

Redefining a UN peace doctrine to avoid regime protection operations

By Larry Attree and Jordan Street

Over the past two decades, the United Nations (UN) has drifted into ever greater engagement in counter-terrorism and militarised stabilisation efforts.¹ This trend within the institution will generate profound dilemmas for UN peace operations in years ahead. How will the principle of impartiality and the drive to focus on political resolution fare if blue helmets are increasingly drawn into counter-terror, regime protection and stabilisation roles which involve taking sides, neutralising certain conflict actors, reinforcing problematic allies and turning a blind eye to some abuses? Left unchecked, these trends could render UN peace operations unrecognisable by 2030, seriously undermining their potential to contribute to peace sustainment and threatening the ability of the UN to uphold its charter as a unique and indispensable global peacemaking institution that works in the service of we the peoples.

Lessons from international counter-terror and stabilisation experiences offer insights into how the UN can obviate these pitfalls. A new doctrinal approach to protect the principles, integrity and effectiveness of UN peacekeeping should be a defining legacy of Secretary-General Guterres' tenure.

What does the future hold?

It seems unlikely that the world is entering a period of stability. A sharp rise in authoritarianism, growing securitisation and restriction of rights and freedoms, increased arms spending and diminishing commitment to disarmament, intensifying inequalities coupled with environmental degradation and the multi-layered impacts of the climate emergency will all likely presage further spread of violent conflict around the globe. Over the next decade there will certainly be peace to keep, make and build for the UN.

Reduced reliance on central state service provision and increasing patchworks of competing authorities, together with a continued decline of traditional inter-state wars, a shift towards 'borderlands' conflicts, the huge prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, and the role of illicit grey economies exacerbating conflict and supporting violent, criminal elements, are but a few of the key challenges to which future peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts will have to continue to adapt.

At the multilateral level, pressure on budgets, reduced championing of democracy and human rights in order for states to remain economically competitive, the maintenance of geostrategic partnerships with repressive and destabilising allies by permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), and stronger assertion of the rights of sovereign states by emboldened autocrats will all continue to put pressure on UN leadership to move towards what Paul

¹ Street J, Altiok A (2020), 'A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism', Saferworld, June (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>)

Williams refers to as a ‘UN of we the States’.² This could push the UN towards further support for ‘containment’ approaches to the challenges of popular unrest, violent rebellion, ‘terrorism/violent extremism’ and forced displacement rather than more thoroughgoing conflict transformation efforts, with UN peace operations increasingly called on to assist in such containment, peace enforcement and regime protection functions.

This paper summarises risks and threats posed by such trends to the UN and to peace and stability. With the right approach, the ‘UN of we the States’ scenario – in which a more fractious and irresponsible UNSC pushes the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) into a series of lowest-common denominator efforts to support regional stabilisation, regime protection and counter-terror missions in cooperation with illiberal and abusive partners – *is* avoidable if risks are anticipated and managed proactively.³ The UN *can* reaffirm its impartiality, protect civilians, promote conflict resolution, help address conflict drivers and foster peace-centred accountability. Indeed, finding a way to refocus on these aims is vital to protecting blue helmets and future victims of conflict while promoting peace in a time of intensifying inequality, repression and instability.

Where are we in 2020?

Seventy-five years ago, the Charter of the UN established a new institution with three founding pillars: peace and security, human rights, and development. Since 2001, a fourth pillar – counter-terrorism – has emerged. This has had important impacts on UN peace operations, including both peacekeeping and special political missions. In a range of ‘war-on-terror’ battlegrounds, UN missions play either a direct or significant support role in militarised counter-terror campaigns and their aftermath. Mandates from the UNSC have instructed blue helmets to take a more proactive military posture, to assist conflict parties and/or to support countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) initiatives.⁴

Similarly, peace operations are increasingly deployed where there is little peace to keep – stabilisation operations in contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic involve regime protection and combatting ‘spoilers’, without necessarily incentivising peacebuilding actions on the part of host governments.⁵

In some contexts, the UN is already being required to perform a number of challenging tasks – from providing intelligence and ‘targeting packs’ to military actors and offering operational support to other international counter-terror missions to train and equip security forces, through to undertaking C/PVE initiatives that include narrative campaigns against certain groups, and, in some cases, proactively combatting, deterring and/or protecting territory from ‘aggressors’, ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’.⁶

² Williams P (2020), ‘The Future of Peace Operations: A Scenario Analysis, 2020-2030’, July (unpublished – authors retain copy on file)

³ Williams P (2020), ‘The Future of Peace Operations: A Scenario Analysis, 2020-2030’, July (unpublished – authors retain copy on file)

⁴ Attree L, Street J, Venchiarutti L (2018), ‘United Nations peace operations in complex environments: charting the right course’, Saferworld, September (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1183-united-nations-peace-operations-in-complex-environments-charting-the-right-course>)

⁵ De Coning C (2018), ‘Is stabilization the new normal? Implications of stabilization mandates for the use of force in UN peace operations’, in P Nadin (ed.), *Use of force in UN Peacekeeping*, Routledge, pp 84–99.

⁶ Attree L, Street J, Venchiarutti L (2018), ‘United Nations peace operations in complex environments: charting the right course’, Saferworld, September (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1183-united-nations-peace-operations-in-complex-environments-charting-the-right-course>)

Pressure for the UN to support and participate in heavily securitised international stabilisation and counter-terror efforts has importantly shaped its role in contexts such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Mali and Somalia. In Afghanistan for instance, the UNSC has pushed the UN peace operation there to support both the government's counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism strategies, as well as the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.⁷ In Somalia meanwhile, the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) has long provided support to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is tasked with combatting al-Shabaab, and is now being asked to support the implementation of the Somali National Strategy and Action Plan for C/PVE, 'in order to strengthen Somalia's capacity to prevent and counter terrorism'.⁸

Meanwhile, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is the first UN peacekeeping mission that has been deployed in parallel to an ongoing counter-terrorism operation. The mission mandate – to help a state responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial killings⁹ and which has recently been deposed by the military to control territory and to defend and deter attackers – has pushed the UN into uncharted waters. Alongside logistical and other support, it has been alleged that the UN mission is also providing 'targeting packs'¹⁰ for counter-terrorism missions such as the Group of Five Sahel (G5 Sahel) joint regional counter-terror operation in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and the French-led Operation Barkhane.¹¹

Counter-terrorism and stabilisation have also begun to filter more broadly into the work of the DPO, where officials have limited scope to push back. More 'robust' UNSC mandates for peacekeepers that have pushed blue helmets¹² into the role of assisting in member states' wars against 'terrorists' and other 'spoilers' do not need authorisation from DPO leadership and staff, even if many staff have good reason to be concerned over the implications of this shift.

Beyond mandated peace operations, the DPO has additional engagement in counter-terrorism through its Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI).¹³ OROLSI has in recent years adapted its traditional disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration approach to fit contexts affected by terrorism and violent extremism.¹⁴ Some DPO officials have tried to differentiate the department's overall approach from that of OROLSI, arguing that UN peacekeeping should remain independent of counter-terror objectives or activities, but these contradictions have not yet been fully debated or resolved into a unitary approach.

⁷ United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Resolution 2405, S/Res/2405(2018)', 8 March (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2405>)

⁸ United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Resolution 2408, S/Res/2408(2018)', 27 March (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2408>)

⁹ UN MINUSMA (2020), 'Note sur les tendances des violations et abus de droits de l'homme. 1er Janvier - 31 Mars 2020', April (https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/note_trimestrielle_sur_les_endances_des_violations_et_abus_des_droits_de_lhomme.pdf)

¹⁰ Karlsrud J (2017), 'UN Peacekeeping and Counter-Terrorism', Oxford Research Group, March (<https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/un-peacekeeping-and-counter-terrorism>)

¹¹ Karlsrud J, Novoseloff A (2020), 'Doing Less With More? The Difficult "Return" of Western Troop Contributing Countries to United Nations Peacekeeping', Global Governance Institute, February (<https://www.globalgovernance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/0220GGIAnalysisDoing-Less-with-More.pdf>)

¹² 'Blue helmets' is a colloquial term used to describe UN peacekeepers.

¹³ Saferworld interviews, New York, November 2019.

¹⁴ O'Neil S, Cockayne J (2015), 'UN DDR in an Era of Violent Extremism: Is It Fit for Purpose?', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/un_ddr_in_an_era_of_violent_extremism.pdf)

Why are counter-terror and regime protection problem areas for UN peace operations?

Over the past two decades, the war on terror has profoundly reshaped international policy and practice on security and conflict issues. While the UN system at first kept counter-terrorism and stabilisation at arm's length, initial misgivings have been set aside: its engagement in stabilisation efforts has grown steadily, and counter-terrorism has dramatically risen in prominence within the UN, becoming integrated into a wide range of entities and programmes.¹⁵ Those concerned with ensuring the institution lives up to its ideals and maintains relevance and effectiveness in years to come should redouble their focus on avoiding the key pitfalls that have consistently bogged down the counter-terror and stabilisation efforts of the world's most powerful nations and coalitions since 2001. Here we highlight five of these key pitfalls.

1. The dire impacts of belligerent responses to security threats on peace, human security and human rights

Force used in the global war on terror in contexts such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen has proven deeply problematic – killing, injuring and displacing tens of millions of civilians,¹⁶ deepening humanitarian crises, and feeding into new cycles of grievance and intractable conflict. Within the context of the wider global war on terror, the use of, and support for, military force to respond to the issues of individuals joining armed groups has exacerbated violence and grievances.¹⁷

UN use of force to combat 'terrorist' groups could perpetuate and exacerbate conflict in much the same way. Even supporting non-UN counter-terrorism and military missions with logistics and intelligence risks making the UN a conflict party and complicit in conduct that causes immense human suffering and fuels conflict.

2. Prioritising militarised responses has meant neglecting prevention and peacebuilding priorities and methods

The UN has repeatedly acknowledged what research has also clearly shown: most violent movements cannot be ended by military means. Although political solutions to conflict in war-on-terror battlegrounds may not always be possible or desirable, decades of protracted, metastatising conflict of the kind witnessed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia and the Sahel are even less palatable. Time and again in such contexts, military objectives and tactics have run far ahead of the development of clear, comprehensive strategies for working towards violence reduction, conflict resolution and lasting peace. If the UN is operating in support of, in parallel to or under security guarantees provided by national, regional or international military campaigns, it becomes hard to assert and clarify a distinct, impartial, trusted and influential peacemaking role.¹⁸

¹⁵ Street J, Altiock A (2020), 'A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism', Saferworld, June (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>)

¹⁶ Vine D, Coffman C, Khoury K, Lovasz M, Bush H, Leduc R, Walkup J (2020), 'Creating refugees: Displacement caused by the United States' post-9/11 wars', Watson Institute Brown University, September (https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Displacement_Vine%20et%20al_Costs%20of%20War%202020%2009%2008.pdf)

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme (2017), 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,' September (<http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>)

¹⁸ Karlsrud J (2017), 'Towards UN counter-terrorism operations?', *Third World Quarterly* 38 (6), January, pp 1215–1231.

As these battlegrounds have become more and more dangerous, the space for peace options such as dialogue, addressing root causes and building trust with communities has often become inoperable. Proscription regimes are further stymieing mediation or peacebuilding work with listed groups.¹⁹ The challenges created by intense violence and proscription of a growing number of armed groups pose a big threat to the UN's peacemaking role and its current leadership's aspirations to invest in 'preventive diplomacy'²⁰ and to promote 'the primacy of politics' in UN peace operations.

The utility of framing conflict problems as challenges of 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism' carries significant advantages for many of the actors involved in conflict and relevant conflict management processes. This has led to a tendency towards 'threat inflation' – where incentives are being created for those inside and outside the UN to exaggerate and prioritise terrorism over other important issues.²¹ This same tendency has underpinned the rise of counter-terrorism and C/PVE at the UN.

3. C/PVE has failed to mitigate the shortcomings of counter-terrorism or tackle underlying problems effectively

While the C/PVE agenda promised to compensate for the excesses of militarised counter-terror efforts, its tendency to apportion blame to a limited range of non-state conflict actors and their ideology has resulted in a lopsided agenda – palatable to member states precisely for its propensity to shy away from substantive action to tackle drivers of conflict such as marginalisation and human rights abuse.²² One problem has been that development-based C/PVE efforts do too little to change the abusive military-security responses that make it impossible for more constructive approaches to succeed.

Another challenge has been counter-terror legislation that proscribes armed groups as terrorist organisations, and poorly defined concepts such as 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'.²³ These narrow the potential for entities such as the UN to understand violent groups, take seriously the grievances that typically underpin them, influence them, and facilitate their engagement in conflict resolution or peace processes.²⁴

The kinds of change and reform that can underpin peace are driven by state-society bargaining processes made possible by social empowerment. With their focus on 'capacity building' of often abusive state authorities and co-option of communities and civil society to state-led

¹⁹ Haspelslagh S (forthcoming), 'The Mediation Dilemma of (Not) Talking to Terrorists', *Swiss Political Science Review*.

²⁰ A survey from Conciliation Resources has shown that the general public in the US, UK and Germany support the UN's potential engagement with armed groups – this is at odds with the UN's risk aversion in this area. For more, see: Conciliation Resources (2017), 'Public support for peacebuilding', September (<https://resources-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Public%20Support%20for%20Peacebuilding.pdf>)

²¹ Tricot O'Farrell K, Street J (2019), 'A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan', Saferworld, March (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/a-threat-inflated-the-countering-and-preventing-violent-extremism-agenda-in-kyrgyzstan>); Street J, Altiok A (2020), 'A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism', Saferworld, June (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>)

²² Ni Aoláin F (2020), 'Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights challenge of states of emergency in the context of countering terrorism, A/HRC/43/46', 21 February (<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/46>)

²³ Neumann P (2013), 'The trouble with radicalization', *International Affairs*, 89 (4), pp 873–893 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049>); Knefel J (2013), 'Everything You've Been Told About Radicalization is Wrong', *Rolling Stone*, 6 May (https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/everything-youve-been-told-about-radicalization-is-wrong-80445/?stop_mobi=yes); Horgan J (2009), *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge).

²⁴ Haspelslagh S (2013), "'Listing terrorists": the impact of proscription on third-party efforts to engage armed groups in peace processes – a practitioner's perspective', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 6 (1), pp 189–208 ([10.1080/17539153.2013.765706](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2013.765706))

agendas, C/PVE strategies and programmes are proving to be a costly failure because they tend to ignore how change and reform processes actually work.²⁵ The result has been poor strategies and ineffective programmes that have contributed little to the cause of just and lasting peace and which have alienated many long-suffering communities in the process; while some counter-terror action may have prevented imminent attacks, and some C/PVE programming has been able to demobilise individuals from armed groups,²⁶ on the whole the report card is not favourable.²⁷

At the UN, this is already leading to a ‘PVE-isation’ of peace, human rights, development and humanitarianism – through the infusion of questionable C/PVE methods and approaches into many traditional areas of UN activity.²⁸ This is deflecting the attention of the UN system away from supporting peace, rights and development work, and towards securitised state-centric agendas.

4. The role of toxic partnerships in reinforcing rather than tackling abuse, corruption and exclusion that drive conflict

A narrow focus on protecting and building the institutional and security capacities of host states for counter-terror and stabilisation purposes has repeatedly failed to result in reduced violence, improved governance or sustained peace.²⁹ Instead, such support has tended to reinforce state capture by abusive, corrupt and exclusive elites whose excesses effectively guarantee the perpetuation or recurrence of conflict, protracted crisis and development stagnation for future generations.

Approaches that involve the UN in either militarily underpinning the authority of such governments or training, equipping and supporting national and regional security forces to do counter-terrorism and stabilisation carry many of the same risks. UN buy-in to a counter-terrorism agenda championed by a catalogue of the world’s most repressive states risks ‘blue-washing’ abusive approaches – allowing the UN ‘brand’ to be used to legitimise abusive, corrupt, exclusionary or discriminatory security policies labelled as ‘counter-terrorism’ to avoid scrutiny.³⁰ The principle of impartiality that is supposed to be a defining feature of UN peace operations is an important safeguard which should be used to distance the UN from a role in reinforcing poor governance by abusive elites and lessening elites’ incentives to bargain with communities and civil society. UN support to the expansion of state authority in counter-terrorism and stabilisation missions also carries huge risks of aggravating public grievances, undermining public trust in the UN for generations to come and exposing blue helmets and other

²⁵ Attree L (2017), ‘Shouldn’t YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?’, Saferworld, March (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/shouldnt-you-be-countering-violent-extremism>)

²⁶ Khalil J, Brown R, Chant C, Olowo P, Wood N (2019), ‘Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab’, RUSI, April (https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190104_whr_4-18_deradicalisation_and_disengagement_in_somalia_web.pdf)

²⁷ Ni Aoláin F (2020), ‘Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights challenge of states of emergency in the context of countering terrorism, A/HRC/43/46’, 21 February (<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/46>)

²⁸ Street J, Altiock A (2020), ‘A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism’, Saferworld, June (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>)

²⁹ Attree L (2016), ‘Blown back: lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Yemen’, Saferworld, February (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1033-blown-back>)

³⁰ Street J, Altiock A (2020), ‘A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism’, Saferworld, June (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>)

UN staff to violent backlashes (which could potentially be avoided if the UN asserts impartiality more assiduously).³¹

Where governments are viewed as illegitimate by sections of their populations in the wake of historic marginalisation, indiscriminate violence and other abuses, even UN backing for C/PVE efforts could be interpreted as complicity with problematic security approaches – weakening trust and limiting scope for the UN to engage in crucial peacemaking roles such as facilitating dialogue, mediation and reconciliation, or in supporting and delivering relief and development.

5. Strangling civil society rather than embracing its contribution to peaceful change

The nexus between counter-terrorism, authoritarianism,³² the most egregious violations of human rights and violent conflict is becoming increasingly disturbing. Counter-terrorism has provided a hugely powerful discourse that drives and legitimises militarised responses to conflict systems by states, coalitions and multilateral bodies. As our research has illustrated – from Egypt³³ to Kyrgyzstan³⁴ and from Syria³⁵ to Tunisia³⁶ – counter-terrorism has been a hugely significant vector for securitisation and autocratisation, with catastrophic implications for civic space. According to the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism: ‘It is no coincidence that the proliferation of security measures to counter terrorism and to prevent and counter violent extremism, on the one hand, and the adoption of measures that restrict civic space, on the other, are happening simultaneously.’³⁷

Valuable work by women’s rights organisations, youth peacebuilders and those working on conflict transformation has been subsumed and at times instrumentalised by counter-terrorism programmes and objectives. Research has shown that C/PVE approaches also too often co-opt civil society into top-down security agendas.³⁸ In particular, the instrumentalisation of women’s rights groups and youth peacebuilders into counter-terrorism strategies has deeply compromised the role of these groups in many contexts.³⁹ It is increasingly hard to justify the UN being so closely aligned with a counter-terror agenda that has done so much damage to peace, human rights and civic space all over the world.

³¹ Attree L, Street J, Venchiarutti L (2018), ‘United Nations peace operations in complex environments: charting the right course’, Saferworld, September (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1183-united-nations-peace-operations-in-complex-environments-charting-the-right-course>)

³² In 2020, for the first time since 2001, autocracies are in the majority, with nationalist-populist orders dominating several of the countries wielding the greatest military, economic and political influence. Lüthmann A, Maerz SF, Grahn S, Alizada N, Gastaldi L, Hellmeier S, Hindle G, Lindberg SI (2020), ‘Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020,’ Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), March (https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/f0/5d/f05d46d8-626f-4b20-8e4e-53d4b134bfcf/democracy_report_2020_low.pdf)

³³ Saferworld (2017), ‘We need to talk about Egypt: how brutal “counter-terrorism” is failing Egypt and its allies’, October (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/we-need-to-talk-about-egypt/>)

³⁴ Tricot O’Farrell K, Street J (2019), ‘A threat inflated? The countering and preventing violent extremism agenda in Kyrgyzstan’, Saferworld, March (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/a-threat-inflated-the-countering-and-preventing-violent-extremism-agenda-in-kyrgyzstan/>);

³⁵ Keen D (2017), ‘Syria: Playing into their hands’, Saferworld, October (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1141-syria-playing-into-their-hands>)

³⁶ Aliaga L, Tricot O’Farrell K (2017), ‘Counter-terror in Tunisia: a road paved with good intentions?’, Saferworld (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/counter-terror-in-tunisia-a-road-paved-with-good-intentions>)

³⁷ Ni Aoláin F (2019), ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism closing civic space and violating the rights of civil society actors and human rights defenders, A/HRC/40/52’, 18 February (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/A_HRC_40_52_EN.pdf)

³⁸ Ni Aoláin F (2019), ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism closing civic space and violating the rights of civil society actors and human rights defenders, A/HRC/40/52’, 18 February (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/A_HRC_40_52_EN.pdf)

³⁹ Vasuki N (2015), ‘Chapter 9: Countering violent extremism while respecting the rights and autonomy of women and their communities’, in R Coomaraswamy (ed.), *A Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UN Women)* (<https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/CH09.pdf>), who describes how ‘Research has revealed that “counterterrorism measures limit the ability of organisations to implement programmes according to needs alone”, while, “the concept of preventing and countering violent extremism potentially impacts independence, where it could be used to support a negative political narrative about certain groups”.

Towards UN regime protection operations?

A failure to heed these lessons could result in counter-terror and militarised stabilisation seeping further into the bloodstream of UN peace operations, with stark consequences.

As the world evolves towards the ‘sea of volatility’ that current trends point to, an increasingly divided UNSC – whose members include a growing number of assertive authoritarian regimes – likely lead to more mandates that side with the sovereign authority of host governments, regardless of their role in the conflict and its causes. This will make it hard for the UN to maintain impartiality of peace operations in line with the Capstone doctrine and to ‘consistently authorise, finance and staff its peace operations’,⁴⁰ even where there is an urgent need to protect civilians.

Depending on who sits in the White House from 2021–2024, there could be added pressure from the biggest financial contributor to the UN system to embroil blue helmets in the quicksand of unwinnable wars on terror – adding to previous pressures from France for the UN to take on a more assertive role in contexts like the Sahel,⁴¹ and the momentum generated by the growth of UN counter-terrorism funding and entities driven by wealthy authoritarian states attempting to remake multilateralism in support of their interests.

It is also likely that many would-be defenders of multilateralism will continue to make the argument that embracing counter-terrorism, C/PVE and stabilisation roles is a way of facilitating multilateral action by divided powers – ‘protecting’ the UN by ensuring it has money and mandates to be a player in the most contested contexts.

These pressures will likely push the UN – albeit with other governments, coalitions or organisations in the lead – into a range of new counter-terrorism/stabilisation operations focused on containing and suppressing violent rebel movements and regime protection.⁴² By 2030, the UN’s aspirations in conflict zones could thus shift considerably from the promotion of peace and human security to an agenda that facilitates the management of violence in support of the national security of embattled member states.

Although it appears bleak, it could be extremely difficult to avoid this outcome. To do so, there are a number of dilemmas to be navigated and steps that can be taken to protect and improve the contribution of UN peace operations.

Navigating tricky waters

The case for UN peace operations becoming more involved in counter-terrorism and stabilisation has been made by a number of internal and external parties, and it typically relies on five arguments:

⁴⁰ Williams P (2020), ‘The Future of Peace Operations: A Scenario Analysis, 2020-2030’, July (unpublished – authors retain copy on file)

⁴¹ In response to pressure from France, in 2016 the UN Security Council authorised MINUSMA to adopt a “more proactive and robust posture” to “anticipate, deter and counter threats”. France has pushed to extend MINUSMA’s mandate further still. In September 2017, during the opening of the UN General Assembly’s 72nd session, French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian remarked that “if granting MINUSMA a counter-terrorism mandate is not the solution, we must come up with something else.” For more, see: United Nations Security Council (2017), ‘United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Reform of United Nations Peacekeeping, implementation and follow-up S/PV.8051’, 20 September.

⁴² Williams P (2020), ‘The Future of Peace Operations: A Scenario Analysis, 2020-2030’, July (unpublished – authors retain copy on file)

- 1) If this is what states want, this is what the UN must do.
- 2) The UN will lose relevance if it is not involved.
- 3) Pressure on budgets requires UN peace operations to embrace new roles.
- 4) The fragility of multilateralism requires the UN to be proactive on issues that states can agree on.
- 5) If the UN washes its hands, other actors will have free rein to make the situation worse.

To avoid the slide into UN regime protection operations, it will be important to highlight relevant counter-arguments and identify viable alternatives. For example:

- 1) **If this is what states want, this is what the UN must do.** In 1961, the then UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld told an audience at Oxford University: “It is my firm conviction that any result bought at the price of a compromise with the principles and ideals of the Organization, either by yielding to force, by disregard of justice, by neglect of common interests or by contempt for human rights, is bought at too high a price. That is so because a compromise with its principles and purposes weakens the Organization in a way representing a definite loss for the future that cannot be balanced by any immediate advantage achieved.”⁴³ It is the duty of leadership to resist pressure from states that move the UN into territory that risks undermining the institution. This will remain as true in 2030 as it was in 1961.
- 2) **The UN will lose relevance if it is not involved.** It is in the interest of people all around the world, especially those who are disenfranchised, marginalised and excluded, for the UN to remain relevant, given its powerful norm-setting role and vital humanitarian, peace and development work. But this hypothetical is a false dichotomy. Engaging in counter-terrorism and regime protection operations will undermine the UN’s relationships with the very people that most need the UN, and negate its critical role in addressing the challenges of the future in line with people’s interests. Clarity on the pitfalls of past counter-terrorism and militarised stabilisation efforts should equip the UN to advocate the difficult path of just, sustainable and comprehensive peacebuilding approaches. However long it takes, such approaches will ultimately be embraced in most conflict contexts, because member states ultimately pay a heavy price for intractable conflict and there are few viable alternatives to peacemaking and peacebuilding. By advocating such approaches in all phases of conflict, the UN makes the strongest possible case for its relevance and added value as the indispensable custodian and broker of international peace and security.
- 3) **Pressure on budgets requires UN peace operations to embrace new roles.** Funding for multilateral institutions and peace, rights and development work ebbs and flows. There are some worrying indications from traditional donors, and the oncoming recession will likely lead to some fissures. But the recession of 2007 did not lead to a reduction in the budget for UN peace operations and trends show that in the years to come there will be peace to build, make and keep. The UN’s best strategy, if it wants to protect and build its budget, is to do the work that it is good at. UN peace operations have many areas for improvement but their positive contribution in many contexts has been well documented. The same can be said of the UN’s human rights monitoring, development and humanitarian efforts. It does not need

⁴³ Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (2019), ‘The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact: Lecture delivered by Dag Hammarskjöld, Oxford, 30 May 1961’, October (https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ics_100_no_4_oxfordspeech.pdf)

to chase missions and mandates where it is ill-equipped, inexperienced and has good reason to foresee grave risks of doing harm. To do so could well result in long-term reputational damage and budgetary reductions.

- 4) **The fragility of multilateralism requires the UN to be proactive on issues that states can agree on.** It is true to say multilateralism is at risk – the rise of nativist, insular and autocratic governments is a severe threat to the multilateral systems of today. But embracing heavily securitised, high-risk agendas does little to protect the function of multilateralism, which is to save the world’s people from the scourge of war and facilitate effective collaborative responses to shared challenges. Collaboration on a counter-terrorism agenda driven by national security interests and tainted by its destabilising, rights-eroding impacts will not be the saving grace of multilateralism. There are no easy fixes to declining multilateralism, and states and UN leadership should not fall into traps that will further unravel it.

- 5) **If the UN washes its hands, other actors will have free rein to make the situation worse.** There is a real risk that other actors engaging in counter-terrorism will have lower standards than the UN – two decades of war on terror attest to this. Yet this does not require the UN to follow suit. The UN has the greatest potential to influence for peace, rights and development if it remains a principled champion of these priorities in all contexts and assiduously avoids complicity in approaches that undermine both them and the unique role it has been entrusted under its Charter. As the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) advises, there are times when the UN must withdraw support or its presence – because the risks are too high.⁴⁴ This is a fine line to walk, but the UN should never engage solely for the reason that if others engage, they will do more harm. Allying the UN with high-risk approaches to addressing security threats is no clear strategy for improving them. A much better path to influence is focusing peace operations assiduously on impartial engagement, political solutions, human rights monitoring, protection of civilians, relief and development efforts, and working with communities to address the drivers of conflicts. Demonstrating what can succeed, and remaining the consistent voice of reason as more militarised approaches reveal their flaws, is the path to positioning the UN as the most influential and successful peacemaking institution in the world of 2030.

While these responses are founded on a set of assumptions outlined earlier in this piece, they do not require the UN to sit on its hands. That would not be consistent with the UN’s commitment to maintaining international peace and security, to upholding human rights, or to providing life-saving humanitarian and development support. There is a role for the UN in complex conflict environments, but its ambition should be to support peaceful conflict resolution and transformation rather than containment and regime protection. To realise this, a new doctrine – capable of navigating UN peace operations through tomorrow’s volatile seas – might well be needed.

⁴⁴ United Nations (2015), ‘Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on United Nations Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces: Guidance Note’, October (<https://unsdg.un.org/resources/guidance-note-human-rights-due-diligence-policy-un-support-non-united-nations-security>)

Protecting people, peace and the UN: The Guterres peace operations doctrine?

As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet recently told the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Committee: ‘it is crucial that we make every effort to promote a more principled – and more effective – policy framework that can address core issues and avoid violence and conflict’ – because if we don’t, the UN will find it hard to keep, build and make peace, and people all over the world will be worse off because of it.⁴⁵ So what can be done? We see three areas where UN leadership should invest time, energy and resources, in order to counteract potential slides towards a worst-case scenario. These areas could be core elements within a new peace operations doctrine:

1. Reaffirm clearer boundaries under a new peace doctrine

The Action for Peacekeeping initiative has made important progress in recent years, but has not yet been able to provide a solution to the emergence of complex conflict environments and the repercussions for UN peace operations. For this to occur, a new doctrine must begin with a process that builds upon the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report and rebuilds a conceptual framework that will provide direction for how UN peace operations should and should not engage.

Within this process, the UN should recommit to achieving impartiality in practice by seeking to separate all operational UN entities from specific states’ war aims and hard security strategies. Equally important will be re-grounding with a framework that incentivises respect for human rights and maintains clear boundaries on what support the UN system is prepared to provide to governments that fail to curb abuse, corruption and exclusion – withdrawing support from state institutions and redefining its mandate where necessary.

2. Create clearer, uncompromising operational guidelines

After conceptualising a framework of what is appropriate and what is not, the doctrine will need to develop clear, forward-looking guidelines, to delineate the contours of UN engagement. Within this process, the UN should address how peace operations should engage with all conflict parties and how they should be referred to through clear terminology guidance – explicitly addressing the problematic implications of terminologies such as ‘terrorism’, ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalisation’. Building upon the HRDDP, the doctrine should commit to strengthening integrated human rights components to ensure that all peace operations monitor and report on human rights abuses by all sides.

3. Develop and deploy new capabilities

⁴⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (2020), ‘Strengthening the protection and promotion of human rights and the rule of law at the heart of the Counter-Terrorism Compact: Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’, September (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26195&LangID=E>)

Once guidelines are in place, the UN will need to begin to invest in new capabilities, to ensure it is able to perform newly defined tasks and operations. This is dependent on the new guidelines, but will most likely include developing greater civilian capacity to work on addressing conflict drivers (regardless of whether conflict parties are labelled ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’), increasing the gender-specific work of UN peace operations to focus on the different experiences of women and men in conflict and the gendered drivers of conflict, and a re-commitment to community security interventions as a significant component of the overall strategy for improving security.

There are many other pieces to the puzzle, but the elements mentioned above will provide UN leadership and the DPO with an opportunity to clearly define a role for the UN that is transparent about boundaries but which carves a needed role as a peacebuilder, maker and keeper, does not threaten the Charter, and enables the institution to stay relevant and committed to working for people all around the world.