



## THE IMPACT OF TERRORIST THREATS ON UNITED NATIONS PEACE OPERATIONS

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Through its manifestations and multiplied effects, terrorism is not only a threat to the stability of the international system and global security, but also a challenge to international organizations. UN peace operations are taking place in conflict zones characterized by a range of multiple threats. This article aims to present the effect of the terrorist phenomenon - a dynamic threat - on UN peace missions and operations, but also to address the dilemma: more robust mandates for these missions and operations, in order to ensure the capabilities, strategic concepts and training needs to combat terrorists' activities versus undermining the international legitimacy of the UN and its role as an impartial mediator in the conflict.

**Keywords:** stability; failed states; violent extremism; radicalization; fundamentalism.

### Preliminary considerations

The events of September 11, 2001 were the premise by which the international community, through the United Nations Security Council, agreed to intervene much faster in the failed states, considered "safe-havens" for terrorist groups. The sovereignty of these states was not only understood as a safeguard against any external interference but also a fundamental obligation that the state has towards its own population, in terms of security.

Thus, due to the deterioration of issues related to good governance and institutional efficiency, these failed states have a high potential in terms of cross-border threats: terrorism, organized crime, armed attacks, disease, civil conflict.

The international community has a vital interest in developing strategies and tools to combat the resurgence of the terrorist phenomenon, with a direct impact on the stability of the international system and global security.

Article 2 of the UN Charter states that the United Nations shall not intervene in matters falling within the domestic jurisdiction of any states<sup>1</sup>, but Chapter 7 of the Charter provides, as an exception to the principle of non-interference, for coercive measures, including military intervention where the Security Council determines that there is a threat to security and international peace<sup>2</sup>.

It must be said that the phenomenon of globalization determines the interdependence

of all aspects related to conflicts in a given area, with effects difficult to measure. Thus, the states of conflict in certain areas of the world (Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Libya or Afghanistan) acquire international dimensions, by practically multiplying them.

Some conflicts are endemic; in areas such as the Middle East, multiple, dynamic and evolving threats have led to an endless series of religiously or ethnically motivated clashes.

The prospect of a wide spread of the terrorist phenomenon is very real and justifies the efforts of the international community to find viable, long-term solutions, although it is not very simple. In a brief analysis of the security environment in Africa, for example, after the Cold War, we can identify two trends.

The first trend is that, although characterized by a high poverty rate, the African continent is now experiencing a substantial reduction in violence and conflict compared to the 1990s. The number of conflicts on the continent in the first 30 years since the independence of African countries increased in the early 1990s and has declined significantly since then.

The second trend is the changing nature of armed conflicts in Africa. Although civil wars have been the most important feature of the continent's post-colonial history, today they are, mostly, at a small and structurally different dimension.

Non-state actors have reduced military capabilities and are divided into factions that fail to act coherently, in a uniform manner. Rebel groups operate mainly in border areas, and their

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type of conflict involves terrorist, violent extremist actions and asymmetric tactics. In addition, there is a decline in mass crime and genocide against the civilian population, which is characteristic of African postcolonial civil wars.

Regarding the manifestations of terrorist groups in Africa, it should be noted that they are constantly developing in areas with active conflicts: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Libya (AQIM); The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO); Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria and Cameroon; Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabaab) in Somalia; Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa; "Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda" in Rwanda; the "M23" rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ansar al Dine group in northern Mali.

The activities of the groups listed above are carried out across borders, without restrictions, active cells operating independently, but also showing loyalty to the core group and its ideology. Such cells, made up of "foreign fighters" from countries known as "safe-havens" for terrorists (Sudan and Libya, for example), have a monopoly on violence in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and, in particular, in a smaller number of cases, in Somalia, Mali, Kenya, Nigeria and other African countries.

At the same time, there are tendencies to carry out joint violent actions between Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and other regional groups, well determined in space and time, in order to achieve a major impact. Areas where terrorist groups are present are usually hard-to-reach areas for government officials, with almost non-existent infrastructure and social services, often in border areas linking two or more states. Here the population is neglected and marginalized politically, socially and economically, this favoring the emergence of the terrorist phenomenon and violent extremism.

Terrorist groups, currently active in Africa, are usually affiliated with ideological trends, mainly of a religious nature. The fusion between religion and radicalization is largely established when the identity of the individual or group, through subversive and persuasive measures, is confiscated, thus seeking to gain new followers and, at the same time, influence social and political decisions.

In terms of recruiting its members, religion serves as a catalyst and has the role of legitimizing

the use of violence to satisfy the needs. People in poor areas are targeted, with no possibility of improvement, in the short, medium and long term of social life. Where there are social inequities, lack of food, medicine, lack of resources to ensure a living, extremist ideologies present themselves as a miraculous solution and as a form of escape. The message is adapted by recruiters to suit different contexts, as well as the typology of the masses. In general, lack of education and dependence on religious leaders are inevitable consequences of the neglect, by the political factor, of these socially, economically and politically marginalized generations.

The attacks organized by the terrorist groups are extremely large and include a vast arsenal: firearms, car traps, suicide bombers, magnetic mines. Also, armed conflicts between armed groups of rebels (Boko Haram, Sudanese Liberation Movement, Sudanese Liberation Army, Islamic State) at the regional, inter-tribal level, organized crime (assassinations, drug trafficking, armed attacks, armed robberies, kidnappings, hostage-taking), as well as aggressive protests, demonstrations, coups constantly fuel the spiral of violence.

### **The impact of the terrorist phenomenon on UN peace operations**

In the historical context, within the United Nations, peace operations have also taken place in areas with terrorist threats, even if they were not directed against UN personnel.

These peace operations have also undergone an evolution and a certain adjustment over time, in order to permanently adapt to historical realities (the post-Cold War period, the events of September 11, 2001 – turning points in international relations) and in order to diversify the range of effective responses to emerging threats of a hybrid or asymmetric nature.

Following the Brahimi report<sup>3</sup> since 2000, when the idea of setting up a fusion center with the purpose of gathering and exploiting information in support of peacekeeping missions was suggested, countries vehemently rejected the idea, and subsequently, their positions became more nuanced due to new threats.

UN Security Council Resolution 1373, adopted on 28 September 2001 following the attacks of 11 September 2001, referred specifically to the

terrorist phenomenon, establishing a new mandate for Member States to prevent and counter terrorist attacks.

The transition from the notion of terrorism to that of violent extremism has paved the way for the employment of a wider set of actors and tools. This agenda was adopted by the George W. Bush administration in 2005, when it recognized the limits of the "Global War On Terror" (GWOT) and reoriented itself to the "Struggle against Violent Extremism" (SAVE).

As a reference point for addressing this phenomenon, in 2006, at the level of the United Nations, the global strategy against terrorism is conceived, as a useful, programmatic tool to fight against this scourge. According to it, four important pillars were the cornerstone of the anti-terrorist threat approach<sup>4</sup>:

- Identifying and solving the causes, conditions that led to the emergence and proliferation of the terrorist phenomenon;
- Preventing and combating the terrorist phenomenon, through concrete counter-operations;
- Building the capacity of States to respond to such threats, while strengthening the role of the United Nations in this regard;
- Taking the necessary measures to respect human rights as a fundamental element in the fight against terrorism.

In this strengthened framework, in response to the direct threats posed by UN peacekeeping operations, a new initiative took place in 2013, when the Security Council decided to set up a Force Intervention Brigade for the Congolese UN

mission. The force was set as a benchmark at the time in the UN operations, with the mandate of "conducting operations with a precise target, on neutralizing armed groups"<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, other types of capabilities are implemented and exploited in peacekeeping missions: surveillance drones (South Sudan, Congo, Ivory Coast, Mali), communication tools as a solution to counter the online recruitment procedures used by terrorist groups (Somalia), intelligence activities in the fight against Islamist rebel actions (Libya).

The MINUSMA mission established in Mali in 2013, however, marked the beginning of a paradigm shift by the international community in the fight against terrorism. MINUSMA was the first peacekeeping mission to operate in parallel with a regional counterterrorism initiative led by France (Operation Serval renamed Barkhane).

The terrorist groups that emerged at the time, IS (Islamic State), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoune, Ansar Eddine and affiliated groups, such as the "Front de Libération du Macina" (FLM), did not seek international recognition but the establishment of areas in the region with an Islamist-jihadist character, the basis of Islamic fundamentalism and radicalization. To this end, modern communication tools are used to recruit supporters and raise awareness of their atrocities on a global scale.

Large number of casualties (due to violent malicious acts) among UN staff in this mission, since its establishment (2013) until 2017 (91 deaths)<sup>6</sup>, determined a new approach of the organization to

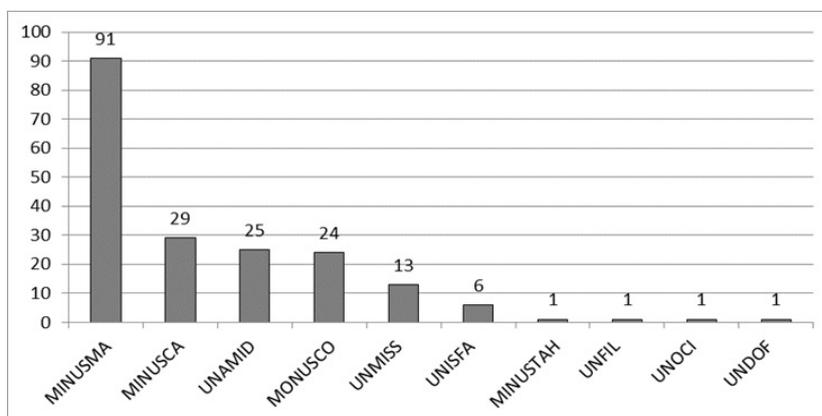


Figure 1 Number of fatalities, due to violent malicious acts, in peacekeeping missions during the period 2013-2017

Source: author's calculations based on DPKO data, [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats\\_by\\_mission\\_incident\\_type\\_4\\_55.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats_by_mission_incident_type_4_55.pdf)



the terrorist phenomenon, in relation to the global strategy of 2006.

Thus, ten years after the implementation of the global strategy against terrorism, in 2016, through the "Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism"<sup>77</sup> Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon indicated a strong UN stance on the threat, with a direct impact on other UN missions in Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

The Action Plan on the Prevention of Violent Extremism states: "The current Action Plan [...] considers and addresses violent extremism when appears and leads to terrorism"<sup>78</sup>. Extremism is a phenomenon which no region, nationality or system have been spared from. In recent years, terrorist groups, such as ISIL, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram, have given multiple, violent forms to extremist actions, thus determining the need to counter these threats with new methods. The religious ideology propagated by these groups was made under the sign of intolerance and with dramatic consequences in many parts of the world.

However, even with these new strategic documents, the organization is not yet ready to add counterterrorism operations to its range of instruments in support of available peace.

The High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, established in 2014 at the initiative of the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, for the purpose of an in-depth review of United Nations peace operations, endorsed the conclusions that "UN troops should not undertake military operations to combat terrorist acts"<sup>79</sup>.

There are several actors in conflict areas, given the presence of both non-state actors (rebel groups, militias, tribes, etc.) and international, regional and NGO organizations. Threats represent, for the various security structures, any factors (actions, capabilities, intentions or plans) that may affect peace missions.

Given the security structures of international organizations, present in conflict zones to fulfill a given mandate, vulnerabilities can be considered consequences of systemic dysfunctions or deficiencies, which can be exploited or can contribute to the materialization of threats.

International organizations, through their peace implementation strategies are forced to take part, even from a non-violent position, in the ongoing conflicts, to interact with members of

different groups, to persuade them to participate in various negotiations, to adopt, at a declarative level, positions on various issues that are not to the liking of all combatants, etc. The impartiality of these organizations and the peaceful nature of the activities carried out are defining elements for the fulfillment of the entrusted mandate.

Upon the emergence of anarchy, various rival groups want to arm themselves as soon as possible to defend themselves but also to gain supremacy over rivals. Thus, innocent citizens fall victim to intrastate clashes, and are forced to either end up in refugee camps (for example, in Darfur in 2015 there were 4,000,000 homeless people grouped in camps specially set up by humanitarian organizations – IDPs: internally displaced persons) or to follow migratory routes in search of a better living conditions.

Thus, peace operations that take place in an environment characterized by terrorist threats and violent extremism and are not perceived as impartial can lead to the emergence of risk to our own personnel, vulnerable to such threats. Over a longer period of time, it risks marginalizing and politicizing the agendas of humanitarian non-governmental agencies and organizations, as well as the mandate of the peace mission.

### Conclusions

I consider that UN peace operations should be strengthened to prevent terrorist threats when necessary, and that the task of counteracting and neutralizing these threats remains the responsibility of multinational coalitions and regional initiatives mandated by the UN Security Council.

The organization's core documents, including the new counter-terrorism plan mentioned above, have failed to significantly reduce the effects of these threats on peacekeeping missions and operations. Even in the MINUSMA mission in Mali, the latest data show a number of 134 casualties<sup>10</sup> among UN employees, which indicates a continuous increase in terrorist attacks and actions in the area, targeting the organization's staff.

Responsibility for the security of members of UN missions and the organization's facilities lies with the host country. Cooperation in this regard between the representatives of the UN mission and those of the politico-military leadership structures of the respective state must take place on several



levels in order to create a stable security climate for those who risk their lives in order to bring peace to the area.

The first level of cooperation is that of effective communication at the level of ministries and structures with clear tasks regarding the presence of the United Nations in the area: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, police structures, various government security and intelligence services.

It is very important to create a clear, precise mechanism for the exchange of data to be used by the relevant structures within the UN mission in order to obtain relevant risk analyses for UN staff and senior officials.

The second level of cooperation between UN structures and the host country is the establishment of communication strategies aimed in particular at the people necessary for a good understanding of the mission's mandate, the objectives pursued, and the steps required to achieve them.

The third level aims to achieve cooperation in crisis situations, when functional cells must be activated in order to solve such situations. They would be composed of representatives of the military, police and security structures within the UN mission, and government authorities, who would respond effectively to the threats.

To this end, security structures, in cooperation with the line ministries of the host country, must identify risk mitigation solutions and strategies to the exposed personnel of international organization.

The evolution of science and technology has led to new dimensions of the range of risks and threats: unmanned aerial vehicles, generically called "drones", which can be controlled by remote control and satellite links or even via mobile phones, improvised explosive devices, made with material purchased from the online environment, modern means of communication that can intercept radio signals, etc.

At the same time, the following should also be considered threats to the general security of contemporary society: internal developments within each society, especially those in collapse, as well as geopolitical trends such as: the persistence of crimes related to arms trafficking, drugs, cross-border smuggling, the security environment generated by the transition period and relative economic instability, the insufficiency of allocated resources, the sometimes feeble reaction of state institutions.

In the context of globalization, amplification and diversification of the terrorist phenomenon, through followers who show extreme fanaticism (direct attacks with small arms, raid/guerrilla attack, indirect attacks with grenade launchers, suicide attacks with explosive vests, hostage-taking, kidnappings, executions), realistic threat assessment, increasing security through modern technical means, implementation of effective detection, deterrence and prevention tactics are basic coordinates in terms of the concept of security of peace operations and missions.

#### NOTES:

1 *Charter of the United Nations*, p. 3, [http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/legislatie/internationala/Carta\\_Organizatiei\\_Natiunilor\\_Unite\\_ONU\\_.pdf](http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/legislatie/internationala/Carta_Organizatiei_Natiunilor_Unite_ONU_.pdf), accessed on 20.10.2020.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

3 *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, p. 42, <http://undocs.org/A/55/305>, accessed on 01.09.2020.

4 *The United Nations Global Counter – Terrorism Strategy*, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/60/288>, accessed on 20.08.2020.

5 *Rezolution 2098 since 2013*, p. 6, <http://unsr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2098>, accessed on 12.09.2020.

6 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>, accessed on 10.07.2020.

7 *Plan of action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674), accessed on 10.07.2020.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 1.

9 *HIPPO Report*, p. 47, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/report-of-independent-high-level-panel-peace-operations>, accessed on 12.09.2020.

10 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>, accessed on 6.11.2020.

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