



Can UN Peace Operations Protect Civilians?

Digital Development Dialogue (3D)
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This seminar aimed to discuss whether and how United Nations peacekeeping protects civilians in armed conflict, bringing academic evidence into dialogue with operational practice. In the first presentation, [Lisa Hultman \(Uppsala University\)](#) discussed what quantitative research reveals about the effectiveness of peacekeeping, the mechanisms through which it works, and its limitations. In the second presentation, [Evan Cinq-Mars \(UN DPO Protection of Civilians Team\)](#) offered a practitioner's perspective, drawing on field experience to illustrate how protection works on the ground and the "ingredients" that make peacekeeping effective.

[Lisa Hultman](#) opened the seminar by noting that the answer to whether peacekeepers protect civilians depends heavily on the source: media coverage tends to emphasize the failures and challenges of peacekeeping, whereas two decades of academic research present a more optimistic picture. On average, peacekeeping appears to be an effective instrument for protecting civilians, though its success is conditional and subject to clear limitations. Crucially, peacekeeping operations are not uniform; they vary enormously in size, composition, and the tasks they perform, and this variation shapes their protective impact.

A central message of her presentation was that capacity and composition matter. Missions endowed with greater capacity of military troops and police, deployed in larger numbers are better able to protect civilians. Hultman illustrated how the composition of a mission typically evolves over time, often beginning with observers before military and then police components grow. In the presentation, Hultman also emphasized that where peacekeepers are located matters. Many conflicts span vast, remote, and difficult terrain, and using geo-referenced data on deployments and civilian fatalities, researchers can track how missions adapt to where violence occurs. Analysis at the local level shows that peacekeeping presence reduces civilian fatalities, particularly violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups.

Turning from whether peacekeeping works to how and why, Hultman outlined several mechanisms identified in the literature. Peacekeepers can monitor and report on ceasefire violations and support disarmament processes, helping armed actors make credible commitments and reduce tensions. Their physical presence and patrolling deter violence, including through buffer zones and visible shows of force. At the local level, peacekeepers engage in mediation and reassurance, building trust and advancing political processes. In rare situations, protection is achieved through the actual use of force, though even the threat of force contributes to deterrence. Hultman closed by stressing the limitations of peacekeeping and the value of looking beyond fatalities like at civilian harm such as displacement, and at perceptions of safety and trust as additional measures of impact, and of identifying the conditions under which peacekeeping is more or less effective.

[Evan Cinq-Mars](#), discussed the topic that from an operational standpoint to answer whether peacekeeping protects civilians with field examples. He argued that MINUSCA protected tens of thousands of people at imminent risk in the early stages of the conflict in the Central African Republic. In the contested Abyei region between Sudan and South Sudan, UNISFA has invested in dialogue and engagement between communities and effectively reduced inter-communal violence to near zero incidents over a year period. Even in southern Lebanon, amid a dramatic escalation of hostilities, UNIFIL peacekeepers sheltered civilians on their bases, facilitated humanitarian access, and engaged the parties on the conduct of hostilities, despite being attacked themselves.

Cinq-Mars highlighted the comprehensive approach to protection which accounts for all factors that drive threats against civilians and the whole-of-mission, integrated approach that leverages the full range of available tools to protect people. He pointed to the multinational character of peacekeeping as a distinctive asset, and to the UN's impartiality as critical to responding to threats regardless of their source, while acknowledging that the UN may be less effective in responding to state-perpetrated violence (though this depends on several factors). Finally, he stressed the importance of the robust architecture of policy, doctrine, guidance, and training the UN has developed over decades to help peacekeepers implement protection mandates.

Cinq-Mars concluded with a cautionary image: this architecture is like a house whose foundations are now shaky, strained by geopolitical and financial pressures and by shifting conflict trends, including the use of AI and new technologies. His argument was not to demolish the house but to shore up its foundations and renovate it for the future by keeping the

protection of civilians central, since wherever the UN flag is present, people expect and perceive that they will be protected.

The discussion that followed explored several themes. On the multinational composition of missions, Hultman explained that military contingents are typically deployed as national units while police may serve individually or in formed units; although diversity could in principle create coordination problems, research suggests it tends to enhance protection through complementary competences and informal checks and balances. On gaps between academic and operational practice, both speakers saw the relationship as complementary: practitioners hold deep, case-specific knowledge, while researchers can provide the "bird's-eye" view and construct counterfactuals to estimate protective effects, and both agreed on the pressing need for further research on performance and on the implications of AI, new technologies, and hybrid threats for civilians.

Overall, the seminar showed that combining systematic academic evidence with operational experience yields a consistent picture: UN peacekeeping is an effective but conditional instrument for protecting civilians. Considering Hultman's emphasis on adequate capacity, composition, and rigorous evaluation, and Cinq-Mars's emphasis on integration, impartiality, and institutional standards, it was concluded that sustaining the protective role of peacekeeping requires continued investment in capacity, evidence-based learning, and keeping the protection of civilians at the center of decision-making amid mounting institutional and geopolitical strain.

A suggested reading recommended by the speakers is provided below.

- [International Peace Institute | Issue briefs on Protection of Civilians](#)

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