



Remarks by Arthur Boutellis,  
Director of the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations  
at the International Peace Institute (IPI)

*(as delivered)*

**Security Council Ministerial Open Debate on  
“Peace operations facing asymmetrical threats”**

**7 November 2016**

*Merci Monsieur le Président.*

Excellency Mr. President, excellences members of the Security Council, Mr. Deputy Secretary-general, ladies and gentlemen, let me first thank you on behalf of the International Peace Institute for this opportunity to present the results of some of the research and convening work our think tank has done over the past year on challenges facing peace operations operating in countries confronting asymmetrical threats, including terrorist attacks.

Think tanks like ours, help policy makers make informed decisions on emerging issues, by offering practical, research-based ideas and stimulating debates on how best to operationalize those ideas.

The report which serves as the basis for this briefing, entitled “*Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism*”, which I co-authored with Naureen Chowdhury Fink, produced by IPI and the Global Center on Cooperative Security, is the result of extensive conversations with UN officials, member state representatives, and practitioners, as well as field research carried out over the past year.

Of the eleven countries most affected by terrorism and other asymmetrical threats globally, seven currently host UN peace operations, ranging from small special political missions to larger peacekeeping operations. The deployment of peace operations in countries where there is not only little or no peace to keep, but where terrorist attacks are part of the threat landscape, adds to the complexity of the challenges facing the UN system, member states, and national and local partners.

To date, discourse among experts and policymakers on peace operations operating in asymmetrical threats environments has narrowly focused on two key issues.

First, it has focused on whether peacekeeping operations can undertake kinetic counterterrorism operations. On this, the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) and follow-on report of the Secretary-General concluded that UN peace operations “are not the appropriate tool for military counterterrorism operations.”

Second, it has also focused on the range of capabilities and the posture required to protect civilians in complex security environments and to improve the safety and security of UN personnel on the ground. Establishing missions in such environments has both a human and a financial cost that we must bear in mind.

While it is indeed essential for the UN to adapt its mission presence and activities when operating in such environments, the practical question before us is **how** to adapt while upholding the spirit and the letter of the doctrinal principles that have thus far governed UN peacekeeping.

Clearly, retreating behind secure compounds or “bunkerisation” is not the solution to this dilemma.

There has however been comparatively little exploration of the broader political and practical challenges, opportunities, and risks facing UN peace operations in these complex environments. This has created a gap between the policy debate here in New York and the realities confronting UN staff on the ground.

Mr. President,

The three major UN peace and security reviews in 2015 all highlighted the need for UN peace operations to adapt to the changing nature of conflicts. They also emphasized the primacy of political solutions for preventing, ending conflicts and sustaining peace.

This emphasis on prevention was echoed in the secretary-general’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and during the review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Both underscored the limitations of solely securitized approaches that focused on symptoms rather than causes, and advocated for greater investment in preventive, multi-stakeholder strategies.

This is the added value of the United Nations.

The report before you therefore seeks to expand the scope of the discussions beyond **whether** peace operations can adapt to asymmetrical threats environments, to **how** they can better implement their mandate and support national governments and local communities in the face of terrorism and violent extremism.

This raises a number of key questions related to **whether, where, when, and how** preventative approaches could and should be integrated into the mandates of peace operations and **how** to capacitate UN field missions in consequence. Can this be done in a context of limited resources and expertise without impairing their impartiality or complicating relations with host countries? Can this be done while ensuring the safety and security of staff? And critically, how should the issue of fragmented policy development at UN headquarters, and the resulting lack of clear guidance and resources for field missions, be addressed?

Mr. President,

Allow me to highlight a few key recommendations the report puts forward for how peace operations could adopt more cohesive and strategic approaches to addressing the threat of terrorism and violent extremism which shape a number of asymmetrical threats environments.

First, UN peace operations need to develop a more nuanced understanding, not only of terrorist groups but also of the drivers and grievances leading to radicalization and violence, as well as of local capacities for peace and resilience. This will require better and more real-time information and analysis, including regional analytical frameworks in some contexts.

Second, greater coherence and clearer policy guidance on these issues is needed. This requires continued UN system-wide discussions between UN counter-terrorism bodies and peace operations teams of course, but also between member states and across the three pillars of the organization's work.

In this regard, mandates and structures should not be an obstacle to either UN system-wide collaboration nor to adopting more strategic approaches to addressing the drivers of asymmetrical threats, without securitizing those mandates.

Third, it is important that UN peace operations preserve and expand the space for dialogue with all parties to a conflict. Security Council sanctions do not legally bar UN actors from talking to listed armed groups and their leaders, and there should not be an a priori branding of who is a legitimate or illegitimate interlocutor

without a balanced analysis of who they are and whether dialogue or alternative strategies may bear fruit.

Fourth, UN peace operations should have honest conversations with host governments about what the UN does **NOT** do to fight against asymmetrical threats, including terrorism; and where the UN **CAN** add value and support member state priorities in preventing terrorism – including in areas of rule of law, security institutions and human rights -, and advising on national strategy development, including on which national counterterrorism measures can be counterproductive. Peace operations should **also** encourage host nations to address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, including by promoting better governance and state-citizen relations.

Fifth and finally, while more empirical evidence is needed to fully understand the impact and potential of preventive initiatives, peace operations could already start mainstreaming some of these initiatives as part of context-specific, integrated mission strategies for prevention and sustaining peace. While doing so, it should adopt a “do no harm” approach, and exercise caution in the use of labels.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, the added value of the UN in helping address asymmetrical threats is not to deliver a decisive military response but to support and strengthen preventive, multi-stakeholder approaches to sustaining peace.

This timely thematic debate will hopefully help this organization develop a more strategic and integrated approach to waging and sustaining peace rather than only perfecting an instrument to better manage the symptoms of asymmetrical threats. I submit that the continued relevance of the United Nations should be judged by the former, not the latter.

Thank you.