The Effectiveness of Peacekeeping during Civil War

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The prevalence and destructiveness of civil wars in Mali, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and many other countries has spurred debates about peacekeeping. There are several sizable missions, but questions remain over whether or not they are *effective in mitigating civil war violence*. Policy analysts have produced numerous reports about the issue. But what have academics said about these questions? And what prompted and promoted the trend towards large-scale peace operations, mandated to protect civilians against threats of physical violence, in the first place?

Post-Cold War Peacekeeping

With the end of the Cold War, the international community began to devote more attention to peacekeeping operations. Deadlocks inside the UN Security Council, which had thwarted the launch of numerous missions, diminished (Fortna and Howard, 2008: 287). National armies (mostly western) that, until then, had to be prepared for defensive action – in case of a military clash between the superpowers – could and arguably wanted to direct their energy towards other conflicts. And with the presentation of *An Agenda for Peace* in 1992, the UN provided a policy framework that enabled military forces to engage in peacekeeping and peacebuilding under the umbrella of the United Nations.

Optimism about peacekeeping reigned initially, (Fortna and Howard, 2008: 287) however in the mid-1990s several missions failed. In Rwanda and Srebrenica, UN forces were unable to prevent the unfolding of genocides: troops were small in number, lightly armed, and unprepared for the eruption of violence (Howard, 2007: 21-51). In Somalia, dozens of peacekeepers were brutally killed in an attempt to restore peace and order in a highly fragmented and unstable country. International media showed how the bodies of peacekeepers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu (Ibid).

A UN report on peace operations followed in 2000. Looking back at the preceding decade, the authors observed that the environments in which peace operations had unfolded, and the assignments given to UN (military) personnel during those operations, were sometimes very complex. They concluded that, "It should have come as no surprise to anyone that these missions would be hard to accomplish." (Brahimi Report, 2000: 4)

To increase the likelihood of success of future operations, the authors recommended "clear, credible, and achievable mandates", robust rules of engagement, and improved intelligence capacity (Ibid: 10-13). In addition, and quite importantly, the *Brahimi Report* explicitly called upon peacekeepers to protect civilians under imminent threat of violence:

Indeed, peacekeepers — troops or police — who witness violence against civilians should be presumed to be authorized to stop it, within their means, in support of basic United Nations principles and, as stated in the report of the Independent Inquiry on Rwanda, consistent with 'the perception and the expectation of protection created by [an operation's] very presence' (see S/1999/1257, p. 51) (Brahimi Report, 2000: 11).

Sizable missions have emerged since the publication of the *Brahimi Report*. At present, there are 16 ongoing UN peace operations. Most of these are in Africa. The missions altogether employ more than 120,000 individuals,

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including about 100,000 uniformed personnel. These numbers may be a cause for (renewed) optimism: they have never been as high before. But when looking at some of the larger missions, like the ones in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we may ask whether these missions, and UN peace operations more broadly, are really effective.

Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations: Recent Research

Several studies have tried to address the question of effectiveness. One of the rather constant findings is that "peacekeeping has a large and statistically significant effect on the duration of peace *after* civil wars" (Fortna and Howard, 2008: 290; see also Fortna 2008). But how effective are peacekeepers *during* civil wars? More specifically, can they help mitigate violence between warring factions, and protect civilians during those conflicts? If so, what are the mechanisms by which they do so? Systematic research on these questions, from a micro-level perspective, was absent for a long time. But recently, three political scientists – Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon – picked up them up.

In their first article, these authors focused on the protection of civilians. For each month, they documented "the number and type of peacekeepers [troops, police, and military observers] deployed to each mission and the number of civilian deaths committed by combatants during intrastate conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa from 1991 to 2008" (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, 2013: 876). Based on a series of statistical analyses, authors concluded: "*increasing* the number of UN troops and police significantly *decreases* violence against civilians by both governments and rebels" (Ibid, emphasis added). Quite surprisingly, UN military observers, according to authors, "exacerbate victimization" (Ibid: 886).

In a second article, the authors engaged in a similar exercise. But this time, they concentrated on battlefield deaths, which include "government soldiers and rebel fighters, as well as civilians and unknown victims killed in the crossfire by battle-related violence" (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, 2014: 744). Statistical analyses suggest that battlefield deaths decrease when the number of UN troops deployed increases. The size of the police force, in this case, does *not* appear to have an effect on the number of battlefield deaths (2014: 746-47). And the impact of UN military observers is mixed: in some analyses, military observers appear to significantly *increase* the number of battlefield deaths, while in other analyses they appear to significantly *decrease* that number (Ibid: 746).

The message that culminates from the above articles seems quite simple: send more troops and police forces to the ground, and perhaps reconsider the deployment of military observers. But should that indeed be the conclusion for policy makers? Instead of answering that question, I suggest that we use the results to pose *new* questions. Why, for instance, are police forces more than 10 times as effective in reducing 'violence against civilians' – as compared to UN troops – during peace operations (Hultman et al., 2013: 11-12). What is the context in which 'violence against civilians' occurs *and* gets reported? Do these events occur mostly in urban areas or in cities and villages in which UN police operates? What is it exactly that the UN police does to reduce *lethal* violence against civilians? Is it indeed through patrolling, as the authors suggest? Similar questions can be raised for troops and military observers.

An Ethnographic Approach

The questions call for more contextual information. Two monographs by Séverine Autesserre offer important insights. In her first book, *The Trouble with Congo* (2010), the author asks why the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, "the largest peacekeeping mission in the world […] failed to build a sustainable peace in the Congo" (2010: 5). At the national level, there was a peace agreement in 2003. But at the local level, violence continued to be rampant. To explore the reasons for ongoing local-level violence, Autesserre conducted more than a year of ethnographic work inside the DRC, interviewing military and civilian personnel.

Autesserre points out that peacekeepers have had a tendency to adopt a *top-down* approach to local problems and only consider *top-down* solutions for those problems (2010: 41-125). Attempts to understand the *local* nature of conflicts, and serious efforts to resolve these conflicts through *local* mechanisms appear to be sparse. Effective solutions to local level violence, accordingly, are few in number.

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In *Peaceland* (2014), her second book, Autesserre digs deeper into the background of the "practices, habits, and narratives" that shape the attitudes and actions of peacekeepers across missions. She explains how peacekeepers move from one mission to the next without ever getting to understand the contexts in which they operate. Peacekeepers often isolate themselves from local populations to form expatriate communities. The boundaries that emerge, according to Autesserre, hinder (1) complete understanding of the situation, and (2) effective humanitarian assistance (2014).

Moving Forward

Séverine Autesserre has offered a vivid picture of the practices of peacekeeping. That picture is necessary for grasping why peacekeeping efforts sometimes fail to protect civilians and occasionally even exacerbate civil war violence. But for comprehensive understanding, we need to also consider cases of success (Howard, 2007: 3). Lise Howard (2007) and Page Fortna (2008) have offered one template for such an analysis: they intensively studied and then systematically compared a small number of successful and unsuccessful peacekeeping operations – they considered but not specifically focused on mitigation of civil war violence. Future research could use the template, offered by Howard and Fortna, to specifically study the impact of peacekeeping on civil war violence.

However, I suggest another template. I propose research by which we consider cases of failure and success *within* and *across* peacekeeping operations. Such research should include the strengths of the quantitative approach (clear measurement, a comparative angle, and large-N) and the power of ethnography (understanding of the beliefs and emotions that trigger action). The study would unravel contexts on the ground like Autesserre does. But it would also apply the rigor – measurement and analysis – that Hultman, Kathman and Shannon showcase. It would combine the best of two academic approaches in order to provide insight into the best available options for decreasing civil war violence.

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