



Future of UN Peace Operations: UN Support Offices to Regional Counterterrorism Operations?

July 7, 2021 • by John Karlsrud

United Nations peace operations and the prevention of violent extremism and counterterrorism agendas (PVE/CT) have been on converging paths since the launch of the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2014. During this time, the UN Security Council has discussed various ways to strengthen operational assistance (which currently includes fuel, rations, medical evacuation, and engineering support) to the Group of Five Sahel Force (G5S Force), a cooperative counterterrorism operation between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. These discussions continued last month during the renewal mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

Some allies of the G5S Force believe the best way to strengthen assistance is to establish a separate UN support office to the G5S Force, and during the renewal of the MINUSMA mandate at the end of June 2021, France and its African allies in the Security Council once again tried to convince the Council to do this, when France and the “A3 plus one” (Kenya, Niger, Tunisia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) indicated that they would consider a resolution to establish the office. The secretary-general has also repeatedly advocated for a separate support office. However, the United States (US) and the United Kingdom are unwilling to use assessed contributions on non-UN missions, as that would threaten to convert the one existing exception (UNSOs) to a rule.

However, while the establishment of a separate support office was blocked, the Council agreed that the secretary-general should provide a report by September 30, 2021, on both bilateral and multilateral options for support to the G5S Force. A separate support office is thus likely to stay on

the agenda for some time, and might eventually be approved. This development reflects larger shifts in how states are organizing efforts to tackle instability and conflict around the world.

While global counterterrorism efforts in the 2000s were marked by large-scale military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies, there was a notable shift in strategy in the 2010s. Large-scale stabilization and statebuilding interventions were replaced with more targeted counterterrorism operations. Western states shifted their engagement in counterterrorism operations to include more of the Middle East and Africa. Concurrently, there has been pressure at the UN to cut costs. These converging trends create a need for counterterrorism engagement that could potentially be seen by member states as nimble and cost-effective. UN peace operations thus crystallize as a possible tool to manage low-intensity conflicts with these criteria.

In 2013, MINUSMA was deployed in the context of an ongoing conflict in the country. MINUSMA is the first UN peacekeeping operation that was deployed alongside an ongoing counterterrorism operation—the French “Serval” operation that later transitioned into “Barkhane.” Mali and the subregion have since seen a flurry of CT and PVE initiatives and can be a space to examine the evolving relationship between UN peace operations and counterterrorism.

Although much has been learned from the initiatives in Mali, they have so far been unsuccessful in terms of improving the security situation on the ground. Instead, jihadist groups have multiplied and expanded their reach, as they have often been able to provide a modicum of protection, security, justice, and basic welfare that national and local authorities have repeatedly failed to offer. While the initial conflict started in the north of Mali, armed attacks and intercommunal conflict has in recent years moved to the center and western regions. Northern Burkina Faso and western Niger have also seen a dramatic deterioration of security, and vulnerable populations at risk in the subregion are at record levels. Ostensibly trying to fight groups designated as terrorists such as Ansarul Islam and others affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the national armed forces and allied militias of all the three countries have perpetrated repeated grave human rights violations, killing more civilians and suspected criminals than the jihadist groups they are supposed to protect civilians from.

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't

Experience from MINUSMA has shown that UN peace operations and counterterrorism are an uneasy match. While the details of a support office remain to be seen, it is clear that they would include the tasks already given to MINUSMA. A proposed office would be separate from MINUSMA and provide logistical support, fuel and maintenance support, and capacity building and training to the G5S Force. It would be the first of its kind to cover five countries, with a headquarters most likely in Mali or in Chad. The funding for the office would also be premised on continued support from the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights to develop and implement a compliance framework “to prevent, mitigate and address international human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations that could be committed by security forces.”

In a previous post on the Global Observatory, I and Cedric de Coning looked at the pros and cons of establishing a separate office, concluding that it would be the best solution, all things considered. Other commentators came to the opposite conclusion, arguing that it would “set a bad precedent... undermine UN claims to impartiality, and further blur the line between peace operations and domestic counterterrorism activities.” However, these arguments could also apply to the current state of affairs, which is MINUSMA being mandated to undertake those same tasks, possibly setting an even worse precedent of using UN peace operations to support ad-hoc counterterrorism coalitions. So there is merit in trying to further unpack what the consequences of a separate support office would be.

While a separate office would ease MINUSMA's logistical burden, the repercussions for the UN's ability to be an impartial actor would linger on. It is unlikely that local populations would differentiate between MINUSMA and the support office, reinforcing the perception that the UN is part of the conflict in Mali and in the neighboring countries where the G5 Sahel operates. This would continue to have a very negative impact on the mediation and humanitarian work that various parts of the UN, including MINUSMA, are doing in Mali and the subregion, making the UN a continued target of terrorist attacks.

For a support office to the G5S Force to be effective, its approach would need rethinking. Fortunately, reform of peacekeeping has been a constant since its inception. UN peace operations have over time shown themselves to be adaptive and flexible, from the early engagements in the Middle East, to robust use of force in the Republic of the Congo in the 1960s, to multidimensional missions with a core mandate to protect civilians, developing since the deployment of the UN Mission to Sierra Leone in 1999.

The creation of the UN Support Office for the African Union Mission in Somalia (UNSOA) is another testimony to this. It was established to support the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), funded by assessed contributions. In 2015 it was replaced by the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS). UNSOA/UNSOS has been controversial, as it was mandated to support an African Union (AU) warfighting mission, and also moved the UN closer to funding AU operations from the UN assessed contributions budget. Williams has argued that "AMISOM's specific configuration of forces and mechanisms is unlikely to be repeated," with particular reference to the "AMISOM model" of "partnership peacekeeping."

If reinvented in Mali, a new category of UN peace operations may be solidifying in shape and form: UN support offices to regional counterterrorism operations. Such a development would enable the organization to be nimble and responsive to member states' needs, but would betray the ideals that the organization rests on. Developed to support large multidimensional peace operations in vastly different theaters around the world, the UN has developed a niche capacity to provide logistical and bureaucratic support to complex operations. The UN can also confer much-needed legitimacy on counterterrorism operations conducted by fledgling governments. A future scenario may then be UN support missions operating in support of and alongside regional counterterrorism operations, drawing upon the logistical and bureaucratic support system of the UN, but without the need to adhere to UN peacekeeping principles of impartiality, consent, and non-use of force.

Such operations would likely continue to be conducted by the UN Department of Operational Support, which is currently backstopping UNSOS in Somalia. This would require a new set of rules, regulations, and organizational culture to enable the UN to provide the support that counterterrorism operations need. As Paul Williams noted, "UNSOA was rooted in an organization that was prepared to do no more than robust forms of peacekeeping but had to support an AU mission that was fighting a war." However, even if member states agree to develop these rules and regulations, they will not be able to shield the rest of the UN from the negative impact that such operations will have on the ability to carry out mediation and humanitarian tasks with a high level of legitimacy.

Ongoing shifts in global politics are impacting UN peace operations, resulting in a "strong downward pressure on peacekeeping," increased support to ad-hoc coalitions such as the G5S Force, and increasing pressure on the UN to support such coalitions. While the US is deeply skeptical of providing support to counterterrorism operations through UN assessed contributions, the bureaucratic expertise and physical infrastructure of the UN system for providing support to complex operations in difficult places is unmatched. UN support missions could be established to support ad-hoc coalitions in situations where there is a low appetite in the Council to give the UN a

mandate for more intrusive liberal tasks, but where there is a strong need for international support. However, from a liberal internationalism point of view, the dangers are clear—liberal internationalism in the form of human rights and democratization is slowly being dispelled in the quest for a more stable, but perhaps not peaceful, world.

This article is part of a [series](#) on the role of the UN system in preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism (PVE/CT), done in collaboration with the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace Operations.

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