

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING THE 2016 UNITED NATIONS' PLAN OF ACTION TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF MINUSMA

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United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in Africa are conducted in areas where protracted warfare has led to conditions of insecurity characterized by, or susceptible to, violent extremism. The conflict prevention, reconciliation, and post-conflict reconstruction mandate of the UN implies the requirement for preventing violent extremism (PVE) and de-radicalization strategies as a complement to other security sector reform, reintegration, and stabilization initiatives. By way of a case study on Mali, this paper contributes to the discussion on the potential challenges for UN peacekeeping missions to incorporate PVE-relevant and -specific strategies into their operations to implement the UN Secretary-General's 2016 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism inhibits peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in fragile post-conflict states and states with enduring conflicts. The Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) declared that “violent extremism undermines our collective efforts towards maintaining peace and security, fostering sustainable development, protecting human rights, promoting the rule of law and taking humanitarian action.”¹ It prevents developing countries from reaching the UN's sustainable development goals and places the personnel of integrated multidimensional peacekeeping missions and non-government organizations at risk because “Violent extremist groups ...

PEACE RESEARCH

The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies

Volume 50, Number 2 (2018): 29-56

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are targeting peacekeepers, human rights advocates, educators, civil society activists and aid workers in order to weaken our resolve and our results.”² This implies that implementing strategies to prevent violent extremism (PVE) and radicalization as a complement to security-based counter-terrorism measures and other security sector reform, reintegration, and stabilization initiatives is required if UN-integrated multidimensional peacekeeping teams are to achieve their mandate of conflict prevention, provision of security, reconciliation, and post-conflict reconstruction.

In response to this requirement, the UN Secretary-General released his 2016 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* in which he recommended seven PVE strategies for corresponding national plans of actions and regional strategies and stated that he intended to “Integrate preventing violent extremism into relevant activities of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions in accordance with their mandates, as well as into relevant activities of United Nations country teams in order to build the capacity of Member States...”³

Following the release of the *Plan of Action*, a conference on the way forward was held in Geneva in April 2016, followed by the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review in June and, on 1 July, the adoption by the UN General Assembly of resolution A/RES/70/291 that reinforced the global consensus on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Incorporating PVE into peacekeeping missions is considered a contribution to the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy pillar two, preventing terrorism, and to pillar three, strengthening the role of the UN. This high-level guidance puts the onus on all states to develop national strategies, with the support of UN bodies and peacekeeping missions where deployed, instructs peacekeeping operations and special political missions to conduct PVE activities, and instructs country teams to assist in capacity building within their mandates.

This paper considers the possible challenges that are likely to confront the implementation of the UN *Plan of Action* by UN peacekeeping missions. Although the UN *Plan of Action* is a product of the UN’s counter-terrorism strategy and responds to the transnational threat of jihadist terrorist organizations, PVE strategies are applicable to all post- and enduring conflict situations involving armed groups whether labelled as terrorist or not. They include both macro institutional and local initiatives intended to address structural root causes, reconcile differences, and prevent further conflict.

Indeed, UN peacekeeping missions are already producing PVE effects through PVE-relevant activities in the absence of an official mission-specific PVE strategy and with only Mali having a national mission.⁴ Although some compatibility of activities and desired effects exist between PVE and mainstream conflict resolution mechanisms, the implementation of the PVE concept and strategies that provide the foundation for the *Plan of Action* may pose challenges to mission components for a number of reasons.

The paper begins with an overview of the problem of violent extremism in Mali followed by a general analysis of the UN's *Plan of Action* to Prevent Violent Extremism, including how it relates to international and national responses to violent extremism. Subsequently, it uses the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as a case study to provide examples of PVE-specific and -relevant interventions already undertaken and to identify current and potential challenges PVE implementation is likely to confront. This is a qualitative desk study with information and empirical data drawn from official government sources, international and regional organizations, NGOs, and journal articles.

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND MINUSMA

Peacekeeping has evolved over the years due to changing security contexts, both in terms of the broader scope of the mandate and the higher level of threat in which missions operate. A more contemporary addition to the security environment are internationally recognized terrorist groups, or violent extremists, who threaten mission personnel and international peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. Although much is being done by African regional organizations, countries that are inflicted with violent extremist groups, and military coalitions, this has become a major issue for UN missions in recent times especially in current mission states such as Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁵

Jihadist violent extremists gained a foothold in Mali during the 2012 armed conflict in the northern and central regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. The French-led Operation SERVAL and the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) deployed to northern Mali in January 2013 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to neutralize the Islamist threat of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine (AAD), and the Mouvement pour L'unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO).⁶

Their mission was a localized success that permitted the interim government to gain control of the region. MINUSMA assumed operations from AFISMA the following July.

Operation Barkhane, initiated in August 2014 and still ongoing, followed Operation Serval with a much broader scope. It targets Islamist extremists in Mali, Chad, and Niger with forces in Mali, Chad, Niger, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso and includes some 3,500 French soldiers.⁷ The mission of Op Barkhane is “to deploy French forces in support of the armed forces of France’s partners in the Sahel to counter ‘armed terrorist groups’ and to prevent the reconstitution of terrorist sanctuaries in the region.”⁸ The five African countries form the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance with France. They established the G5 Sahel Cross-Border Joint Force in 2017, endorsed by the African Union and recognized by the UN Security Council by resolution 2359 (2017): “Its mandate is to combat terrorism, transnational organized crime and human trafficking in the G5 Sahel area.... At full operating capacity, it comprises 5,000 troops.... It covers a strip of 50 km on each side of the countries’ borders.”⁹

Despite the international operations and reconstruction efforts, conditions that continue to exist in Mali are weak institutions of state, government, and civil society; perceived marginalization of the North; and intercommunal rifts created by the war and the conditions that precipitated it. Terrorist groups continue to form, such as the Macina Liberation Front in 2015, and existing ones in neighbouring states, such as Nigerian-based Boko Haram, are operating training camps in Mali.¹⁰ Many of the terrorist groups formed an alliance in March 2017 called the Salafi-Jihadi Alliance of Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), comprising elements of Ansar al-Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, al-Mourabitoun and a branch of AQIM¹¹ The JNIM was responsible for 71 per cent of all violent extremist attacks in Mali in 2017 according to the Global Extremism Monitor (GEM), with attacks occurring in both the northern and central provinces:

The GEM documented 156 incidents of Islamist violence across Mali, with seven provinces affected: Mopti, Ségou, Tombouctou, Gao, Kidal, Koulikoro, and Bamako. . . . Security forces and armed militias were targeted in 86 per cent of attacks in these areas. The GEM also documented assaults on educational institutions, local leaders and the government, revealing similarities to the attacks that have plagued northern Mali since

the outbreak of civil war in 2012.¹²

In addition to the jihadist groups, the UN mission must also contend with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and with criminals involved in drug trafficking and smuggling in the region.¹³ As of 30 September 2018, 104 peacekeepers have lost their lives from malicious acts in MINUSMA since 2013.¹⁴

Islamist terrorist organizations in the region continue to degrade the security environment and undermine national, regional, and international stabilization and peacebuilding efforts.¹⁵ The intent of the UN *Plan of Action* is to help reinforce national institutions and civil society to create a fertile soil for peace, and build community resilience against the draw of jihadism and participation in terrorist acts and resourcing.

UN PLAN OF ACTION TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The *Plan of Action* states that “definitions of “terrorism” and “violent extremism” are the prerogative of Member States,” that the “*Plan of Action* pursues a practical approach to preventing violent extremism, without venturing to address questions of definition,”¹⁶ and that “Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief.”¹⁷ Despite a reticence to define, the UN *Plan of Action* is rooted in the field of counterterrorism and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Perpetrators of violent extremism or violent extremists are, in that context, understood to belong to terrorist organizations, and terrorist organizations that have captured international attention are jihadist/Islamist ones.

The asymmetric threat of terrorism has captured global attention since 2001, but the success of Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) in recruiting and inspiring terrorists during its early expansion in Iraq and Syria beginning in 2014 encouraged states with “foreign fighter” problems to focus on strategies to prevent citizens from engaging in violent extremism abroad and at home. Insights gained in the study of drivers of violent extremism and program implementation have since been leveraged into international (bilateral and multilateral) interventions such as those by Denmark, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)/U.S. State Department and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).¹⁸ The UN 2016 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* draws on those national and international insights into violent extremism and associated programs.

Its intent is to strengthen international co-operation and national capacities to address the threat of terrorism.

Although not explicitly stated in the *Plan of Action*, or more broadly in national and international countering-violent extremism (CVE)/PVE strategies, the theoretical basis of implementing PVE programs in UN peacekeeping operations draws from structural and individual conflict theory and the supposition that reducing the structural drivers and individual incentives that lead individuals to engage in violence will prevent radicalization and enhance peacebuilding and state-building efforts. The concept is that individuals can be prevented from engaging in terrorism, or disengaged and reintegrated into society, by a series of social, economic, and political measures applied at the state and local levels. CVE/PVE draws from crime reduction models that involve police, health, education, and social services. It also includes measures to counter human and internet enablers that play a role in drawing at-risk individuals to extremist views and the use of violence.¹⁹

The literature on push and pull drivers and what constitutes persons/communities at risk of radicalization spans the spectrum of psychological, sociological, and political factors.²⁰ The route taken by CVE programs is a package of preventive and reconciliatory non-violent informational and dialogue activities intended to lead to both group and individual behavioral and attitudinal change. The theories of change of the various types of CVE programs depend to a large degree on the drivers of radicalization to violence. There is a considerable body of knowledge on identifying these drivers, resulting in a generally agreed upon typology. Drivers consist of push (structural motivators) and pull (individual incentives) factors:²¹ “‘Push’ factors are structural factors that contribute to the conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism.... ‘Pull’ factors refer to the conditions that have a direct individual impact that include psychosocial and/or personal incentives that attract individuals to join terrorism and violent extremism.”²² Push factors include “social / cultural / political / religious / ethnic marginalization, corruption, poverty, lack of employment, lack of opportunity, and/or poor governance” and pull factors include “a sense of identity or self-worth, support for family or other economic incentives, sense of duty or honour, and/or a sense of power, adventure or desire to commit violence.”²³ In addition, there are “enabling factors,” such as social media influences and mentors. Similarly, push (dissatisfaction) and pull (reasons to be out) factors

exist for disengagement by terrorists.²⁴

CVE/PVE refers to the non-coercive, mostly non-securitized, activities of the prevention pillar of international and national counter-terrorism strategies. It is a people-centric or grassroots approach to conflict prevention and mitigation. CVE/PVE consists of programs and policies for countering and preventing radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism and is part of an overall counter-terrorism strategy and framework. CVE/PVE includes: strategic, non-coercive counterterrorism programs and policies including those involving education and broad-based community engagement; more targeted narrative/messaging programs and counter-recruitment strategies; disengagement and targeted intervention programs for individuals engaging in radicalization; and de-radicalization, disengagement and rehabilitation programs for former violent extremist offenders.²⁵ CVE/PVE programs tend to fall within three broad types: prevention programs, generally targeting an at-risk segment of society; disengagement programs, designed to encourage individuals to leave violent groups; and de-radicalization programs, designed to “alter extremist beliefs that an individual holds.”²⁶ In addition to these are reintegration programs, which generally require disengagement and de-radicalization as a prerequisite.

The *Plan of Action* similarly identifies “conditions conducive” to violent extremism and its “structural context,” including: lack of socioeconomic opportunities; marginalization and discrimination; poor governance, violation of human rights, and rule of law; unresolved conflicts; and radicalization in prisons.²⁷ It also identifies a number of drivers that contribute to the process of radicalization that have push, pull, and enabler elements: individual backgrounds and motivations; collective grievances and victimization; distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies, and ethnic and cultural differences; and leadership and social networks. It proposes seven priority areas or strategies that correspond to these drivers with detailed recommendations for action by Member States, and encourages peacekeeping operations to adopt these strategies in accordance with their mandates: dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights, and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality and empowering women; education, skill development, and employment facilitation; and, strategic communications, the Internet, and social media.

The body of literature on the integration of PVE strategies into peacekeeping operations is limited given the relatively recent decision to take

this approach. In their 2016 report on counterterrorism and CVE/PVE, Arthur Boutellis and Naureen Chowdry Fink noted work towards providing counter-terrorism capacity building in the security sector and that the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has identified broad PVE actions for peacekeeping operations.²⁸ These include: understanding the impact of violent extremism on peacekeeping, developing policy guidance, adapting and resourcing missions, building national PVE/CVE capacity, developing PVE disengagement guidance for Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) personnel in the field, and working with “the Group of Friends of Corrections in Peace Operations and other NGO partners to compile international best practices on P/CVE in prisons.”²⁹

The UN, regional organizations, states providing assistance, and most states facing the threat of terrorism in Africa acknowledge the requirement for PVE-relevant and -specific strategies to be integrated into peace-building, state-building, and counter-terrorism strategies. Current PVE initiatives are implemented and resourced to varying extents by states hosting UN peacekeeping missions depending on host nation and mission capabilities. The OSCE, USAID/State Department, and many states concerned with extremism, such as Denmark, provide institutional and national examples of initiatives that could be taken by or in collaboration with UN peacekeeping missions. Successful Western PVE/CVE models, however, tend to gravitate around a hub model whereby police, social services, and schools work with at-risk individuals (mostly youth) and communities. Indeed, the seven strategies of the *Plan of Action* involve community engagement and social programs to work against the drivers of extremism. Unfortunately, countries afflicted with conflict generally lack extensive and effective hub institutions and the security environment hinders implementation.

DPKO offices have moved forward on providing guidance on national PVE capacity and security sector reform and progress is being made in this area. CVE-relevant measures include stabilizing the conflicts, security sector reform (SSR), improving governance and institutions, fair and free elections, protecting civilians, supporting humanitarian assistance, and creating employment opportunities. CVE-specific measures include such activities as providing counter-narratives to terrorist and insurgent social media campaigns, holding national dialogue on reconciliation, and supporting measures to preserve culture.³⁰ Mali released its National Policy on the Prevention and Combating of Violent Extremism and Terrorism on 2 February 2018 and

MINUSMA provides examples of the successful implementation of what might be considered PVE-relevant and -specific measures and insights on the possible difficulties associated with implementation of the *Plan of Action* in fragile states.³¹

IMPLEMENTING PVE STRATEGIES IN MINUSMA: ACTIVITIES AND CHALLENGES

Mali drafted its first national strategy to prevent radicalization, terrorism, and violent extremism in 2016, but its implementation was undermined by the lack of security caused by extremist groups.³² In 2018, Mali released its National Policy on the Prevention and Combating of Violent Extremism and Terrorism, developed with support from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), USAID, and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD).³³ The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, MINUSMA and the UN Country Team are prepared to work with the government of Mali to implement the policy. PVE-relevant and -specific activities are already included in MINUSMA's renewed mandate, although PVE is not cited by name,³⁴ and there are a number of examples of mission activities that fit the PVE descriptor and can be categorized according to the seven strategies.

The dialogue and conflict prevention strategy addresses the drivers associated with unresolved conflict, including insecurity and identity group friction. Its objectives are to encourage disengagement, promote tolerance, preserve and protect the heritage of cultural and religious diversity, and promote inclusive regional and national dialogue and social media interaction with youth, women, marginalized groups, and local governments. MINUSMA has a related three-tiered strategy to protect civilians in keeping with its mandate that contributes to the dialogue and prevention priority area. The first tier “consists of dialogue and political advocacy, such as support for reconciliation, peace agreements or mediation, liaison with the government, or the resolution of local conflicts.”³⁵ MINUSMA also has a mandate to protect cultural and historical sites, many of which have been attacked and heavily damaged.³⁶ In addition to the UN-sponsored activities, nations contributing to peacebuilding in Mali:

have for some time encouraged their international and local NGO partners to carry out a range of activities that could be considered P/CVE-relevant, including ... intercommunity

dialogue, local conflict prevention, and resolution Some P/CVE-specific projects, such as amplification of the voice of “moderate” imams, intra-religious dialogue ... are also being trialed in an attempt to curb recruitment by armed groups of all kinds and to advance the broader objective of peace and reconciliation.³⁷

The challenge that MINUSMA may face in moving forward with this strategy is bringing parties together for meaningful dialogue in a context characterized by the absence of security, by a lack of confidence in the Malian government and its security services, and by the presence of counter-terrorism operations by the G5 Sahel Task Force, UN Peacekeepers, and Malian security forces. Extremist groups as organized entities do not indicate any desire for dialogue and continue to recruit youth who are attracted by religious ideas, group membership, employment, and a variety of other structural and personal incentives.³⁸ These contextual factors undermine efforts to promote disengagement and even lead communities to encourage membership in armed groups:

Community support for armed groups encourages youth to engage in violence out of a sense of duty or quest for respect. A majority of members of armed groups—pro-government, anti-government, and violent extremist—said their communities supported and shared values with these groups, making youth participation in violence neither deviant nor abnormal.³⁹

The strategy of strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law addresses the drivers associated with the structural “push” towards violent extremism by improving the professionalism and respect for human rights of the government and its security forces. Its objectives are to promote, within the security forces and government, respect for human rights, good governance, and rule of law, and to eliminate corruption.

MINUSMA, as the pilot mission for PVE/CVE capacity building in coordination with UN and other partners, is undertaking activities that include “training and supporting national security forces in first response, investigation, forensics analysis, and aspects of efforts to counter improved explosive devices (IEDs).”⁴⁰ Other initiatives include an action plan to support Malian law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and corrections sectors, although these are generic activities undertaken in other missions without having a specific PVE/CVE focus.

The challenges of this strategy for MINUSMA are related to the conduct of Malian security forces, the counter-terrorism campaign, and UN intelligence capabilities. The Malian military have killed and arrested members of communities at risk of radicalization for being suspected jihadists, acting as a “tipping point” for recruitment into extremist groups.⁴¹ The UN mission needs to assist in security sector reform (SSR) without strengthening the negative elements therein: “In the absence of ‘state legitimacy’, in the eyes of citizens living in high-risk areas, initiatives that focus exclusively on state capacity-building run the risk of perpetuating malign power structures, which are overt drivers of violent extremist recruitment in Africa.”⁴²

Counter-terror operations seek to eliminate the terrorist threat through strikes against terrorist cells. They tend to require less “hearts and minds” considerations than counter-insurgency operations and can produce counterproductive results with regards to civic participation.⁴³ The heavy-handedness of the approach of the Malian security forces as well as the G5 Sahel forces has in some instances resulted in youth voluntarily joining the violent extremists to defend themselves, family, and communities: “in a majority of cases, paradoxically, state action appears to be the primary factor finally pushing individuals into violent extremism in Africa.”⁴⁴ The Nigerian experience, as another example, is that counter-terrorism accelerated radicalization.⁴⁵

As part of SSR, MINUSMA is building cantonment sites for former members of armed groups but it has not established guidance or a protocol on how to identify and then treat violent extremists:⁴⁶ “The UN has faced similar challenges in Somalia, where the UN mission has had to rely on the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency to determine which candidates for reintegration from al-Shabaab are ‘low risk’ and ‘disengaged combatants’ versus which are ‘high risk’ and need to be incarcerated.”⁴⁷ UN intelligence gathering capabilities will likely limit effectiveness of this program and others requiring detailed knowledge of organizations and individuals. The majority of uniformed UN peacekeeping components in Africa do not have the intelligence gathering resources, profile, or training to make a significant contribution to identifying violent extremists or reforming the intelligence services such as that of the Malian military.⁴⁸

The engaging communities strategy addresses violent extremism enablers by depriving extremists of sympathizers and voluntary recruits by building a strong civil society, identifying and treating persons at risk of

radicalization, protecting victims, and addressing human rights violations. This approach is particularly supported by community dialogue and youth empowerment strategies. Although community-oriented policing models or family-based mentorship programs do not appear to be part of MINUSMA, the mission does include community level confidence-building, measures to protect children, and measures to identify and address human rights violations. In Mali, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) contributes to bringing the government, civil society, and the private sector together to develop localized PVE responses.⁴⁹ The military, UN police, and judicial affairs have key responsibilities related to the protection of children, and MINUSMA's Gender Unit promotes the protection of women and the response to violations of human rights. NGOs such as the Association Malienne pour la Survie au Sahel (AMSS) also work towards building social cohesion and against gender-based violence.⁵⁰

The factors that may cause challenges to engaging communities are similar to those of the dialogue and prevention strategy, as Malians feel victimized by government corruption and military human rights abuses. Social cohesion is exacerbated by ethnic or tribal cleavages, with groups such as the Fulani in central Mali preferring to side with extremists for the expediency of having some form of justice and stability in their lives.⁵¹ Some Malians have sided with Islamists not because of shared ideological objectives, but for stability and in reaction to government abuses:

Perceptions of community exclusion perpetrated by the government—based on geography or ethnic identity—fuel participation in anti-government armed groups. Across the North, respondents cited a lack of government services. However, youth in anti-government and violent extremist groups in particular shared deep grievances rooted in their perceptions of the government's relative neglect and mistreatment of their communities.⁵²

Identifying persons at risk of radicalization is another potential challenge for MINUSMA and the Malian government because of the complex security environment and because the drivers of violent extremism in the *Plan of Action* are based on Western knowledge of extremism and radicalization that may poorly fit the African reality. Although national and international studies have identified generic drivers and enablers of violent extremism, those drivers are context specific with political, economic, religious, cultural,

social, and historical dimensions:⁵³

Africa faces a unique vulnerability to violent extremism that is shaped by persistent underdevelopment and incomplete peacebuilding and state-building in key regions.... Narratives of radical upheaval and change, which appeal to the multifaceted sense of grievance that may envelop an individual whose horizons promise no path for advancement, will continue to be attractive as long as underlying circumstances remain unaddressed. Where there is injustice, deprivation, and desperation, violent extremist ideologies present themselves as a challenge to the status quo and a form of escape.⁵⁴

Great Britain, comprised of police, education, health, and social services. In Mali, these networks are weak or non-existent. Moreover, in the Western context families and the general public/communities are educated on and aware of signs of radicalization, but in the Malian case those communities may be encouraging their members to join the jihadist groups.

Finally, identifying persons at risk requires knowledge about individuals within communities. It requires human intelligence gained while in close proximity to those communities, something MINUSMA contingent troops—with Burkina Faso, Chad, Bangladesh, Senegal, and Togo the top five in 2018—require the training and capacity to perform, and the ability to do in insecure areas.

The empowering youth strategy addresses social media enablers and at-risk persons. The objective is that youth supports are integrated into PVE efforts. This is achieved by increasing participation, increasing confidence-building measures and leadership opportunities, and pursuing engagement mechanisms identified in the 2015 Amman Declaration on Youth, Peace, and Security⁵⁵ that built upon the UN's Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding.⁵⁶ Although MINUSMA does not have explicitly identified PVE activities, the effects desired by this strategy are generated by policies related to the protection of children, gender, DDR, human rights and civil affairs.

The challenges of engaging youth and identifying at-risk persons are shared with the other strategies. It is difficult to engage youth if they are encouraged to join terrorist entities or other anti-government groups for retribution, economic reasons, or peer/community pressure:

Youth cite experience with injustice—including abuses and

corruption—as motivators for joining anti-government armed groups. . . . Some youth, seeking the long-term stability of a government position, see armed groups as a steppingstone to joining the military ... others hoped to benefit from the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) provisions.⁵⁷

Mercy Corps interviews in Timbuktu, Gao, and Mopti from ten different ethnic groups: found that, “while efforts to counter violence often focus on the most disenfranchised youth, many participants in the study expressed deep ties to their communities.”⁵⁸ Communities supported armed groups and gave youth a sense of duty to support those groups.⁵⁹ The challenge for peacekeepers to implement PVE measures in this context is that they are working against socially accepted behaviour within communities. In Western cases, violent extremists are peripheral actors whose actions are contrary to the norm. PVE measures will be ineffective unless communities reject violent extremist groups as sources of stability. To do so, stability needs to be provided by Malian security forces supported by UN peacekeepers.

Community support also complicates the differentiation of jihadist violent extremists and insurgent or protective armed groups. The violent extremists of the *Plan of Action* are Islamists who are pursuing ideological objectives, but for some Malian communities they provide a measure of stability in the absence of effective and equitable governance by the state. This could complicate identifying extremists and convincing them to disengage through appropriate messaging and incentives.

The gender equality and empowering women strategy is about encouraging the participation of women in society and enhancing their role in PVE and counter-terrorism activities. Its objective is to empower women as key actors in the fight against violent extremism primarily by mainstreaming gendered perspectives, understanding the radicalization drivers specific to women, and incorporating women into law enforcement and security agencies. Despite measures to advance legislative representation (2015 gender quota bill),⁶⁰ legalize women’s rights,⁶¹ and improve school attendance by girls,⁶² Mali’s gender index remains very high for poor discriminatory laws and practices affecting civil liberties, physical integrity, or women’s control over their own bodies, and family code or women’s decision-making power.⁶³

To improve this situation, some of the approximately forty NGOs operating in Mali have education, livelihood, and youth empowerment

programs that benefit women and girls.⁶⁴ Although MINUSMA has no explicitly declared PVE-specific activities related to this strategy, the Gender Units Advisory Section and SSR Units are intended to primarily guide the PVE-relevant ones by supporting “the Malian authorities and civil society organizations working in the field of gender, in cooperation with United Nations agencies in the country.”⁶⁵ Locating information on the activities and achievements of this unit, however, is elusive. What is available is that there are 477 women out of 13,912 personnel in all MINUSMA categories (staff officer, contingent troops, police, FPU, experts on mission).⁶⁶ This represents less than four percent of the force. If MINUSMA is to incorporate women in law enforcement and security agencies, it needs to improve its credibility by increasing its number of women in its own force first.

Encouraging participation of women in society is already an objective of the government of Mali,⁶⁷ but contributions by MINUSMA in this area will only be effective if there is a general cultural change of social norms. Likewise, although encouraging mothers to take on PVE roles in Western states has been achievable, enhancing the role of mothers in PVE in Mali requires mothers to have both the ability to influence and the desire to dissuade their children from joining armed groups. MINUSMA could have a role in improving knowledge of the radicalization drivers specific to women, but contingents would first require a human intelligence capability, and an understanding of the drivers and how to determine them.

The education, skills development, and employment facilitation strategy addresses structural drivers' related lack of social programs, education, and related employment opportunities. The objective is for children and youth to receive quality education that leads to employment. This is achieved through working with civil society and public and private sectors to invest in education, support inclusive and civic education, and create social and economic opportunities. Military components of peacekeeping missions often provide civil-military (CIMIC) Quick Impact Project (QIP) funding for local projects to enhance the military-civilian relationship and to contribute to reconstruction efforts. Mission civil affairs sections do likewise through collaboration with UN family entities, NGOs, and contributing member and donor states. MINUSMA has assisted in the restoration of schools to facilitate access to education⁶⁸ and promoted human rights in schools. An example of the latter is the establishment of human rights clubs in schools to promote a culture of peace and non-violence.⁶⁹

MINUSMA would have minimal impact on this strategy apart from providing a safe and secure environment for economic growth. Apart from CIMIC projects, MINUSMA could work with communities to ensure that DDR participants reintegrate into the workforce. The challenge for MINUSMA and the government of Mali is to promote economic growth in an unstable environment while in economic competition from jihadist groups. These latter groups used their proceeds from illegal activities – human trafficking, hostage taking and drug trafficking – to pay fighters’ salaries, purchase weapons, and to invest in communities.⁷⁰ Jihadist groups hence provide a semblance of stability and “protection and other forms of service provision.”⁷¹

Like peace and state-building objectives in general, the PVE objectives in Mali are interconnected and need to be achieved simultaneously. For communities to reject jihadists and their ideology, they need effective security, economic, and political alternatives. MINUSMA PVE activities under this strategy will only be successful if accompanied by the expansion of Malian security and economic control throughout the central and northern regions.

The strategic communications, the Internet, and social media strategy addresses the pull driver of manipulative messaging that attracts at-risk individuals. The objective is to counter extremist messaging by working at the national and local levels with social media companies and the private sector to promote tolerance and human rights, and to challenge the narratives of violent extremism. An example of PVE projects of this nature, generally led by the mission’s Public Information element, is the production of radio counter-narratives in Mali.⁷² The challenge for MINUSMA and the central government is the coverage of telephone lines and mobiles and internet broadband in a country with sparsely populated and remote areas, particularly in the north and west.⁷³ National mobile phone service provided by Malitel and Orange provide the best coverage with ninety percent of households assessed as having a portable phone—“98 per cent in urban areas and 88 per cent in rural areas.”⁷⁴ The radio network has also expanded to rural locations and broadcast information in local languages. TV coverage is less, newspaper circulation is low, and only about 12% of the population were online in 2016.⁷⁵

A facilitating role for MINUSMA in the northern and central regions, and in Kidal, Gao, Timbuktu, and Mopti in particular, in addition to developing counter-narratives with local communities, would be to support

local network infrastructure and their programming and to protect a free media from attacks and intimidation by armed groups. Transmitting counter-narratives and other programming activities imply control of the information domain, something that is not guaranteed in areas under the influence of jihadist groups.

IMPLICATIONS

PVE-relevant measures addressing the structural drivers of violent extremism are already within the scope of activities undertaken by MINUSMA. The implementation of the *Plan of Action* may pose challenges to mission components for several reasons.

First, there is room for misinterpretation of who the target audience of “extremist and radicalized individuals” actually is within a security context characterized by jihadist and other armed groups. This also implies, however, that activities provide the possibility for treating people belonging to any armed group. The *Plan of Action* concerns terrorist groups but, as is the case in Western CVE strategies, any form of violent offender can be included in the scope of PVE activities. Encouraging youth to disengage and reintegrate into society regardless of their group affiliation is just one example. PVE strategies reinforce existing peace-building and reconciliation measures common to UN, African Union, and NGO enduring conflict resolution measures.

Second, PVE strategies need to be context-specific. The drivers of radicalization to violence identified and used to build Western CVE programs reflect Western problem sets. More work may be required in Mali and other UN mission states to identify the context-specific drivers, for youth and women for example, and how that affects PVE activities.

Third, Western CVE strategies and programs tend to require effective social welfare, education, health, and community policing services but, given the absence or disrupted nature of these services in UN mission states, those same strategies cannot be transferred wholesale to those states. MINUSMA and other UN missions will need to assess the government services available and adjust activities to resources available or find other informal community services that can replace government services.

Fourth, PVE is an alternative to militarized counter-terrorism approaches, and not necessarily compatible with them. PVE strategies promote local peace-building solutions involving local actors and communities.

Counter-terrorism operations by, and the force posture of, the international, UN security component, and Malian defence and security forces may impede PVE implementation. The preventive measures of PVE require human intelligence gathering, community support, and confidence and trust in the armed forces ensuring security. These requirements could be undermined by peacekeepers acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter if their activities are perceived as impartial and unjust by Malian identity groups.

Fifth, UN component capabilities will likely limit effectiveness. The uniformed peacekeeping components require information operations capabilities, intelligence gathering resources, and training to make a significant contribution to identifying and reducing the salience of the drivers of radicalization to violent extremism and identifying at-risk individuals/communities.

Despite these challenges, the Plan of Action is compatible with common peace-building and reconciliation measures and it can contribute to UN Mission Concepts and Integrated Strategic Frameworks as it provides sets of activities and measurable outcomes that support conflict resolution objectives and peace consolidation. In particular, the Plan of Action provides variables for in-depth conflict analysis and potential activities for consideration in the establishment of mission priorities and stakeholder roles and responsibilities, and for the monitoring and evaluation of progress.

CONCLUSION

The MINUSMA case study provided examples of current PVE-type activities and of some issues related to implementing the seven strategies of the Plan of Action. There are many PVE-relevant measures that are already part of the mainstream peacebuilding model that address push or structural drivers such as good governance, human rights, rule of law, SSR, DDR, empowering women, education, and employment. There are also a number of PVE-specific measures related to information control, facilitating reconciliation, protecting heritage sites, disengagement and reintegration of soldiers, child soldiers in particular, and the sensitization of local communities. The challenge for peacekeeping operations is the sheer magnitude of this endeavour. Mainstream peacebuilding, and most PVE-relevant activities, are people-based and require a more sophisticated understanding of the social context, the support of the local population, and something comparable to the social services found in Western democracies.

There is a role for the uniformed and civilian components of peacekeeping missions in PVE activities but it represents an expansion of the scope of duties from the already difficult “safe and secure environment” and institution building to, at the very least, assisting in national reconciliation, winning the war of information, and interdicting enablers of violent extremism. In an environment characterized by insurgency and terrorism, such as in Mali, peacekeepers may be directly or indirectly involved in counter-terrorism, PVE, counter-insurgency, and counter-organized crime. The challenges for peacekeeping missions involved in preventive, disengagement, de-radicalization, and re-integration programs are to remain a supporting actor in what needs to be a locally supported endeavor, navigating through an environment characterized by sectarianism to alleviate identity group tensions, and retaining impartiality as perceived by the local population to be able to contribute to counter-narrative and messaging programs and broad-based community engagement. Peacekeeping missions must be trained and equipped to conduct both coercive counter-terrorism and non-coercive preventive measures and, importantly, to understand the impact of both types of operations on one another.

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