



## Tackling Mis- and Disinformation in United Nations Peace Operations

### Stockholm Forum 2023<sup>1</sup>: Key Takeaways on Mis- and Disinformation in UN Peace Operations



On 16 May, the Challenges Forum International Secretariat (CFIS) and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO) co-organized a roundtable discussion focusing on concrete challenges and threats of mis- and disinformation in international peace operations, with a particular focus on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The discussion gathered an audience of approximately 80 participants, both on-site and online, including representatives from 13 of the Challenges Forum partner organisations.

#### Identifying the Issue: Key Aspects of Mis- and Disinformation in Peace Operations

Truth is always the first victim in conflicts. Mis- and disinformation is **an old problem but now in a new context, turbo-charged by today's digital communications and social media**. The fast-changing communication landscape makes it harder for truth and expertise to prosper in conflict settings.

Peace operations are also victims of social media's dual nature. On one hand, it provides opportunities for empowerment, participation, and influence. While on the other hand, it increases politicizing, polarizing, and weaponizing social media. Resulting in intentionally targeting **safety and security** of UN peacekeepers, civilian staff, and local populations where the field mission operates.<sup>2</sup>

Truth is often a victim of **cultural and language barriers** that result from contradicting narratives and erroneous interpretations of the developments. It is challenging for most people to recognize what is mis- or disinformation, and their

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<sup>1</sup> **The Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development** (Stockholm Forum) hosted by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) gathered over 300 participants, with sessions running over three days.

<sup>2</sup> **For example, at least 15 persons including three UN peacekeepers, were killed in DRC** in July 2022, following strong anti-MONUSCO reporting in social media. In December 2022, an Irish peacekeeper was killed by a hostile mob in Southern Lebanon following rising tensions between UNIFIL and local armed groups.

own potential biases in how they perceive and analyse, and sometimes unintentionally spread disinformation.

Truth might also be a victim of **asymmetries in information access**. While the amount of information people have access to has increased in general, one needs to be aware that the access varies. People in urban areas generally have more access to telecommunication and media than people in rural areas. The intersectional and gender aspect is also important, given the differences between how certain types of media can resonate with male and female populations, as well as digital gender gaps in terms of access.



From left: **Andrea Tenenti**, Head of Strategic Communications and Public Information, UNIFIL, **Flaminia Minelli**, Chief Policy, Evaluation and Training Division, UNDP, **Pernilla Rydén**, Director CFIS, **Comfort Ero**, President and CEO, ICG, **Per Olsson Fridh**, Director General, FBA.



From left: **Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé**, Full Professor, Department of Politics and International Studies, Bishop's University, **Yvan Ilunga**, Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Salve Regina University.

## Key Recommendations

The roundtable discussion generated some key takeaways on how to tackle the roles of different actors and how to mitigate the problems with mis- and disinformation:

- **Not all criticism of the UN is mis- or disinformation. The key is to protect the freedom of expression while strengthening the resilience of communities** to better sustain the threats posed by mis- and disinformation. It is particularly important to work proactively and ensure that correct information is available. This could be supported by independent media, training of journalists as well as rule of law, in the host states.
- **Civil society organizations** have an important role to play as verifiers and protectors of truth. They should be supported to establish facts (fact-checking) and get beyond the noise of fake news on social media.
- **Contextual analysis** is key when assessing the root causes of the spread of mis- and disinformation. In the case of UNIFIL, it has proven critical to understand the politicized and polarized media landscape in Lebanon. For example, political parties finance media outlets who circulate contradictory narratives, which are sometimes used for propaganda purposes. In 2006, UNIFIL changed dramatically after the hostilities between Israel and the Lebanese *Hezbollah*. Following this, European and NATO countries started to deploy troops in

UNIFIL, exacerbating the media narratives of an intervention by the West in the Middle East.

- UN peace operations should invest in mission-wide communication strategies. This would include developing alternative narratives through better “storytelling”, to communicate their mandates both at the capital and the more peripheral locations. It is crucial to ensure media and communication training for all **senior mission leadership**. At the same time, UN peace operations should adopt a more proactive “**whole-mission**” approach, beyond the strategic communication. This should encompass the cycle of planning as well as the decision-making process and support the mandate implementation and the safety of personnel. The approach should also be tailored to specific target groups, especially to those most vulnerable to mis- and disinformation. In this regard, partnership and coordination with stakeholders is essential.
- It is important to understand **the roles of different actors** when it comes to the spread of mis- and disinformation. While the host countries' governments have a responsibility to regulate social media, the officials sometimes might be the instigators of mis- and disinformation, targeting the legitimacy and mandate implementation of UN peace operations. Sometimes, civil society organizations also become manipulated and instrumentalized by other interests. There is a need for more guidance and political support from the Security Council in this regard.
- Peace operations must acknowledge the existence of different contexts and narratives within a country. Given the central role of the host government and local communities it is important to identify whose voice is perceived as legitimate in a particular context. In particular, **UN peace operation personnel need to be aware of the elite agendas** as well as to be able to analyze who owns the narrative. The intent of the **Diaspora** is also important to analyze and assess. Their influence on the political and social landscape in parts or whole of a country or region.
- UN Peace operations are complex and large, involving actors with different social, language and cultural settings. The gap and understanding between peace operation personnel and local people might create distrust and undermine the legitimacy of the field mission. **Linguistic and cultural proximity** to local communities is key to developing trust and transparency and creating conditions for dialogue.

