

Operationalizing Conflict Prevention – The Role of United Nations Police

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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.

Conflict prevention, sustaining peace and UN policing

2015 was an impactful year for international peace and security with three major reviews of peace operations, peacebuilding and women, peace and security respectively.² Each of these underlined the need for a coherent and continuous approach to conflict management reflected in the notion of sustaining peace. As captured in the 2016 twin General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, sustaining peace is “a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society [...], which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict.”³ Upon taking office in January 2017, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reinforced this sentiment, when he pinpointed prevention as his top priority.

The link between a breakdown in the rule of law, conflict and lack of development has long been recognized. With the rule of law at the heart of the functioning of a state, conflict is often fueled by issues of dysfunctional, corrupt or abusive security and justice sectors, as well as residual violence, threats to public safety and broken relationships between the population and their security and justice institutions. This renders preventive approaches in this area both especially important and particularly sensitive.

UN Police contribution

UN Police themselves consider their work “as much preventive as it is responsive, and [...] central to efforts to avert, mitigate and resolve violent conflict.”⁴ As of 30 April 2019, there are 10,385 police officers in nine UN peacekeeping operations

¹ SG Report on Policing (S/2018/1183), 31 December 2018.

² High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO); Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture (AGE); Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

³ UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/262; UN Security Council Resolution 2282 (2016).

⁴ Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations Policing (S/2018/1183, 31 December 2018), para. 3.

(10,314) 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 to, for instance, 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 start-up, 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.

In the Eastern **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, UN Police sought to overcome popular distrust and foster a cooperative relationship between local authorities, civil society and the Congolese National Police by assisting in the establishment of local security committees through which popular concerns can be shared.

In Northern **Mali**, UN Police brought together national officials, community leaders, women and youth to ease tensions between self-defense groups, Malian security services and the community.

In **Abyei**, UN Police worked with a community-led joint peace committee to de-escalate incidents around the Amiet common market and promote intercommunal dialogue.

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

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

In **Somalia**, UN and AMISOM police conducted joint training on community policing for rival security providers on either side of the disputed border around Gaalkayo. Joint patrols then contributed to regaining the trust of the communities and preventing further escalation.

In **Libya**, UNSMIL police advised authorities on a security plan for Tripoli to shore up the national police service vis-à-vis the militias and avert further destabilization of the security situation.

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.

In **Liberia**, **Sierra Leone** and **Côte d'Ivoire**, UN Police supported transition planning and continued to provide assistance during and after mission withdrawal. In cooperation with the UN country team and the Peacebuilding Fund, UN Police devised a project to further professionalize the **Sierra Leone** police following UNIPSIL's withdrawal in 2014. In **Liberia**, UN Police worked with UNDP to develop and implement a joint program to strengthen accountability and oversight over the national police post-UNMIL. In both countries, significant efforts were invested in joint analysis and needs assessment processes which involved the UN country team, the respective governments and other international partners.

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.

UN Police have supported election processes in **Mozambique**, the **Dominican Republic**, **Malawi** and elsewhere by assisting host-state police to draft operational plans or deliver security at campaign rallies or by enhancing data analysis capacity. They thereby reduced the risk of intimidation and violence and fostered popular trust in the legitimacy and fairness of the process.

UN Police also provided advice to UNHCR in **Ethiopia** on security in and around camps of refugees from South Sudan, chiefly on facilities and logistics, training and coordination, and particularly addressing women, children and youth. This has frequently been a focus area for training and assistance provided in other non-mission settings, such as in **Chad**, where UN Police assisted UNDP in the development of strategic plans and training initiatives on gender mainstreaming.

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

⁶ SG Report on Policing (S/2018/1183), 31 December 2018.

⁷ World Bank Group/United Nations, Pathways for Peace. Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict (Main messages and emerging policy directions), The World Bank, 2017.

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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⁸ SC Resolution 2447 (S/RES/2447), 13. December 2018.

