

Robust Peacekeeping: A Desirable Development?

Written by Lisa Hultman

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LISA HULTMAN, SEP 2 2014

A UN-sponsored report recently concluded that more than 191,000 people have now been killed in the Syrian conflict. Commenting on the report, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay strongly criticized the Security Council for its inaction. The case of Syria has once again raised the question about the relevance of the UN and its ability to protect civilians. While civilians are being slaughtered on the battlefield, the UN Security Council fails to agree on an appropriate reaction. It may remind us of historical failures of the UN, like in Rwanda and Bosnia. What happened to the promises that “never again” would this happen?

In fact, much has changed since then. The greatest failure in Bosnia was that civilians were killed despite the presence of UN peacekeepers. The peacekeeping principles of impartiality and the use of force only in self-defense hindered the appropriate action. Today, impartiality does not imply that peacekeepers have to be by-standers to atrocities. Instead, the UN has moved towards an emphasis on civilian protection. In 1999, Resolution 1270 provided the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with an explicit mandate to protect civilians. Since then, peacekeepers are regularly asked to protect civilians from physical harm. In parallel with discussions regarding the Responsibility to Protect, a norm of civilian protection has grown stronger within the international community. But does the case of Syria not illustrate the failure of the UN to implement this norm effectively?

In my own research, I have shown that the UN has indeed moved systematically towards implementing the civilian protection norm. Many peacekeeping missions are justified through the use of protection language, and armed conflicts where the civilian population is suffering more severely from attacks by the warring actors are also the conflicts most likely to receive a UN peacekeeping mission. The data also shows that this effect is particularly strong since 1999, when the first protection mandate was issued. Hence, the UN Security Council has become more likely to agree on peacekeeping missions when there are large-scale massacres of civilians. While the Security Council certainly fails to come to an agreement in some instances of ongoing atrocities, the UN is at least on average more likely to intervene against atrocities the more severe they are.

Civilian protection is not an easy task. In order to enable civilian protection, UN peacekeeping missions nowadays often get more robust mandates. Invoking chapter VII under the UN Charter, missions are authorized to use all means necessary to perform the given tasks. This has pushed UN peacekeeping into new domains. Several missions have dealt with extremely complex situations, and the line between peacekeeping and enforcement has become blurred. This is a consequence of the UN intervening more often into ongoing conflicts, where the need for civilian protection is high.

So, the UN has an ambition to protect civilians by establishing robust peacekeeping missions with explicit protection mandates. But is this a desirable development? In a recent article here on E-International Relations, James Sloan argues that militarized peacekeeping, with more robust missions relying on offensive force, is unlikely to succeed. According to Sloan, they lack the personnel, the equipment, and the leadership necessary for carrying out offensive operations. In addition, such operations are restricted by one of the fundamental criteria for UN peacekeeping, namely that they need full consent of the host government. As a consequence, these missions cannot act forcefully against state perpetrators.

This critique is sound and there are several examples of peacekeeping failure to accompany such an interpretation of

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the militarization of peacekeeping. Sloan is certainly not alone in criticizing the UN for its inability to protect civilians. Others have argued that the UN rarely succeeds in protecting civilians. However, by looking at single cases, we cannot tell whether peacekeeping is effective or not. The central question is always what would have happened short of a UN intervention. Since the UN is more likely to deploy peacekeeping forces to the most severe cases, it is not surprising that we witness violence also after UN peacekeepers have arrived. Only a systematic analysis can inform us about the general effects of deploying a peacekeeping mission.

In an article in *American Journal of Political Science*, two colleagues and I show that UN peacekeepers are indeed effective in protecting civilians. We find that the more peacekeepers (troops and police) that are deployed, the fewer civilians are killed. Hence, when equipped with larger numbers of military troops and police who can enforce strategies necessary to prevent armed actors from targeting the civilian population, UN peacekeepers do protect civilians. Another way of expressing these results is to say that peace enforcement by the UN is more likely to fail if it does not have enough personnel – it is not bound to fail. With large numbers of troops and police, UN missions can separate the parties on the battlefield and patrol behind the frontlines. Such activities by an impartial peacekeeping mission can curtail the destructive fighting and recruitment strategies that lead to civilian killings. The UN can certainly improve its protection strategies and become even better at managing atrocities – but it is important to acknowledge that UN peacekeeping is, in fact, doing what it is supposed to do, even if not perfectly.

Can we conclude that militarized UN peacekeeping is a better alternative than unilateral interventions for civilian protection? No, not directly. One empirical study in fact shows that partial interventions that challenge the perpetrators are the most effective in ending atrocities. This suggests that UN peacekeeping operations, that strive to be impartial, may not be forceful enough in comparison to unilateral interventions. However, other studies highlight problems with biased interventions. An empirical study of the effects of military interventions supporting either side in the conflict shows that such bias may actually increase violence against civilians. Moreover, a recent article presenting a game-theoretical model suggests that impartial interventions are able to minimize the negative effects of third-party interventions into civil war. More research is thus necessary to tease out the relative effectiveness of various forms of military intervention.

While UN peacekeeping is effective if adequately composed, there are certainly limits to how much the UN can move towards more robust missions without introducing new problems. In March 2013, the UN peacekeeping mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) received a new mandate from the Security Council to neutralize armed groups with the help of an 'intervention brigade'. Although Resolution 2098 carefully stated that this should be done "without creating a precedent of any prejudice to the agreed principles of peacekeeping", this resolution can certainly be viewed as a potentially dramatic alteration of the principles of UN peacekeeping. If UN peacekeepers are allowed to take an active stance against one side of the armed conflict, with the clear mission to neutralize these actors through the use of force, it is difficult to see this as anything else than moving away from the core principles of impartiality and the use of force only in self-defense.

While robust mandates may be necessary for effectively protecting civilians, a move towards offensive mandates is risky. Not only are UN peacekeepers unsuited for such operations, but, more importantly, warring parties will change their perception of UN peacekeepers. Blue helmets will no longer symbolize impartiality. This is a problem in some missions already today, with warring actors deliberately attacking UN peacekeepers. Research shows that the risk for UN personnel to be killed is higher in operations with a peace enforcement mandate. An extended perception that the UN takes active part in conflicts could be severely damaging for future operations. Nevertheless, some conflicts require robust action in order to address and contain the destructive dynamics that lead to civilian victimization. Hence, the challenge for the future is to find the right balance of deploying strong UN missions that can effectively protect civilians, while at the same time maintaining an impartial position in the conflict. Civilian protection is a difficult, but not impossible, task. The track record of the UN is better than its reputation.

About the author:

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