UN Peace Operations, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade or so, terrorism and violent extremism have moved centre stage on the international policy agenda. Consequently, also the question of the United Nations peace operations' role vis-à-vis these threats has gained strength.

Historically, UN peace operations have been deployed in theatres where such threats have been present, but they have so far not confronted these threats directly. The UN stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA), deployed in 2013, marked the beginning of a new era in this respect. MINUSMA has been the target of terrorist attacks from a number of different groups, and had at the time of writing suffered 95 fatalities and a number of injuries as a result (UN 2017a). But MINUSMA is also a notable case study because it has been mandated by the UN Security Council to take "direct action" to mitigate and respond to the asymmetric threats that the terrorist groups represent (UN 2016a, p. 8).

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This chapter will first look at the evolving discussion on terrorism and violent extremism, seen from the perspective of UN peace operations. It will then use the case of MINUSMA to discern some arguments for and against giving UN peace operations a larger role in mitigating and responding to these threats. In conclusion, the chapter argues that although there may be good financial and political reasons to give UN peace operations a larger role in the global war on terrorism and violent extremism, this will be close to impossible to do in practice. Indeed, it will have unintended and negative consequences for the role the UN has in the humanitarian and political domains in countries emerging from conflict and the future role of UN peace operations in general.

A NEW ERA OF TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

The number of fatalities caused by terrorism has been rising steadily since 2000, from 3329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014 (IEP 2015, p. 2). A particularly dramatic increase was noted in 2014, with an 80% increase compared to 2013, largely because of the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) as well as Boko Haram (ibid.). 2015 was the second deadliest year on record with 29,376 deaths (IEP 2016, p. 2).

Some of the key groups behind terrorist attacks are Al Qaeda (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria), IS (e.g. Syria and Iraq), Boko Haram (Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad), Al Shabaab (Somalia), AQIM (Mali), Al Mourabitoun (Mali), and Macina Liberation Front (Mali).[1] Not only have the number of victims increased exponentially over the last 16 years, but the acts that these groups have committed are aimed to shock the conscience of humanity, and many constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity (see e.g. UNHRC 2015). Transnational terrorist groups such as the IS are qualitatively different from previous terrorist groups because they are not seeking recognition from the international community. Instead they are seeking to establish a new caliphate, irrespective of existing borders, and willing to use extreme violence to achieve this objective. Another key characteristic of these groups is the

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[1] These groups are changing frequently. The al Mourabitoun, for example, emerged from the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and the Masked Men Brigade, and, in the beginning of 2017, Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoun, and al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) announced their merger. For more, see e.g. Raineri and Strazzari (2015) and Haugegaard (2017).

use of modern tools of communication and technology to intimidate and communicate the atrocities they commit, and recruit and radicalise new followers on a global scale. The shockingly violent acts, including the use of rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage as tactics of terror against civilians (UN 2015a), have created a new sense of urgency to deal with these rapidly growing threats.

THE UNITED NATIONS, TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Terrorism has for long been a controversial topic at the UN, and the member states have so far not been able to agree on a definition of terrorism. Nevertheless, violent extremism and terrorism have been rising on the international agenda since the 9/11-attacks in 2001. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy was adopted by the General Assembly in 2006 (UN 2006), and had four pillars:

a. tackling conditions conducive to terrorism;
b. preventing and combating terrorism;
c. building countries' capacity to combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard; and
d. ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism. (UN 2015b, p. 3)

In the following years, the strategy was revisited at regular intervals, but with limited coordination and integration with the rest of the tools in the UN peace and security toolbox. This gradually started to change in parallel with a discursive move from "terrorism" to countering and preventing violent extremism (PVE and CVE, here grouped together as 'PCVE'). Realising that the Global War on Terror (GWOT) initiated after the 9/11-attacks proved controversial, the US administration under former US President George W. Bush made a discursive move from GWOT to "Struggle against Violent Extremism" or SAVE (Fox 2005). This reconceptualisation, subsuming the counter-terrorist agenda under less ominous sounding concepts, proved less divisive and in the following years, in parallel with the rapid increase in incidents labelled terrorist attacks, preventing and countering violent extremism have become mainstream concepts and agendas.

This was evidenced when Ban Ki-moon, the former UN Secretary-General launched a *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* in the beginning of 2016. He stated that

> [t]here is no single pathway to violent extremism. But we know that extremism flourishes when human rights are violated, political space is shrunk, aspirations for inclusion are ignored, and too many people – especially young people – lack prospects and meaning in their lives. (UN 2016b)

In the action plan, he lamented the fact that so far there has been "a strong emphasis on the implementation of measures under pillar II of the Global Strategy, while pillars I and IV have often been overlooked" (UN 2015b, p. 3). In the plan, the terms "extremism", "violent extremism," and "terrorism" were used interchangeably (Modirzadeh 2016).

In the above-mentioned pillar II, we find counter-terrorism operations. Currently, the UN is neither principally nor operationally set up to fight terrorist groups by force. Operationally, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report drew a red line with counter-terrorism operations, saying 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" (UN 2015c, p. 31). However, this quote could be interpreted as to say that if these shortcomings were amended, UN peace operations would be able to take on such operations. However, the main message of the report is the primacy of a political engagement—a UN peace operation should always seek to be part of a "robust political process" and "continuously seek to build consent to the UN role and presence through an impartial posture" (ibid., p. 33). The ability to facilitate a political dialogue, often in tandem with key members of the Security Council, is argued to be the comparative advantage of the UN. By becoming a party to the conflict, this advantage is in peril.

Terrorism and violent extremism are part of the same spectrum, but they are not the same thing. Both are willing to use violence to pursue political goals, but to different degrees. If the objective is to limit, counter, and prevent violent extremism it follows that a primary objective would be not to further alienate those that may have legitimate governance and development concerns, and who are yet not fully radicalised. Characterising all groups and individuals as terrorists, no matter

where they are located on the spectrum, risks further radicalisation and strengthening the most extreme groups.

There is thus a need to appropriately nuance the understanding of and strategies for dealing with violent extremism. Violent extremism can stem from a variety of root causes—including injustice, marginalisation, under-development, governance structures undermined by corruption, lack of responsive governments and social cohesion, weak and limited state-society relations, and externally supported religious radicalisation. The UN Secretary-General has warned against a securitised approach to countering violent extremism, and has outlined a prevention agenda where the main goals must be to better understand the motivations for joining groups such as the IS; avoid using "terrorism" as a label to eliminate political opposition; and deal with root causes through strengthening governance, the respect for human rights, more accountable institutions, service delivery, and political participation (UN News Centre 2015). The multitude of root causes to violent extremism must be reflected in the register of tools and approaches of member states and global and regional institutions to deal with these challenges.

The UN is a state-centric organisation. In the states it is seeking to support, however, the governments often enjoy weak legitimacy among large parts of the population. Material and ideational resources are concentrated among the elites, and access to education and other basic services is often limited to urban centres, leaving room for radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist groups to fester. Adding to this vulnerable starting point, weak governments are often pursuing militarised solutions to the challenges it is facing, perpetuating, fuelling, and becoming an ever more intrinsic part of the problem. Being a state-centric organisation, the UN is in risk of following the same pattern by supporting member states in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism.

Since 9/11, the UN has unfortunately also increasingly become the target of terrorist attacks. The attacks in Baghdad in 2003, Algiers in 2007, Kabul in 2009, Mazar-i-Sharif in 2011, Abuja in 2011, Mogadishu in 2013, a number of attacks in Mali from 2013 until today, in addition to a high number of smaller attacks have all made it clear that the UN is increasingly considered a participant in the global war on terror. With the increase in attacks, the UN has been adapting its risk posture, taking precautions on movement and deployment of staff in high-risk zones.

Member states and multilateral organisations have developed various doctrines and guidelines for countering and preventing violent

extremism, ranging from military-oriented counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism guidance such as the US Counterterrorism doctrine and *NATO's military concept for defence against terrorism* (United States Department of the Army 2014; NATO 2011). The UN is currently in a state of flux when it comes to policy development on the issue of counter-terrorism and countering and preventing violent extremism, and there is increasing pressure from member states on the UN to take on a greater share of these challenges (Boutellis and Fink 2016; Karlsrud 2017, 2018). These member states request that UN peace operations should be more relevant to what are seen as challenges of the twenty-first century, and MINUSMA has become the laboratory for testing whether UN peace operations actually are able to take on these challenges.

MINUSMA: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Although the UN has been the target for spectacular attacks previously, the frequency and consistency of attacks on the UN have increased with the more active role that the organisation has been given in for example Somalia and Mali. Until now, it has been special political missions and UN development presences that have been the main targets for these attacks, but with the deployment of MINUSMA to Mali a UN multidimensional peacekeeping mission has been given a direct role in stabilising a country that had been destabilised by inter alia violent extremist and terrorist groups (Karlsrud 2015). It is also the first time a multidimensional peacekeeping mission has been deployed in parallel with an ongoing counter-terrorism operation, the French *Opération Serval*, later transitioned into the current *Opération Barkhane* (Ministère de la Défense 2015).

In 2014, one year after deployment, the Force Commander of MINUSMA briefed the UN Security Council, saying that "MINUSMA is in a terrorist-fighting situation without an anti-terrorist mandate or adequate training, equipment, logistics or intelligence to deal with such a situation" (UN 2014, p. 4). MINUSMA was suffering from repeated attacks, and in 2014 alone, MINUSMA suffered 41 fatalities—"one of the highest one-year fatality rates for any peacekeeping operation in UN history" according to the Ban Ki-moon, the former UN Secretary-General (UN 2015d). However, at that juncture, MINUSMA had still not been tasked to take 'direct action' against asymmetric threats.

MINUSMA has e.g. had a task force on counter-terrorism and organised crime, with a mandate to "provide recommendations on the delivery of a common and comprehensive strategy to support the Government of Mali in counter-terrorism and in combating organized crime" (UN 2015e, p. 23). In the more robust end of the spectrum, the MINUSMA military troops have been preparing "targeting packs […] on groups and individuals considered a threat to the mission," (Karlsrud 2017, p. 1224) and has been sharing information with the parallel French counter-terrorism mission *Opération Barkhane* (ibid.). Taken together, these practices suggest that MINUSMA may already have crossed the red line drawn by the HIPPO.

What, then, should be the way forward? When deployed to countries like Mali, the UN must be equipped to mitigate and prevent attacks against itself and the local population. In practice, this means militarily engaging violent extremists and terrorists. As I have already noted, this takes UN peace operations across the line drawn by the HIPPO-report. For MINUSMA, this is already the reality it is struggling to deal with. Future missions may be deployed to Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, and find similar mission environments and threats.

USE OF FORCE: BURDEN-SHARING WITH REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Since similar ongoing operations are shouldered by the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organisations on the African continent, and that likely future operations of this kind will be in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, it may make more sense to undertake such operations in coalitions of the willing. This would give the lead regional organisation/group of states the space to decide on a range of issues that might be more constrained in a UN setting. Such missions should be sequenced to not further undermine traditional UN peace operations. Coalitions of the willing, and in some instances regional organisations, will remain the only options with the requisite political will, capabilities, doctrines, and staying power to conduct counter-terrorism operations, equipped with a UN mandate.

The AU and sub-regional organisations have proven that they are enhancing their competency and ability to conduct peace support operations, although the potential for improvement is still significant.

The AU has been either mandating or directly implementing counter-terrorist operations in a number of theatres—with for example its AU Regional Task Force for the elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the AMISOM mission in Somalia, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali, the Multinational Joint Task Force established to fight Boko Haram, and the Group of Five Sahel Joint Force composed of troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

AU peace enforcement missions also have the comparative advantage of participating states' strong political will and the ability to sustain significant losses over time, something UN peace operations simply cannot or will not be able to match. However, the funding, capability, and capacity issues remain unresolved. The initiative of the AU to increase the self-funding of AU peace operations to 25% over a five-year period (AU 2015), alongside strengthened accountability and human rights due diligence mechanisms and the development of a mission support concept, could unlock further support. However, also the AU is still suffering from weak capacity in many areas, with frequent reports on human rights violations committed by troops in Somalia as one example (see e.g. UN 2017b). Member states thus need to continue to build the capacity of the AU, sub-regional organisations, and African member states to counter and prevent violent extremism in a holistic manner, including a stronger emphasis on early peacebuilding and recovery programmes that can provide real opportunities and stop the recruitment into terrorist organisations.

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH

The comparative advantage of the UN lies in its convening power and impartiality as well as in its ability to provide and coordinate comprehensive support across the peace and security, development, and human rights pillars. This gives the UN unique legitimacy from which it draws its strength. However, each of these elements are vulnerable to mission creep, overstretch, and inefficacy in implementation. The state-centric nature of the UN is both its advantage and its Achilles' heel.

Using force limits the ability of the UN to provide good offices, engage with armed groups, and be a legitimate actor in early peacebuilding, recovery, and development efforts. Taking active part in a conflict also significantly increases the risks of attacks against the soft targets of the UN—international and local staff, as well as contractors and other actors with real or perceived ties to the organisation.

Fortified UN compounds with Hesco barriers, barbed wire and limited freedom of movement are often apt responses to increased threats from violent extremists and terrorists. However, while increased security measures may be necessary, more limited engagement with local populations may lead to a weaker understanding of underlying political, economic, and social dynamics and increased vulnerability for attacks, perpetuating and increasing the gap between local populations and UN staff. The risk avoidance of troop contributing countries in hostile theatres will also contribute to weakening the legitimacy of UN peace operations, as seen in Mali.

A militarised strategy does not only risk fuelling further radicalisation, but also draws funding from potential prevention activities, leading to a negative spiral on local, national, regional, and global levels. A prevention agenda must engage national elites in a rethink of state-society relations that should include more and deeper dialogue with civil society and lead to more inclusive, participatory, and representative societies (de Coning et al. 2015). The UN thus needs to maintain an impartial stance vis-à-vis the government in power and counter efforts of instrumentalisation of the UN peace operation to fight political opposition labelled "terrorists".

To tackle the root causes of violent extremism and terrorism, UN peace operations and the UN system can partner with national governments, multilateral organisations, religious organisations, and NGOs to promote holistic approaches. There is a need to generate new platforms for political dialogue, inclusion, and community engagement. In view of the rapidly increasing interconnectedness and transnational character of the challenges the world faces, strategies must not only be national, but regional and global in scope. New partnerships are needed—particularly at the sub-regional and regional levels—that are holistic, comprehensive, integrated and based on a deep analysis of the societal challenges that the violent extremism stems from. Unfortunately, the responses are often frustrated by limited acknowledgment of underlying societal drivers and root causes, lack of cooperation, competition, and rivalry among member states on the sub-regional and regional level.

Due concern must also be given to the impact on women of violent extremism and militarised responses to these threats. "The rise of violent extremism, which is given much importance in the report, threatens women's lives and leads to a cycle of militarisation of societies" (Stamnes and Osland 2016, p. 17). Violent extremism, terrorism, and

counter-terrorism put vulnerable groups between a rock and a hard place, narrows the space for engagement by women peacebuilders, and limits the funding for basic services and peacebuilding activities.

The religious dimension of radicalisation also deserves scrutiny. Gulf states have been exporting their particular kind of Islam to the rest of the world for many decades, fomenting and driving radicalisation. In Mali for example, Muslims are traditionally Maliki Sunnis and Sufis, but the more radical Wahhabi strand of Islam has rapidly taken hold with the financial support of key Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia. In this context, it is also curious to notice that Saudi Arabia is the main sponsor of the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), part of the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) (UN 2016c), endorsed by member states of the UN General Assembly through the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted in 2006 (UN 2006). The UNCCT and CTITF are both part of the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), also responsible for special political missions. The UNCCT received in 2014 a donation from Saudi-Arabia of $100 million to strengthen its "tools, technologies and methods to confront and eliminate the threat of terrorism" (UNCCT 2015). It is also partially funded by Germany, the UK, and the US. According to one UN official, the CTITF/UNCCT accounted for roughly half of the operational part of the DPA budget funding projects and activities in the field in 2015, and UNCCT has for example reached out to the UN mission in Mali, UN agencies, and others to develop projects, counting 31 projects at the beginning of 2016 (UN 2016c).

This apparent oxymoron points to an important point—the prevention and deradicalisation agenda is fairly well known, but implementation is either limited or ineffective. This shows the limited political will to deal with clear-cut and well-known challenges, such as the continued financing of the export of radical Islam by Gulf states. The thin and at times non-existent legitimacy of the regimes that are facing violent extremists is another clear challenge, severely limiting the will to engage in political dialogue.

The UN Security Council should maintain a central role for the UN in the mediation of conflict even where the UN is a party or considered to be a party to the conflict. Therefore it should nominate a separate Special Envoy to lead the negotiations to create the necessary space for engagement. The UN should not be barred from talking with any of the actors, even those beyond the pale, but keep communication channels open.

More capacity is needed to uncover and address linkages between organised crime, terrorist groups, and national elites (UN 2015a). For the UN, this is a particularly sensitive area, as a focus on corruption may lead to significant resistance and increase the hurdles the UN peace operation and the UN Country Team are facing. However, only continued emphasis on this is likely to make leaders accountable to their populations, and enable representative, inclusive, and legitimate regimes.

A UN peace operation should be working closely with the UN Country Team to devise peacebuilding and early recovery plans that use a combination of development data and intelligence to target particularly vulnerable populations such as youth and marginalised communities or ethnicities. Community violence reduction programmes have proved useful in for example Haiti, and are being tested in Mali "to address recruitment into the armed movements present in the country, including those allied to Al-Qaida" (UN 2015e, p. 22). UN peace operations should also consider limiting their military presence and focus on civilian activities in areas where they are seen as party to the conflict (Di Razza 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations report emphasised the primacy of political solutions. It stated, "there is a clear sense of a widening gap between what is being asked of [UN] peace operations today and what they are able to deliver" (UN 2015c, p. 9). Jean-Marie Guéhenno, the former head of UN peacekeeping, argues that robust peacekeeping has to be supported by a robust political strategy (2015). UN peace operations are operating in increasingly difficult theatres, facing the threats of violent extremism and transnational terrorist networks. This is partly due to the UN Security Council asking for deployment of missions long before the conditions are ripe, such as in Mali, and partly because of a structural development in technology and communication also propelling the nature of terrorist threats, with violent extremists and terrorists becoming far more interconnected and media-savvy.

These threats are likely to intensify, and in order to continue to operate in difficult and at times hostile environments, the UN will have to improve at all levels, even if it is not explicitly being asked to undertake counter-terrorism tasks. As it is likely that the UN will continue to be deployed in parallel with regional organisations that have a

counter-terrorism mandate, the UN should be wary of the security, reputational, and legitimacy risks it will be facing in parallel deployments. It must mitigate increasing security risks by limiting engagement in military and substantive tasks where it is in parallel deployment with a counter-terrorism operation, intensify its efforts to establish a functioning and integrated intelligence concept for UN missions, strengthen its conflict prevention agenda, with particular emphasis on the engagement with those in risk of being radicalised. As borders are only lines in the sand, intermission cooperation must be intensified, with sharing of information, analysis, and capabilities on a regular basis.

While the UN can and should prepare for and be able to better respond to transnational terrorist threats, I have shown the limits of what UN peace operations are able to do operationally, principally, and politically. The growing capacity of regional and sub-regional organisations to deal with these threats should be supported by the UN and member states in the South and the North.

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