UN Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism: Uncomfortable Bedfellows?

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Based on the case of the UN stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the article argues that UN peacekeeping neither is, nor will be ready operationally, doctrinally or politically to take on counterterrorism tasks. Such a development will jeopardize the legal protection of UN staff, and the ability of the UN to be an impartial arbiter of conflict, and for other parts of the UN family to carry out humanitarian work. The article thus argues that MINUSMA is an anomaly in the history of UN peacekeeping, and should be avoided as an example for future operations.

Since 9/11 2001, terrorism has taken an increasingly central space in the international policy arena. As terrorism is a relational concept, often used to label political adversaries – as the saying goes: one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter – terrorism has been a controversial topic at the UN. However, after a slow start, terrorism is moving towards the center of the policy agenda also at the UN.

Member states such as the United Kingdom and the USA have in recent years cited terrorism when motivating their increased support to UN peacekeeping.[1] On the ground, the UN multidimensional stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has suffered 72 fatalities from its inception in 2013 until 31 March 2017 from attacks by violent extremists, terrorists and rebel groups, making it the deadliest peacekeeping mission active today.[2]

Looking to the future, many member states expect that this is the beginning of a longer trend, where UN peacekeeping missions should expect to be confronted with violent extremist and terrorist groups. This article will examine the policy debate on this topic and the tactical, operational, strategic and political consequences of giving UN peacekeeping operations counterterrorism tasks.

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[1] Mason, Rowena (2015) "UK to deploy troops to help keep peace in Somalia and South Sudan," *The Guardian,* September 27, 2015. Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/27/uk-to-deploy-troops-to-help-keep-peace-in-somalia-and-south-sudan. Accessed January 11, 2016.
Goldberg, Mark Leon (2015) "Why President Obama is Hosting a Summit on UN Peacekeeping," *UN Dispatch*, September 28, 2015. Available at: http://www.undispatch.com/why-president-obama-is-hosting-a-summit-on-un-peacekeeping/. Accessed January 11, 2016.
[2] UN (2017) '(4a) Fatalities by Mission, Year and Incident Type up to 31 Mar 2017'. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_4amar.pdf. Accessed 30 April 2017.

The age of terror

At the UN, the first global strategy against terrorism was agreed upon in 2006. However, this strategy did not lead to concerted action, as there was still no agreement on how to define terrorism. Even though there still is no agreement on the issue, increasing consensus has been achieved in the ten years that have passed.

Part of the reason is that terrorist attacks have been increasing rapidly over the last decade. The al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, Islamic State and the Boko Haram have shocked the conscience of humanity with the inhumanity and cruelty of their attacks, their ability to communicate these to a global audience, and their capacity to rally and recruit new followers and perpetrators on a global scale. According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, 29,376 people were killed in terrorist attacks in 2015.[3] 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).

The increase in victims from terrorist attacks has spurred policy development. But conceptually the debate has also developed considerably. The so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT), initiated by former U.S. President George W. Bush proved controversial. However, in 2006 the George W. Bush administration changed its rhetoric from GWOT to 'Struggle against Violent Extremism' or SAVE. This conceptualization has proved much less divisive and in the following years 'preventing' and 'countering' violent extremism has become mainstream concepts and agendas. In 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched his *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.[4] In the plan, the terms 'extremism', 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' are used interchangeably.[5]

Turning to the UN

Other factors are also important to consider. 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. In an environment of enduring austerity in the aftermath of the 2008-09 financial crisis, member states are increasingly turning to the UN to see what role it can play in the global security burden-sharing. This entails a more utilitarian relationship vis-à-vis the UN, not necessarily considering whether there are organizational, political or moral limits to what the organization is able to do.

Increasingly robust peacekeeping operations

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[3] IEP (2016) *Global Terrorism Index 2016.* Sydney: Institute of Economics and Peace: p. 2.
[4] United Nations (2015) *A/70/674. Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, 24 December 2015. New York: United Nations. In the plan, the terms 'extremism', 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' are used interchangeably.
[5] Naz K. Modirzadeh (2016) "If It's Broke, Don't Make it Worse: A Critique of the U.N. Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism." January 23, 2016. Accessed October 28, 2016. https://www.lawfareblog.com/if-its-broke-dont-make-it-worse-critique-un-secretary-generals-plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism.

UN peacekeeping operations have during the last decades been deployed to protect civilians in increasingly unstable conflicts, most often without a peace to keep.[6] This has led to the creation of a doctrinal gap between the principles guiding UN peacekeeping, and what UN peacekeeping is asked to do by the UN Security Council.[7] UN peacekeeping operations are supposed to be impartial, operate with the consent of the main parties, and only use force to defend itself or its mandate (which most often includes to protect civilians). Regarding the use of force, it should only use force on the tactical level and for short durations, and not on operational or strategic levels, as that would make it a party to the conflict.

It was thus a defining moment when MONUSCO, the UN stabilization mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), was tasked by the UN Security Council to "neutralize" identified rebel groups, including the M23.[8] The mandate made MONUSCO a peace enforcement mission (in UN terms), and a party to the conflict.[9]

The deployment of MINUSMA to Mali marked another step in this direction. It was deployed into an ongoing conflict and was given a mandate to extend state authority and stabilize the north of Mali, an area that include many different violent extremist and terrorist groups. These include "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoune, Ansar Eddine, and their affiliates such as the Front de Libération du Macina (FLM)."[10] These groups resort to asymmetric tactics, including suicide attacks, mortar attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

The mandate specifically asked MINUSMA to "deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas."[11] The mandate was made even more robust in 2016, when it requested "…MINUSMA to move to a more proactive and robust posture […] to enhance early warning, to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats, and to take robust and active steps to protect civilians…"[12]

In parallel to MINUSMA, France has deployed a counterterrorism mission, *Opération Barkhane*.[13] France has also a less known operation in the region, *Task Force Sabre*, consisting of 200 troops based in Burkina Faso, deployed throughout the region and used for 'target, capture or kill' operations.[14]

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[6] See e.g. Mats Berdal and David H. Ucko (2015) "The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Problems and Prospects," *The RUSI Journal,* Vol. 160, No. 1: pp. 6-12; Emily Paddon Rhoads (2016) *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); and John Karlsrud (2017) *UN Peace Operations in the 21st Century: The UN at War?* Basingstoke: Palgrave.
[7] Cedric de Coning Chiyuki Aoi and John Karlsrud (eds.) (2017) *UN Peacekeeping Doctrine in a New Era: Adapting to Stabilization, Protection and New Threats*. Abingdon: Routledge.
[8] United Nations (2013) *S/RES/2098*, 28 March 2013. New York: United Nations: p. 7.
[9] John Karlsrud (2015) "The UN at War: Examining the Consequences of Peace Enforcement Mandates for the UN Peacekeeping Operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1: pp. 40–54.
[10] United Nations (2016) *S/RES/2295,* 29 June 2016. New York: United Nations: p. 2.
[11] United Nations (2013) *S/RES/2100*, 25 April 2013. New York: United Nations: p. 7.
[12] United Nations, *S/RES/2295*: p. 9.
[13] The mission was previously named *Opération Serval*, but was renamed *Barkhane* in 2014, in conjunction with an extension of the scope from covering Mali to cover Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauretania and Niger. For more about the mission, see Ministère de la Défense (2017) "Opération Barkhane." Available at:

MINUSMA is the first UN peacekeeping operation that is deployed with a dedicated intelligence unit – the All-source Information Fusion Analysis Unit (ASIFU), and it has also dedicated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) companies deployed by Germany in Gao (who replaced the Dutch ISR company in 2017) and Sweden in Timbuktu. In its concept of operations, a third ISR company based in Tessalit in the north of Mali was also envisaged, but no member state has so far been willing to deploy to this area.

From 2013 to 2016, the ASIFU has been staffed with only European member state officers. The unit has been tasked to source information from different types of 'sensors' – short- and medium-range surveillance drones, various fixed-wing and rotary aircrafts with sensors mounted, long-range patrols conducted by the ISR companies, and analysis of traditional and social media by in-house analysts. In addition, the ASIFU has drawn upon reporting from MINUSMA military troops, policy and civilian officers.[15] The European officers have long experience from counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in e.g. Afghanistan, which is reflected in the fact that the ASIFU was modeled on experiences from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) special operations forces (SOF) Fusion Cell (SOFFC).[16]

The robust mandate, combined with the inclusion of western troops with counterinsurgency and counterterrorism experience in MINUSMA, has 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.[17] A 2015 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.[18]

Said differently, the practice of sharing information that could lead to targeting operations by *Barkhane* or *Task Force Sabre* could have serious operational, political and legal implications. The study warned that through such a practice, MINUSMA may be "perceived as a party to the conflict,"[19] and in case this happened,

http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations/sahel/dossier-de-presentation-de-l-operation-barkhane/operation-barkhane. Accessed 13 March 2017.

[14] High Level Military Group (2016) "Our Military Forces' Struggle Against Lawless, Media Savvy Terrorist Adversaries: A Comparative Study." 2nd ed. February 2016. http://www.high-level-military-group.org/pdf/hlmg-lawless-media-savvy-terrorist-adversaries.pdf: p. 79.

[15] The ASIFU model has been celebrated but also significantly challenged, and in 2016 it was decided to merge it with the U2 intelligence cell of the Force component, becoming the Military All Sources Information Cell (MASIC). Ibid.

[16] United Nations (2016) *Lessons Learned Report. Sources Information Fusion Unit and the MINUSMA Intelligence Architecture: Lessons for the Mission and a UN Policy Framework. Semi-final draft for USG Ladsous' review, 1 March 2016.* New York: United Nations. On file with the author: p. 3.

[17] Targeting is a military process of identifying, capturing or killing military targets. For more, see e.g. United States Department of the Army, *Joint Publication 3-26. Counterterrorism* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army, 2014). http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_26.pdf.

[18] United Nations, *Lessons Learned Report*, 15.

[19] Ibid.

"MINUSMA military personnel would lose their protected status and thereby become lawful targets under IHL [international humanitarian law]."[20]

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

UN peacekeeping and counterterrorism

United Nations peacekeeping operations have a long history of operating in theatres affected by terrorism – in e.g. Cambodia (Khmer Rouge), Lebanon (Hezbollah) and the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic (Lord's Resistance Army), terrorist groups have been active, but seldom posed a direct threat to the UN peacekeeping operation. However, this has changed significantly with MINUSMA, which has been mandated to support the extension of state authority and engage in direct operations against terrorist organizations and counter 'asymmetric' threats.[21]

Operational consequences

The experience from MINUSMA, as well as from long engagements by Western troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, shows that UN peacekeeping operations operating in asymmetric threat environments are in need of a radically different set of legal and administrative frameworks, as well as capabilities for logistical support, engineering, intelligence, casualty and medical evacuation (CASEVAC/MEDEVAC) and special forces operations.[22] At the robust end, they would need to be equipped with better capabilities and reformed guidelines for intelligence gathering, analysis, storage and dissemination; to e.g. 'disable networks behind IEDs and other attacks',[23] and 'anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats'.[24]

The high-level independent panel on peace operations, nominated by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, argued that UN peace operations 'lack the specific equipment, intelligence, logistics, capabilities and specialized military preparation required, among other aspects'.[25] However, this could also be read as a list of areas of reform that should be addressed if UN peace operations should be given counter-terrorism tasks. Furthermore, it argued that when the UN is deployed to areas where asymmetric threats are encountered,

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[20] Mona Khalil (2014) "Peacekeeping missions as parties to conflicts." 13 February 2014. *Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP)*. https://phap.org/thematic-notes/2014/february/humanitarian-law-policy-2014-peacekeeping-missions-parties-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 counter-terrorism regimes.
[21] 'Asymmetric threats' is the standard euphemism for violent extremism and terrorism in UN mandates.
[22] John Karlsrud and Adam C. Smith (2015) *Europe's Return to UN Peacekeeping in Africa? Lessons from Mali.* New York: International Peace Institute.
[23] United Nations (2016) *Summary of Concept Note: Countering and preventing violent extremism: role of UN peacekeeping. Proposed areas for DPKO/DFS research and policy development.* New York: United Nations. On file with the author: p. 2.
[24] United Nations, *S/RES/2295*, p. 9.
[25] United Nations (2015) *A/70/95, S/2015/446. Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people.* New York: United Nations: p. 31.

they should be equipped with the necessary capabilities and training to 'protect itself and deliver its mandate', attain a 'preventive and preemptive posture and willingness to use force tactically to protect civilians and UN personnel'.[26]

Western member states are willing to help the UN in this process, providing it with their experiences from Afghanistan and Iraq. Western member states also want to strengthen the command and control of UN peacekeeping missions, which often translates to military control of aviation assets to ensure that CASEVAC/MEDEVAC can be effectively carried out without asking the civilian part of the mission for permission to use aviation assets.

However, it is African troops that are bearing the brunt of the attacks, while Western member states have proven more risk-averse, and have been reluctant to deploy their troops and assets to the far north of the country. During the last ten years, the balance of troop contributing countries has shifted from Asia to Africa, with African states now contributing more than 50% of the troops. [27] As a necessary consequence, the principle of not including neighboring states that could have a particular political interest in a conflict has also been abandoned. The consequence of these shifts is an increased willingness to make the UN a party to the conflict, as witnessed with the regional and sub-regional pushes for inclusion of the Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC,[28] the Regional Protection Force in South Sudan,[29] a robust mission in Libya,[30] and the repeated requests for a force intervention brigade included in MINUSMA.[31]

This could be indicative of where UN peacekeeping operations may be heading, with the Security Council, Western and African member states increasingly being willing to use UN peacekeeping operations to solve problems that they are not operationally capable of solving. And although MINUSMA and the UN is in the process of trying to adopt its operational setup, there are doctrinal and principal challenges that may be more difficult to deal with.

Principled consequences

The move towards giving UN peacekeeping operations counterterrorism tasks is driven more by operational and circumstantial factors than principled reasoning. But what are the political and doctrinal consequences of such a shift? First and foremost, the drive to make the UN a party to the conflict will weaken or even render it impossible for the UN to be a central partner in the mediation of these conflicts. Second, by becoming a party

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Richard Gowan (2015) "Ten Trends in UN Peacekeeping," in Jim Della-Giacoma (ed.), *Global Peace Operations Review: Annual Compilation 2015.* New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University: p. 19.

[28] See e.g. de Coning et al., *UN Peacekeeping Doctrine in a New Era.*

[29] Mandated in August 2016. UN (2016) *S/RES/2304*, 12 August 2016. New York: United Nations.

[30] Laurent Lagneau (2014) "Le G5 Sahel demande une intervention de l'ONU en Libye, en accord avec l'Union africaine," 20 December 2014. Available at: http://www.opex360.com/2014/12/20/le-g5-sahel-demande-intervention-de-lonu-en-libye-en-accord-avec-lunion-africaine/. Accessed 14 March 2017.

[31] AU (2015) *Report of the Commission of the African Union on the Follow-up to the Relevant Provisions of the Declaration of the Summit of the Member Countries of the Nouakchott Process of 18 December 2014*. Addis Ababa: African Union.

to the conflict, the legally protected status of UN peacekeeping mission staff – military, police and civilian, may be undermined.[32] Third, the legitimacy and credibility UN peacekeeping missions enjoy rests on their ability to keep the peace, protect civilians and support early peacebuilding activities. Taking sides, it is likely that local populations that are marginalized by the government also will perceive the UN as an enemy, when it is mandated to extend what is likely to be perceived as illegitimate state authority. Finally, the humanitarian actors under the UN umbrella, such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), may experience increasing difficulties to access populations in need, as the UN is becoming a party to the conflict.

Conclusion

There is currently a tendency to extrapolate from the case of MINUSMA and use this as a template for future UN peacekeeping missions. However, we should be careful to use the experiences of one singular peacekeeping mission when deciding on the future of UN peacekeeping. Christopher Chivvis has argued that the French successfully managed to get support for and deploy a UN stabilization force that "allowed the French to shift focus elsewhere and reduced the chances of their troops becoming mired in a long and bloody counterinsurgency operation."[33] While France may have considered this a success, the UN is faced with an unprecedented situation challenging the tool of peacekeeping to the very core.

Member states should avoid entrapment, and not undermine a valuable tool in the international peace and security toolbox. Research shows that UN peacekeeping can be an effective tool when deployed in support of a peace agreement and in tandem with political support toward the development of an inclusive and legitimate government. Counterterrorist operations are best left with national, sub-regional and regional actors, with member states and other parts of the UN playing a supportive role to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

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[32] Khalil, "Peacekeeping missions as parties to conflicts".
[33] Christopher Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa'ida in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: p. 13.