UN Peace Operations in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments

Introduction

The UN system, member states, and national and local partners face complex challenges in deploying UN peace operations—ranging from small political missions to larger multidimensional peacekeeping missions—in countries where there is not only little or no peace to keep but also, increasingly, a threat of terrorism and violent extremism. High-level discussions and reports to date have narrowly focused on the question of whether or not peacekeeping operations can undertake offensive kinetic counterterrorism. There is broad consensus among member states around the conclusion of the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) that UN missions should not be mandated to conduct military counterterrorism operations because they are not suited to do so. There has been comparatively little exploration of the political and practical challenges, opportunities, and implications for UN peace operations of operating in complex security environments, particularly when operating in parallel with a non-UN counterterrorism force.

The UN is increasingly asked to "stay and deliver," forcing it to review its capacity to operate safely and effectively in such environments, with implications not only for budgets and staff safety but also for the organization's core business of promoting lasting peace through political solutions. The increased militarization of some of the UN's "stabilization" missions could make missions riskier rather than safer, as well as risk "sucking the oxygen out of politics." Conversely, the capacity and readiness of the UN to send observers to support cease-fires in Syria or Yemen was questioned. In his follow-up report, the UN secretary-general seconded the conclusions of HIPPO,[1] and in his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, he recommended that member states "integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities of UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions in accordance with their mandates."[2] This raises additional questions as to whether, how, and when the UN should engage in supporting host governments in addressing violent extremism and some of the factors that drive and sustain it (e.g., politics, governance, human rights).

In light of these important questions, the International Peace Institute (IPI), with the support of the French Ministry of Defense's Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS), convened a full-day roundtable

1   United Nations Secretary-General, *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations: Implementation of the Recommendations of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations*, UN Doc. S/2015/682, paras. 15, 94, 95.
2   United Nations Secretary-General, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, UN Doc. A/70/674, para. 58(b).

in New York on "UN Peace Operations in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments" on Thursday, February 11, 2016. The event gathered a wide range of representatives from member states and the UN Secretariat, as well as subject matter experts. The objective of the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House rule of nonattribution, was to contribute to developing a shared understanding of the issues at stake and to moving forward some of the related policy debates. The content of the discussions will feed back into a series of research papers on new peace operations environments, which IPI will publish over the course of 2016 as part of the "New Issues Observatory on Providing for Peacekeeping."[3]

Political and Policy Implications of Operating in Asymmetric Environments

The first panel focused on the state of policy discussions on UN peace operations in asymmetric environments. It was noted that, while the HIPPO report and subsequent report of the secretary-general on *The Future of Peace Operations* include some recommendations for UN missions operating in hostile environments, clearer and more strategic guidance is needed. Participants questioned whether the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Political Affairs (DPA) have sufficient resources and personnel to be able to operate safely and effectively in these environments, as well as whether it is always a worthwhile investment to "stay and deliver," given the security costs in places like Afghanistan. It was noted that there has been relatively little exploration of the political and practical challenges of preventive efforts in complex environments, in particular with regards to violent extremism.

Missions all across the spectrum of UN peace operations, from smaller political presences to large-scale multidimensional peacekeeping operations, are facing similar pressures to adapt to riskier environments. Participants noticed a change in UN policy, in that the question asked is no longer "when to leave" but "how to stay." Special political

missions (SPM) in particular continue to work in volatile environments, with seven political missions currently operating in countries that face the highest level of threat from al-Qaida.

While environments where missions are deployed are evolving, the capacity of missions to adjust to the heightened security costs is lagging behind. Missions resort to armed security staff and private security companies as ad hoc measures, but these are often not sustainable in the long run and overburden missions financially. For instance, in the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 40 percent of the mission's budget is associated with security costs. This also helps to explain the rise in SPM budgets over the last twelve years. The lack of better and more regular capacities to ensure the protection of mission staff leads to "bunkerization," which affects the mission's ability to reach out and engage with the local population and, consequently, the successful implementation of its mandate. As recommended in the HIPPO report, tailored and flexible approaches (rather than templates) should be adopted when planning peace operations, and UN security arrangements must be custom-made. It was also suggested that the UN Secretariat be clear when presenting options to the Security Council in terms of what can be done with the allocated resources in such environments.

A substantial obstacle to policy development is the lack of conceptual clarity and clear definitions of "terrorism," "violent extremism," and the proper mechanisms to address these. Classifying actors remains a policy and operational challenge, particularly when it comes to terrorist and criminal armed groups that evolve over time and when the host government may be tempted to label its enemies terrorists and prevent interaction. Blurred distinction is also an issue for the UN when a mission operates in an asymmetric environment in parallel with a non-UN force. While the decision to deploy peace operations to such environments needs to remain under constant scrutiny and be questioned as an assumption, it is important to de-stress the debate by taking into account the UN's history of managing asymmetric threats, which are not a new challenge.

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3 Available at www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/new-issues-observatory/ .

The secretary-general's recently released *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* calls for a more comprehensive approach to prevention that goes beyond short-sighted, security-focused counterterrorism policies. While this is a welcome step, efforts have yet to be made to create a more strategic and coherent approach for the UN as a whole. Common policy prescriptions to address the range of factors that lead individuals to join extremist groups remain at risk of lacking a clear target. It was emphasized that the operationalization of the plan ultimately rests on member states. Participants debated the difference between strategies for *countering terrorism* (CT) and *preventing* or *countering violent extremism* (PVE/CVE). Some argued that CVE is merely rebranding and questioned the empirical evidence of the impact of CVE programming and the added value of the approach. Others suggested that using a CVE lens when developing strategies and some projects with broader development or stabilization objectives could be valuable.

The discussion on the goals UN peace operations could set to adopt a strategic approach to prevention in practice highlighted three aspects:

1. **Engagement:** Echoing the recommendation of the HIPPO report, the first step to finding political solutions to violent extremism is for the UN to be able and willing to talk to all actors, including some extremist groups. It was suggested that the UN's impartiality principle should not be imposed as neutrality, as the UN seeks to create space for inclusive debate. The UN must also be better placed to identify and navigate group fragmentation in order to target moderate voices within extremist groups. While this requires increased political leadership from the UN, it more importantly relies on a strong commitment from member states to contribute to the UN's analytical capacity.

2. **Containment:** Participants agreed that a heavy-handed approach and direct confrontation are outside the scope of peace operations. It was suggested, though, that the UN should be prepared to use military tools to counter violent extremism in some cases to undermine extremists' ability to be violent and reduce their political space to maneuver. This is particularly critical for missions mandated to protect civilians but requires strengthening the military capabilities of missions through improved capacity for medical evacuation and rapid reaction. Ensuring that populations will not be under constant attack can have an important influence on long-term stability, peacebuilding, and resilience building. It was emphasized, however, that the military approach should not dominate and should come in support of a political strategy.

3. **Rehabilitation:** The UN has an essential role to play in assisting processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), expanding these programs beyond individuals previously or currently involved in violent extremism to also target individuals prone to radicalization.

Lessons Learned from Somalia and Beyond

The second panel largely drew on the example of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the longest-running African Union (AU) peace support operation and a complex partnership between the AU and the UN. A common challenge facing operations led by the African Union and other offensive and stabilization operations in asymmetric threat environments is that neither the AU nor the UN has a clear conception of what "stabilization" is. Missions commonly struggle to find the right balance between military tasks and stabilization tasks that require more police and civilian activities, including DDR. Often this is due to lack of capacity (particularly a shortage of key enablers) and overly ambitious mandates where the means do not correspond to the designated ends. AMISOM, as an offensive operation, has experienced a heavy death toll, though accurate figures are lacking, and costs significantly more than a regular UN peacekeeping operation (a ratio of 3 to 1, one speaker noted).

Furthermore, the success of the mission and its exit strategy have been largely predicated on territorial expansion rather than the ability to build successful security forces that can contain key spoilers. AMISOM's implementation of its core task of extending state authority has proven to be actively conflict-generating, at least in the short term. Government forces are not perceived as national forces, in part because insufficient

resources are invested in reconciliation and conflict resolution initiatives at the local level, resulting in a lack of shared vision for a security strategy at the national level. In relation to the first panel, one speaker wondered whether the creation of PVE advisor positions to assist the head of mission with an interdisciplinary view on the subject could help connect the military and civilian dots and lead to better mission strategy.

Participants also discussed the role of missions' human rights components in a context where there is a growing consensus that approaches to address asymmetric threats that are not compliant with human rights are ineffective. Human rights components of peace operations are thus crucial to ensure that grievances are addressed, which in turn can make terrorist propaganda less attractive to civilians. By engaging in the protection of all victims of violations, irrespective of their alliances, the UN's human rights work can help to produce trust on both sides. Impartial monitoring and public reporting of violations, both by extremists and government forces, help to reinforce the image of the UN mission as an impartial actor. This, in turn, can help the mission engage with all parties during political negotiations and support local and national reconciliation efforts. While the human rights due diligence policy should guide UN support to non-UN forces and be based on a thorough risk assessment, it was suggested that it should not prevent the UN from talking to all actors. And if the risk of human rights violations by non-UN forces is high, mitigation measures such as human rights training and monitoring must be introduced instead of eliminating support entirely.

Some participants questioned the extent to which stabilization missions are by definition partial. Operating in the same mission area as parallel non-UN counterterrorism and offensive operations can affect the UN's impartiality and ability to fulfill its mandate. However, the idea that the proximity between the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and AMISOM leads to more targeting of UN personnel and impairs the ability of the UN to talk to everyone was called into question. The question is sometimes more about the willingness of and incentive for certain armed groups to talk to the UN, and this may evolve over time, as seen in Afghanistan. That said, the population's lack of confidence in AMISOM's ability to protect them

from al-Shabaab attacks in Somalia has complicated the work of UNSOM, as Somalis who cooperate with the mission are often threatened.

Capabilities Required for Operating Safely and Effectively

The last panel focused on capabilities and methods required for peace operations to operate safely and effectively in risky environments, with a particular focus on the issue of intelligence. The HIPPO report recommended strengthening the analytical capabilities of peace operations to be better able to deal with new environments. The secretary-general's follow-up report on *The Future of Peace Operations* clearly confirmed that "an effective system for acquiring, analyzing, and operationalizing information for peace operations in complex environments" was lacking. Since then, the Secretariat has been tasked with developing parameters for "an information and intelligence framework that can support field missions in operating effectively and safely." A small Information and Planning Cell is in the course of being set up in the Office of the Secretary-General. Increased intelligence capabilities and analysis for the UN are also consistent with the need for a renewed focus on prevention.

Participants discussed the need for good knowledge of the context down to the tactical level to ensure the safety and security of peacekeepers and to implement the mandate. This should be the basis for developing a concept of intelligence for UN peace operations that responds to the UN's specific needs and requirements. It was noted, however, that there is a lack of common understanding as to what intelligence in the context of UN operations means. Debates are often tainted by misconceptions of the term due to the lack of a clear concept. Intelligence is often associated with gathering information through covert means, though this is not what the UN requires, as most of its intelligence is based on openly available information.

It was also suggested that the UN needs to improve its assessments before UN missions deploy, including of the spoilers they may face. To be able to operate safely in asymmetric environ-

ments, emphasis must be placed on (1) securing camps, (2) extending the use of early-warning systems, (3) mitigating the threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) through the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), and (4) improving capacity for casualty and medical evacuation (CASEVAC and MEDEVAC, respectively), among other things.

Means of gathering information for UN peace operations are expanding with the greater use of unmanned unarmed aerial vehicles (UUAVs) and more emphasis on technology. However, the importance of intelligence gathered from human sources should not be overlooked, and technology is not a panacea. Strengthening mission leadership is essential, particularly in identifying priority intelligence requirements—determining information gaps and tasking the right section within the mission to address these. Better training in the needs and requirements of information gathering and analysis is needed not only at the leadership level but at all levels within missions, including as part of pre-deployment training for troops. Troop patrolling should aim to seek information and increase trust in the local population instead of limiting itself to passive routine observation. One participant noted that knowledge implies the responsibility to act and questioned whether UN missions were prepared for this duty.

Improved methods of information gathering alone do not give good intelligence—analytical capabilities and expertise to process the information into intelligence have to be improved as well. The discussion assessed the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU) in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the most robust intelligence structure a UN mission has ever had, which has been functioning for over a year with a number of lessons already identified. In particular, the need for the UN to establish secure channels for sharing sensitive information and intelligence across mission contingents and components, as well as for protecting sources, was highlighted. Participants also voiced the need for integrating more local knowledge through closer interactions with communities, while ensuring that sexual exploitation and abuse are adequately prevented.

Conclusion

Today, the UN is deployed to a range of environments where it faces asymmetric and violent threats, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, and Somalia, and while its activities are limited by security concerns, its presence alone is of significance. Although participants agreed that the UN is not the right actor for engaging in counterterrorism operations, they also concluded that the UN is not irrelevant in asymmetric threat environments and can play a useful role in its core activities of protecting civilians and facilitating political processes. However, a number of areas for strategic and operational improvements were identified for the UN to be able to operate more safely and effectively in such environments.

First, there is a need for improved understanding of the context and planning of missions before deploying them, including through liaisons and cooperation with regional organizations. Second, peace operations should have clear mandates and appropriate postures and should be adequately resourced and capacitated for operating safely in such environments—all of which could be achieved through better cooperation between the Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and troop-contributing countries. Third, missions should have the ability to adequately monitor what happens in their environments by deploying intelligence capacities and making sure these are well integrated into the mission. Fourth, missions need to become more people-centric.

Although not provided for as such in the UN Charter, UN peace operations have proven to be a flexible and adaptable tool that has evolved over time to respond to evolving challenges. As peace operations find themselves in environments with new expectations and increased challenges, it is ultimately the prerogative of member states to ensure that they have the necessary capabilities and strategic guidance to be fit for purpose.

Agenda

Thursday, February 11, 2016

9:00–9:15	**Welcome**

Youssef Mahmoud, *Senior Adviser, IPI, and former member of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO)*
Olivier Landour, *Director, Europe, North America & Multilateral Affairs, Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS), French Ministry of Defense*

9:15–9:45   **Opening Remarks**

Jeffrey D. Feltman, *Under Secretary-General for the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA)*
Dmitry Titov, *Assistant Secretary-General, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI), UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)*

9:45–11:30   **Session 1: Political & Policy Implications of UN Field Missions Operating in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments**

What are some of the lessons from past UN field missions operating in asymmetric threat environments, in the Middle East and Africa in particular, and what are the political and policy implications for the UN? Beyond the fact that the UN, when deployed in violent and asymmetric threat environments, "must be capable of operating effectively and as safely as possible therein," how could and should UN peace operations "integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities" by addressing some of the political and governance factors that drive and sustain violent extremism? Looking forward, what, if any, role could and should peace operations play as part of a broader all-of-UN approach to preventing violent extremism, and how can they be appropriately mandated and tailored for this task?

Chair
H.E. Geir O. Pedersen, *Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN*

Speakers
Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *Head of Research and Analysis, Global Center on Cooperative Security (GCCS) (presenting draft research paper on UN peace operations and violent extremism)*
Muhammad Rafiuddin Shah, *Senior Political Affairs Officer, UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF)*
Leanne Smith, *Chief, Policy and Best Practice Service, UN DPKO and Department of Field Support*
Richard Gowan, *Associate Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and Non-Resident Fellow at Center on International Cooperation, New York University*

11:30–11:45   Coffee Break

11:45–1:15   **Session 2: Practical Approaches and Lessons Learned from Offensive Operations, Human Rights Work, and Capacity-Building Programs**

What are some of the lessons from African Union and other offensive and stabilization operations in asymmetric threat environments? How should the UN relate to parallel counter-terrorism and offensive operations and ensure that it does not unwittingly jeopardize the

political work of a parallel UN presence operating in the same mission area? What are the potential risks for UN peace operations in adopting "preventive and preemptive posture and willingness to use force tactically to protect civilians and UN personnel"? What are some of the challenges and opportunities for the UN's human rights work and capacity-building programs in the areas of police, justice, corrections, DDR, and security sector reform (SSR) in violent extremism environments? What are the implications for SSR initiatives? How does this affect potential exit strategies?

Chair
H.E. Fodé Seck, *Permanent Representative of Senegal to the UN*

Speakers
Paul D. Williams, *Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Security Policy Studies Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University and IPI Non-Resident Senior Adviser (presenting draft research paper on lessons from AMISOM stabilization and offensive operations)*
Nicholas Kay, *former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) for Somalia*
Ivan Šimonović, *Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, UN*

1:15–2:00   Lunch

2:00–3:45   **Session 3: Capabilities Required for Operating Safely and Effectively in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments**

How can the UN better understand the threat environment before missions are designed/deployed and better plan accordingly? What kind of capabilities (military, police, civilians, field support), new technologies, postures, and leadership are necessary for operational effectiveness in high-tempo risky environments to allow a UN peace operation to carry out its political and protection of civilians (PoC) mandates safely and effectively? What are the information and intelligence capabilities currently available to the UN, and how could these be rendered more adequate? What are the implications for peace operations of having such capabilities and how can they be prevented from unwittingly creating unrealistic expectations for the host government, communities, and partners, and from diverting the mission's focus from political/peace processes? Does this have any implications for how the performance of missions is reviewed?

Chair
H.E. Syed Akbaruddin, *Permanent Representative of India to the UN*

Speakers
Walter Dorn, *Professor and Chair of the Master of Defence Studies Programme at the Royal Military College of Canada and the Canadian Forces College (presenting draft research paper on UN peace operations and new technologies)*
Alexandra Novosseloff, *Senior Visiting Fellow, Center on International Cooperation, New York University (presenting draft research paper on UN peace operations and intelligence)*
Major General Adrian Foster, *Deputy Military Advisor, UN DPKO*
Colonel Vincent de Kytspotter, *French Chief of Defense Staff, UN Section Head*

3:45–4:00   **Wrap-up Session and Closing Remarks**

Arthur Boutellis, *Director of the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations, IPI*
H.E. François Delattre, *Permanent Representative of France to the UN*

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