UN Police have been an established instrument in the peace and security toolbox since their first deployment in the 1960s. In the course of the last 50 years, their role has increasingly been framed as preventive. In addition to peacekeeping operations, UN Police have become a regular feature of special political missions in the last decade or so. The “sustaining peace” concept consolidated the notion of UN Police as a central actor in conflict prevention in a wide range of settings and stages of conflict. In the context of the recent peace and security architecture reform, the Secretary-General formally assigned UN Police the role of a system-wide service provider.¹ This opens up a range of deployment settings where UN Police can contribute to prevention, but also entails organizational, financial and political challenges.

³ UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/262; UN Security Council Resolution 2282 (2016).
and four special political missions (71). UN Police bring a range of capacities to their preventive roles. With the rise of residual violence in UN areas of operation, the share of Formed Police Units has grown to constitute 72% of UN Police in the field and predominantly addresses immediate threats of violence.

Individual police officers help to build capacity through training and advice. As the need for specialized skills has grown, for example, to engage communities or tackle organized crime, they have increasingly been complemented by civilian (non-police) experts and specialized police teams. A particular resource is the Standing Police Capacity (SPC) which was created in 2007 and originally conceived as a tool to rapidly mobilize a police capability during mission startup, as they did for MINURCAT, UNMISS, UNISFA, MINUSMA, MINUSCA and recently for UNMHA in Yemen. SPC personnel – 36 staff at present – reinforce existing missions during strategic reviews and transitions, or support key initiatives, which require particular expertise. The SPC (and the Justice and Corrections Standing Capacity) are the only flexible response mechanisms and must navigate the fact that organizationally they remain firmly anchored in the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO).⁵ Even so, they have also deployed to non-mission settings. Early examples were support to human rights investigations in Syria at the request of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) or advice on the role of police during the 2009 elections in Mozambique in cooperation with the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

The creation of the Global Focal Point for Police, Justice and Corrections areas in the rule of law in post-conflict and other crisis situations (GFP) in 2012 has led to enhanced coordination and collaboration at headquarters and in the field between the UN DPO and key partners including UNDP, OHCHR, UN Women, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and others. As reflected in the reference to "other crisis situations" in its name, the GFP first made the possibility of deploying into non-mission settings explicit.

**Peacekeeping operations**

Preventive roles are inherent in a range of mandated tasks in UN peace operations from protection of civilians to operational support, capacity and institution building. While it is valid for UN Police to conceptualize all their mandated tasks as contributing to prevention, the most direct links exist with efforts to avert immediate physical threats to civilians and to address local conflict dynamics through community engagement.

When it comes to immediate prevention of violence, UN Police play a key role in implementing the protection of civilians (POC) remit in South Sudan or Mali, as well as in the prevention and investigation of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Haiti or the DRC. Mid- to long-term, UN Police aim to address the structural factors that typically give rise to violence through institution and capacity building, police development or community policing.

**Special political missions**

In special political missions where police components are a fraction the size of those in multidimensional peacekeeping operations (on average 18 versus 1,146), UN Police have focused on strategic advice to police development and institution

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⁵ Until 01 January 2019, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO).
building, as well as training in specialized areas, such as organized crime or SGBV. The Secretary-General has also called on his regional offices, envoys and representatives to make greater use of UN policing expertise in political processes, mediation and prevention.⁶

Transitions

Where UN Police have been engaged in a country for a long time through a peace operation and have invested significant effort into public safety and the development of host-state police, the question of sustainability and preventing a recurrence of violence is pivotal. Collaboration with partners, primarily UNDP, has accelerated greatly with the GFP arrangement and been instrumental in the context of transitions.

Non-mission settings

The demand for deployment in non-mission settings is growing. Typical entry points are the resident coordinators and their country teams, regional offices and other UN entities, often based on a member state request for policing expertise. Activities have been advice, training and investigative support, typically in cooperation with UNDP, OHCHR or UN WOMEN through the GFP.

Key considerations

Despite these windows of opportunity for a UN Police contribution to conflict prevention, challenges remain. Some are specific to police, others are inherent to preventive engagement more broadly but have police-specific connotations.

Finding a persuasive narrative: The most fundamental challenge is gaining host-country consent for early preventive engagement without appearing to undermine its authority and sovereignty and potentially ‘exposing’ areas of fragility and contested legitimacy. The joint World Bank-United Nations report “Pathways for Peace” (2017) suggests that a narrative which explains how preventive support will in fact bolster a state’s sovereignty and capacity might be persuasive.⁷

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Balancing technical and political engagement: Concepts of police reform have long argued that building state capacity without concurrently establishing democratic oversight and good governance, bears the danger of strengthening corrupt or authoritarian institutions. Hence, promises of technical support to enhance sovereignty must be complemented by political engagement, in order not to aggravate tensions and feed conflict drivers.

Addressing regional dimensions of conflict dynamics: Although conflicts tend to be part of a regional system, most deployments remain country-based: UN Police conduct activities with national police services and other stakeholders as part of a peace operation within a particular country. There are few examples of support to conflict prevention through regional offices to address transnational dimensions of conflict. The Peacebuilding Plan for Liberia is one; it foresees future support being channeled through the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel. These examples are likely to increase in the future.

Avoid flying blind: Conflict analysis in the UN has been notoriously disjointed. Efforts are underway to strengthen these capacities throughout the system, but challenges remain in merging component parts of the analysis produced by different stakeholders into a cohesive UN strategy for conflict prevention. This also entails structuring UN Police cooperation with DPPA and other system-wide instruments for coordinating conflict prevention.

Convincing member states of expanding portfolios: Russia and China are the most vocal member states that consider broadening the context of UN Police assistance to non-mission settings beyond the remit of the UN Security Council. Perhaps recognizing that the GFP is the primary entry point for such assistance, Russia rejected that a call for greater member state support for the GFP be included in the December 2018 SC Resolution 2447 on Police, Justice and Corrections.⁸

Securing resources: Mobilizing funds for preventive activities has been challenging. While UN Police efforts in a peace operation are funded through the support account (peacekeeping budget), there are no such ready funds in non-mission settings – nor are there currently modalities for deploying individual officers outside of the SPC setup. Where the Peacebuilding Commission is engaged, such as in Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia, the Peacebuilding Fund can provide vital funding to address post-transition needs. All other extra-budgetary financing has to be generated for a specific program, such as the senior management training for police in Tunisia, which individual member states have funded through UNDP and OHCHR projects. Germany is also providing funding to enable preventive UN Police deployments.

Pursuing prevention in new thematic areas: New areas, such as organized crime and preventing violent extremism, are pushing their way onto the prevention agenda. Organized crime represents a prime case for prevention: unless addressed early, it festers and infiltrates state institutions. Given the nexus between organized crime and national political dynamics, however, addressing organized crime, for which UN Police has deployed specialized teams as in Mali, endangers fragile consent and confounds political engagement. The same can be argued when it comes to taking on the prevention of violent extremism.

Given the mismatch between the deep roots of destabilizing forces and the duration of UN Police deployments, preventive contributions cannot bear fruit in isolation from longer term political and developmental efforts that can affect underlying causes of conflict. And yet, these contributions bring valuable change where it matters most, close to the people, and thereby maintain space for a political process to unfold.

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