Unintended Consequences

Reconsidering the Effects of UN Peacekeeping on State-sponsored Violence

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Abstract

This essay challenges theoretical and empirical arguments about peacebuilding effectiveness that put the state at the center of United Nations peace operations. We argue that state-centric UN peacebuilding operations inadvertently incentivize local-level violence in post-conflict zones. We demonstrate that when the UN supports central governments it unintentionally empowers non-professionalized militaries, paramilitaries, and warlords to settle local scores. Armed violence against civilians in turn triggers a vicious cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals. As an alternative to state-centric peacebuilding operations that incentivize local violence, we suggest that the UN should shift strategic resources away from central governments and toward UN policing, support of traditional and religious authorities, and the training of local security institutions.

Introduction

The ongoing civil war in Mali (2012-2021) began as a separatist conflict in the northern part of the country. MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping operation in the country, deployed explicitly in response to this conflict. Yet, in recent years violence has spread to central Mali, drawing in members of the Peulh ethnic group. What accounts for the spread of violence in Mali and the salience of a new ethnic cleavage in spite of the support of robust peacebuilding operations? Likewise, why does violence persist, evolve, or emerge in other contexts featuring UN peacekeepers?

We argue that United Nations peacebuilding operations inadvertently incentivize local-level violence. UN peacebuilding operations materially support domestic governments' efforts to maintain order following conflict. However, domestic governments and their armed forces often use their power to settle local scores rather than keep the peace. The governmental abuse of power creates a new local-level cycle of violence divorced from the original conflict.

This essay makes three contributions relevant to debates about peacekeeping in academia and the policy-world. First, it highlights the wide range of actors that peacekeepers interact with, encouraging scholars to understand a broader range of peacekeeper-armed actor dynamics. Second, we explain how UN support of formal state institutions can unintentionally contribute to local-level conflicts in peacebuilding operations. Third, the article highlights alternative peacebuilding strategies for analysts and practitioners of peacebuilding operations alike.

How the UN Promotes Peace

How does peacebuilding work? Existing cross-national research on peacekeeping is largely optimistic about operations' likelihood of success. Scholars have emphasized how international peacebuilders can help belligerents overcome commitment problems.¹ Subsequent expansions have applied these theories to local-level outcomes² as well as to civilian protection, both in wartime and after conflict.³ These studies have shown that UN peacekeepers prevent violence from breaking out both nationally as well as sub-nationally.

Much of the existing work assumes that statebuilding is the most effective means to promote the rule of law. Statebuilding refers to international efforts to support a post-conflict state's capacity to resolve future conflicts peacefully. Statebuilding can bolster institutional legitimacy, improving long-term prospects for peace.⁴ International actors can lend legitimacy to post-conflict states, as well as support public goods provision.⁵

However, existing research suggests international actors lack the capacity⁶, legitimacy,⁷ or local know-how⁸ to help consolidate gains from peace into successful statebuilding at the end of which local populations view the state as legitimate. Others have pointed out that UN peacebuilding features a liberal concept of state-society relations. Scholars criticize universal peacebuilding models as fundamentally unsuited to many post-conflict contexts⁹ or failing to

¹ Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*; Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents Choices after Civil War*

² Ruggeri et al., "Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict."

³ Hultman et al., "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War"; Hultman et al., "Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting."

⁴ Blair, "Legitimacy After Violence: Evidence from Two Lab-in-the-Field Experiments in Liberia."

⁵ Lake, "The practice and theory of US statebuilding."

⁶ Beardsley, "Agreement without Peace? International Mediation and Time Inconsistency Problems."

⁷ Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma*.

⁸ Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*; Autesserre, *Peaceland*.

⁹ Lynch, "Neoliberal Ethics, the Humanitarian International, and Practices of Peacebuilding."

account for local-level failures.¹⁰ Thus, a key tension is the discrepancy between the optimistic cross-national evaluations of peacebuilding and recent critical approaches; we directly address this tension. We show that UN peacebuilders effectively stop existing conflicts but may also increase the prospects of new types of conflict breaking out.

Moving Away from the State

We argue that UN peacebuilding efforts can create incentives for new conflict in a post-conflict state. In particular, we suggest that statebuilding can create new conflict in unintended ways. UN operations are fundamentally state-centric. Many peacebuilding operations are tasked with extending the authority of the state¹¹ and provide benefits to increase state capacity.¹² Likewise, peacekeepers in civil wars deploy where their military benefits can best support host governments.¹³

UN peacebuilding operations incentivize local-level conflict through their support of central government and their militaries. The UN prioritizes the creation of order and security in post-conflict zones, often delegating this task to domestic states and their armed forces. Governments use UN-provided support, resources, and legitimization to create and maintain order. However, in most developing states, governments rely on non-professionalized militaries, warlords, and paramilitary forces to keep the peace. These groups create conflict and perpetuate grievances that lead to further local-level violence.

¹⁰ Autesserre, *Peaceland*.

¹¹ Missions such as those in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and the DRC (MONUSCO) have been mandated to re-establish, extend, or consolidate the authority of the state.

¹² Di Salvatore and Ruggeri “The Withdrawal of UN Peace Operations and State Capacity”

¹³ Villa “Externalities of Consent”

Such groups are ubiquitous in armed conflict and often engage in violence against civilians¹⁴ Figure 1 demonstrates the clear rise of militias engaging in violence against civilians in the African countries hosting peacekeepers between 1997-2018.¹⁵

Figure 1: The Number of Militias Engaging in Violence Against Civilians in African Countries Hosting a Peacekeeping Operation, 1997-2018

Violence against civilians can motivate and prompt new cycles of conflict. A new violent conflict cycle can occur through three sequential processes, as diagrammed in Figure 2. First, non-professional armed groups commit violent acts against civilians. Although the UN empowers these armed groups to keep the peace and prevent rebel groups from attacking civilians, they often use their newfound power to settle local scores.

¹⁴ Carey and Mitchell “Progovernment Militias”

¹⁵ Burundi, CAR, Chad, Cote D’Ivoire, DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Mali, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and South Sudan. These data come from Raleigh et al. 2010.

Figure 2: Diagram of argument, how UN peacekeeping inadvertently creates new salient conflicts

Second, local populations retaliate against supporters of the armed groups and vice versa. Retaliation cycles are common and easily triggered following civil war violence.¹⁶ Victims of armed group violence do not feel like they can rely on the government or the UN, since these actors supported the perpetrators. As a result, they resort to attacking perceived supporters of the armed group, the government, or the UN. The victims of this violence retaliate, perpetuating an all new cycle of local-level conflict.

Third, new armed groups emerge to meet the demand for new violence, recruiting from ethnic groups attacked by state-supported militaries or from ethnic groups facing retaliatory attacks. As a result, UN support of a central government can inadvertently create new fronts of violence that can threaten the entire state's stability.

¹⁶ Bateson, "Order and Violence in Postwar Guatemala".

Alternative Approach

We do not argue that the United Nations should entirely abandon programs that support the state or that attempt to build the state-security apparatus. Rather, policy-makers should consider shifting peacekeeping resources away from post-conflict states and into other avenues for promoting peace. To its credit, the UN has started in recent years to invest in other strategies. In particular, three non-state centric peacebuilding strategies hold great promise moving forward: (1) local-level peace enforcement by United Nations police forces and peacekeepers; (2) training of local police forces and security brigades independently of the state; (3) cooperation with traditional and religious authorities.

First, instead of empowering governments and their non-professionalized militaries to enforce local-level peace in post-conflict states, UN peacekeepers and UN police can directly enforce local-level peace. Peacekeepers use a strategic posture in order to stop current violence and deter future violence. From the perspective of the local population, the practical implication is that violence is no longer considered a feasible strategy for solving a local-level dispute. This is because of the high likelihood that the UN will stop or punish the violence later by the UN, which citizens assume the military would not do. Recent evaluations at the micro- and sub-national levels suggest that direct UN enforcement can effectively increase interethnic cooperation and reduce violence.¹⁷ Direct UN enforcement of local-level peace can alleviate the need for central governments to rely on their non-professionalized security forces. It can also provide the UN time to help governments professionalize and reform the security sector.¹⁸

¹⁷ Nomikos, “Do International Actors Boltster Interethnic Cooperation at the Local Level? Evidence from Peacebuilding in Mali”; Ruggeri et al., “Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict”. See Autesserre, “the Trouble with the Congo” for a critique of UN operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo because they de-emphasized local-level security.

¹⁸ Karim and Gorman, “Building a more competent security sector: The case of UNMIL and the Liberian National Police”.

Second, the UN should continue to embrace non-state centric peacebuilding operations. In particular, the UN should cooperate with non-state authorities that carry a great deal of legitimacy in developing country settings. Traditional authorities typically play a central role in resolving disputes in these contexts, particularly in small rural communities. These leaders can facilitate aid provision and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies.¹⁹ Similarly, recent research suggests that religious leaders can mobilize collective action in post-conflict settings, especially when embracing Qur'anic scripture.²⁰

Finally, in conflict settings that necessitate some degree of local order-building, the UN should shift resources away from formal institutions such as militaries to local security institutions comprised of local volunteers trained by UN experts. The United States has achieved above-average peacebuilding outcomes with such programs—the Sons of Iraq and Afghan Local Police programs in Iraq and Afghanistan. The effectiveness of these local security institutions derives from those community members who volunteer to serve in the police force and the community leadership that helps international peacebuilders recruit volunteers. This is no easy task. The peacebuilder—in this case the UN—must identify and monitor potential local leaders that can serve as useful agents that can help recruit volunteers. These leaders must be competent, carry a great deal of legitimacy and community-level trust, and must be interested in community-level peace. Once American peacebuilders selected training sites for the ALP program, local police would be trained by American advisors but governed by local councils (shuras) and tasked strictly with keeping local-level peace. The shuras would designate leaders that would oversee

¹⁹ Baldwin, The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa; Blattman et al., “How to Promote Order and Property Rights under Weak Rule of Law? An Experiment in Changing Dispute Resolution Behavior through Community Education”.

²⁰ Condra et al., “Clerics and Scriptures: Experimentally Disentangling the Influence of Religious Authority in Afghanistan”; Masoud et al., “Using the Qur'an to Empower Women,” Grossman, Nomikos, and Siddiqui 2021.

the ALP. The shuras, which are viewed as legitimate actors by the local populace, would bestow legitimacy on the security personnel. The ALP-leadership would be vetted by government officials, who would impose their own preferences on selecting leaders. Thus, American leaders had to have enough information to select suitable training sites, shuras, and government officials to vet police leaders and volunteers. While such programs do not entirely eliminate the state, they incorporate local, non-governmental stakeholders that can minimize the involvement of non-professionalized militaries.

UN peacebuilding has limited violence in post-conflict societies. Yet, in important ways the UN underachieves and is occasionally counter-productive. In this article, we have argued that UN peacebuilding operations can unintentionally create incentives for new conflict. At the same time, I have suggested that this incentivization process is avoidable. With some shifting of resources and strategic prioritization, the UN can help prevent the unintentional creation of new local-level cycles of violence.

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