



UN Peacekeeping in Complex Environments: An Interview with Larry Attree and Jordan Street

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Saferworld's Larry Attree and Jordan Street discuss their recent report on the lessons learned from UN peace operations in complex environments.

Q. You recently wrote a report examining peace operations in complex environments. Why did you decide to undertake this research?

For several years, [Saferworld](#) has been challenging violent, repressive and counter-productive responses to crises and threats – especially militarised and authoritarian campaigns to stamp out ‘terrorism’ and ‘violent extremism’. These responses often entrench mistrust and grievances that drive conflict, rather than addressing them. For us, the answer lies in peacebuilding responses. Our research, laid out in [this](#) and past reports, explains what is going wrong with current approaches and suggests ideas for more constructive alternatives.

So far we’ve mostly focused on the counter-terror actions of Western governments and their ‘allies’. But given United Nations involvement in Mali and other fragile contexts, we’ve come to see how relevant this evidence is to understanding how the UN’s actions can reinforce instability through its peace operations.

UN peace operations – which are meant to be impartial – are increasingly being drawn into complex conflict environments, and in some cases asked to support counter-terror operations. This is a huge red flag for us. It means

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abandoning impartiality and other vital principles, as well as ignoring the lessons of recent internal policy reviews.

At the same time, the recently created UN Office of Counter-terrorism is actively carving out a role and relationship with other UN agencies – including the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (soon to be the UN Department of Peace Operations). So it's a good moment to reflect on what [Afghanistan](#), [Somalia](#), [Syria](#), and [Yemen](#) have taught us and apply those lessons when asking how UN peace operations should (or shouldn't) engage in counter-terror and 'countering/preventing violent extremism' (C/PVE) efforts – before it's too late.

Q. The report discusses “complex environments”. What is meant by this term and are the environments where peacekeepers operate today more complicated than twenty or thirty years ago?

In a nutshell, 'complex environments' is a UN term – helpful in that it avoids suggesting a given conflict is simply a problem of 'terrorism' or 'violent extremism' – which is [what many governments would have us believe](#). A complex environment is basically a place affected by international or regional civil war coupled with violent groups using terror tactics, or where violent organised crime is rampant.

These are the environments in which UN peace operations now work, and they are a bit more complicated than traditional conflicts where sides tended to be more clearly demarcated. Complex environments throw up many other challenges, too – it can be hard to move around, consult people or engage with conflicting parties. And higher rates of peacekeeper fatalities are a key indicator of the more fraught security environment.

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Q. How clear are UN policies and mandates on peacekeeping and counter-terrorism? Is it obvious where the lines begin and end?

Some UN policies discourage flawed ‘war on terror’ style approaches. The 2015 High-level Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report rejected a role for blue helmets in direct military counter-terror operations, and other UN policies define the UN’s role as focusing on political resolution of conflict, civil society empowerment and human rights-based approaches. There is a policy to keep the UN from providing security assistance to abusive security forces. UN leaders and documents have also slammed the war on terror – for example when Guterres wisely noted that ‘Terrorism is fundamentally the denial and destruction of human rights, and the fight against terrorism will never succeed by perpetuating the same denial and destruction’.

Yet despite this, the UN does have three policy weak spots that could be exploited to draw it into counter-terror and military operations. Firstly, UN reluctance to play a direct military counter-terror role is not borne out of a desire to protect its impartiality and values, but rather out of a practical recognition that it is not well set up to do so. The second is Ban Ki-Moon’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which in 2015 outlined an intention to ‘integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities of UN PKO [Peacekeeping Operations] and special political missions’. The implications of this have never been properly thought through. And third, the sacred status of ‘national ownership’ leads to the UN taking a largely state-centric approach to peacekeeping. Working with governments in this way in conflict situations can unfortunately result in the UN taking sides in war rather than pushing all sides to make peace.

Q. Tell us more about the counter-terror related activities the UN is taking on. Why is this happening?

We're starting to see the UN's mandate expand to include military support such as training and equipping security forces, supporting countering violent extremism (CVE) campaigns by abusive governments, taking proactive stances against 'terrorist' groups, and offering intelligence, medical evacuations and funding as well as other forms of support for counter-terror operations. This is leading the UN into some grey areas where it will face greater risks.

Mali is perhaps the clearest example of the UN being asked to carry out direct counter-terror activities – but other missions, like in Somalia and Afghanistan where 'softer' CVE-type interventions are now becoming commonplace, also raise concerns.

Member states that are bogged down in intractable conflicts they can't seem to 'win' have a strong motive for encouraging the UN to take responsibility. This is one way to look at what is happening in Mali, where France has increasingly pushed other members of the UN Security Council to outsource some of their costly counter-terror engagement. At one point during negotiations, it seemed that the French delegation wanted to give the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) an explicit counter-terror mandate. Some states resisted this pressure, but it is unclear whether they did so to keep budgets down and safeguard their troops or whether it was based on concerns over risks to peace and UN impartiality.

The resultant mandate for MINUSMA saw the UN supporting other counter-terror operations including a new regional 'fighting force' called the G5 Sahel – composed of troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Those fighting in Mali – France, the regional G5 Sahel force and MINUSMA – want to frame their actions as successes, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Human rights groups, independent assessments and even some UN reports tell a different story – one of **extrajudicial killings**, mass graves and torture of ‘suspected militants’ by forces that the UN is supporting. Meanwhile, Mali’s peace process and progress with governance reforms have stalled, and the UN is **doing too little** to work for new political solutions between the authorities and armed groups.

Over the coming years, Mali may well become yet another prime example of how not to deal with a complex conflict environment, and of the sort of engagement that the UN should avoid at all costs.

Q. Why should peace operations and counter-terrorism be kept separate? Is mixing the two always a bad idea?

In our view there are several major risks for the UN if it continues down the path of supporting or doing CVE programming and counter-terror operations.

First, taking sides in these wars harms the UN’s credibility, impartiality and space for supporting development and peace initiatives (including dialogue and mediation. This can perpetuate or even worsen conflict. Second, by supporting one side over another, it risks making the UN into a conflict party that is complicit in conduct that can fuel conflict. Support to state authority can also reinforce state abuses, lessen incentives for reform and aggravate public grievances. Third, UN training and equipping of security forces can be counter-productive if partners do not uphold human rights standards or use assistance for its intended purpose. Fourth, we are increasingly seeing that efforts to integrate ‘countering violent extremism’ into peace operations risks

compromising their impartiality, alienating communities, disempowering civil society and aggravating conflict.

In places like Mali, these risks have become the reality, indicating an urgent need for an internal rethink.

Q. What steps can be taken to improve the effectiveness of peace operations in complex environments?

In our [report](#), we advocate for the UN to work towards achieving impartiality in practice and seeking to separate itself from military strategies and approaches of all parties to the conflict. For us this means disengaging from any activity that will bring that impartiality into question – i.e. counter-terrorism. We are not the first to say this – scholars like [John Karlsrud](#) have done a great deal of work exploring this issue.

In response to our report, [Richard Gowan](#) raised the concern that that if the UN doesn't do counter-terror work, it could become irrelevant and lose influence, ceding ground to counter-terror operations with little regard for human rights. This could also leave the UN underfunded in conflict environments.

But there are important flaws in this 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!' argument. Apart from undermining important global norms, there is also no reason to assume that the UN will be able to gain any traction on human rights by joining in with counter-terror efforts. Our [detailed studies](#) of western counter-terror engagement illustrate the [persistent failure](#) to influence partner governments to curb their abuse, corruption and authoritarianism – quite the contrary. So in fact the biggest threat to UN peacemaking influence would be allowing its

peace operations to sink further into the quicksand of the unwinnable war on terror.

The alternative is for the UN to position itself as the voice of reason, with every confidence that at some point those frustrated at the failure of counter-terror approaches will require an institution with the integrity and tools to make peace.

There are some examples of positive engagement and mandates in Afghanistan for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), where human rights monitoring of all parties to the conflict (including prison visits to Taliban detainees) over time enabled a stronger UN peacemaking role. Strong human rights components of UN peace operations are crucial in protecting the organisation's impartiality, reputation and role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

We also believe UN peace operations should develop greater civilian capacity to work on addressing conflict drivers – regardless of whether a conflict is defined as having a ‘terrorist’ or ‘violent extremist’ dimension. It’s a lot harder to support inclusive dialogue and conflict resolution efforts when you label one side of the conflict as the problem. In reality, conflicts are usually a consequences of grievances that stem from abuse, corruption and repression – problems that governments must do their part to address.

For this reason, we believe that the UN and member states should exercise caution before designating conflict parties as ‘aggressors’, ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists.’ This could help to safeguard UN impartiality and keep a broad range of options on the table. Instead, all parties to an armed conflict should be judged on their adherence to international law.

Undeniably, members of the UN Security Council are putting a lot of pressure on the UN to join in counter-terror efforts in a way that suits their immediate geopolitical interests. Too often, this undermines long-term peace and stability, not to mention the reputation of the UN. The UN will struggle to avoid counter-terror related activities unless and until UN member states bring other perspectives and solutions to the fore.

We think it's pretty clear that in the long run, by safeguarding its values, refusing to back abusive forces, and investing in peacemaking, the UN will accrue greater respect and influence for building peace – while avoid providing perverse incentives by backing campaigns that often lead to the opposite.

It is important to contextualise this conversation in wider questions around UN peacekeeping too. The reputation of UN blue helmets has been damaged in recent years by terrible revelations of sexual exploitation and abuse and the cholera scandal in Haiti. Together with the ever-present threat of budget cuts, it's clear that the UN does not need another crisis. Thus it must find a way to avoid getting bogged down in supporting counter-terror forces responsible for indiscriminate violence and other abuses. It is our view – and indeed the view of many others – that this means rejecting any counter-terror and CVE role for UN Peace operations – no matter the context.

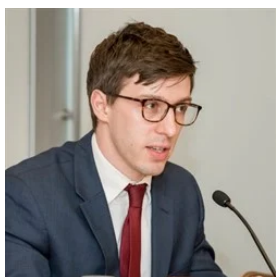
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About the interviewees

Larry Attree is head of policy at Saferworld. With over 13 years' experience, he



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