory state is being built.

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