

The Effect of Peace Operations on Mass Atrocities and Closely-Related Outcomes

Tools for Atrocity Prevention: Evidence Brief

The 1979 Report of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, which led to the creation of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, stated, "Only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group."

The "lessons learned" project of the Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is one way the institution seeks to carry out the charge to identify lessons from history that can potentially contribute to saving lives by preventing future genocides and related crimes against humanity.

To identify these insights, we reviewed academic articles and think tank reports, and interviewed experts. We then distilled this body of policy-relevant knowledge into an accessible, practical resource.

Read more about our approach at: www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned

Definition

Peace operations are composed of “military and/or civilian personnel deployed by one or more third-party states, frequently but not necessarily under the auspices of a global or regional organization” (Mullenbach 2005, p. 529). The mandates and composition of peace operations can vary widely, from civilian observer missions to missions authorized to use military force to enforce the peace. Common goals include mitigating hostilities, restoring state authority, preventing recurrence of civil war, and/or achieving humanitarian goals, including the protection of civilians.

Connection between peace operations and atrocity prevention strategies

If peace operations help prevent the outbreak or recurrence of armed conflict, they would reduce the likelihood of mass atrocities because armed conflict is the strongest risk factor for mass atrocities. In addition, if peace operations provide direct physical protection to civilian populations; defeat, detain, or degrade the capacity of atrocity perpetrators; and/or shift armed actors’ calculations of the costs and benefits of targeting civilians (e.g., by publicizing violations), they would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Protecting vulnerable civilian populations

Overview

Our research review includes 96 reports: 8 that address the effects of peace operations on mass atrocities and 92 that address the effects of peace operations on closely related outcomes, such as civilian killings, human rights violations, and conflict recurrence. It found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether peace operations were effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes, and
- Relatively strong evidence on the association between several design factors and greater effectiveness of peace operations in helping prevent mass atrocities.
 - We found the strongest evidence that *having a high quantity of troops; a high level of commitment; and international support or coordination* were associated with peace operations success.
 - Other factors supported by relatively strong evidence include *the peace operation being unbiased; having clear policy objectives; being well-informed; and receiving cooperation from the host country.*

Success factors

We list below only those factors on which we found relatively strong or moderate evidence that the factor is associated with peace operations being more effective at decreasing mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes. These include contextual factors, which describe the circumstances in which the tool is used but which are beyond the control of policymakers, and design factors, which describe the manner in which policymakers use the tool.

Contextual factors

CONTEXTUAL FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Domestic cooperation with the tool	The country under study cooperates with the tool.	Stronger	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Absence of external assistance or foreign troops	There are no foreign troops active in the ongoing conflict situation nor are external actors offering assistance to the conflict parties.	Moderate	Conflict
Target lacks access to resources	The target lacks access to resources, such as oil or gemstones, to continue the conflict.	Moderate	Conflict
Comprehensive settlement or peace agreement	There is a comprehensive settlement or peace agreement between the conflict parties.	Moderate	Conflict
Strong government	The national government is strong, or has a high degree of resilience, adaptability, military experience, power, or territorial control.	Moderate	Human rights violations, Mass atrocities
Ripeness	The parties to the conflict perceive a negotiated resolution as in their mutual interest.	Moderate	Conflict
Local support for tool	Most of the local population and/or local civil society supports the use of the tool and perceives its use as legitimate.	Moderate	Conflict, Violence against civilians

Design factors

DESIGN FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
High quantity of troops	The peacekeeping or intervening military force is large in size.	Stronger	Conflict, Human rights violations, Mass atrocities, Violence against civilians

DESIGN FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Committed implementer	The tool implementer has a high level of commitment, resolve, or credibility, or has committed a great deal of resources toward use of the tool.	Stronger	Conflict, Mass atrocities, Violence against civilians
International support or coordination	There is a high degree of international support for the use of the tool, or the tool implementer coordinates with other international actors on the use of the tool.	Stronger	Conflict, Mass atrocities, Violence against civilians
Unbiased implementer or intervention	The tool implementer or intervention is not biased toward either party. Bias refers to the posture of the intervener, not necessarily prejudices that the intervener might hold about parties.	Stronger	Conflict, Mass atrocities
Clear policy objectives	The implementer's objectives in using the tool are clear.	Stronger	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Well-informed implementer	The tool implementer is well-versed in the political and social context in which the conflict is occurring, or has credible information about the intentions or capabilities of the target.	Stronger	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Early implementation	The tool is implemented early in the conflict or rapidly after the appearance of early warning signs or occurrence of mass atrocities.	Moderate	Conflict, Mass atrocities
Skilled implementer	The tool implementer is highly competent in the use of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Consent	The peace operation has secured broad consent.	Moderate	Conflict
Concurrent use of multiple tools	The tool implementer or other actors are simultaneously implementing other tools that are consistent with the goals of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict, Human rights violations, Mass atrocities
UN mandate	The peacekeeping mission is operating under a UN mandate. (Note - For our review, we assume that findings associated with a regional mandate can be considered equivalent to findings associated with a non-UN mandate.)	Moderate	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Willingness/ability to use force	The tool implementer is willing and able to use force.	Moderate	Conflict, Mass atrocities
Cohesive implementer	The tool implementer has a cohesive agenda.	Moderate	Conflict, Violence against civilians
Flexibility and linkage to behavior	The use of the tool is flexible and linked to the behavior of the target--i.e., if the target improves their behavior, the tool is lifted.	Moderate	Conflict, Mass atrocities

DESIGN FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Tool addresses root causes	The tool addresses the root causes of the conflict.	Moderate	Conflict, Mass atrocities

Case Illustrations

Peace operations were used in both Central African Republic and South Sudan to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.

Central African Republic (2014–present)

In March 2013, after the Muslim-majority rebel group Seleka seized control of CAR’s capital, mostly-Christian “Anti-balaka” militias emerged ([Arieff and Husted 2016](#); [MINUSCA](#)). Both sides of the conflict have committed atrocity crimes, wreaking collective punishment against civilians of the other group ([Arieff and Husted 2016](#)). In response to the violence, with US support, the UNSC passed [Resolution 2149](#)(2014) establishing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) under Chapter VII. MINUSCA’s initial mandate provided for 10,000 peacekeepers who were tasked with protecting civilians, supporting the transition process, facilitating humanitarian assistance, promoting human rights, supporting international justice, and assisting in demobilization. Subsequent resolutions have increased the size of the force, the scope of its mandate, and the mission’s duration. MINUSCA has contributed to a decrease in violence in CAR, through support for disarmament activities, civilian protection, and community violence reduction programs ([IPI 2018](#)). Yet, the operation has faced challenges in deploying country-wide, enforcing disarmament, protecting peacekeepers, and dealing with sexual exploitation of civilians in CAR by peacekeepers ([Arieff and Husted 2016](#)).

South Sudan (2011–present)

When South Sudan became an independent country in 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) established the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) ([Resolution 1996, 2011](#)). With an initial size of 7,000 peacekeepers, UNMISS was authorized under Chapter VII and mandated primarily to support peace consolidation, economic development, and governance capacity-building. In 2013, civil war broke out in South Sudan after a political feud between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar. This divided the ruling party along ethnic lines and led to government forces and militia on both sides to attack civilians based on ethnic identity. Thousands of civilians immediately took shelter on UN compounds, which became impromptu “protection of civilians sites.” UNMISS’s decision to shelter fleeing civilians may have saved many lives in the moment, but the mission is also criticized for its inability to protect civilians across the country and against later attacks on protection of civilians sites ([Murphy 2017](#); [MSF 2016](#); [Wells 2017](#)).

Selected informational resources on US government use of peace operations

UN Security Council authorization of UN peace operations:

- See a [UN website](#) on the role of the UN Security Council in UN peace operations
- Examples of UN peace operations:
 - [South Sudan](#)
 - [Mali](#)
 - [Democratic Republic of Congo](#)

US funding for UN peace operations:

- Congressional Research Service [brief](#) (2022) on US funding of UN peace operations

US military support to UN peace operations - example:

- [Central African Republic](#)

US support to regional peace operations:

- US State Department [fact sheet](#) (2021) on US capacity building for peace operations
- Examples of US support to regional peace operations:
 - The US State Department [obligated](#) more than \$100 million from the Peacekeeping Operations account in FY2020 “to support the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), to include logistics, equipment, and training of troop contributing countries” for the African Union Mission in Somalia.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.



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