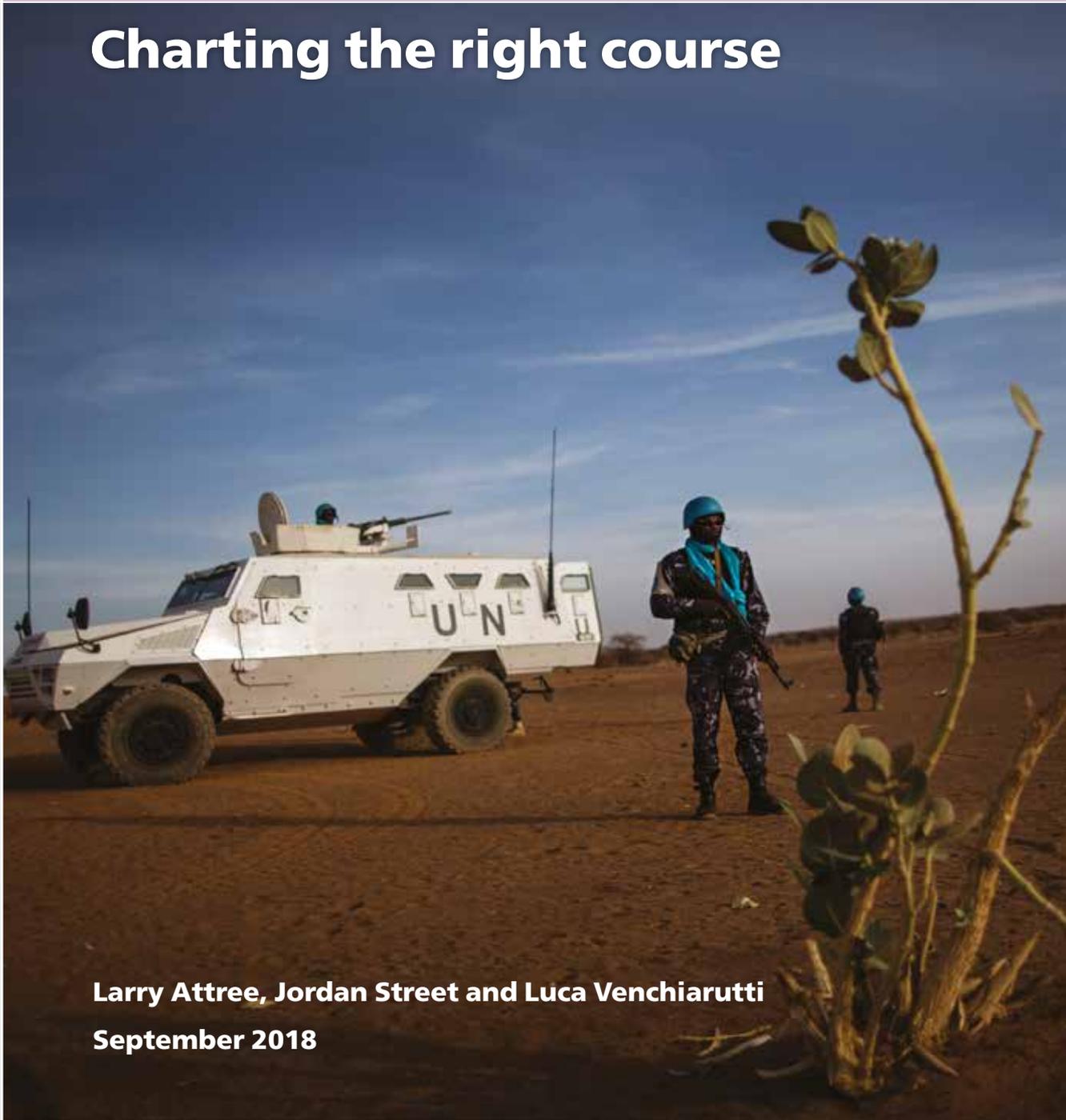


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PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

United Nations peace operations in complex environments

Charting the right course



Larry Attree, Jordan Street and Luca Venchiarutti
September 2018

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This paper is part of a strand of work to promote long-term peace through research and analysis, and by setting up policy dialogue with governments, international organisations and civil society on peace, terrorism, stability and responses to forced displacement.

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Abbreviations

AAS	Ansar al Sharia
ALP	Afghan Local Police
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
C/PVE	Countering/preventing violent extremism
CAR	Central African Republic
COIN	Counter-insurgency
CSO	Civil society organisation
CT	Counter-terrorism
CVE	Countering violent extremism
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DPKO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EU	European Union
FC-G5S	Force Conjointe du G5S – G5S Joint Force
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
G5S	Group of Five Sahel
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
HIPPO	High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PKO	Peacekeeping operations
PVE	Preventing violent extremism
SEMG	Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group
TCC	Troop contributing countries
TFG	Transitional Federal Government (Somalia)
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNSMIL	United Nations Support Mission in Libya
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
US	United States of America

Summary

THIS PAPER shows how lessons from international engagement in complex conflict environments can inform the growing number of United Nations (UN) peace operations in these contexts. Drawing on Saferworld's research from Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, it describes **five shortcomings of counter-terrorism (CT) and militarised stabilisation**. These include:

1. The over-reliance on military methods without a wider peace strategy.
2. The use of military force – and support for it – which exacerbates violence and grievances while reducing scope for dialogue.
3. Support for abusive, corrupt and exclusive 'partners', which prolongs and worsens conflict.
4. The perverse effects of efforts to build the security capacities of host states for CT and stabilisation.
5. The neglect of long-term, inclusive political dialogue and conflict transformation efforts.

Recent years have seen the emergence of 'countering/preventing violent extremism' (C/PVE) approaches. Presented as a more constructive and human rights-based alternative to CT, **C/PVE has several significant flaws**. These include:

- Oversimplifying conflicts and creating gaps in response strategies.
- Imposing external security agendas on local realities.
- Acquiescing in governments' agendas despite their roles in fuelling conflict – and undermining transformative change.
- Ignoring what we know about how change and reform processes work.
- Co-opting civil society into top-down agendas driven by elites.
- Failing to challenge crackdowns on dissent.
- Focusing on ideology and counter-messaging over addressing grievances.

UN policy guidelines on peace operations, CT and C/PVE to some extent discourage the UN from adopting similarly flawed approaches. The High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report warned against direct military CT by UN peace operations; a number of UN policies also focus on political resolution of conflict, civil society empowerment and human rights-based approaches that avoid offering assistance to abusive security forces. Yet **UN policy has three weak spots**:

- The recommendation against the UN playing a direct military CT role is based on the recognition that peace operations are neither designed nor equipped to do so effectively, rather than a principled commitment to impartiality or out of a concern for peace and conflict dynamics.
- Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism set out the UN's intention to "integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities of UN peace operations and special political missions", despite limited assessments of what effects this might have.
- The principle of 'national ownership' of UN-backed peacebuilding efforts, and the politics of sovereignty at the UN, can also drag it towards a partial, state-centric approach to peace support.

Member states whose CT efforts have led them into intractable conflicts can have strong motives for encouraging the UN to take over responsibility. While some states have not taken this course, their reasons appear to be more to do with keeping costs down and safeguarding their troops rather than based on concern over the risks to peace and UN impartiality. In some contexts, the **UN is already being required to:**

- proactively combat, deter and protect territory from 'aggressors', 'terrorists' or 'violent extremists'
- offer operational support to other international counter-terror missions
- provide intelligence and 'targeting packs' to military actors
- side with states to protect, reinforce and expand their authority under stabilisation or CT mandates and norms regarding 'national ownership'
- train and equip security forces
- define rebel groups as 'violent extremists' and support or undertake C/PVE initiatives, including narrative campaigns denouncing certain groups; and
- avoid dialogue and mediation efforts with armed groups labelled as 'terrorists' by member states

In light of these trends, the lessons from CT, C/PVE and stabilisation highlight **six areas of risk:**

1. UN support to militarised CT and stabilisation efforts hurts its credibility, impartiality and its ability to build peace, monitor human rights abuses and support development initiatives.
2. Increased and more proactive use of force to combat 'terrorist' groups by the UN could prolong and intensify conflict.
3. Supporting non-UN CT and military missions with logistics and intelligence risks making the UN a conflict party and complicit in fuelling conflict.
4. UN support to the expansion of state authority in CT and stabilisation missions risks reinforcing state abuses, lessening reform incentives and aggravating public grievances.
5. UN involvement in training, equipping and funding national and regional security forces for CT could prove counter-productive.
6. Integrating C/PVE objectives, terminology and programming into peace operations risks compromising their impartiality, alienating communities, disempowering civil society and aggravating conflict.

To navigate these risks, the UN needs clearer norms and boundaries to shape its engagement in complex environments. This paper recommends the following:

1.	The UN should aim to achieve impartiality in practice and seek to separate itself from the military strategies and approaches of all parties to the conflict.
2.	The UN should exercise extreme caution and better assess political and operational risks of providing funds, logistical and operational support and training to other military missions.
3.	Peace operations should develop greater civilian capacity to work on addressing conflict drivers – regardless of whether conflict parties are labelled ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists.’
4.	Member states and senior UN leadership should strongly discourage UN Security Council members from instrumentalising UN peace operations to further their own counter-terror strategic interests to the detriment of peace and human rights.
5.	UN peace operations should invest in new skill sets and more flexible approaches to working with communities to empower them and promote their inclusion in peace processes.
6.	The UN should recognise the conceptual and practical drawbacks of adopting C/PVE approaches and redouble investment in development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance programmes.
7.	Regardless of budget cuts and irrespective of their size and shape, UN peace operations should always have an integrated human rights component mandated to monitor and report on human rights abuses by all sides. The UN must incentivise respect for human rights and maintain clear boundaries on what support it is prepared to provide to governments who fail to curb abuse, corruption and exclusion – withdrawing support from state institutions and redefining its mandate where necessary.
8.	Peace operations should include community security as a significant component of the overall strategy for improving security.
9.	Member states should exercise caution before designating conflict parties as ‘aggressors’, ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’ to safeguard UN impartiality and keep a broad range of options on the table. Instead, all parties to an armed conflict should be judged on their adherence to international humanitarian law. UN peace operations should also carefully assess the implications of using such terminology for strategic and operational purposes.

1

Introduction

THIS PAPER analyses lessons from international engagement in complex conflict environments and shows how they can inform the growing number of UN peace operations in such contexts. In particular, it looks at counter-terrorism (CT), countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) and militarised stabilisation approaches and summarises shortcomings in the way these approaches have been conceived and delivered, with evidence from recent experience in Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. It then shows how, in spite of relevant policies and principles that can help the UN navigate the dilemmas and risks it faces, strong political and institutional pressures are drawing the UN into areas where it is not fit for purpose.

Recent UN decisions illustrate some awareness and avoidance of the consequences of CT and stabilisation efforts by member states and coalitions. But in some cases the UN has already begun to adopt risky and counter-productive approaches. This paper highlights the risks of current stabilisation, CT and C/PVE approaches that UN member states and decision makers must consider more carefully. It then concludes by offering recommendations on how such risks can be better managed in order to safeguard and enhance the UN's role in resolving conflict and sustaining peace through its peace operations.

A note on how we use terms in this paper is included in annex A. These definitions explain what we have described as the 'mainstream approach' to CT and stabilisation, acknowledge that not all stabilisation efforts are militarised, and clarify that 'stabilisation' in this paper refers to militarised efforts that resemble the mainstream approach.

2

Lessons from counter-terrorism, C/PVE and stabilisation strategies

UN ENGAGEMENT IN CT, C/PVE AND STABILISATION by member states and coalitions are at best not succeeding – and at worst, they are aggravating the problem.

Global efforts to combat terrorism since 2001 have had huge financial and human costs. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Syria remain unresolved and have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. By the end of financial year 2018, the US alone will have spent approximately \$5.6 trillion combating terrorism since 9/11.¹ Despite this expenditure, global casualties from terror attacks increased seven-fold from 2000 to 2016,² and the ranks of violent Islamist movements are thought to have more than tripled from 2000 to 2013.³

The vast majority of terror attacks are carried out in conflict zones and repressive environments – and this is not a coincidence.⁴ Terror attacks are not a problem that can be viewed in isolation; they are often a tactic in the wider conflict or set of conflicts at play. Moreover, the onset and persistence of these conflicts is closely connected to the human rights abuses, corruption and exclusion that are major drivers of conflict in many ‘war on terror’ battlegrounds.

As Saferworld and many others have documented, in a growing list of countries mainstream approaches to counter-terror and stabilisation routinely fail to resolve conflicts – and often make them harder to resolve. The conviction that such conflicts can only be addressed by defeating the ‘terrorists’ and other ‘spoilers’, and by eliminating ‘extremist’ viewpoints, has ruled out mediation and reconciliation options in many contexts. Instead, military-security approaches have dominated international strategy, despite their poor track record in getting results.⁵ These approaches have fed into long-term patterns of violence and revenge, entrenching grievances while

¹ Crawford N (2017), ‘United States Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2018: A Summary of the \$5.6 Trillion in Costs for the US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Post-9/11 Veterans Care and Homeland Security’, Watson Institute, November.

² Institute of Economics and Peace (2017), ‘Global Terrorism Index: 2017,’ October (<http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf>).

³ Goepner E (2016), ‘Measuring the Effectiveness of America’s War on Terror’, United States Army War College (<http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3323.pdf>).

⁴ Institute of Economics and Peace, op cit.

⁵ Jones S G, Libicki M (2018), ‘How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida. Santa Monica’, RAND Corporation, June (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741-1.html>).

reinforcing poor governance, security force abuses, and the diversion and misuse of security assistance.

The strategic danger of reinforcing such abuses is underlined by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) widely-read 'Journey to extremism' report, which suggests that 'disaffection with government' and incidents such as the killing or arrest of a family member or friend, are important motives for those who join 'violent extremist' groups:

*"Grievances against government and state security actors are particularly pronounced among those most vulnerable to recruitment, who also express deep-seated scepticism about the possibility of positive change."*⁶

It is also problematic that CT and stabilisation efforts have stacked the cards against social empowerment, dialogue and reconciliation, not only by concentrating power in the hands of the wrong individuals and groups, but also by generating intense insecurity that has made bottom-up community engagement and peacebuilding difficult. Social empowerment and long-term support to society – important engines for vital reforms – have been badly neglected.

**Togolese peacekeepers from
the United Nations
Multidimensional
Integrated Stabilization
Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)
stationed in Menaka.**

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⁶ United Nations Development Programme (2017), 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,' 7 September.

3

Examples of CT and stabilisation challenges in specific contexts

THIS SECTION provides examples that illustrate challenges that UN peace operations will need to consider carefully in order to contribute to peace.

3.1 Over-reliance on military methods without a wider peace strategy

Saferworld’s studies of Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen all illustrate the predominance of international military-security strategies in the absence of wider peace strategies. This focus on short-term security gains has created or worsened intractable conflicts, causing mass casualties and human rights abuses, the entrenchment of existing grievances, the growth and spread of violent movements and a reversal of human and institutional development.

In Afghanistan, the narrow security aim of closing down space for international terrorists “had serious negative implications for... long-term peace”, and 17 years after the US-led invasion the Afghan war persists, with the Taliban remaining a potent force.⁷ While an initial campaign to defeat the Taliban was supposed to leave room for longer-term peacebuilding, “the list of targets to kill or arrest kept expanding”, and the dominance of the military in overall US strategy drove decisions that contradicted civilian analysis of conflict issues. Even when civilian efforts grew with the counter-insurgency strategy in 2009, resources were never deployed as planned: “Instead, young and inexperienced soldiers – with short 6- to 12-month contract rotations – led activities on the ground, and senior US army officials were providing civilian leadership mentoring to Afghan officials.”⁸

In Somalia, the one priority agreed on by international actors has been “the job of degrading and defeating al-Shabaab”⁹ This has “locked international actors into a militarised approach to resolving the various drivers of the Somali conflict”, and “prevented the development of a more comprehensive peacebuilding strategy”.¹⁰

⁷ Groenewald H (2016), “Hammering the bread and the nail” – Lessons from counter-terrorism, stabilisation and statebuilding in Afghanistan, Saferworld, February. See also: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2018), ‘Quarterly Report to the United States Congress’, 30 April, p 86 (<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-04-30qr.pdf>).

⁸ Ibid., p 34.

⁹ Suri S (2016), “Barbed wire on our heads” – Lessons from counter-terrorism, stabilisation and statebuilding in Somalia’, Saferworld, February.

¹⁰ Ibid., p 22.

This militarised approach has proven deeply misguided by ignoring the fact that “Al-Shabaab is a symptom rather than a cause of fragility” and has largely failed to promote the actual long-term security needs of the Somali people.¹¹ A military-first approach has meant that other aspects of state-building have been neglected: “There is nothing to fill the void when AMISOM [African Union Mission in Somalia] eventually leaves the so-called newly liberated areas”.¹²

Yemen faces a similar situation. As Project on Middle East Democracy’s Nadwa al-Dawsari observed, “The West focused on Western priorities – short-term aims and short-term stability – without enough thought about the long-term impacts.”¹³ From 2001 until about a decade later, Western countries engaged in counter-terror and stabilisation initiatives, including drone strikes, arms transfers, military and stabilisation assistance, intelligence collaboration, and backing for offensives by the Yemeni government. However, both Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its domestic wing Ansar al Sharia (AAS) and other militant groups still grew in strength. The narrow-minded focus on eliminating these groups blinded international actors to more urgent peacebuilding priorities, leading them to reinforce a predatory government and feed, rather than help avert, the crisis of 2011, the failure of Yemen’s transition and the descent into civil war.

The Saferworld report, ‘Syria: playing into their hands’ by London School of Economics Professor David Keen describes how, in the absence of a more comprehensive strategy for stopping the violence and tackling its drivers, “an increasingly narrow focus on counter-terrorism proved especially counterproductive.”¹⁴ Most significantly, amid the “ruthless hijacking of the ‘war on terror’ by Moscow... Tehran and Damascus”, the military focus on destroying the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Nusra detracted from a coherent focus on tackling the violence and abuse of the Syrian regime and its backers, and in addressing their role in enabling the rise of ISIS. Civilian casualties, destruction and resource scarcity in Syria were all compounded by the focus on CT, which helped generate support for violent jihadist groups.¹⁵ Similarly, war on terror objectives led the US to support the Kurds as the ‘best hope’ against ISIS. The unintended consequence of this was to destabilise the peace process within Turkey and push them closer to Russia, and to encourage multiple Turkish military incursions into Syria.¹⁶

3.2 Use of military force – and support for it – exacerbates violence and grievances while reducing scope for dialogue

The use of force in the name of counter-terrorism has often been found to worsen conflict rather than achieve a military objective such as ‘eliminating rebels’. In Afghanistan,

“... tactics like night raids and home searches, alongside high civilian casualty numbers, caused a lot of resentment among the Afghan population [...] detaining insurgents without trial and allowing torture and extraordinary rendition further undermined the rule of law and delegitimised the interveners.”¹⁷

There were efforts to reduce casualties – making drone use more frequent – but by 2010 in Afghanistan, US Army studies and other research showed that “the majority of the population in combat areas saw the foreign forces as ‘occupiers’”.¹⁸ This was particularly problematic in that “International military engagement fuelled militancy by providing more targets and enabling a recruitment rhetoric around defeating the

¹¹ Ibid., pp 22, 23.

¹² Ibid., p 22–27.

¹³ Saferworld (2016), ‘A new war on terror or a new search for peace – learning the lessons of Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen’, February.

¹⁴ Keen D (2017), Syria: Playing into their hands, Saferworld, October.

¹⁵ Ibid., p 80.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp 80–87.

¹⁷ Groenewald H, op. cit., p 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., p 34.

invading foreigners”.¹⁹ Additionally, “Targeting and killing Taliban leaders made it difficult for those pragmatically interested in talks to reach out”.²⁰

Militarised CT interventions in Somalia have also harmed civilians – fuelling grievances and rebellion while shutting down space for political dialogue. After 9/11, the US collaborated with warlords and the Ethiopian government to kill or capture al-Qaeda members in Somalia, and backed the Ethiopian invasion to oust the Islamic Courts Union on the basis of its al-Qaeda links. However, this strategy ultimately served “the parochial self-interest of Ethiopia and the TFG [Transitional Federal Government]” – eliminating few ‘terrorist’ operatives, while giving birth to a much more potent violent movement (al-Shabaab).²¹

Human rights reports from 2009–2015 consistently illustrate the culpability of AMISOM, regional forces, and their proxies in indiscriminate attacks and abuses against Somali civilians.²² Such abuses have served to reinforce al-Shabaab’s narrative of grievance.²³ Targeted assassinations also hardened al-Shabaab’s resolve. In the course of three attempts to assassinate al-Shabaab leader Aden Hashi Ayro in 2007–2008, over 50 civilians were killed.²⁴ As Alex de Waal has concluded, these killings “didn’t hasten a political resolution to the conflict”.²⁵ He elaborates:

*“After Ayro was killed, Godane affiliated al-Shabaab with al-Qaeda – realising the worst fears of many – and Godane’s successor, Ahmad Omar, has been described as ‘an even more determined extremist.’”*²⁶

The tendency of such strikes to create more ‘terrorists’ than they kill led senior US military leader Lt Gen Michael Flynn to conclude that “as an over-arching strategy, it is a failed strategy”.²⁷

The US programme of targeted killings in Yemen has eliminated some violent individuals. However, it has been criticised for targeting the wrong people through questionable methods, causing dozens – perhaps hundreds – of civilian casualties. Such killings enflamed anti-US sentiment and appear to have contributed to an increase in recruitment by militant groups – as suggested by the estimated tripling in size of AQAP between 2009 and 2013. The secrecy surrounding targeted killings in Yemen has made it harder to address resultant grievances, creating an absence of accountability for civilian deaths and injuries. Widespread use of sexual torture by coalition forces against terror suspects in Yemen, recently exposed by Associated Press journalists, has also been condemned for motivating Yemenis to join AQAP and other militant groups.²⁸

As force was used by the US and other Western powers against ISIS in Syria, it carried the same drawbacks as in other contexts – killing, injuring and displacing large numbers of civilians, deepening the humanitarian crisis, and thus feeding into support for violent fundamentalist groups.²⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., p 41.

²⁰ Ibid., p 46.

²¹ Suri S, op. cit., p 31.

²² Ibid., pp 25–26.

²³ Ibid., p 27.

²⁴ Ibid., p 24.

²⁵ Ibid., p 24.

²⁶ Ibid., p 24.

²⁷ Ibid., p 24.

²⁸ According to a Yemeni commander quoted by AP, “Joining ISIS and al-Qaeda became a way to take revenge for all the sexual abuses and sodomisation. From here, the prisons, they are manufacturing ISIS”. Michael M (2018), ‘Detainees held without charges decry Emiratis’ sexual abuses’, *Associated Press*, 21 June (<https://apnews.com/7994b4508e9c4a5eaf8a1cca9f20322f>).

²⁹ Keen D (2017), *Syria: Playing into their hands*, Saferworld, October.

MINUSMA has faced frequent attacks, showing the risks of engaging in complex environments. This attack in Kidal on 8 June left three peacekeepers dead and eight injured.

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3.3 Supporting abusive, corrupt and exclusive 'partners' prolongs and worsens conflict

To maintain their military CT and stabilisation efforts, international governments and groups have reinforced and emboldened problematic national and regional 'allies'. In the process, they have become complicit in enabling corruption, abuse and exclusion by these regimes in a way that has predictably fuelled instability and rebellion. In this sense, Saferworld evidence echoes the progress study on youth, peace and security commissioned by the UN Secretary-General, which recently noted that:

*"...in countries facing insurgencies led by violent extremist groups, community members have reported feeling more fearful of their governments' violations of human rights and abuse by security forces than of extremist groups."*³⁰

In Afghanistan, supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban meant handing the state over to known warlords, and institutionalising patronage and corruption.³¹ The mass assistance provided was "not perceived to benefit ordinary Afghans, but rather unaccountable elites[...] who forged alliances within ethnic groups, with armed militias or with sections of the police or armed forces, strengthening impunity for corruption and human rights abuses."³² As abusive and unaccountable warlords and militias were supported to reach military aims and provide security for international groups, Afghans came to perceive international interveners as "complicit in abuses and crimes perpetrated by their 'allies'."³³ Corruption and predation were so bad that the public in some areas came to see the Taliban as providing a better alternative.³⁴

Donors engaged in Somalia have long believed they "have to embrace elites for the sake of counter-terror and stabilisation objectives, even though this means sanctioning behaviour that works against peace in Somalia."³⁵ In backing the federal government against al-Shabaab, they "wilfully ignored many of the actual drivers and root causes of the Somali conflict."³⁶ Shocking examples reveal how international assistance fed corruption and the pernicious war economy on a grand scale.³⁷ In 2014, when the

³⁰ United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Identical letters dated 2 March 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, A/72/761-S/2018/86', 2 March.

³¹ Groenewald H, op. cit., p 39.

³² Ibid., p 33.

³³ Ibid., p 33.

³⁴ Ibid., p 41.

³⁵ Suri S, op. cit., p 37.

³⁶ Ibid., p 34.

UN's Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) accused the federal government of diverting funds, it noted patterns of misappropriation “with diversion rates of between 70 and 80 per cent”. Given the failure to address corruption in the context of severe humanitarian crisis, it is unsurprising that “one poll showed that 98 per cent of respondents felt the FGS [Federal Government of Somalia] only protected its own interests”.³⁸ And as international donors provided an estimated \$800,000 a day to AMISOM, regional security personnel were implicated in abuses and corruption that fuelled the conflict – such as Kenya's participation in the illicit but lucrative trade in charcoal, which helped sustain al-Shabaab's income.³⁹

In Yemen, the West helped build institutional capacity, hoping to address the weakness of a fragile but willing state. Again, this approach rested on false assumptions: Yemen's descent into civil war was caused by the country's kleptocratic rulers who controlled and ransacked the country's economy in the decades leading up to the 2011 crisis⁴⁰ and afterwards.⁴¹ In this context, services receded, leaving many parts of the country without electricity, water, gas, healthcare and education.⁴² Having long failed to play a constructive role in addressing the drivers of instability, the state crumbled in the face of multiple armed rebellions.

The West's primary CT ally, Yemen's corrupt and authoritarian ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh, resisted external pressure to reform and cemented international backing by allowing al-Qaeda to regroup from 2006 onwards.⁴³ In response, foreign backers led by the United Kingdom pledged US\$7.8 billion in aid to help fight terror and maintain stability.⁴⁴ The United States alone spent over \$600 million on security assistance to the regime.⁴⁵ Playing host to anti-Western militants had become a lucrative endeavour, and external pressure to reform melted away.⁴⁶ Mounting public grievances then fed into rebellions by Houthis, southern secessionists, tribes, AQAP/AAS and ISIS, and when the crisis of 2011 erupted, Yemen's institutions had decayed to the point where peaceful transition proved impossible.⁴⁷

After 2011, deals made during the post-Saleh transition ultimately entrenched the same kleptocratic elite whose behaviour was driving Yemen into the ground. Saleh was allowed to remain in Yemen with impunity to wreak further havoc.⁴⁸ By providing material support and training to security actors implicated in grand corruption, torture, violence against civilians, and repression of political protests and free speech, the West abandoned its core principles in Yemen.⁴⁹ While foreign governments backed an abusive and unjust regime to combat al-Qaeda, AQAP positioned itself as a “lightning rod for entrenched grievances” by criticising the abusive Yemeni state and its foreign backers, and by providing services to the public in some parts of the country.⁵⁰

In Syria, the Western focus on combating ISIS and al-Nusra in the context of a war on terror provided important cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by

37 For example, defections from the Somali army have been linked to misappropriation of resources and non-payment of salaries; huge volumes of food aid were found to have been diverted by a ‘cartel’ implicated in channeling some of their profits to armed opposition groups; and the World Food Programme was heavily criticised for awarding transportation contracts worth \$200 million to businessmen suspected of having links to al-Shabaab. Suri S, *op. cit.*, p 39.

38 Suri S, *op. cit.*, p 37.

39 *Ibid.*, pp 39–40.

40 For example, Yemen's ten most prominent groups and families are thought to control 80 per cent of its banking, finance, insurance, telecoms, transport, shipping, construction, engineering, manufacturing and import businesses. In 2008, at least 50 per cent of public funds allocated to diesel subsidies (estimated at \$3.5 billion) were thought to have been diverted for private gain.

41 The government's 2014 budget of \$14 billion (triple that of 2004) apparently disappeared into a ‘black hole’, with “practically nothing” being spent on investment and infrastructure. Despite this, “The backers of the transition [...] imposed practically no accountability on the president”.

42 Attree L (2016), ‘Blown Back: lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Yemen’, Saferworld, February.

43 *Ibid.*, pp 37–38.

44 *Ibid.*, p 24.

45 *Ibid.*, pp 16–17.

46 *Ibid.*, pp 32–37.

47 *Ibid.*, pp 32–37, 3–12.

48 *Ibid.*, p 36.

49 *Ibid.*, pp 32–46.

50 *Ibid.*, pp 44–46.

the Assad regime, Russia and Iran.⁵¹ Moreover, it created a strong incentive for the regime to nurture violent jihadist groups – playing on domestic and international fears of who would take over the country if Assad was deposed. This remains a core element of Assad’s strategy for enduring the war.⁵² While claiming to be combating terror, the Syrian regime not only boosted armed rebellion but also nurtured violent fundamentalist elements within the rebellion. It stoked sectarian divisions, released known violent fundamentalists from prison, and seemingly colluded in the staging of terror attacks, as well as cooperated economically and militarily with fundamentalist elements (especially ISIS) while concentrating brutal violence on civilians, non-fundamentalist opposition and governance structures.⁵³

As is the case elsewhere, evidence from Syria shows how manipulation of relief and development assistance by a host government can reinforce conflict. Government efforts to block aid to besieged areas combined with sanctions and concerns about aid being diverted by ‘terrorists.’ The resulting resource shortages did little to dent the relative wealth of ISIS and al-Nusra, but did succeed in driving many moderate but desperate Syrians into its ranks.⁵⁴

Placed alongside other examples of contemporary CT and stabilisation operations, Saferworld’s analysis serves as a stark warning against international resignation to a ‘peace,’ reconstruction and ‘C/PVE’ effort dominated by the Syrian regime and its backers. There is a clear risk in Syria of not only reinforcing conditions that gave rise to violent fundamentalism, but also the regime that orchestrated its rise.

3.4 The perverse effects of efforts to build the security capacities of host states for CT and stabilisation

Saferworld’s research highlights how security assistance – driven by the apparent imperative to ‘give’ partners capacity to eliminate designated terror groups – is consistently proving counter-productive.

One key issue is diversion and misuse of security and other assistance pumped into CT efforts in different contexts. In Somalia, the UN SEMG has criticised the UN and several governments for supplying weapons to Somalia in violation of international rules and therefore feeding “the diversion of government and AMISOM weapons onto arms markets in Somalia”⁵⁵ For decades, attempts to train and equip Somali forces without civilian oversight structures have led to repeated rounds of defections to al-Shabaab, together with huge numbers of weapons, uniforms and vehicles.⁵⁶

In Afghanistan, equipment provided to the police was sold for private gain.⁵⁷ “The Petraeus report of 2011 estimated that about \$360 million of the US’s assistance [...] had ended up in the hands of the Taliban and criminals, or political elites with ties to them.”⁵⁸ Meanwhile, contractors had “paid up to \$5.2 million in protection money to the Taliban.”⁵⁹

Afghanistan also vividly illustrates the profound unsustainability and incoherence of many internationally-backed state-building and security assistance processes: “International assistance at some point accounted for up to 90 per cent of Afghan public expenditures”,⁶⁰ policing assistance was “too small in the early years, and then scaled up too fast and to too great amounts in later years”, resulting in diversion of funds by powerful individuals,⁶¹ and “the establishment and arming of other groups like local militias, the ALP and the arbokai strengthened warlords and undermined

⁵¹ Keen D, op cit., see pp 60–79.

⁵² Ibid., pp 24–51 (on ‘Regime Survival: the war system and its functions for regime actors’).

⁵³ Ibid., pp 24–51.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp 88–110 – see also pp 17–23 on the rise of ISIS and Nusra.

⁵⁵ Suri S, op. cit., p 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp 34–35.

⁵⁷ Groenewald H, op. cit., p 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p 48.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., p 35.

earlier DDR [disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration] efforts and the potential for the Afghan state to establish monopoly over the use of force.”⁶²

Yemen provides another instructive example. As early as 2002, there was advance warning about the high risks of military aid meant for fighting terrorism being misused by the regime. Nonetheless, the US supported Yemen to develop capable and well-trained CT forces, which were not primarily used to tackle terrorism but to protect the capital and the presidential palace. Saleh used CT capabilities to bolster and retain his family’s grip on power during the 2011 uprising, committing serious human rights violations.⁶³ Even during the post-2011 transition, international support to the transition administration – which talked tough on CT – was strong. Yet the climate for justice and civil liberties worsened after the transition began, and the new administration remained at best a dubious CT partner.⁶⁴ Much of the military equipment supplied by the US to Yemen’s forces is ‘unaccounted for’ – while some fell into the hands of the very armed groups it was meant to fight.

Efforts to build up Somali security forces also proved ineffective and dangerous because they were rushed and top-down. The attempt to establish a monopoly on state use of force “without negotiation or consensus” has largely disregarded the concerns of many Somalis, who as Jeremy Brickhill has pointed out, have good reason to be “both sceptical and fearful of the state”.⁶⁵ In this regard, international security assistance programmes have proven unworkable because of their tendency to reinforce failure – by avoiding engagement with the Somali people or neglecting to build bottom-up consensus for addressing conflict.

3.5 Neglect of long-term, inclusive political dialogue and conflict transformation efforts

If international actors have pursued short-term, unrealistic and unsustainable strategies for eliminating terrorism and achieving stability at the expense of human rights, it is in part because of wilful blindness to local political realities and how to influence them to encourage sustainable conflict resolution and transformation. Not only have CT and stabilisation strategies overlooked the lack of political will among ‘partner’ governments to reform and address conflict drivers – they have also lacked the courage and creativity to promote long-term, inclusive transformation.

In Afghanistan, the primary focus on eliminating the Taliban and al-Qaeda meant that “insufficient emphasis was placed on addressing the issues that had fuelled political conflict in the country for decades”.⁶⁶ Building on a weak understanding of the social order, and the extent to which public alienation from the government would undermine this strategy, foreign governments ended up working too closely with warlords and strongmen towards short-term goals. Ultimately, this “undermined the space for a more legitimate and acceptable governance system to come into being”.⁶⁷

Failure to explore options for political resolution of conflict has also been a major problem. In Somalia, as different groups “instrumentalised the counterterrorism agenda” for their own ends, not only did it help the federal government “secure considerable military and security resources” – it also fed marginalisation of groups whose grievances and concerns should have been considered and addressed through dialogue and other efforts.⁶⁸ International actors have too often failed to question processes in which “Somali elites do not want or seek reconciliation”.⁶⁹ As one civil society representative warned: “You are making spoilers, but they are not spoilers.

⁶² Ibid., p 35.

⁶³ Attree L, op. cit., pp 39, 33–41.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch reported that Hadi’s arrival in February 2012 brought “no significant relaxation of state pressure on journalists”; in February 2014, 19 AQAP militants escaped despite warnings from prison officials to Yemeni government officials that a planned AQAP prison break was imminent. See Attree L, op. cit., pp 32–41.

⁶⁵ Suri S, op. cit., p 34.

⁶⁶ Groenewald H, op. cit., p 44.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p 39.

⁶⁸ Suri S, op. cit., p 30.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p 36.

What is the benefit of alienating [these] groups?”⁷⁰ Similarly, at the local level, “The absence of social reconciliation processes has contributed to a lack of trust among Somalis in the nature of the statebuilding project as a whole.”⁷¹

For too long in Yemen, the focus on defeating ‘spoilers’ obscured the need for a broader, longer-term strategy for just and lasting peace. Rather than a strategy to combat ‘terrorists’ and ‘Iran-backed’ rebels, Yemen’s elites, political parties and state structures urgently needed to respond to public anger and reform the state in order to avert disaster. Belligerent approaches left little room for creative experimentation with alternatives that could help end violence. Although there were some efforts to reform governance, these failed to influence those who really wielded political and economic power. They also fell short of supporting and empowering sections of society to press for change. International actors failed to engage with a diverse range of political, religious and tribal groups, civil society, youth and women, and rarely communicated with the population outside Sana’a in rural areas and the south, while military-security assistance to the regime guaranteed that reform efforts would not succeed.

A further problem has been how the ‘terrorism’ label takes options for political resolution of conflict off the table. It is true that prospects for dialogue with the Taliban in Afghanistan were never promising, but political engagement should have been stepped up earlier than it was. As we noted in an earlier report, “The international strategy of dealing with the Taliban has arguably made it more difficult to achieve peace, and increased the risk that negotiations conducted with them now may end up undermining hard-won freedoms and rights.”⁷²

Attempts to depose corrupt state leaders could be destabilising,⁷³ but at the same time efforts to engage with alternative power holders were ad hoc and uneven.⁷⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan’s (UNAMA) support to Afghan civil society networks and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission to develop local roadmaps and a ten-point national agenda for peace was a notable exception, but overall international donors in Afghanistan failed to push effectively for “a process that allow[ed] for more democratic and representative leaders to emerge.”⁷⁵

*“Truly inclusive peace processes need to reach beyond tribal leaders into marginalised constituencies, including women, but also young people, diaspora and religious leaders. Negotiating with and resourcing corrupt elites in effect excludes other social forces from emerging and asserting a voice and vision for the future. Investigating the options for engaging with local shura/jirgas earlier on may have generated quick impacts on local conflict and justice issues and opened up space for conversations about the future.”*⁷⁶

Instead, short-term, top-down approaches undermined much of what international governments and agencies sought to achieve. Similar tendencies are visible in Somalia, where they became guilty of “trying to manage Somalia from outside Somalia” – for example by pushing high-level peace processes, which were focused on a narrow pool of elites, to meet deadlines imposed from outside.⁷⁷ Indeed, “Somalia’s history is littered with failed efforts to impose templates and short-term timeframes for peacebuilding and statebuilding processes”. An approach more likely to be successful could have involved support for inclusive processes through which Somalis would be supported to form their own institutions. Ultimately, donor support for the role of Somali civil society in peacebuilding and statebuilding processes has been lacklustre, and has “done little to reinforce a positive relationship between civil society and the state.”⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Ibid., p 30.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 37.

⁷² Groenewald H, op. cit., p 47.

⁷³ Ibid., p 40.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p 41.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p 44.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p 49.

⁷⁷ Suri S, op. cit., p 37.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p 38.

There are many examples illustrating the challenges highlighted by our studies. Given the contribution these challenges have made to strategic failure, intractable conflicts and the global rise in forced displacement and terror attacks, it is critical that UN decision makers think through how such obstacles apply to the future of UN peace operations.

Senior Afghan police officers meet with the UNAMA Director of Human Rights in Kunar Province, Said Khil.

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4

Challenges with C/PVE approaches

ALTHOUGH THE UN HAS SHOWN caution in getting involved in direct CT, the rise of C/PVE – purported by some to provide a human rights-based and constructive alternative to CT – has largely been embraced by the UN, with limited scrutiny of the risks it may pose. However, as Saferworld’s paper ‘Shouldn’t YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?’ has explained,⁷⁹ C/PVE approaches have a number of important shortcomings that should prompt decision makers and practitioners to rethink their approaches and adopt alternative frameworks and tools for addressing problems. Some of the main challenges are listed below.

4.1 Oversimplifying conflicts and creating gaps in response strategies

C/PVE approaches implicitly blame conflicts on ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’. Given the complexity of contemporary conflicts, this simplification tends to weaken the understanding of those involved. Narrow analysis, focused on why recruitment into violent groups happens, can lead to a failure to understand:

- violent movements: why are people fighting? What grievances should be taken seriously? Could dialogue and negotiation be possible?
- the role of governments and regional actors: who else is responsible for violence, injustice and other conflict drivers? How could strategies help change their behaviour rather than just helping them suppress the ‘extremists’?
- international actors: could a change in their security, economic or diplomatic approaches help solve the problem?

Narrow analytical framing easily leads to weak engagement strategies that neglect important peacebuilding options.

4.2 Imposing external security agendas on local realities

In many contexts C/PVE is a donor priority, which gets further endorsed given the political and financial incentives that host governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities have to play along. For example, in Central Asia, policy panic about foreign fighters has led donors to pump money into C/PVE efforts without carefully assessing the true nature or extent of the problems affecting communities. UN agencies, international NGOs and national civil society organisations have been forced to respond to this new donor environment

⁷⁹ Attree L (2017), ‘Shouldn’t YOU be countering violent extremism?’, Saferworld, March.

to become C/PVE implementers – often at the expense of their work on governance or peacebuilding. Meanwhile Central Asian governments have at times exaggerated these problems to attract greater international support. Yet the issues people see as important for future peace and stability are often very different from the priorities imposed by C/PVE. Our research in Kenya has found that despite the trend to defund human rights and peacebuilding in favour of C/PVE, ‘violent extremism’ is hard to translate into local languages and these efforts often fail to address the priorities communities identify for promoting peace in areas targeted by al-Shabaab.⁸⁰ This is problematic because in Kenya as elsewhere, there is little chance of resolving conflict in the long term without prioritising the issues that people see as important.

4.3 Acquiescing in governments’ agendas despite their roles in fuelling conflict – and undermining transformative change

As we have seen, poor and repressive governance is almost always at the heart of why conflicts and violent movements begin and persist. It is crucial for national governments to change such behaviour and restore trust to solve problems faced by their populations – and in turn for international partners to offer incentives and apply pressure on them to do so. Host government-led C/PVE strategies often fail to emphasise genuine reform, concentrating, for example, on efforts to counter ‘extremist’ narratives.⁸¹ As seen in Somalia, these programmes can actually worsen mistrust between the state and communities.⁸² International support for these approaches can reinforce governments’ problematic perspectives and their roles in perpetuating conflict rather than challenging it. This is often inappropriate given the impartiality required by peace-making efforts.

4.4 Ignoring what we know about how change and reform processes work

While purporting to be new and fresh, C/PVE initiatives tend to repeat the mistakes of past CT, stabilisation and state-building efforts,⁸³ and fail to call strongly enough for an end to the tactics that made these approaches fall short. In many cases, C/PVE programmes support governments to win over communities, regardless of whether the regimes have the political will needed to reform the security forces and become more accountable themselves. In this sense, for Peter Romaniuk, learning from past C/PVE efforts:

“...comprises mostly negative examples regarding the development and implementation of CVE programming[...]. The key lesson is that CVE measures at the community level rise or fall on the basis of the vitality of prevailing state–civil society relationships onto which CVE measures are imposed, especially relations between governments and

⁸⁰ Nyagah T, Mwangi J, Attree L (2017), ‘Inside Kenya’s war on terror: the case of Lamu’, Saferworld, February.

⁸¹ See quote from Romaniuk P (2015), ‘Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism’, Global Center on Cooperative Security, September: “It is striking that different governments, especially among the advanced democracies of Europe, North America, and elsewhere, have arrived at fairly similar approaches to CVE. At the macrolevel (society-wide), many governments engage in CVE communications, i.e., public diplomacy and online interventions, to remove extremist content and counter extremist narratives, especially through social media. At the mesolevel (community), governments have developed a range of outreach and dialogue mechanisms with communities, including grants programs and capacity-building measures toward CVE objectives. Within governments, CVE training is being rolled out to an increasing variety of officials, beginning with law enforcement and extending to social workers, health care professionals, educators, and others. At the microlevel (individual), governments have developed or support a range of intervention programs designed to identify, dissuade, counsel, and mentor individuals at risk of committing to extremist violence.”

⁸² For example, C/PVE programmes focusing on ‘deradicalisation’ in Somali prisons criticised by Human Rights Watch over their treatment of child soldiers associated with al-Shabaab. For more information see Human Rights Watch (2018), “It’s Like We’re Always in a Prison” – Abuses Against Boys Accused of National Security Offenses in Somalia’, February.

⁸³ As noted elsewhere: “A further challenge for those calling for some course correction is the idea that countering violent extremism is a new endeavour. This appears to necessitate the need for fresh learning on what works, and makes it hard for CVE pioneers to absorb highly relevant lessons from political economy analyses of aid, years of learning about what works in peacebuilding, conflict analysis and strategy development techniques, the limits of stabilisation and security assistance, how to approach perplexing capability traps in the governance sphere, ways to support social empowerment, and so on. The purported ‘newness’ of CVE, and the idea that ‘violent extremism’ should be categorised separately from other forms of violence, implicitly marginalises the huge amount we already know about conflict prevention, peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency (COIN), stabilisation, psy-ops (or ‘Hearts and Minds’ strategies). This risks condemning the international community to ‘doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results’. [...] many CVE programmes continue in hopes that security forces will change their behaviour with increased volumes of capacity support and mentoring. More credible strategies to improve the flawed security provision that feeds grievance and rebellion will in fact depend on empowering societies to help transform the behaviour and accountability of security actors – and the power structures that keep them in place. By failing (with some exceptions) to turn these clear lessons into credible strategies, CVE is doing too little to improve military and criminal justice behaviours – and may even be making them worse.” Attree L, ‘Shouldn’t YOU be countering violent extremism?’, (Saferworld, 2017).

minority, most often Muslim, communities. Whether these relationships are good, poor, or barely existent, the evidence suggests that CVE can impede their further development.”⁸⁴

Therefore, C/PVE can marginalise and undermine the urgent need for strategies and programmes focused more directly on peace, human rights and governance while further alienating disaffected populations from international peace efforts. In this sense, C/PVE wastes huge amounts of time and resources to learn lessons that should be obvious from a cursory study of existing evidence.

4.5 Co-opting civil society into top-down agendas driven by elites

Civil society has a vital role in encouraging conflict parties to improve their behaviour and make peace. C/PVE programmes generally fail to recognise that sustainable improvements in government behaviour depend on empowering society to challenge authorities and work for change. C/PVE strategists see ‘whole of society’ efforts as a tool to mobilise civil society organisations, youth and women against ‘violent extremists’. In addition to the trends in Central Asia described above, women’s rights organisations in Libya and Yemen consulted by Saferworld in 2017 shared similar concerns.⁸⁵ They are involved in a lot of frontline relief and community cohesion work, including with armed groups and those who support them. They are political actors working for change and peace. Despite the obvious importance of supporting these types of groups, they only get international support for C/PVE – which puts them at risk and undermines a long-term peace and human rights agenda.⁸⁶ This drive to orient civil society to side with governments and their international partners (often in the context of a wider war effort) is risky, and has the potential to undermine and remove already scarce funding from peace, accountability and reform efforts.

4.6 Failing to challenge crackdowns on dissent

As the UN progress study on youth, peace and security points out, in the many contexts where CT and C/PVE coincide with governments cracking down on opponents, “Identifying ‘extremism’ as the problem only provides more grounds to crush dissent”.⁸⁷ This creates risks of C/PVE working to discourage rebellion while authorities repress political opposition, civil society and civilians – using the ‘extremist’ label as justification. C/PVE discourse can also play into stigmatisation of religious and ethnic minorities who may be associated with violent groups. This risks making marginalisation and discrimination worse, and leading to violence, pogroms or ethnic cleansing.

⁸⁴ Romaniuk P, ‘Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism’, (GCCS, 2015).

⁸⁵ For more in-depth analysis on the risks posed by counter-terrorism and C/PVE policies and programming to women’s rights organisations, see Ní Aoláin F, Huckerby J (2018), ‘Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part I’, Just Security, 1 May (<https://www.justsecurity.org/55522/gendering-counterterrorism-to/>) and see Ní Aoláin F, Huckerby J (2018), ‘Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part II’, Just Security, 3 May (<https://www.justsecurity.org/55670/gendering-counterterrorism-to-part-ii/>).

⁸⁶ For further examples, see Gender Action on Peace & Security (2018), ‘Prioritise Peace: challenging approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism from a Women, Peace and Security perspective’, June (http://gaps-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GAPS-report_Prioritise-Peace-Challenging-Approaches-to-P-CVE-from-a-WPS-perspective.pdf). This paper argues that “Current approaches to P/CVE do not take seriously the protection of women and girls’ rights, and are inconsistent with peacebuilding processes that promote social empowerment and reform to address the root causes of all forms of violent conflict”.

See also Möller-Loswick A (2017), ‘The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support’, Saferworld, April 26 (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/221-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support>).

⁸⁷ United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Security Council (2018), ‘Identical letters dated 2 March 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, A/72/761–S/2018/86 [presenting the progress study on youth and peace and security]’, March 2 A/72/761–S/2018/86 [presenting the progress study on youth and peace and security]’, 2 March.

4.7 Focusing on ideology and counter-messaging over addressing grievances

Finally, C/PVE strategies typically include a strong emphasis on countering ‘extreme’ ideologies, which are seen as drivers of violence. However, there is limited evidence that counter-messaging programmes work. C/PVE propaganda campaigns are too often a costly distraction from efforts to improve people’s lives by addressing the grievances that fuel support for violent movements.

Even its strongest proponents acknowledge that it can be counter-productive. As one of the main architects of CVE, Eric Rosand, admitted:

“... strengthening the relationship between the state and its citizens and building trust between all levels of government and local communities lie at the heart of the P/CVE agenda. [...] Yet, all too often, national governments are reluctant to acknowledge that their behaviour matters when it comes to P/CVE, let alone change it [...]. Perhaps most fundamentally, too many national governments continue to double down on authoritarian policies and practices, often with direct or indirect support from partners in the West[...]. These policies and practices ultimately do more in the long run to create grievances that can spur radicalisation to violence rather than provide security and liberty.”⁸⁸

A wide view of the General Assembly hall as Vladimir Voronkov (on screen), Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, addresses the opening of the High-level Conference on Counter-Terrorism.

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⁸⁸ Rosand E (2016), ‘Communities First: A Blueprint for Organizing and Sustaining a Global Movement Against Violent Extremism’, The Prevention Project, December.

5

Strengths and weaknesses of existing policies shaping UN engagement in complex environments

GIVEN THE MANY CHALLENGES of CT, C/PVE and stabilisation efforts in complex environments, it is vital for the UN to have clear and robust policies and approaches in place at every level to chart the right course in its peace operations. There are already a number of important norms and policy directions outlined in UN policy documents. In 2015, the High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (HIPPO) recommended that UN peace missions should not undertake counter-terrorism and enforcement tasks.⁸⁹ In case of parallel deployment of a non-UN force carrying out military counter-terrorism or other offensive operations, a “clear division of labour” and “a strict adherence to its impartial commitment to the respect for human rights” should guide the UN peace mission.⁹⁰

Several UN documents and statements provide clear warning about counter-productive CT approaches, and underline the vital importance of human rights for solving terror-related problems. Beyond those cited above, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s (2015) Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism observes that ‘security-based counter-terrorism measures’ have not solved the problem, and that human rights abuses by governments for CT purposes risk “generating community support and sympathy for and complicity in the actions of violent extremists”.⁹¹ Ban thus affirmed “the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights” as “the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism”.⁹² Similarly, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated that “Terrorism is fundamentally the denial and destruction of human rights, and the fight against terrorism will never succeed by perpetuating the same denial and destruction”.⁹³

⁸⁹ United Nations (2015), ‘Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, Uniting Our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership and People’, 16 June.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ United Nations General Assembly (2013), ‘Identical letters dated 25 February 2013 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and to the President of the Security Council, A/67/775-S/2013/110’, 5 March.

⁹² Ibid., p 31.

⁹³ Guterres A (2017), ‘Counter-terrorism and human rights: winning the fight while upholding our values’, speech, SOAS, University of London, London, 16 November (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-11-16/secretary-general/s-speech-soas-university-london-“counter-terrorism”>).

Such statements are in line with the long-neglected⁹⁴ fourth pillar of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) on respecting the human rights of all people and enshrining the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.⁹⁵ Moreover, the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, agreed in February 2018 by UN entities, affirms human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for all UN support to member states on C/PVE.

UN documents elaborate on a number of other policy norms which would distinguish UN peace operations from governments' and regional coalitions' CT and stabilisation approaches in important ways.

- The HIPPO report affirms the **primacy of politics**, arguing that “lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions”.⁹⁶ Likewise, UN doctrine stresses achieving “a negotiated political settlement” as the main objective for UN peace operations.⁹⁷
- The Brahimi report describes UN peacekeepers and peacebuilders as ‘inseparable partners’, where “peacekeepers work to maintain a secure local environment while peacebuilders work to make that environment self-sustaining”.⁹⁸ Given how they complement each other, **support for peacebuilding** is crucial to the success of UN peace operations.
- UN doctrine acknowledges the need to go **beyond a narrow focus on conflict management** and bring **conflict prevention** to the fore.⁹⁹ As part of this effort, Sustainable Development Goal 16 – with its focus on tackling key conflict drivers such as injustice, corruption, exclusion and denial of fundamental freedoms – is seen as an “opportunity to strengthen **collaboration between development and peace and security actors**”.¹⁰⁰
- UN doctrine and strategy commit its peace missions to adopting a **human rights-based approach** and the **meaningful involvement of civil society**.¹⁰¹ Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) policy also stresses the **importance of engaging with local communities and civil society** to achieve sustainable peace,¹⁰² while the HIPPO recommends more ‘**field-oriented and people-centred**’ peace operations.¹⁰³
- In addition, the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy compels the UN **not to provide support to non-UN security forces if there is a risk that they are committing grave violations** of international humanitarian, human rights or refugee law.¹⁰⁴
- The UN has also repeatedly affirmed the need for **coherent, flexible peace operations**, with “clear, credible and achievable” mandates, tailored to the context through a comprehensive context analysis.¹⁰⁵

94 The June 2018 resolution reviewing the UN's 2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, “calls upon Member States and the United Nations entities involved in supporting counter-terrorism efforts to continue to facilitate the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as due process and the rule of law, while countering terrorism, and in this regard expresses serious concern at the occurrence of violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as of international refugee and humanitarian law, committed in the context of countering terrorism”. United Nations General Assembly, resolution adopted on 26 June 2018 ‘The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review’, A/RES/72/284, p 16.

95 United Nations General Assembly (2006), ‘UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy’, 8 September.

96 United Nations (2015), op. cit., p 11.

97 United Nations General Assembly (2015), ‘Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674’, 24 December.

98 United Nations General Assembly (2013), ‘Identical letters dated 25 February 2013 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly and to the President of the Security Council, A/67/775-S/2013/110’, 5 March.

99 United Nations (2015), op. cit., p 9.

100 United Nations General Assembly (2015), ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)’, 21 October.

101 United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support (2008), ‘United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Principles and Guidelines’, 18 January.

102 United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Department of Field Support (2016), ‘Understanding and Improving Engagement with Civil Society in UN Peacekeeping: From Policy to Practice’, 1 May.

103 United Nations (2015), op. cit., p 15.

104 United Nations General Assembly (2006), ‘UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy’, 8 September.

105 United Nations, Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, p 12, 47–48; United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, ‘Identical letters dated 21 August 2000 from the Secretary-General to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council’, pp 10–11.

It is important to note three areas of concern. First, although the HIPPO report steers UN peace operations away from a direct military CT role, it does so based on the argument that UN operations are neither designed nor equipped to perform counter-terrorism tasks, rather than a recognition of how these approaches would be counter-productive to peace or the UN's role as peacemaker.

Second, although UN policy discourages UN peace operations from playing a direct military CT role, Secretary-General Ban's Plan of Action on PVE sets out an intention to "integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions in accordance with their mandates".¹⁰⁶ This is affirmed despite little discussion as to "whether, when, where, and how UN peace operations should engage in CT and C/PVE."¹⁰⁷

Third, the importance placed on 'national ownership' of UN-backed peacebuilding efforts – in addition to the politics of sovereignty at the UN and the requirement for host state consent in UN peace operations – means that the UN tends to adopt a partial, unbalanced and state-centric approach to peace support.¹⁰⁸ As the Capstone Doctrine states:

*"[UN] peacekeeping operations are deployed with the consent of the main parties to the conflict. In the absence of such consent, a United Nations peacekeeping operation risks becoming a party to the conflict; and being drawn towards enforcement action, and away from its intrinsic role of keeping the peace [...] The fact that the main parties have given their consent to the deployment of a [UN] peacekeeping operation does not necessarily imply or guarantee that there will also be consent at the local level [...] A mission must be careful to ensure that the rhetoric of national ownership does not replace a real understanding of the aspirations and hope of the population, and the importance of allowing national capacity to re-emerge quickly from conflict to lead critical political and development processes."*¹⁰⁹

Given the problems stemming from state abuse, corruption and exclusion, alignment of UN peace efforts with host and regional government agendas must have limits if the UN is to have a hope of resolving conflict and building peace through a 'human rights-based approach'.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations, General Assembly, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674, 24 December 2015, p 21.

¹⁰⁷ Boutellis A, Fink N (2016), 'Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism', International Peace Institute, October.

¹⁰⁸ As an example, see: United Nations (2013), 'Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning' (2013) describes national ownership as 'an essential condition for the sustainability of peace'.

¹⁰⁹ United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Department of Field Support, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Principles and Guidelines, 2008, p 39.

6

Pressure for UN peace operations to engage more in CT, P/CVE and military stabilisation

6.1 Political environment

GIVEN THE TENDENCY for states to label their opponents as unlawful combatants whose views are too extreme to be considered, it is unsurprising that member states who label their enemies in this way press the UN to do the same.¹¹⁰

A growing number of member states – including most permanent members of the UN Security Council – have bought into this paradigm in certain cases, using the rhetoric and practical pursuit of CT and to some extent C/PVE. UN member states whose counter-terror efforts have led to intractable conflicts can have strong motives for encouraging the UN to take responsibility for the situation.

There is a strong need for UN decision makers to negotiate the pitfalls of CT, C/PVE and military stabilisation carefully. Given the right combination of support from powerful states, the UN can be forced to define certain conflict actors as ‘terrorists’, ‘violent extremists’ or ‘aggressors’ – dropping impartiality and engaging in military or non-military efforts to counter such groups in partnership with governments and coalitions.

This has been the case in Mali and the Sahel. Discarding much of its former scepticism of the Bush-era war on terror, France has been active in combating armed rebels in the region, and has strongly pushed for the UN to engage in CT and stabilisation there, to unburden its ‘Barkhane’ counter-terror operation and to bolster the Group of Five Sahel (G5 Sahel) joint regional counter-terror operation of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. It has called for the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to be a “dam against the spread of terrorism in Mali and the whole region”¹¹¹ – that is, to have a strong mandate that strays visibly into an active role for the UN in CT and C/PVE.

¹¹⁰ Here it is worth noting that member states sometimes label conduct by armed groups as ‘terrorist activities’, which might not be authorised under international humanitarian law. As noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, “Counterterrorism responses, combined with a robust counterterrorism discourse in both domestic and international fora, have significantly contributed to a blurring of the lines between armed conflict and terrorism, with potentially adverse effects on international humanitarian law.” (Authors’ correspondence with OHCHR, August 2018).

¹¹¹ Lynch C, McCormick T (2017), ‘To Save Peacekeeping From Trump’s Budget Ax, Will the U.N. Embrace Fighting Terrorism?’, *Foreign Policy*, March 29 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/29/blue-helmets-in-mali-targeted-by-terrorists-and-by-trumps-budget-cuts/>).

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”.¹¹² 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.”¹¹³ In December 2017 the security council authorised MINUSMA to provide “specified operational and logistical support to the FC-G5S [G5 Sahel Joint Force]”.¹¹⁴ Based on this authorisation, MINUSMA works to extend government authority and build Mali’s security and justice capacity to support the G5 Sahel CT mission and supply intelligence, and to engage in C/PVE efforts.

MINUSMA might have had a more belligerent mandate had the US not watered down French proposals for stronger backing to the G5 Sahel. However, the position of the US – the originator of both the ‘war on terror’ and its ‘affable cousin’ CVE – reportedly resulted less from concern over the UN’s impartiality and the risks of undermining peace than from the drive to reduce the US’s financial contribution to the UN.¹¹⁵

The UK falls somewhere between France and the US. It has expressed similar concerns to the US about UN budgets, but supports bolstering the intelligence capabilities of peace operations.¹¹⁶ The UK has pushed to have UN missions share intelligence with CT operations, with important implications for their impartiality.

Both Russia and China strongly believe CT is the prerogative of member states. While Russia has affirmed that “It is absolutely unacceptable for peacekeepers to side with any party to a conflict under any pretext”, it remains to be seen how well these principles may hold up when options for more robust peacekeeping mandates coincide more closely with Russian interests.

China’s position is less clear, but includes an acknowledgement that peacekeeping, when acting in accordance with mandates, “can help host countries strengthen capacity building on counter-terrorism”.¹¹⁷ The loss of Chinese troops in Mali in 2016 will likely continue to influence China’s reticence towards using UN peacekeeping troops to support CT operations.

Many European states that were formerly critical of the Bush-era ‘war on terror’ have become increasingly invested in military CT. Nine European Union (EU) members¹¹⁸ have either conducted or assisted military action against jihadist groups in the regions surrounding Europe; and the overwhelming majority of EU members are training local security forces to strengthen their counter-terror capacity, including in Mali, through the European Training Mission in Mali, under the Common Security and Defence Policy.¹¹⁹ The EU is also one of the main supporters¹²⁰ of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and in February 2018 made available € 100 million for its establishment.¹²¹

112 United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Security Council (2015), ‘The future of United Nations peace operations: implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations. Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/357–S/2015/682’, 2 September.

113 United Nations Security Council (2017), ‘United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Reform of United Nations Peacekeeping, implementation and follow-up S/PV.8051’, 20 September.

114 United Nations Security Council (2017b), ‘Security Council Resolution 2391 (2017), Peace and Security in Africa, S/RES/2391 (2017)’, 8 December.

115 Lynch C (2017), ‘Trump Weighs Vetoing France’s African Anti-Terrorism Plan’, *Foreign Policy*, 13 June (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/13/trump-weighs-vetoing-frances-african-anti-terror-plan/>).

116 Lynch C, McCormick T, (2017) “To Save Peacekeeping From Trump’s Budget Ax, Will the U.N. Embrace Fighting Terrorism?”, March 29 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/29/blue-helmets-in-mali-targeted-by-terrorists-and-by-trumps-budget-cuts/>).

117 United Nations Security Council (2016), ‘Maintenance of international peace and security, Peace operations facing asymmetrical threats, S/PV.7802’, 7 November.

118 France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Spain and Poland. See Dworkin A (2016), ‘Europe’s New Counter-Terror Wars’, European Council on Foreign Relations, October.

119 The EU has had a military training mission in Mali since 2013 under its Common Security and Defence Policy, supporting the Malian armed forces. Twenty one EU member states are involved. Fifteen EU member states had forces deployed in MINUSMA as of October 2016. See Dworkin A (2016), ‘Europe’s New Counter-Terror Wars’, European Council on Foreign Relations.

120 European Commission (2018), ‘The European Union pledges to rebuild the headquarters of the G5 Sahel Joint Force in Sévaré, Mali,’ July 25 (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-4646_en.htm).

121 European External Action Service (2018), ‘The European Union’s partnership with the G5 Sahel countries,’ June 18 (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/46674/european-unions-partnership-g5-sahel-countries_en).

As a non-permanent member of the security council from 2018 to the end of 2019, Sweden played an active role in promoting its support for peacebuilding and human rights. Sweden and the Netherlands have also politically and financially¹²² supported a human rights compliance framework for the G5 Sahel force – a mechanism seen by some to reduce the risks of violations. Given the flaws in CT approaches in the Sahel, it remains to be seen how impactful these compliance efforts can be. However, overall it seems less likely that European countries would oppose the UN collaborating in CT efforts than might once have been the case.

Troop contributing countries (TCCs) are also important sources of pressure for the UN, urging caution and scrutiny when shaping mandates. Many are reluctant to see blue helmets embroiled in counter-terror and stabilisation efforts which put them in the line of fire. However, states that depend on the income and benefits that come from participation in peace operations, or who have a vested interest in the conflict in question, are likely to uphold their contributions.

Secretary-General António Guterres (centre) during the high-level meeting he convened on the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel). Pictured with him (from left at table): Emmanuel Macron, President of France; Alpha Condé, President of the Republic of Guinea and Chairperson of the African Union; Federica Mogherini, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.
© UN PHOTO/ESKINDER DEBEBE



6.2 Institutional environment

Beyond political pressure from member states, UN budget cuts may create institutional pressures to develop the UN's 'added value' in the fields of CT and C/PVE. Specifically, the DPKO may feel an urgent need to demonstrate the added value of peace operations for CT, C/PVE and stabilisation to key donor countries like the US.

The growth of CT-focused departments, offices and officials across the United Nations (including the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism), as well as initiatives such as the June 2018 High-level Conference on Counter-Terrorism (promoted on social media with the hashtag #UNitetoCounterTerrorism) and the tendency for C/PVE programming to reframe the positioning and work of various UN agencies all suggest a distinct internal momentum to integrate CT and C/PVE into the fabric of the UN in a way that risks increasing the role of peace operations beyond their current boundaries.

¹²² The Government of Netherlands (2017), 'The Netherlands pledges €5 million in support of regional military force in the Sahel', 13 December (<https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2017/13/the-netherlands-pledges-%E2%82%AC5-million-in-support-of-regional-military-force-in-the-sahel/the-netherlands-pledges-%E2%82%AC5-million-in-support-of-regional-military-force-in-the-sahel>).

There are few political forces likely to oppose the slide of UN peacekeeping and peace support operations towards a more pro-active role in CT, C/PVE and military stabilisation efforts. Since some of those opposed to this appear to be acting out of self-interest, and there are institutional pressures to do more to counter terrorism, few governments and officials currently appear likely to oppose this move based on a principled understanding of the risks to international peace and security.

Somali women sell tea on the side of a road in Baidoa, as Ethiopian troops serving with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) conduct a night patrol in the city.

© UN PHOTO/TOBIN JONES



7

Current UN mandates and practice in complex environments

TRADITIONALLY, PEACE OPERATIONS were deployed to oversee peace agreements. In more recent years, several UN missions have been instructed to engage in or support military stabilisation, C/PVE or even CT. Some of these missions have evolved towards protecting and extending state authority and taking an increasingly active military posture to counter the threat posed by designated aggressors (or ‘terrorist’ groups in the case of Mali) – in contexts where a peace agreement is absent or untenable.

In some instances, UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) have shown the UN’s awareness of international failures in complex environments, and have called for long-term inclusive political approaches to address protracted conflicts. In Afghanistan, for example, the security council acknowledges the crucial importance of a “comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political process to support reconciliation”, and stressed that the stability of the country cannot be achieved through purely military solutions.¹²³ The same UNSCR also called for the full implementation of the Afghan 1325 National Action Plan and for more women’s involvement in the peace process.¹²⁴

Similarly, UN officials we spoke with praised earlier versions of the mandate for the UN mission in Afghanistan for ensuring impartiality and allowing documentation of all conflict parties’ roles in human rights abuses and civilian casualties. They credited such measures with ensuring the UN was seen by communities as an impartial actor, enabling it to maintain a presence across the country and ultimately to become an interlocutor in mediation efforts with the Taliban.¹²⁵

In the case of Somalia, UNSCR 2408 (2018) stresses the need for inclusive political dialogue to support the peaceful resolution of disputes that “threaten internal peace and security” and recognises “the need for non-military approaches as part of the security approach in order to achieve long-term human security for Somalis”.¹²⁶

¹²³ United Nations Security Council (2018), ‘Security Council Resolution 2405 (2018), The Situation in Afghanistan, S/RES/2405’, 8 March.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Saferworld discussions with UN officials, July 2018. Officials noted in particular the long-term benefits of the UN monitoring the condition of Taliban detainees in Afghan prisons for building trust. For an example of a relevant resolution, see United Nations Security Council (2012), ‘Security Council Resolution 2041 (2012), The Situation in Afghanistan, S/RES/2041 (2012)’, 22 March.

¹²⁶ United Nations Security Council (2018), ‘Security Council Resolution 2408 (2018), The Situation in Somalia, S/RES/2408 (2018)’, 27 March.

These are just a few examples of positive aspects of mandates that enable UN peace operations to play constructive peacemaking roles.

However, some UNSCRs have bought into risky CT, C/PVE and stabilisation objectives and have affirmed a worrying approach to national ownership in contexts where national authorities have problematic roles. In Afghanistan, the security council supports both the government's CT and CVE strategies, as well as the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.¹²⁷ While encouraging full implementation of UNSCR 1325, it also encourages the participation of women in CT and C/PVE efforts,¹²⁸ ignoring the detrimental effects that this involvement could have on women's empowerment and women's rights organisations (noted in section 3.5 above).¹²⁹

As for Somalia, the UN has long provided support to AMISOM.¹³⁰ This year, UNSCR 2408 (2018) requested the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) 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".¹³¹ Concerning Libya, the security council has repeatedly stressed its support to the Government of National Accord (GNA) as the sole legitimate government of Libya – despite its limited backing by Libyans themselves – and tasked the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), *inter alia*, to provide advice and assistance to GNA-led efforts to stabilise post-conflict zones, including those liberated from ISIS.¹³² It is not hard to imagine UNSMIL supporting a government that lacks popular legitimacy, and working to undermine support for its opponents without distinguishing between 'violent extremists' and other opposition.

These mandates show how the security council is increasingly asking UN peace operations to take on questionable roles. As Cedric de Coning observes, a new generation of stabilisation missions has emerged in which "the UN Security Council has identified aggressors that need to be contained".¹³³ In such missions:

*"... the designated aggressors are not recognised as legitimate political parties to a conflict with whom a political settlement is desirable. [...] In CAR [Central African Republic], the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo] and Mali the UN recognises and supports the state [...] against insurgents or armed-group[s], who are seen as operating outside the legitimate political space."*¹³⁴

De Coning identifies three concerns with such missions: that "designated aggressors are not recognised as legitimate political parties to a conflict with whom a political settlement is desirable";¹³⁵ that they introduce an element of offensive operations, where "The security council and senior UN officials now expect UN peacekeepers to anticipate attacks and to proactively engage such potential attackers to deter them before they cause harm to civilians";¹³⁶ and that they "create a structural relationship between the host government [...] and the UN that leaves little room for engagement with non-state actors" and that undermines the host government's willingness "to seek political settlements or to invest in the state services".¹³⁷

¹²⁷ United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Security Council Resolution 2405 (2018), The Situation in Afghanistan, S/RES/2405 (2018)', 8 March, pp 8–9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 9.

¹²⁹ See Möller-Loswick A (2017), 'The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support', Saferworld (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/221-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support>); Gender Action on Peace & Security, 'Prioritise Peace: challenging approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism from a Women, Peace and Security perspective' (GAPS, 2018) http://gaps-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GAPS-report_Prioritise-Peace-Challenging-Approaches-to-P-CVE-from-a-WPS-perspective.pdf.

¹³⁰ Williams P (2017), 'UN support to Regional Peace Operations: Lessons from UNSOA', International Peace Institute, February (<https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/IPI-Rpt-Lessons-from-UNSOA-Final.pdf>).

¹³¹ United Nations, 'Security Council Resolution 2408 (2018), The Situation in Somalia', p 4.

¹³² United Nations Security Council (2017), 'Security Council Resolution 2376 (2017), The Situation in Libya, S/RES/2376 (2017)', 14 September.

¹³³ De Coning C (2018), 'Is stabilization the new normal? Implications of stabilization mandates for the use of force in UN peace operations', in Nadin P (ed), *Use of force in UN Peacekeeping*, Routledge, pp. 84–99.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

The dilemmas of engaging with CT, C/PVE and stabilisation are becoming very real for the UN – most visibly in Mali and the Sahel.¹³⁸ On Mali, peacekeeping experts have warned that “The spread of violence combined with a lack of delivery of peace dividends is contributing to the lack of trust in the state and its security forces and has led to an increase in the grievances felt by the local population.”¹³⁹

Revelations of grave human rights violations in 2018 highlight why the UN’s role in supporting the Malian state is a problem. Three of the most shocking incidents – the discovery of mass graves in April 2018,¹⁴⁰ the alleged execution of 12 civilians at a cattle market in Boulkessy in May 2018,¹⁴¹ and the extrajudicial killing of approximately 25 Fulani civilians in central Mali in June¹⁴² – are all believed to have been carried out by members of the Malian military.

As International Crisis Group has observed, in the Sahel there is:

*“... a danger today of choosing the security-based solution and giving up on the difficult search for non-warlike solutions to problems that are eminently political and social. [...] Efforts to curtail jihadists’ expansion have involved mostly military operations; the results, thus far, have been unconvincing. The use of militias to fight jihadists has aggravated intercommunal conflict and arguably played into militants’ hands.”*¹⁴³

Commentators have warned of the risks of the G5 Sahel mission, to which MINUSMA offers operational and logistical support, “pushing more people into the arms of armed groups through frequent misconduct and abuse against civilians during counter-insurgency operations”, and warned that the influx of hundreds of millions of dollars in funds to support G5 Sahel militaries “will fuel the corruption that has undermined the G5 member countries in the past” and prove destabilising.¹⁴⁴

In addition to providing medical support and being co-located with military CT missions, MINUSMA has also been criticised for providing intelligence to CT operations. As John Karlsrud pointed out, “The mission is actively supporting counter-terrorism actions, as it has been preparing ‘targeting packs’ and has been informally sharing information with the French parallel counter-terrorism operation Barkhane.”¹⁴⁵

Following an independent strategic review of MINUSMA in early 2018, the Secretary-General highlighted to the security council that:

*“The proximity of MINUSMA, and its support role and cooperation with security actors, including counter-terrorism actors, had contributed to the perception that the mission was engaging in counter-terrorism actions[...]. The review team indicated that MINUSMA, with international partners of Mali and the [UN] country team, should reprioritise its actions to focus on political tasks [...] and should also support the long-term goal of addressing governance deficits”*¹⁴⁶

¹³⁸ Karlsrud J (2017), ‘Towards UN counter-terrorism operations?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 38:6, January, pp 1215–1231
 Karlsrud J (2017b), ‘UN Peacekeeping and Counter-Terrorism’, Oxford Research Group, March
 Karlsrud J (2017c), ‘UN Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism: Uncomfortable Bedfellows?’, December (https://www.dgvn.de/fileadmin/publications/PDFs/Zeitschrift_VN/VN_2017/Heft_4_2017/Karlsrud_VN_4_2017_final.pdf); Smit T (2017), ‘Multilateral peace Operations and the Challenges of terrorism and violent extremism’, SIPRI, November; International Crisis Group (2018), ‘The Sahel: Promoting Political alongside Military Action’, January.

¹³⁹ International Peace Institute, Security Council Report, Stimson Center (2017), ‘Applying the HIPPO Recommendations to Mali: Towards Strategic, Prioritized, and Sequenced Mandates, Meeting Note’, June, p 2 (<https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/IPI-E-RPT-HIPPO-Recommendations-MaliFinal.pdf>).

¹⁴⁰ *The Guardian* (2018), ‘Mali mass grave victims had been in military custody, claims Amnesty’, April 03 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/mali-mass-grave-victims-had-been-in-military-custody-claims-amnesty>).

¹⁴¹ *Reuters* (2018), ‘U.N. says Malian forces executed 12 civilians at a market’, June 26 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-un/u-n-says-malian-forces-executed-12-civilians-at-a-market-idUSKBN1JM2JZ>).

¹⁴² Lebovich A (2018), ‘Mali’s impunity problem and growing security crisis’, European Council on Foreign Relations, June (https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_malis_impunity_problem_security_crisis).

¹⁴³ International Crisis Group (2017), ‘Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force’, Africa Report N. 258, December.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p 8.

¹⁴⁵ Karlsrud K (2017), *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁶ United Nations Security Council (2018), ‘Security Council, Report of the Secretary General “Situation in Mali”’, S/2018/541, 6 June.

Adopted in June 2018, UNSCR 2423 partly reflects the need to return to political tasks, but at the same time maintains the instruction for MINUSMA to help the G5 Sahel build up its security force capacities by providing operational and logistical support as well as sharing intelligence – without conditioning this support on progress on military reforms. The Mali case clearly illustrates the dangers for peace operations of replicating mistakes from other failed engagement strategies in complex environments.

Togolese peacekeepers from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) stationed in Menaka.

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Key issues and potential consequences for UN peace operations

TODAY, THE DEMAND THAT THE UN JOIN WARS against ‘terrorists’, ‘violent extremists’ and other ‘aggressors’, rather than being a resource for conflict prevention and peacemaking, is evidenced in requirements for it in certain instances to:

- proactively combat, deter or protect territory from ‘aggressors’, ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’
- offer operational support to international counter-terror missions
- provide intelligence and ‘targeting packages’ to military actors
- side with states and protect, reinforce and expand their authority under stabilisation/CT mandates and norms around ‘national ownership’
- train and equip security forces
- define rebel groups as ‘violent extremists’ and support or carry out C/PVE initiatives, including narrative campaigns against certain groups
- avoid dialogue and mediation efforts with armed groups labelled as ‘terrorists’ by member states.

There is already evidence of the UN playing these roles and of the negative consequences this can have. The table below highlights six major risks for the UN and their potential consequences for peace operations:

Risk	Consequences
<p>1. UN support to militarised CT and stabilisation efforts reduces the UN's credibility, impartiality and space for building peace, monitoring human rights abuses and supporting development</p>	<p>There is a clear risk that the UN could find itself trapped in a cycle of indefinitely containing conflict – at high human and financial cost – and failing to pursue peace strategies that could resolve conflict. Because ‘terrorist’ groups rarely end in military defeat, the role of the UN as peacemaker is crucial and must be protected. Its loss of impartiality increasingly places UN peace operations and staff in the crosshairs. Evidence shows mainstream CT and stabilisation approaches deepen insecurity – so the UN's involvement in them can make its dialogue, reconciliation, relief and development work as well as monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses hard to deliver. It can also undermine its potential to work closely with other partners – such as human rights defenders and humanitarian, development and peacebuilding NGOs – which need to maintain their impartiality.</p>
<p>2. Increased and more proactive use of force to combat ‘terrorist’ groups by the UN could perpetuate and exacerbate conflict</p>	<p>Violence – even if deployed proportionately and discriminately to safeguard civilians and in the interests of peace – always leaves a trace. It can readily lead to grievances and encourages support for further violence and revenge, undermining the potential to engage with its victims, sometimes for generations into the future. Proactive use of force by the UN can therefore lead to blowback that endangers staff, partners and communities and makes conflict resolution and peacebuilding impossible.</p>
<p>3. Supporting non-UN counter-terror and military missions with logistics and intelligence risks making the UN a conflict party and complicit in conduct that fuels conflict</p>	<p>By providing intelligence and operational support to other missions that are parties to a conflict, the UN essentially takes sides. If these other parties are viewed as illegitimate by large sections of the local population – or if the UN supports those who have entrenched grievances through indiscriminate violence and other abuses – they will be seen as complicit. This risks perpetuating and escalating conflict, making it impossible for peace operations to pursue dialogue and mediation, or to consult with communities, support the delivery of relief and development and work to improve public perceptions of peace efforts.</p>
<p>4. UN support to the expansion of state authority in CT and stabilisation missions risks reinforcing state abuses, lessening reform incentives and aggravating public grievances</p>	<p>Mandates that require the UN to ally with, protect and extend the authority of host governments in the context of counter-terror or militarised stabilisation operations, make the UN complicit in the conduct of state authorities, who are often implicated in significant abuses. This support could embolden states to maintain repressive behaviour, lessening the need for them to make peace, address political grievances or provide public goods to disaffected communities. Although UN peace operations often have human rights components, limited funding and attention to human rights frameworks can result in blindness to the faults of state actors. This leads to support for more repressive tactics endorsed by the state, when better engagement strategies that promote inclusion and human rights would be more effective in building peace.</p>
<p>5. UN involvement in training, equipping and funding national and regional security forces to do CT could prove counter-productive</p>	<p>When mishandled, UN security assistance can feed corruption, strengthen those responsible for human rights violations, lead to diversion of weapons and equipment and lessen incentives to reform – perverse outcomes that occur with alarming regularity. UN funding for CT operations may further undermine UN impartiality.</p>
<p>6. Integrating C/PVE objectives, terminology and programming into peace operations risks compromising impartiality, alienating communities, disempowering civil society and aggravating conflict</p>	<p>If UN peace operations label some conflict actors as ‘violent extremists’, they lose the claim of impartiality and come to see the conflict through the eyes of the host government and its allies. This could undermine the UN's potential to shift the host government's behaviour and approach. The pursuit of C/PVE programmes by peace operations could similarly lead them to overlook societal grievances underpinning violent movements.</p> <p>When the UN empowers civil society to work closely with state authorities against ‘violent extremists’, it can often fail to empower these groups to challenge those who need to improve their behaviour. Diversion of resources into C/PVE campaigns also risks cutting off support for women's rights and youth activists to pursue their own agendas. Or it can force them to compromise their values to get access to C/PVE funds. If C/PVE campaigns were to stigmatise certain groups in society – in particular religious minorities and youth – or are associated with Islamophobia, the UN would be tainted by association. The aspiration for UN peace operations to become more people-centred could also be undermined where communities feel alienated by C/PVE ‘support’ driven by external security goals that labels them as potential terrorists.</p>

9

Recommendations

DESPITE THE MANY UN POLICIES and norms that help guide decisions, mandates and strategies, future UN peace operations risk falling into the same traps as international CT, C/PVE and stabilisation efforts. As a result, it is vital to develop clearer UN policy on this as soon as possible.¹⁴⁷ It is time for more honest debate and clearer policy thinking that sets clear norms and boundaries for how the UN will and will not engage in complex environments. The following recommendations should be considered in any such discussions.

9.1 Future role of UN peace operations

1. The UN should aim to achieve impartiality in practice and seek to separate itself from the military strategies and approaches of all parties to the conflict.

The hallmark of UN engagement in peace efforts should be impartiality and championing the role of non-violent actors, civilians and civil society. This is consistent with the role of UN peace operations in efforts to monitor the human rights conduct of all conflict actors, enable local and national dialogue and reconciliation efforts, provide an enabling environment for and support relief, development and peacebuilding work, and protect UN staff and civilians. But this can be jeopardised by the UN directly or indirectly supporting CT and C/PVE efforts and protecting or extending the authority of states whose abuses are fuelling conflict. The impartiality of UN peace operations should be sacrosanct, no matter the context.

2. The UN should exercise extreme caution and better assess political and operational risks of providing funds, logistical and operational support and training to other military missions.

Such support should only be acceptable when these actors are viewed as making a strategic contribution towards overall peace objectives and must only be provided on the basis of adherence to the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy.

3. Peace operations should develop greater civilian capacity to work on addressing conflict drivers – regardless of whether a conflict is defined as having a ‘terrorist’ or ‘violent extremist’ dimension.

Operations should be centred on monitoring the human rights situation, facilitating and supporting inclusive dialogue and local conflict resolution, and encouraging all conflict parties to address the drivers of conflict and engage coherently and in a way that contributes to conflict resolution and peace.

¹⁴⁷ Out of current mandated UN peace operations, it is most likely that this could manifest in the United Nations Disengagement Observation Force and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. In contexts where UN peacekeepers are not currently present, there have been a variety of discussions at different levels about the viability of this taking place in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

9.2 Future role of wider UN system

4. Member states and senior UN leadership should strongly discourage UN Security Council members from instrumentalising UN peace operations to further their own counter-terror strategic interests to the detriment of peace and human rights.

Principled member states, UN agencies, and UN leadership must push back on moves to instrumentalise peace operations – especially where the UN is being drawn into roles that violate policies intended to safeguard its impartial, human rights-based approach to peacekeeping and peacemaking. Troop contributing-countries should refuse to provide personnel for missions that violate these ideals.

5. UN peace operations should invest in new skill sets and more flexible approaches to working with communities to empower them and promote their inclusion in peace processes.

The UN must recognise when partners can play complementary roles and should create the space and structures that facilitate their work. At all times, the UN system must be willing to support independent human rights reporting on all conflict actors and should encourage civil society efforts to advocate with conflict parties for peace and human rights, including by championing the role of civil society, youth and women in peace processes.

6. The UN should recognise the conceptual and practical drawbacks of adopting C/PVE approaches and redouble investment in development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance programmes.

The growth of C/PVE programming appears to come less from community demand than from donors. Therefore it is vital to focus development, peacebuilding, protection, human rights and governance efforts on the needs, priorities and perspectives of communities, with a focus on why violence and conflict are occurring, rather than allow these efforts to be subsumed under a C/PVE framing that may distort or ignore important peacebuilding priorities.

9.3 Interaction with host states

7. Regardless of budget cuts and irrespective of their size and shape, UN peace operations should always have an integrated human rights component mandated to monitor and report on human rights abuses by all sides. The UN must incentivise respect for human rights and maintain clear boundaries on what support it is prepared to provide to governments who fail to curb abuse, corruption and exclusion – withdrawing support from state institutions and redefining its mandate where necessary.

It is not in the interests of peace for the UN to be mandated to provide long-term stabilisation support without clear progress from the government on taking tangible steps towards respect for human rights. If host states continue to practise abusive behaviour and thereby contribute to the continuation of conflict, the UN must take timely action to withdraw its support.

8. Peace operations should include community security as a significant component of the overall strategy for improving security.

Building peace requires shifting security actors' behaviour and this in turn requires a focus on capacities of societies and of states. Peace operations should also monitor carefully whether security efforts are leading to tangible improvements in how the public experiences security and keep a close watch on: the political will of partners to improve security; governance impacts of security support being provided; whether corruption in the security sector is being addressed or enabled; and whether resources provided are being diverted or misused.

9.4 Labelling conflict parties as 'terrorists' or 'violent extremists'

9. Member states should exercise caution before designating conflict parties as 'aggressors', 'terrorists' or 'violent extremists' to safeguard UN impartiality and keep a broad range of options on the table. Instead, all parties to an armed conflict should be judged on their adherence to international law. UN peace operations should also carefully assess the implications of using such terminology for strategic and operational purposes.

It is possible for the UN to work effectively on the factors that underpin support for violent movements and groups – and to tackle the wider drivers of conflict – without adopting CT or C/PVE labelling that weakens peace strategies, alienates communities and puts UN impartiality at risk.

Annex A: Note on use of key terms

In the 2015 discussion paper ‘Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding’, Saferworld examined the strengths and weaknesses of what is described as the ‘**mainstream approach**’ to CT and stabilisation taken by some governments and coalitions:

*“The mainstream approach begins with the tendency to define conflicts in a way that designates some actors as ‘spoilers’ (or ‘terrorists’, ‘violent extremists’, ‘radicalised groups’, ‘rogue regimes’, etc.) and to address such conflicts by opposing ‘spoilers’ in partnership with whatever allies can be found. This typically involves the use of military force to depose a ‘rogue’ regime or a reviled rebel group, and is generally combined with – or followed by – some kind of ‘stabilisation’ or ‘statebuilding’ effort. The primary focus in such contexts is on rapidly achieving and maintaining a degree of order, security or stability, and this typically involves negotiating – and then building on – a pragmatic ‘deal’ among influential actors. This normally leads to international military, political, economic and development support that reinforces those actors included in the deal. This often involves continuing use of force against spoilers, coupled with a willingness to overlook the limitations of allies.”*¹⁴⁸

Stabilisation encompasses a broad field that is made harder to define because it can involve the deployment of many different approaches, tools and aims depending on the context. This proliferation of aims within stabilisation gives the term a slippery quality. Stabilisation has tended to include direct military action or support to military actors to remove ‘illegitimate’ political groups from power. It has also embraced: international and regional peacekeeping and other efforts to protect civilians; assistance to security and other institutions; and humanitarian and development efforts. It is increasingly recognised that such elements of stabilisation are not ends in themselves but should be used carefully to enable and support the emergence of sustainable ‘political settlements’. While we acknowledge that not all stabilisation efforts are militarised, ‘stabilisation’ in this paper refers to militarised efforts that resemble the mainstream approach.

Counter-terrorism (CT) consists of military efforts to defeat those defined as ‘terrorists’ or ‘spoilers’ (and their sponsors), as well as efforts to support regional or national allies to do the same. Counter-terrorism may also include efforts to apply law enforcement approaches to disrupt, prevent or punish these actors. It can also involve efforts to stop people joining ‘terrorists’ – which may be in part developmental and involve tackling root causes. This latter, arguably more preventive approach is sometimes styled ‘**countering/preventing violent extremism**’ (C/PVE).

It is hard to draw clear boundaries between CT, CVE and PVE. The US government defines CVE as “Proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilise followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence”. Meanwhile, the UN Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism describes PVE as consisting of systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism. Some have argued a distinction between CVE and PVE in that CVE is “associated with tackling conditions conducive to terrorism on the grounds of military and political interests”, while PVE is “framed with the ambition to contribute to stability, inclusiveness and accountability by transforming the drivers of violent extremism and reintegrate those that have already actively engaged”. However, in practice it is hard to draw a clear distinction between CVE and PVE. Some would thus view PVE as a further attempt to rebrand the apparently benign elements of CT that have been promoted as CVE.

¹⁴⁸ Keen D, Attree L (2015), ‘Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding’, Saferworld, January.

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Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

COVER PHOTO: Togolese peacekeepers from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) patrol Menaka.

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