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Protection of Civilians by Police in UN Peace Operations

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Executive Summary

UN police (UNPOL) have long contributed to protection of civilians (POC) mandates, yet their role remains underexamined and often undervalued. As peace operations evolve in response to shifting global dynamics, understanding how police contribute to protection—both within and beyond traditional mission models—is of critical importance.

This issue brief examines UNPOL's contributions to POC, focusing on their recent experience, emerging functions during mission transitions, and potential place in future models for peace operations. It highlights how UNPOL have played a vital role in reducing violence, engaging communities, supporting host-state law enforcement, and sustaining protection efforts during mission drawdowns. However, persistent challenges—including coordination gaps, militarization trends, limited data on effectiveness, and political constraints—continue to restrict their impact.

As the UN shifts toward more flexible, lighter-footprint mission models and increasingly emphasizes regional partnerships, preventive approaches, and people-centered security, UNPOL could take on an expanded role. This could include greater involvement of UNPOL in addressing emerging protection threats related to urban violence, transnational crime, and cyber-related risks. However, police should not be seen as a substitute for military protection where credible deterrence remains necessary. Future POC strategies must balance UNPOL's strengths with other security tools to align expectations with capacity.

To make UNPOL's contributions to POC more effective, the UN needs to focus more on police in high-level policy discussions, improve coordination across the rule-of-law sector, and strengthen data collection to assess the impact of UNPOL efforts. As peace operations adapt to evolving challenges, ensuring that UNPOL are properly resourced and embedded within mission planning will be key to realizing their full potential in protecting civilians.

Introduction

As UN peace operations undergo a period of contraction, reconfiguration, and potential innovation, it is critical to consider how enduring civilian protection imperatives can be met. Over the past twenty-five years, military-centric approaches to protection of civilians (POC) mandates have proven insufficient. There is thus a pressing need to explore less militarized forms of POC in future missions.¹ UN police (UNPOL) have played a pivotal role in implementing POC mandates since the first such mandate was authorized by the Security Council in 1999.² Indeed, UNPOL have contributed to civilian protection in increasingly complex security settings through multiple modalities, making them an essential component of the protection “toolbox.”³ Yet despite efforts to mainstream POC as a whole-of-mission responsibility, the contributions made by police are often underappreciated.

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This brief examines the contributions of UNPOL to POC, with a focus on mission transitions and potential roles in future mission models. It proceeds in five parts.⁴ The first section takes stock of the main advantages and impacts of UNPOL on POC in recent years. The second details the unique contributions UNPOL can make to POC during mission drawdown and withdrawal, including transitions to follow-on missions and field offices. The third section identifies persistent challenges that hinder UNPOL’s ability to achieve POC objectives. The fourth section explores UNPOL’s potential role in future missions—whether through the replication of established approaches or the adoption of innovative, transformative models that break the mold of current practices. The paper concludes with recommendations for optimizing

police contributions to POC despite a dynamic and uncertain future.

Taking Stock of UNPOL POC Efforts

While the number of UNPOL deployed in the field has declined significantly due to mission closures and drawdowns in recent years, as of January 2025, approximately 6,000 officers from nearly ninety countries were deployed to seven of the eleven active UN peacekeeping operations. Notably, 99 percent of current UNPOL officers operate under POC mandates in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Abyei, and South Sudan, making POC a fundamental part of what UNPOL are mandated to do.

Previous research on police contributions to POC has shown where and how UNPOL have made significant contributions to protecting civilians in large multidimensional peacekeeping missions such as the UN missions in the DRC (MONUSCO), South Sudan (UNMISS), Mali (MINUSMA), and CAR (MINUSCA).⁵ Responsibilities and functions vary based on the unique challenges and risks in each mission area. Nevertheless, police leadership, individual police officers (IPOs), formed police units (FPUs), and specialized police teams (SPTs) contribute to all three tiers outlined in the UN’s POC policy: dialogue and engagement (e.g., through high-level advocacy), physical protection (e.g., by responding to immediate protection threats), and establishment of a protective environments (e.g., through work with host-state and local partners).⁶ In doing so, UNPOL have demonstrated five main areas where they can complement their military and civilian counterparts on POC.

1 Jenna Russo, “Militarised Peacekeeping: Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 12 (2021).

2 UN Peacekeeping, “25 Years of Protecting Civilians Through UN Peacekeeping: Taking Stock and Looking Forward,” October 2024, pp. 7–8.

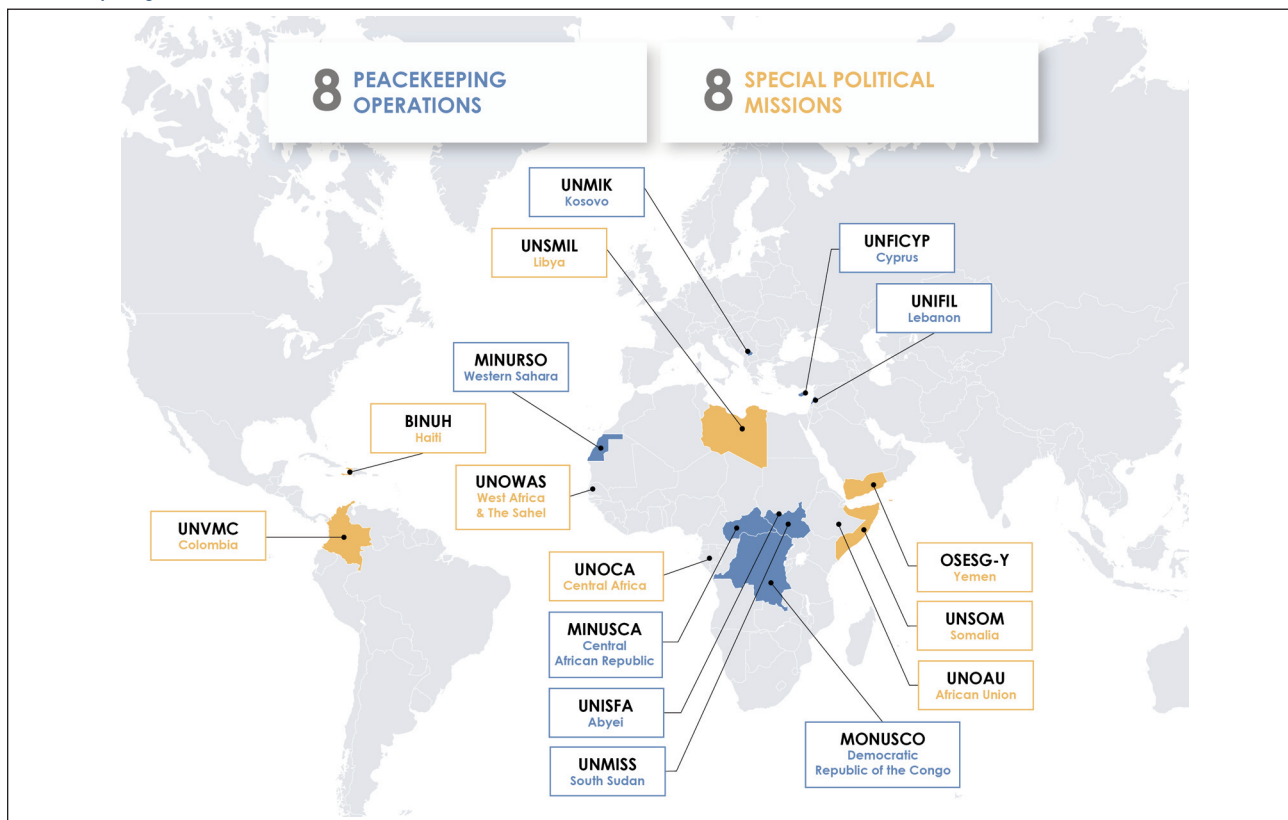
3 Charles T. Hunt, “Protection through Policing: The Protective Role of UN Police in Peace Operations,” International Peace Institute, February 2020.

4 The brief draws on desktop and field research, including interviews and focus groups conducted during multiple field visits to missions in Mali, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan over the past five years, with a cross-section of personnel from UN missions; UN agencies, funds, and programs; nongovernmental organizations; national governments; community-based organizations; and local populations across multiple sites in each country. It also incorporates insights from interviews with current and former police commissioners and deputy police commissioners from missions in Somalia, Abyei, Haiti, Cyprus, and Darfur. It also draws on continued engagement with the UN Police Division and the POC team in the Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET) of the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

5 Charles T. Hunt, “‘To Serve and Protect’: The Changing Roles of Police in the Protection of Civilians in UN Peace Operations,” *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (2024).

6 The UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support originally developed this three-tiered framework as an operational concept for POC in 2010. It was codified in the 2015 POC policy (para. 30), which was updated twice, in 2019 (para. 40) and in 2023. UN DPO, “The Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping,” May 2023. For an illustration of how UNPOL’s activities align with all three tiers of the UN’s operational concept, see: Hunt, “Protection through Policing,” p. 5, Figure 3.

Figure 1. Map of peacekeeping operations and special political missions where UNPOL are deployed



1 First, when violence does not involve extensive use of firearms or military-grade weapons, UNPOL FPU are often better suited than the military to conduct effective operations to protect civilians due to their training and equipment. Targeted arrests of anti-Balaka leaders in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in CAR, anti-gang operations in Haiti’s Cité Soleil,⁷ and public order management inside the POC sites across South Sudan illustrate this critical security function.⁸ Through measures such as long- and short-range high-visibility patrolling, UNPOL have also proven capable of deterring violent acts by armed criminal groups.⁹ For example, MINUSMA police patrols planned to coincide with market days helped reduce the number of violent robberies on key travel routes. This capacity to tackle and deter violence against civilians makes police particularly effective in

densely populated areas, such as urban centers where violence is often concentrated, and in IDP camps where armed groups target civilians.

2 Second, the skills and modalities of UNPOL can enable them to respond to threats with more flexibility and agility than other mission components. Under the right conditions, police can change tack more rapidly than the military—often within hours compared to days. Additionally, police units are highly mobile compared to their civilian colleagues in other sections. They are also adaptive in the medium term. In CAR and South Sudan, for example, FPUs have been temporarily split into smaller platoon-level detachments, allowing them to rapidly redeploy to temporary operating bases in response to outbreaks of violence in rural areas hosting large IDP camps.¹⁰

7 Michael Dziedzic and Robert M. Perito, “Haiti: Confronting the Gangs of Port-Au-Prince,” United States Institute of Peace, September 2008.
 8 Meressa K. Dessu, Yohannes Dawit, and Charles T. Hunt, “How Effective Is Policing in Protecting Civilians in Peace Operations? Lessons from the UN Mission in South Sudan,” Institute for Security Studies, December 2023.
 9 These patrols are often jointly conducted with national police or the mission’s force component.
 10 Interviews with UN Police Division officials, New York, February 2025. This ad hoc practice has now been formalized, see: United Nations, “Policy: Formed Police Units in United Nations Peace Operations,” December 1, 2024, para. 35.

3 Third, UNPOL leadership can engage with the government and national law enforcement to identify potential risks to civilians early, advocate for protective measures, and promote a culture of protection and accountability. UNPOL demonstrated this preventive capacity during election periods in both Mali and the DRC.¹¹ Further, as part of their core mandate in multiple missions, UNPOL have worked to reform abusive and ineffective host-state police institutions and extend state authority through police redeployment. Recognizing host governments' primary responsibility to protect their populations, these efforts contribute to creating a more protective environment by developing national capacities to prioritize and safeguard civilian well-being.¹²

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Fourth, UNPOL's community orientation puts them in close proximity to host populations, helping them better understand context-specific sources of insecurity. This proximity has also facilitated trust building, particularly when UNPOL have actively valued community feedback and centered local perspectives in POC assessments and planning.¹³ For example, police in the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) built the capacity of community protection committees, where no host-state police are present. Similarly, UNMISS and MINUSCA police have supported customary courts and community watch groups in POC sites and IDP camps, effectively engaging myriad local stakeholders in protection partnerships. This trust building also generates broader benefits for missions, enhancing solidarity with local actors and improving mission-wide engagement.

4 Finally, UNPOL play a key role in supporting mission-wide protection efforts by assisting military operations, providing escorts, sharing intelligence, and working with civilian teams. In South Sudan, for example, UNMISS police have worked closely with the human rights division to monitor and investigate human rights violations, which in turn informed early warning and hotspot analysis by the joint mission analysis center (JMAC).¹⁴

These significant contributions have made UNPOL a POC multiplier. Nonetheless, UNPOL have not always been an exclusively protective presence.

Police have themselves posed threats through sexual exploitation and abuse of people they were deployed to protect.¹⁵ There have also been cases where the visibility of UNPOL as UN representa-

tives has inadvertently placed civilians at heightened risk rather than safeguarding them.¹⁶ Consequently, there remains work to be done to ensure police do not unintentionally cause harm when seeking to protect civilians.¹⁷

Existing UN Policies and Definitions

The centrality of POC considerations during mission transitions has become increasingly recognized.¹⁸ However, the specific roles and responsibilities of particular mission components have been less clear. The transition of missions with POC mandates in recent years demonstrate UNPOL's part in addressing the unique protection challenges that arise during mission drawdown and

11 Interviews with MONUSCO and MINUSMA mission managers, UN Police Division, New York, February 2025.

12 Lenneke Sprik, Jennifer Giblin, and Alexander Gilder, "The Role of UN Peace Operations in Security Sector Reform and the Relationship with the Protection of Civilians," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 25 (2022).

13 Harley Henigson, "Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centred Approach to Protecting Civilians," International Peace Institute, November 2020.

14 Charles T. Hunt et al., "Human Rights and UN Peace Operations: A Thematic Study," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), February 2024.

15 Ai Kihara-Hunt, "United Nations Police as a Double-Edged Sword for SEA Accountability," In *Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peacekeeping and Aid: Critiquing the Past, Plotting the Future*, Jasmine-Kim Westendorf and Elliot Dolan-Evans, eds. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024).

16 Charles T. Hunt, "All Necessary Means to What Ends? The Unintended Consequences of the 'Robust Turn' in UN Peace Operations," *International Peacekeeping* 24, no. 1 (2017).

17 There are also arguments that UNPOL can produce or reproduce social orders based on the exclusion of often racialized, socioeconomically marginalized populations. See, for example: Lou Pingeot, *Police Peacekeeping: The UN, Haiti, and the Production of Global Social Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Felicity Gray, "Protection as Connection: Feminist Relational Theory and Protecting Civilians from Violence in South Sudan," *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022).

18 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping"; UN Development Coordination Office, UN DPO, UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and UN Development Programme, "UN Transitions: Sustaining Peace and Development Beyond Mission Withdrawal," 2020.

withdrawal. By leveraging both coercive and community-oriented functions, UNPOL can fulfill three primary roles.

Enabling the Gradual Handover of Security Functions in Stable Contexts

UNPOL are integral to strengthening the operational, analytical, monitoring, information management, and communication capacities of local police. In relatively stable settings, this can facilitate the gradual handover of security responsibilities to host states, enabling them to incrementally assume their primary protection duties while allowing for phased and secure mission draw-downs. In Sierra Leone, for example, UNPOL were at the center of integrated planning and clear benchmarking that led to a relatively smooth transition from peacekeeping to peacebuilding.

When missions transition against a backdrop of ongoing violence and persistent protection gaps, UNPOL have played a bridging role in advancing civilian protection.

a phased drawdown between 2013 and 2016.¹⁹ In the UN–African Union (AU) Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), the mission’s authorized police level was frozen (at approximately 2,500 officers) while the military component was reduced by two-thirds between 2017 and 2020.²⁰

Retaining a strong police presence during a transition also helps to sustain situational awareness, early-warning, and monitoring functions, which are critical to ongoing POC efforts.²¹ Through ongoing monitoring and support, MONUSCO police have been able to emphasize protection priorities in their capacity-building support to Congolese police by, for example, sustaining responses to sexual and gender-based violence and internal displacement.²² UNPOL therefore play an essential part in working toward the benchmarks and key criteria for leaving behind a more protective environment.²³

Bridging Protection Gaps during Unstable Transitions

When missions transition against a backdrop of ongoing violence and persistent protection gaps, UNPOL have played a bridging role in advancing civilian protection. As military contingents draw down, retaining the same number of police—or reducing them gradually—can help maintain security for both UN personnel and civilians by maintaining a uniformed deterrent presence. Quick response teams within FPUs can also preserve a mission’s ability to rapidly react to imminent threats of violence against civilians even as troops withdraw. In the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), for example, the police ceiling was increased by three FPUs (420 officers) as the military underwent

Where host states are unwilling or unable to underwrite a protective environment, UNPOL can also support community-based protection mechanisms. For example, local protection committees in eastern DRC have helped to reduce and mitigate POC threats even as the security guarantee provided by peacekeepers diminishes.²⁴

Supporting Transitions to Follow-on Missions

Where large, multidimensional missions have been succeeded by special political missions (SPMs), UNPOL have been central to maintaining protection efforts post-transition. FPUs converted to guard units or armed escorts have provided security and facilitated access for civilian personnel to conduct POC work. For example, in the UN

19 UN Security Resolution 2066 (September 17, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2066. See also: Daniel Forti and Lesley Connolly, “The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying: Liberia’s Peacekeeping Transition,” International Peace Institute, December 2022.

20 Daniel Forti, “Navigating Crisis and Opportunity: The Peacekeeping Transition in Darfur,” International Peace Institute, December 2019, p. 3. A similar approach was followed in Côte d’Ivoire. See: Alexandra Novosseloff, “Lessons Learned from the UN’s Transition in Côte d’Ivoire,” International Peace Institute, December 2018, pp. 7–8.

21 Josh Jorgensen, “MINUSMA’s Termination and the Future of Protection in Mali,” *IPI Global Observatory*, July 21, 2023.

22 Civilians in Conflict, “Integrated United Nations Approaches to Protection During Peacekeeping Transitions: Lessons Learned from MONUSCO,” November 2023.

23 Interviews with UN Police Division officials, New York, February 2025. FPUs do not normally engage in (and are not well suited to undertake) capacity building and training that is vital to bridging a transition and eventual handover to capable host-state authorities. A balance of FPUs and IPOs (ideally with SPTs in the mix) is required.

24 Gay Rosenblum-Kumar, “As UN Missions Draw Down, Strengthening Community-Led Approaches to Protection of Civilians,” *IPI Global Observatory*, May 3, 2023.

Mission for Justice Support in Haiti (MINUJUSTH), which had no military component, FPUs provided an “added layer of protection” under a Chapter VII POC mandate.²⁵

Even a small UNPOL presence in successor missions can provide continuity in advisory and capacity-building efforts, helping to strengthen local law enforcement and support community engagement on civilian protection. When UNAMID was replaced by the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), its police advisory unit was seen by many, including the Sudanese government, as a core component of the mission.²⁶ This enabled UNITAMS—an SPM with an explicit POC mandate²⁷—to continue the innovative approach of working with the state liaison functions and achieve early success training and advising Sudan police on protecting civilians, including from gender-based violence.²⁸ In follow-on SPMs without an explicit POC mandate like the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), UNPOL’s role in advising and building the capacity of local police has served as a bridge to longer-term protective efforts, reinforcing the UN’s implicit responsibility to safeguard civilians.

Similarly, when departing missions transfer residual tasks to UN country teams (e.g., in Côte d’Ivoire) or regional offices (e.g., in Mali), UNPOL can support the handover of POC-oriented police development projects to relevant UN agencies, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP). In addition to maintaining continuity in capacity-building efforts, this preserves institutional relationships for

sustained UN engagement on policing and POC.

Despite these critical roles, UNPOL have not been fully integrated into recent and ongoing transition planning in contexts where POC remains a priority.²⁹ For example, transition planning for MONUSCO in the DRC and early transition planning via the integrated transition strategy for UNMISS in South Sudan have not elaborated the role of UNPOL in transitional POC efforts.³⁰ The abrupt closure of MINUSMA in Mali also highlighted how POC and UNPOL functions can be deprioritized when withdrawals are rushed, underscoring the need for preemptive planning to mitigate the risk of forced mission closure.³¹

UNPOL need to effectively cooperate with their counterparts in the justice and corrections sectors under a rule-of-law umbrella.

Persistent Challenges

Notwithstanding UNPOL’s potential contributions to POC, a range of challenges continue to impede the impact of police on civilian protection.

Holistic Criminal Justice Reform

It is widely recognized that efforts to reform and develop domestic police are only as effective as parallel initiatives to strengthen judicial and penal institutions. However, missions often face an imbalance in staffing and resources, limiting their ability to deliver a coordinated and comprehensive response. To achieve longer-term objectives and sustainable outcomes, police need to effectively cooperate with their counterparts in the justice and corrections sectors under a rule-of-law umbrella.

25 Namie Di Razza, “Mission in Transition: Planning for the End of UN Peacekeeping in Haiti,” International Peace Institute, December 2018, p. 23. The premature withdrawal of MINUJUSTH and handover to BINUH without a uniformed presence stands as an example of the opposite. A similar arrangement was proposed, though not adopted, during planning for the transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS in Sudan. See: UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Sudan and South Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2020/336, April 28, 2020, pp. 11, 15, 22.

26 Daniel Forti, “Navigating Crisis and Opportunity,” p. 12. See also: UNAMID, “Concept Note: UNAMID Transitional Presence and Coordination with UNCT in Four Darfur States,” internal document, February 2019.

27 The mandate was primarily to support the implementation of its national plan for the protection of civilians. See: Dirk Druet, “United Nations Special Political Missions and Protection: A Principled Approach for Research and Policymaking,” International Peace Institute, July 2021.

28 Julie Gregory, “Civilian Protection in Sudan: Emerging Lessons from UNITAMS,” Stimson Center, October 2024.

29 Remote interviews with UNPOL officials in MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and UNMISS, June–September 2023.

30 On the DRC, see: UN Security Council, *Joint Strategy on the Progressive and Phased Drawdown of MONUSCO*, UN Doc. S/2020/1041, October 27, 2020; UN Security Council, *MONUSCO: Transition Plan*, UN Doc. S/2021/807, September 17, 2021, pp. 26–40; UN Security Council, *MONUSCO: Disengagement Plan*, UN Doc. S/2023/904, on file with author, December 26, 2023. On South Sudan, see: UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Paragraph 31 of Security Council Resolution 2677 (2023)*, UN Doc. S/2023/784, paras. 54–59. In CAR, while Security Council Resolution 2709 (2023) called for recommendations on a possible phased transition, the Independent Strategic Review of MINUSCA in August without a uniformed presence stands as an example of the opposite. A similar arrangement was proposed, though not adopted, during planning for the transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS in Sudan. See: UN Doc. S/2020/336, pp. 11, 15, 22.

31 Lisa Sharland, “MINUSMA and Protection of Civilians: Implications for Future Peacekeeping Missions,” *IPI Global Observatory*, July 14, 2023.

Given that criminal justice reform is a long-term endeavor, coordination with the wider UN system is also critical. The Global Focal Point for Rule of Law provides a useful mechanism for this, and there are good examples of cooperation among various UN agencies, funds, and programs through UN country teams.³² However, duplication and competition for resources continue to undermine a more efficient system-wide approach. Such reform ultimately requires the involvement of bilateral donors and international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) to ensure sustainable funding for broader security governance reform, which is essential for creating a protective environment in the long term.

Militarized UN Policing

One of UNPOL's perceived strengths in POC is their ability to be both robust and community-oriented. However, this dual role also reveals a contradiction. Currently, around 70 percent of UNPOL personnel are deployed in FPUs, which are favored for their ability to operate cohesively while also protecting themselves and others. However, FPUs drive armored vehicles, carry weapons, wear military-style uniforms, and often move through towns without interacting with local populations. In contrast, IPOs are lightly armed, typically patrol on foot, engage directly with communities, and work alongside national police. This means that while the UN promotes the democratization and demilitarization of domestic law enforcement as essential for building durable peace, it does so by using a predominantly paramilitary police force. This sends conflicting signals to conflict-affected societies, many of which have suffered under militarized public security forces. It also distances missions from local populations, undermining community-oriented policing efforts and weakening UNPOL's potential to enable more people-centered approaches to POC.

The substitution of police for the military in providing basic security functions in transitions and future peacekeeping models may lead to further militarization of UN policing. Additionally, trends toward more militarized policing in several police-contributing countries (PCCs) and influential member states—including the US, China, and Russia—may erode the rights-based, democratic policing principles that have historically shaped UN police reform strategies.³³ In this context, arguments for greater use of police for POC should be weighed against the risks of doing so through a more militarized modality.

Insufficient Language Skills and Cultural Awareness

When UNPOL officers share linguistic and cultural affinity with host populations, the relationships between them are often stronger.³⁴ This can lead to better information and intelligence sharing and improved community perceptions of missions. Despite efforts to recruit personnel suited to specific mission contexts, many UNPOL officers lack sufficient language skills or cultural awareness. Relying on community liaison assistants as translators diminishes UNPOL's community orientation and engagement and impacts how they can gather and analyze information about POC threats and responses.³⁵

Data Collection and Impact Assessment

A final challenge relates to the difficulty of assessing UNPOL's impact on POC outcomes. There are currently very few studies that correlate observed levels of violence against civilians with the deployment of UNPOL.³⁶ Beyond assessing presence, evaluating the actual impact of UNPOL activities, including measuring attacks that were prevented because of patrols or attributing police development outcomes to UNPOL, presents methodolo-

32 Relevant agencies, funds, and programs in the UN country team include UNDP, UN Women, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). For example, UNMISS police have worked with UNDP on training and developing a strategic plan for the South Sudanese national police. Interviews with UNMISS police officials, Juba, June 2023.

33 See, for example: UN, "New Vision of the Secretary-General for the Rule of Law," 2023.

34 Remote interviews with UNPOL officials in MINUSCA, MONUSCO, MINUSMA, June–September 2023. See also: Vincenzo Bove and Andrea Ruggeri, "Peacekeeping Effectiveness and Blue Helmets' Distance from Locals," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 7 (2019).

35 Remote interviews with UNPOL officials in MINUSCA, MONUSCO, MINUSMA, June–September 2023.

36 Exceptions, albeit focused only on sexual violence, include: Karin Johansson and Lisa Hultman, "UN Peacekeeping and Protection from Sexual Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 7 (2019).

gical challenges.³⁷ Furthermore, building a more protective environment is a long-term project and difficult to meaningfully evaluate within the relatively short life cycle of a UN peace operation.³⁸

There is, however, greater potential to assess linkages between POC outcomes and direct actions of police peacekeepers (e.g., patrols and collocation with national police). At present, however, the data required to do so is not systematically captured or analyzed and is often overlooked within missions.³⁹ Modalities for collecting data on policing also vary from mission to mission. Across missions with POC mandates, some UNPOL components (e.g., in UNISFA) have used the Unite Aware, Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) tool, while others (e.g., in MINUSMA) devised their own bespoke databases in parallel to other mission approaches. Whatever the modality, data collection has not always been structured to capture outcomes related to POC, nor has it been nuanced, comprehensive, or consistent enough to be reliable for rigorous analysis.⁴⁰

These technical issues have also been exacerbated by the reluctance or inability of UNPOL personnel to collect and input data. Additionally, while police face real data security and confidentiality considerations, information that is captured is not always shared or integrated with other mission tools such as SAGE or the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS) leading to duplication or gaps in mission-wide analysis conducted by JMACs.⁴¹ Finally, missions retain ownership of all collected data, preventing the UN Secretariat from conducting longitudinal analyses

and further restricting its ability to evaluate UNPOL's long-term impact on POC.

Future Models for Police Peace Operations

The New Agenda for Peace calls for “more versatile, nimble and adaptable” mission models,⁴² while the Pact for the Future has initiated a review of “all forms” of UN peace operations with recommendations for adapting the UN’s toolbox for more agile and tailored responses to evolving challenges.⁴³ In light of these calls, this section examines how and where UNPOL can contribute to implementing POC mandates in future missions, including through innovative types of peace operations.

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Back to the Future

Several of today’s conflict settings may become ripe for UN peace operations that could draw on the strengths of

UNPOL highlighted above. A new protection force in Sudan, for example, could use police to protect civilians in displacement sites.⁴⁴ Similarly, police would be central to a potential UN takeover of the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti, which is tasked with protecting civilians from criminal gangs, defending civilian infrastructure in densely populated urban centers, and building public trust in domestic law enforcement entities.⁴⁵ More speculative proposals—such as a potential UN transitional administration in Gaza following an enduring ceasefire or peace agreement—would harken back to UN police with executive authority who performed wide-ranging protection functions, as seen in Kosovo and Timor-

37 Charles T. Hunt, *UN Peace Operations and International Policing: Negotiating Complexity, Assessing Impact and Learning to Learn* (London: Routledge, 2015).

38 For example, the UN–World Bank “Pathways for Peace” report noted that meaningful impact on institutional reform and capacity can take decades. UN and World Bank, “Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Prevent Violent Conflict,” 2018.

39 Interviews with DPO and UN Police Division officials, New York, February 2025.

40 Interviews with DPO officials, New York, February 2025.

41 Interviews with UN Police Division officials, New York, February 2025.

42 United Nations, “Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace,” July 2023, p. 24.

43 UN General Assembly Resolution 79/1 (September 22, 2024), UN Doc. A/RES/79/1, Action 21(b).

44 UN Human Rights Council, *Findings of the Investigations Conducted by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan Into Violations of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law, and Related Crimes, Committed in the Sudan In the Context of the Conflict That Erupted in Mid-April 2023*, UN Doc. A/HRC/57/CRP.6, October 23, 2024.

45 International Crisis Group, “Weighing the Case for a New Peacekeeping Mission to Haiti,” November 1, 2024; International Peace Institute, “Emerging Practices in New Mission Models: The Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti,” December 2024. The plan has been for the number of personnel deployed to the MSS to increase to 2,500.

Leste in the late 1990s.⁴⁶

Police-Centric and Police-Led Operations

Police possess distinct advantages in addressing several conflict trends that are expected to persist in the future.⁴⁷ UNPOL are also increasingly called upon to respond to POC threats emerging from violent urban conflict, transnational organized crime, and inter- and intracommunal violence, as well as to address the unique challenges of protecting IDPs and securing the sites that host them.⁴⁸ Indeed, many of the thirty models proposed in the 2024 UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) paper on the future of peace operations would likely require police, and some member states have advocated for police-centric and police-led missions for contexts with serious POC concerns.⁴⁹ The UN Security Council has previously authorized police-led operations in Burundi (though it was never deployed),⁵⁰ as well as in Haiti with MINUJUSTH and the MSS. Given these dynamics, future UN peace operations may benefit from being more oriented toward police and policing concepts.⁵¹

Expanding UNPOL's role in POC could facilitate a shift away from overly securitized approaches.

UNPOL will likely remain part of a broader constellation of UN prevention and response approaches, working alongside

Expanding UNPOL's role in POC could also help tackle two major critiques of contemporary peacekeeping. First, it could facilitate a shift away from overly securitized approaches that have fed a continuing tendency for POC strategies to become divorced from longer-term objectives of sustain-

able peace.⁵² Field missions mainly staffed by UNPOL or configured around policing concepts are also perceived to be more acceptable to host states given they are deemed less of a threat to closely guarded sovereignty.⁵³

Second, elevating protection through policing can shift the onus for primary protection back to the host state and work toward ameliorating the "stabilization dilemma" whereby the better the UN protects civilians, the less incentive there is for host governments to assume that responsibility.⁵⁴

Working Alongside Other Actors Addressing Insecurity

other actors addressing insecurity and its effects on civilians. Such constellations could involve joint deployments and hybrid operations.⁵⁵ They could also entail more coordinated efforts between UNPOL and other UN entities, including linkages with expert panels, collaboration with specialized agencies in UN country teams,⁵⁶ and strengthened connections with international financial institutions to ensure sustainable funding for security and justice sector reform.

It seems likely that regional and subregional arrangements will play a bigger role in the next phase of peace operations, particularly in peace enforcement. This trend was reflected in the

46 See below for a discussion on broader conceptions of protection extending beyond harms covered under international humanitarian law.

47 Charles T. Hunt, "International Policing and/as the Future of UN Peace Operations," in *Multidisciplinary Features of UN Peace Operations*, Alexander Gilder et al., eds. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

48 See: Hunt, "To Serve and Protect."

49 El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams, and Ai Kihara-Hunt, "The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities," UN Peacekeeping, October 2024.

50 UN Security Council Resolution 2303 (July 29, 2016), UN Doc. S/RES/2303.

51 Kari M. Osland and Mateja Peter, "UN Peace Operations in a Multipolar Order: Building Peace Through the Rule of Law and Bottom-up Approaches," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 2 (2021); Charles T. Hunt, "Rhetoric Versus Reality in the Rise of Policing in UN Peace Operations: 'More Blue, Less Green?'" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 6 (2019).

52 Jenna Russo and Ralph Mamiya, "The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," International Peace Institute, December 2022; Adam Day et al., "The Political Practice of Peacekeeping," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and Stimson Center, 2020.

53 Interviews with members of the Strategic Police Advisors Group, New York, July 2024.

54 Cedric de Coning, "How Not to Do UN Peacekeeping: Avoid the Stabilization Dilemma with Principled and Adaptive Mandating and Leadership," *Global Governance* 29, no. 2 (2023). The flip side of this is the risk of empowering autocratic incumbents. See, for example: Adam Day et al., "Peacebuilding and Authoritarianism: The Unintended Consequences of UN Engagement in Post-Conflict Settings," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April 2021.

55 Historical examples include the UN–Organization of American States (OAS) International Civilian Mission (MICIVH) in Haiti and the UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

56 This includes, for example, monitoring human rights violations to inform early warning in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2719, which creates a framework for UN assessed contributions to help finance AU-led operations on a case-by-case basis. While some regional arrangements may substitute for a UN presence, there will also be a need for cooperative modalities. For example, UNPOL could be called upon to support regional interventions with civilian protection obligations, whether explicit mandates and active duties or more limited civilian harm mitigation imperatives. UNPOL can fulfill policing roles in parallel to such missions, as seen with police training in the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSAM) alongside the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and its successor, the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). They can also assist in preparing police components deployed by the AU or regional economic communities (RECs) through training on POC and familiarize them with accountability frameworks such as the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP).

Sequenced and Modular Approach to a Continuum of Engagements

UNPOL would be critical to realizing more sequenced deployments between the UN and regional bodies.⁵⁷ They would also be critical to phased missions deployed as part of a more modular approach.⁵⁸ Retaining specialized capabilities such as specialized police teams (SPTs) on the ground as missions adapt and transition can provide continuity and ongoing support to the protection efforts of host-state police.⁵⁹ In this sense, UNPOL could serve as a lynchpin in realizing a more seamless transition across a spectrum of operations, moving away from supply-driven models of peacekeeping toward deployments that are more tailored to protection needs on the ground.⁶⁰

Police have the capacity to play a greater role in more innovative peace operations that address a broader range of threats to human security.

Regional Missions and Cross-Border Protection

UNPOL could work with counterparts in multiple host states as part of efforts to tackle threats to civilians emanating from cross-border drivers of conflict such as transnational organized crime, violent extremism, and transhumance. This would require a stronger emphasis on preventive approaches to POC, placing UN police officers in bolstered regional offices under senior UN officials overseeing regional prevention strategies, building on the 2018 UN development system reforms.⁶¹

Supporting Community-Driven POC Efforts

An additional theme in discussions on future models for peace operations is the imperative to become less state-centric and more people-centric by prioritizing the needs and preferences of local populations. UNPOL are well placed to scale up engagement with both armed and unarmed non-state actors that are fundamental to the provision of protection in many missions settings. As with the support to customary courts and community watch groups discussed above, UN police can promote a POC-oriented approach by strengthening local sources of policing, such as POC committees, community protection committees, and community alert networks. At the same time, UNPOL could facilitate better coordination between these community-driven mechanisms and statutory authorities, helping to build long-term protective environments.

More “Panoramic” POC

Police have the capacity to play a greater role in more innovative peace operations that address a

57 As seen with the “rehatting” of AU personnel under the UN in CAR and Mali.

58 Eugene Chen, “A New Vision for Peace Operations,” New York University Center for International Cooperation, October 2024.

59 See: Charles T. Hunt, “Specialized Police Teams in UN Peace Operations: A Survey of Progress and Challenges,” International Peace Institute, March 2024.

60 Eugene Chen et al., “Demand-Driven Operations: A New Approach to UN Peacekeeping,” Institute for Security Studies, February 2025.

61 See: David Passarelli and Adam Day, “Stress Testing the UN’s Regional Prevention Approaches,” United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, July 2023.

broader range of threats to human security associated with violence and conflict—not just military or armed threats but also biological, technological, and environmental risks.⁶² This would align with the secretary-general's recent call to work toward a more “full protection of civilians” approach,⁶³ including the secondary and tertiary effects of conflict on civilian well-being that stretch beyond the minimum protections enshrined under international humanitarian law (IHL).⁶⁴ Despite enduring sovereignty concerns, a strengthened toolbox for protection could see UNPOL deployed as part of operations in settings where violence and homicide rates are comparable to war zones, even if the situation does not meet the formal definition of armed conflict. Police would also be critical to any responses by future peace operations to a broader set of POC threats including electoral violence; crackdowns on civic and political space; the proliferation of harmful information, including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation;⁶⁵ cybersecurity; and climate-driven instability.⁶⁶ Any such shift will require a more preventive approach to POC and likely see missions more concerned with addressing deeply entrenched systems of violence.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The preceding analysis highlights the unique contributions of UNPOL to POC in UN peace operations. As uniformed and coercive yet civilian and community-oriented actors, UNPOL possess comparative advantages over military forces in responding to current realities and trends across a range of mission types and during transitions between them.

Future peace operations—whether lighter footprint

and prevention-oriented, a revival of larger multi-dimensional operations, or something altogether different—will face continued demands for protection. Despite conceptual and operational challenges, police have clear potential to contribute meaningfully to these objectives.⁶⁷ UNPOL will therefore continue to play an important role in adapting peace operations to better respond to new and existing challenges associated with protecting civilians.

In close coordination with their colleagues working on justice and corrections, UNPOL can also advance POC efforts through approaches that do not rely on force, avoiding the limitations—and at times counterproductive effects—of military-led protection strategies. Given the declining appetite for such military approaches among host governments and UN member states, UNPOL's role in fostering more pragmatic, community-driven, and accountable protection mechanisms will only grow in importance.

To strengthen UNPOL's role in future peace operations, the UN Secretariat and member states should consider the following:

- **Focus more on policing in high-level policy discussions and reviews of peace operations:** UNPOL's role in POC should feature more prominently in ongoing policy discussions on adapting peace operations, particularly in three areas: (1) encouraging concrete pledges from PCCs at the 2025 Peacekeeping Ministerial in Berlin and future ministerials; (2) increasing the visibility of policing in the work of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34) and relevant working groups of the Security Council; (3) and considering the role of police during the ongoing review of all forms of peace operations, the 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review, and other

62 For a full explanation of these threats, see: UN, “Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General,” 2021.

63 UN Security Council, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2024/385, May 14, 2024, para. 53.

64 Simon Bagshaw, “Towards the Full Protection of Civilians,” October 2024, Article 36.

65 Annika S. Hansen and Fatoumata Kaba, “Implications and Opportunities for United Nations Police: Harmful Information in the Context of Peace Operations,” in *Ideas Notes 2030: Strategic Reflections on the Future of UN Policing*, Thomas Greminger and Annika Hilding Norberg (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2024).

66 Wendy MacClinchy et al., “Preparing for the Future: Climate-Supportive United Nations Policing,” in *Ideas Notes 2030: Strategic Reflections on the Future of UN Policing*, Thomas Greminger and Annika Hilding Norberg (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2024).

67 For further discussion on challenges facing UNPOL on POC relating to ambiguous authority, militarization, recruitment and retention, and reliance on predatory host states, see: Hunt, “Protection through Policing”; Hunt, “To Serve and Protect.” See also: Annika Hilding Norberg et al., “Preparing for UN Policing 2030: Challenges and Opportunities,” in *Ideas Notes 2030: Strategic Reflections on the Future of UN Policing*, Thomas Greminger and Annika Hilding Norberg (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2024); Hunt, “International Policing.”

relevant processes. It may also be prudent for member states to consider requesting a new report from the secretary-general on UN policing as a precursor to a future Security Council resolution recommitting to UNPOL.

- **Recognize the limits of policing for protection:** While UNPOL offer distinct advantages, it must not be treated as a substitute for military components—especially in contexts requiring credible deterrence. UNPOL lack the capacity for sustained robust physical protection, and they often depend on a credible military backup. A comprehensive, integrated approach aligning police and military capabilities is essential to avoid creating unrealistic expectations for POC that could undermine

the credibility of individual missions and UN peace operations writ large.

- **Closing the evidence gap on UNPOL's effectiveness:** To strengthen the case for police-centric protection models, further research is needed on the effectiveness of police interventions in different operational contexts. UN missions should further develop and harmonize data-gathering and analysis tools like SAGE and CPAS and find ways to feed this data into analysis in the Secretariat. Academic studies measuring both the impact of UNPOL deployments on POC at the subnational level and progress in strengthening local police forces will also be crucial for demonstrating impact.

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