



**Challenges  
Forum**

**CENTER FOR  
CIVILIANS  
IN CONFLICT**  
RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.



**FBA**

## **Beyond Boots on the Ground: Rethinking Protection of Civilians in a Shifting Global Context**

### **About the event**



On 13 May 2025 the Challenges Forum, together with the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) hosted a roundtable discussion focusing on how to protect civilians where there are limited, or no peacekeepers on the ground. The session was part of the 2025 Stockholm Forum for Peace and Development, hosted by SIPRI and co-convened by the FBA and Sida.

Research shows that the presence of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations correlates with a decrease in civilian casualties. However, trends for future missions indicate a shift towards more limited mandates, and increased reliance on Special Political Missions, and the UN Resident Coordinator system. Protection of Civilians (PoC) should remain a vital peace and security endeavour but must also adapt to emerging threats and new realities. Beyond physical protection (“boots on the ground”), PoC also entails political dialogue, dedicated PoC policies and creating a protective environment, including supporting local and national PoC capacities.

The roundtable aimed to draw on the experiences from leaders in Haiti, Iraq, Ukraine and Mali, to distinguish how the UN system and civil society could provide tailored support to national and local authorities.



**Fatima Al Ansar**, Founder and Director of the Tilwate Peace Network, Mali



**Ghulam Mohammed Isaczai**, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq

### **Key takeaways**

The roundtable was underscored by the scale and severity of the global protection crisis; civilian casualties have risen by 72%, which is the sharpest increase since 2015. The need to protect civilians has also been urgent in situations where there is

high criminal activity and other forms of extreme violence, such as in the case of Haiti where criminal gangs now control 85% of the capital.



**Per Olsson Fridh**, Chair, Challenges Forum Partner Meeting and Director General of the Folke Bernadotte Academy

The Pact for the Future emphasises the urgent need to protect civilians in conflict but only five UN missions have explicit protection mandates today.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that peace operations save lives and protect civilians. The recent withdrawals of host country consent and subsequent reconfiguration or closure of UN peace operations have, in some contexts like Mali and Haiti, created a security vacuum that has been exploited by militias, armed groups and organised crime.

The protection needs of the population often persist long after a peace operation leaves, or a conflict ends. Even when host nation consent has been compromised, and there are no longer “boots on the ground”, the UN and civil society can still deliver meaningful protection through localized engagement, community dialogue and bottom-up peace initiatives.

*The discussion highlighted that:*

- For the UN and its partner organisations to effectively respond to complex crises, there is a need for more agile, integrated and context-specific protection strategies. Humanitarian-Peace-Development nexus approaches can enhance responsiveness and sustainability.
- All UN entities are responsible for prioritizing protection, but they need to be capacitated with the right mandates, resources, expertise, tools and capacities for protection.
- Peace operations should serve as a key enabler for other protection actors across the humanitarian, human rights, peacebuilding and development fields.
- PoC needs to be incorporated into early transition planning of peace operations, and include mapping of UN capacities, strengthening national authorities and local communities, and addressing the funding gap that inevitably follows the closure of a mission. Mandated tasks should be transferable to other actors to enable a successful transition.
- The UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators (RCs/HCs), UN Country Teams as well as the UN’s Peacebuilding Architecture have key roles to play in promoting PoC.
- Placing the protection cluster under the auspices of the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights can in certain contexts help RCs/HCs enhance the UN’s focus on protection.
- Data, information, and independent analysis on violations of international humanitarian law and fundamental human rights is crucial to the protection of civilians.
- PoC should be anchored in political strategies and included in national protection strategies.
- Placing local voices and perceptions at the heart of PoC strategies will be essential for building resilient, trusted and inclusive approaches to civilian security.

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<sup>1</sup> MINUSCA, MONUSCO, UNMISS, UNISFA, UNIFIL

- Protection actors and communities should work with states and their militaries to identify specific risks to civilians during the planning and execution of military operations and try to manage and mitigate those risks.
- National stakeholders and local communities need political and financial support to build trust in peace processes, facilitate dialogue between military and civilian actors, and engage in transitional justice initiatives.

The UN is facing its largest liquidity crisis in many years with potential structural implications. Aid and humanitarian budgets face an unprecedented drawdown, which will have enormous consequences for the whole ecosystem of actors in which protection of civilians takes place.

Despite these challenges, protection of civilians should remain a central imperative for the UN and feature in the mandates of future peace operations and UN presences. The upcoming UN reforms – the review of the future of all forms of UN peace operations, and the peacebuilding architecture review, as well as the UN80 initiative – should aim to improve modularity of responses, making tools more flexible, tailored, and adaptive, both in mission and non-mission settings.



**Ulrika Richardson**, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Haiti



**Alexander Grif**, Country Director, Ukraine, Centre for Civilians in Conflict, CIVIC