

BACKGROUND PAPER

UN Peacekeepers' Safety and Security: Patterns of attacks and pathways to peacekeeping performance



ABOUT THE EVENT

The Challenges Annual Forum 2022 (#CAF22Delhi) will take place from 6–7 October and discuss the Future of Peace Operations through three lenses: Preventive Deployment in Diplomacy, Protecting the Protectors and Protection of Civilians in Peace Operations. The co-hosting partner for this year's event is the United Service Institution of India (USI).

Challenges Forum is a global partnership that uses its convening power to generate innovative ideas and promote results for more effective peace operations.

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Safety and security of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers is a ‘top priority’ for the UN and has been made a focus-area of the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative.¹ Risk stemming from the threat of deliberate acts of violence against peacekeeping personnel, in particular, has come into focus. Many aspects related to violence against UN peacekeepers remain poorly understood even though they matter for safeguarding effective operations and mandate implementation. Recent years’ advances to protect UN peacekeepers from harm have heavily focused on improving their access to training and equipment. Added efforts to track and analyse patterns of attacks, including drivers and wider consequences, can also contribute to the safety and security of peacekeeping personnel. This background paper highlights some key findings from existing studies by scholars to stimulate discussion at the 2022 Challenges Annual Forum CAF22.

Inherent part of peacekeeping

Targeted violence has shaped experiences in several interventions by the UN, such as to then- Congo in the 1960s, and to Rwanda, Somalia and the Balkans in the 1990s. Contemporary multidimensional UN peacekeeping characterized by robust mandates and deployed where there is ‘little or no peace to keep’ has further elevated safety and security concerns.² Attacks in settings such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are taken to show the ‘increasingly hostile, violent and non-permissive environment in which UN peacekeeping now operates’.³ The UN’s most hazardous ongoing mission, the

UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), is often seen to exemplify a shift towards a more dangerous environment for peacekeepers.

Studies have, however, found that security risks – measured as fatalities from ‘malicious’ acts – have not risen over time when considering the number of peacekeeping personnel deployed and seen in a longer timeframe (see Figure 1).⁴ Periods of added risk are typically associated with specific, particularly dangerous UN missions. Still, peacekeepers experience violence in many and diverse settings and it is not possible to reduce attacks to single countries, time-periods or perpetrating actors.

1 Jean-Pierre Lacroix, UN Peacekeeping: Harnessing the power of people to secure peace, progress and prosperity (United Nations, 24 May 2022), USG Video Message on the International Day of UN Peacekeepers 2022.

2 UN, Uniting Our Strengths for Peace - Politics, Partnership and People. Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (New York: United Nations, 16 June 2015, p. 42).

3 Challenges Forum, Building Capacity in Peace Operations in Response to Diversified Threats - What Lies Ahead?, (Challenges Forum: Policy Brief 2014:4, October 2014, p. 1).

4 Marina E. Henke, Has UN Peacekeeping Become More Deadly? Analyzing Trends in UN Fatalities, Providing for Peacekeeping (New York: International Peace Institute, December 2016); Jaïr van der Lijn and Timo Smit, Peacekeepers under Threat? Fatality Trends in UN Peace Operations (SIPRI, September 2015) <<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRIPB1509.pdf>>; Alex J. Bellamy, Are New Robust Mandates Putting UN Peacekeepers More at Risk? (IPI Global Observatory, 29 May 2014) <<http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/05/new-robust-mandates-putting-un-peacekeepers-at-risk/>>.

In UN missions where targeted violence is frequent, it is not constant over time (see Figure 2). Studies offer different explanations for why actors in a conflict sometimes target peacekeepers. Some emphasise the rise of robust mandates and provisions for the use of force, arguing that such mandates place the interveners at greater risk by calling into question their impartiality, hence, making them seen as legitimate targets.⁶ Others claim it is rather a failure by the peacekeepers to realize their robust mandates that puts them at risk.⁷ Neither of these explanations would fully account for the variations observe – both across and within missions. Important to note is that most studies focus on lethal violence owing to data availability, while fatalities alone may not be an adequate representation of risk.⁸

Recent evidence-based research focuses on probing conflict actors' logic for targeting peacekeepers.¹⁰ Comparative studies have shown greater risk in contexts where armed rebel groups are relatively stronger than the host-government, and particularly pronounced when power-relations are shifting on the battlefield.¹¹ Other studies emphasise perpetrators' aim to use violence to disrupt peacekeepers' mandate-implementation efforts. This can include obstructing peacekeepers' efforts to protect or interact with civilian communities.¹²

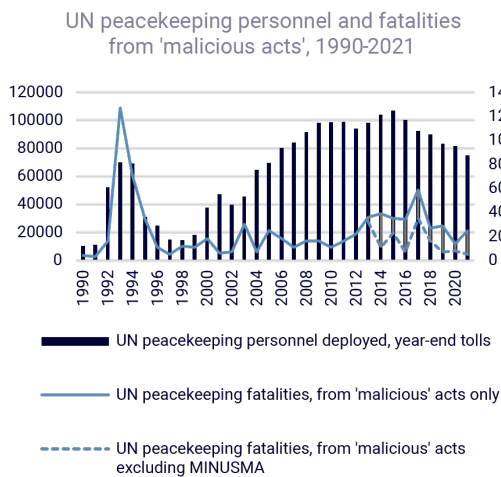


Figure 1. UN peacekeeping personnel and fatalities from 'malicious' acts, 1990-2021⁵

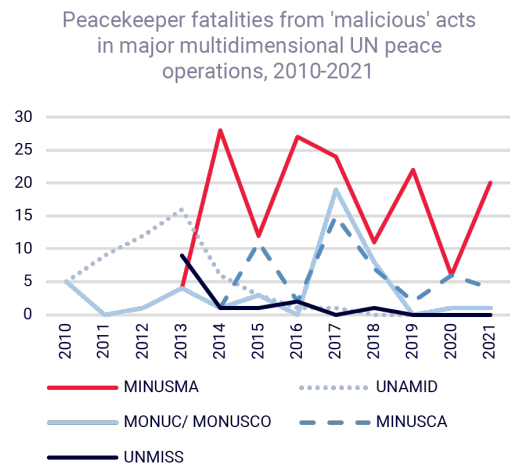


Figure 2. Peacekeeper fatalities from 'malicious' acts in major UN peace operations, 2010-2021⁹

5 Data on UN peacekeeper fatalities and personnel from the UN, 'Open Data Portal', available from <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/open-data-portal>> [accessed 7 March 2022].

6 For instance, Charles T. Hunt, 'All Necessary Means to What Ends? The Unintended Consequences of the "Robust Turn" in UN Peace Operations', *International Peacekeeping*, 24.1 (2017), 108–31.

7 Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, William R. Phillips, and Salvator Cusimano, *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We Are Doing Business* (19 December 2017), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/improving_security_of_united_nations_peacekeepers_report.pdf>.

8 The UN provides publicly available peacekeeper fatalities-data, now in a disaggregated format including more incident-level information. It also tracks a wider set of mission-level security incidents but for internal use.

9 UN, 'Open Data Portal'.

10 For a full review, see Sara Lindberg Bromley, 'Hazards of Peacekeeping: Peacekeepers as Targets of Violence', in *Handbook on Peacekeeping and International Relations* (Edward Elgar Publishing, December 2022, forthcoming).

11 Nynke Salverda, 'Blue Helmets as Targets: A Quantitative Analysis of Rebel Violence against Peacekeepers, 1989-2003', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50.6 (2013), 707–20; Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman, and Sara Lindberg Bromley, 'Offsetting Losses: Bargaining Power and Rebel Attacks on Peacekeepers', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60.4 (2016), 611–23.

12 Allard Duursma, 'Obstruction and Intimidation of Peacekeepers: How Armed Actors Undermine Civilian Protection Efforts', *Journal of Peace Research*, 56.2 (2019), 234–48; Patrick Hunnicutt, William George Nomikos, and Rob Williams, *Non-Combatants or Counter-Insurgents? The Strategic Logic of Violence against UN Peacekeeping* (Open Science Framework, 6 May 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/ta96y>>.

Why it matters for UN peacekeeping

Attacks on UN peacekeepers carry grave personal costs for those directly affected, and are also often linked to wider, adverse consequences for both force-generation and on-the-ground operations. Due to its potential costs for Troop and Police Contributing Countries (T/PCCs), expected or actual risk to personnel is highlighted as one possible factor shaping the willingness of Member States to contribute to UN missions.¹³ Once deployed, experiences from diverse UN mission settings show that deliberate violence can inhibit peacekeepers' ability to operate effectively. Attacks may lead to operational impacts in ways that can, through different pathways, ultimately affect mission performance.

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First, high-threat environments may challenge some peacekeepers' willingness to engage forcefully where such action is associated with added risk. This may create conditions for – declared or undeclared – caveats. Recent work shows that for all the shortcomings in assets and organisation, ‘the unwillingness of blue helmets to take risks also plays a very significant role’ in ‘cases of unsatisfactory performance of troops’ in UN missions.¹⁴

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Second, risk-mitigating efforts often curtail peacekeepers' mobility and reach, adding distance between a mission and local communities. Adaptations can include restricting movements off-base and concentrating personnel on fewer, heavily fortified compounds.¹⁵ Limiting opportunities for contact hampers efforts to generate support for intervention and collect information – essential to keeping peacekeepers safe. Indeed, interpersonal contact in the context of security or aid operations has shown to increase individuals' willingness to share information with UN personnel.¹⁶

Third, force-protection measures can be cost-intensive. Given the endemic resource-shortages in UN peacekeeping, this matters for performance. In MINUSMA, for instance, the mission's capacity to manoeuvre to respond to situations as they arise has often been limited as a result. For mid-2016, for instance, sources in the mission noted that only 300–400 of the then-deployed 11,000 troops were available for other operations; the remainder being tied down with fixed protection tasks.¹⁷ A greater focus on self-protection implies less capacity to conduct operations to support communities, including for key objectives such as protection of civilians.

¹³Recent research shows other factors may matter more, for instance Andrew Levin, ‘Peacekeeper Fatalities and Force Commitments to UN Operations’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 38.3 (2021), 292–315; Rebecca Cordell, Thorin Wright, and Paul F. Diehl, ‘Extant Commitment, Risk, and UN Peacekeeping Authorization’, *International Interactions*, 47.1 (2021), 135–60.

¹⁴Fernando Rodrigues Goulart, ‘Blue Helmets, Armed Groups, and Peace at Stake: Does Combat Motivation Matter for Robust Peacekeeping to Succeed?’, *International Peacekeeping*, 28.1 (2021), 30–51 (p. 42).

¹⁵For instance, Emma Elfversson, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Paul D. Williams, ‘Urban Peacekeeping under Siege: Attacks on African Union Peacekeepers in Mogadishu, 2007–2009’, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 4.2–3 (2019), 158–78; Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁶Grant M Gordon and Lauren E Young, ‘Cooperation, Information, and Keeping the Peace: Civilian Engagement with Peacekeepers in Haiti’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.1 (2017), 64–79.

¹⁷Interviews with MINUSMA respondents (2016; also 2017).

Next steps

Promoting better standards of protection for peacekeepers will remain essential, but efforts to keep UN peacekeepers safe can also benefit from closer examination and understanding of patterns and drivers of attacks, as well as how attacks may come to impact mission performance.

This paper elevates two main such gaps and interrelated questions for discussion at the CAF22:

1. Better understanding from data and analysis

A more nuanced understanding of both drivers and patterns of attacks on peacekeepers matters for devising appropriate operational responses and relies on systematically collected and detailed data. Collapsing security-incidents under banners such as ‘new security threats’ and presupposing perpetrators with aims that cannot be accommodated (such as ‘extremist group’) risks missing important variations. With the UN’s move towards more data-driven approaches already underway, continued efforts can unlock important insights to inform both risk-mitigating efforts and other operations.¹⁸

- How does greater understanding of patterns, drivers and consequences of violence targeting peacekeeping personnel help better tailor UN missions’ responses to attacks?
- How can new data, technologies and skillsets for analysis be put to better use to improve the safety and security of UN peacekeeping personnel?
- People-centred approaches have the potential to contribute to better protection for host communities, but how can they affect the safety and security of UN peacekeepers?

2. Better link safety and security challenges to performance

Often adverse operational consequences following targeted violence, highlight potential links between attacks and wider mission performance and mandate implementation. Dedicated efforts to track and analyse what peacekeepers do on the ground – including in direct response to attacks – can contribute to better teasing out these associations.

- What efforts could be undertaken to mitigate the effect of deliberate attacks on UN peacekeepers in the future, and safeguard effective operations?
- How could enhanced use of modern technology (AI, drones, GPS-trackers, etc.) support operations and increase the safety of UN peacekeepers in the future?

¹⁸Allard Duursma and John Karlsrud, ‘Predictive Peacekeeping: Strengthening Predictive Analysis in UN Peace Operations’, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 8.1 (2019), 1; Adam Day, ‘Can Data Save U.N. Peacekeeping?’, *World Politics Review*, 2019 <<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/can-data-save-u-n-peacekeeping/>>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Sara Lindberg Bromley is a postdoctoral researcher at Uppsala University, Sweden (PhD 2017). Her main areas of research relate to peace operations and civil war dynamics, in particular civilian protection and peacekeepers' safety and security. She is the project leader of UCDP Peacemakers at Risk (PAR) data collection project and author of several publications on the topic of violence targeting peacekeeping personnel.



Visiting Address:
Drottning Kristinas väg 37,
Stockholm, Sweden

Postal Address:
Sandövägen 1,
SE-872 64 Sandöverken, Sweden

E-mail: info@challengesforum.org
www.challengesforum.org
Phone: +46 (0)10 456 23 00



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