

SENIOR LEADERS' ROUNDTABLE: LESSONS LEARNED IN ADAPTING AFRICAN PEACE OPERATIONS TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST THREATS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

From January 22-24, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies and New York University's Center on International Cooperation convened the [Lessons Learned in Adapting Peace Operations to Violent Extremist Threats](#) senior leaders roundtable at the United Nations (U.N.) headquarters in New York. The roundtable brought together senior leaders and experts from across Africa to discuss how peace operations can address the growing threat posed by violent extremist groups.

There were 35 total participants, including 11 serving or retired general officers, 6 current or former force commanders, 4 ambassadors, 3 former heads of mission, and senior United States (U.S.), U.N., and African Union (A.U.) officials. The objectives of the roundtable were to:

1. Convene senior peace operations leaders and experts to discuss experiences, lessons learned, and good practices in regional efforts to address violent extremist threats.
2. Identify opportunities for the U.N., A.U., and other multilateral actors to improve their responses to violent extremist groups.
3. Catalyze the development of regional solution frameworks to address the violent extremist threat.

The program included opening remarks by U.N. Undersecretary General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix, A.U. Permanent Observer to the U.N. Ambassador Fatima Mohammed, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) West Africa Coordination Element Lead Major General Kenneth Ekman, and New York University Distinguished Fellow Ambassador Martin Kimani. This document captures the key insights and recommendations derived from the program.

Key Insights

1. **Africa is at the center of global efforts to address violent extremism, accounting for 59 percent of violent extremism-related deaths worldwide.**¹ In Africa, the threat from violent extremism has expanded. In 2024, there were 6,000 events and approximately 20,000 casualties linked to Islamist militant groups,² the most recognized form of violent extremism in Africa. These figures are at or near all-time highs. Over the past five years, 20 African countries in every region of the continent have experienced violent extremist-related incidents. Violent extremism poses a potentially existential threat to regimes in Somalia, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The threats violent extremist groups pose to these countries and their neighbors mean that the demand for external support and intervention to confront violent extremism is likely to remain high.

¹ United Nations, 9842nd Annual Meeting Press Release, January 21, 2025,

<https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc15971.doc.htm>

² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Militant Islamist Groups in Africa Sustain High Pace of Lethality*, *Infographic*, February 18, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2025-militant-islamist-groups-in-africa/>

2. **Since the year 2000, 10 peace operations³ have been deployed in Africa in whole or in part to address the threat from violent extremist groups.** These include:
 - Two U.N. peacekeeping missions, the U.N.'s Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the U.N.'s Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).
 - Three successive A.U. peace enforcement missions in Somalia.
 - Two Regional Economic Community (REC)-led peace enforcement efforts, ECOWAS's African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Intervention in Mozambique (SAMIM).
 - Three ad-hoc regional coalitions, the Lake Chad Basin's Multinational Joint Task Force (MNTF), the G5 Sahel's Joint Force, and the Accra Initiative's Multinational Joint Task Force.

3. **U.N. peacekeeping doctrine is not suited to address violent extremist threats.** U.N. peacekeeping doctrine emphasizes the pursuit of political processes through principles of impartiality, consent of the parties, and the non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mission's mandate. Violent extremist groups pursue maximalist aims of state capture and regime overthrow. Because of these aims, as well as the reluctance by the international community to engage with violent extremists, no violent extremist insurgency in Africa has ended in a political settlement. Under such conditions, U.N. peacekeeping's foundational principles of impartiality and consent of the parties cannot be upheld. Moreover, peacekeepers typically possess neither the will nor the capability to conduct offensive operations against violent extremists. Since peacekeeping operations are not suited for full scale counterinsurgency, U.N. missions in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo have struggled to address the threat to the satisfaction of either country, which contributed to requests for their withdrawal.

4. **African-led peace enforcement efforts have also not been effective in addressing violent extremist threats.** African-led peace enforcement missions, which are more offensive in nature than U.N. mandated missions and do not require consent of the parties to a conflict, have had limited success. The A.U. missions in Somalia and two Regional Economic Community (REC)-led missions, AFISMA and SAMIM, have been deployed to address extremist groups. They have faced significant challenges, including capacity and resource constraints, particularly with respect to police, justice provision, stabilization, and civil-military cooperation capabilities. At times, they have failed to integrate with locally led conflict prevention strategies, establish effective command and control structures, or align their efforts with other peace operations or national security forces. Large, externally imposed state-building efforts, whether they have been attempted through peace operations or otherwise, have struggled to enable the development of national regimes capable of independently managing the threat from violent extremist groups.

³ Peace operations, broadly defined, are the expeditionary use of uniformed personnel to secure international peace and security. Because they typically involve hot pursuit rules and joint operations, ad-hoc coalitions by this broad definition would qualify as peace operations. The A.U. considers two ad-hoc regional coalitions, the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Lake Chad Basin's MNJTF, among its peace support operations. They are thus included here. See Paul D Willams. Peace Operations. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, December 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-37>

5. **Because of the failure of both U.N. and A.U.-sponsored peace operations to address violent extremism, African governments are turning to other forms of security provision.** The continued growth of violent extremism over the past decade, along with a marked decline in the willingness of the U.N. and A.U. to mandate and support peace operations, are among the contributing factors that have led states to seek alternative forms of security provision. These have come in the form of Private Military Companies (PMCs) such as Russia's Africa Corps, mercenaries, or bilateral partners such as Rwanda, which is currently deployed in Mozambique to address the violent extremist threat in Cabo Delgado. While these forms of security provision have usually proven to be little more (and arguably much less) effective than peace operations in addressing violent extremism, they do pose a significant challenge to the principles, doctrine, values, and approaches espoused by multilateral institutions.
6. **Ad-hoc security initiatives show promise in addressing violent extremist threats, but face limitations.** Ad-hoc initiatives in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and Coastal West Africa have emerged to facilitate coordination between states to address the cross-border dimension of the violent extremist threat. They are created and led by the states most affected by violent extremism, who can bring local knowledge and relationships to bear. By enabling states to share intelligence, conduct joint operations, and pursue violent extremist threats across one another's borders, they fill a critical gap in the approach of traditional peace operations, which are state-centric and were not designed with cross-border threats in mind. In practice, however, mistrust between member states, a lack of alignment with comprehensive, regionally led conflict prevention strategies, resource constraints, and lack of integration between ad hoc initiatives and the rest of Africa's Peace and Security Architecture have prevented them from reaching their full potential.
7. **Major multidimensional peace operations to address violent extremism are unlikely to be undertaken by either the A.U. or the U.N. for the foreseeable future.** Large multidimensional peacekeeping missions are in decline. U.N. peacekeeping missions including MINUSMA and MONUSCO have struggled to mount and maintain offensive operations or find timely mechanisms to support host government efforts to take on responsibility for security provision. These experiences, as well as constraints in funding and the operational environment, mean that future peace operations are likely to be smaller and less well resourced.
8. **U.N. Security Council Resolution 2719 (UNSCR 2719) can contribute to enabling a more effective multilateral response to violent extremism but faces constraints.** UNSCR 2719, which allows for U.N. assessed contributions to support A.U. peace operations, offers one potential pathway forward for African-led peace operations to receive more predictable U.N. financing and gain needed capabilities. In addition to Somalia, where discussions are underway regarding a hybrid deployment of UNSCR 2719, other options for 2719-sponsored missions in areas where violent extremists are active include Mozambique and Coastal West Africa. Nevertheless, however justified the need to abide by financial transparency and human rights standards, the resolution's insistence on effective A.U. command and control is limiting. It does not reflect on-the-ground realities, even in contexts such as the A.U. Mission in Somalia, where effective command lies less with the Force Commander than with each troop-contributing country. Effective A.U. command and control may also prove challenging to reconcile with trends towards ad-hoc coalitions and REC-led missions. Significant capacity at the A.U. as well as potentially within the RECs, outside of UNSCR 2719, may need to be built to maximize the effective implementation of the resolution.

9. **All types of peace operations need more sustainable sources of financing within Africa.** The limitations of UNSCR 2719 mean that peace operations in Africa are likely to continue to face challenges obtaining funding. With continued declines in U.N. peacekeeping budgets, competition from bilateral security providers, and limited patience by external donors, peace operations in Africa urgently need to find new, local means of generating revenue and sustaining themselves. In the context of violent extremist insurgencies, a focus on aligning continental and external support for peace operations with local efforts to mobilize resources could enhance state capacity for governance and security provision.
10. **Not all members, factions, or leaders of violent extremist groups are amenable to dialogue—but some may be.** Not all violent extremist entities are capable of or willing to engage with state, regional or international forces. Nevertheless, some individual leaders, factions, or sub-factions of violent extremist groups have indicated interest and, at times, engaged in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. In cases such as the Islamist Tuareg groups in Mali’s Kidal region, opportunities to get senior leaders of violent extremist groups to defect or engage in political processes have likely been lost due to the restrictions states and peacekeepers face.
11. **Rapid technological adaptation and change is exacerbating the violent extremist threat, and peace operations are struggling to keep pace.** In virtually every theater, violent extremist groups have proven more agile in their use and deployment of emerging technology than peace operations. Violent extremist propaganda is radicalizing local populations and stoking discontent with peace operations faster than they can respond. Violent extremist groups are using drones for surveillance purposes and are increasingly adopting armed drones into their arsenals. The U.N. and the A.U. have yet to adopt comprehensive doctrine concerning how they will use these and other emerging technologies, including the consideration of issues such as compliance with the laws of armed conflict.
12. **Ongoing efforts to reform and revitalize peace operations in Africa offer an opportunity for multilateral actors to adapt their approach.** The future of multilateral peace operations in Africa will likely involve smaller, more modular missions that aim to:
 - reinforce state capacity to address violent extremism, including by helping address the social and economic conditions conducive to its rise,
 - create conditions to enable the defection or the engagement of violent extremist groups with legitimate political processes, and
 - offer states coordination platforms to address violent extremism.This approach, which aligns with the recommendations in the new U.N. Report *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*,⁴ has the potential to be both more effective and sustainable than the approaches of the past twenty years. These objectives place state actors at the forefront of efforts to counter violent extremism, and require multilateral actors to identify how they can best support state-driven policies, strategies and plans of action.

⁴ El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams, Professor Ai Kihara-Hunt, *The Future of Peacekeeping, New Models, and Related Capabilities*, U.N. Department of Peace Operations, October 2024, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/future_of_peacekeeping_report_rev30jan_2.pdf

Recommendations

- 1. Peace operations undertaken in violent extremist contexts should consider less-resource intensive, modular, service-oriented mandates.** The future of multilateral peace operations in Africa will likely involve smaller, more modular missions that aim to reinforce state capacity. This approach would position the A.U. and the U.N. as service providers, enabling them to more effectively build state competencies and compete with other forms of support. These smaller operations could serve a variety of roles. Such roles might include providing specialized capabilities or logistical support to state forces, serving as platforms to share intelligence and coordinate operations, holding strategic locations, offering force protection, protecting civilians, ensuring humanitarian access, building state security competence through training or capacity-building missions, supporting or leading stabilization efforts, running demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, or facilitating dialogue with local communities. Such mandates are more likely to be complementary to ongoing security and stability efforts to address threats from violent extremist groups.
- 2. The U.N. should revisit its peacekeeping doctrine to consider how it might best support efforts to address violent extremism.** The U.N. has opted to separate peacekeeping, whose effectiveness is proven, from peace enforcement efforts such as counterterrorism. However, through the U.N. Office of Counterterrorism, its Department of Operational Support, its U.N. Support Office in Somalia, and other mediation, prevention, and peacebuilding initiatives, the U.N. is deeply involved in countries with active violent extremist threats. UNSCR 2719 allows for U.N.-assessed peacekeeping contributions to support African-led peace enforcement efforts, many of which are likely to be deployed against violent extremist groups. With the potential for a more modular approach to peacekeeping, the U.N. ought to consider additional circumstances under which it may be appropriate to use peacekeeping funds or authorize a modular peacekeeping mission in support of efforts to address violent extremism. For example, the U.N. might consider authorizing a modular peacekeeping mission contingent on the presence of comprehensive nationally and regionally integrated strategies that align with the U.N. Global Counterterrorism Strategy.
- 3. The A.U. should commission a high-level review of Africa's Peace and Security Architecture.** After 20 years, now is an appropriate time to assess the existing architecture to determine what aspects are working and what needs to be improved. Considering a devolution towards more localized models of peacekeeping and security provision, this review might reconsider the roles and responsibilities of states, troop-contributing countries, RECs, and the A.U. in authorizing, mandating, leading, and implementing peace operations. The top-down approach – where the A.U. mandates, leads, and has effective command and control over peace operations – does not always reflect on-the-ground realities. A revised approach where the A.U. sets policies and standards, authorizes, provides services, and helps ensure accountability and oversight of coalitions of troop contributing countries, with a lead nation exercising effective command and control, may be a more viable model in many contexts. As part of the review, the A.U. may consider how best to align its counterterrorism policies with its peace operations. This could include, for example, seeking synergies between a proposed Special Fund on the Prevention and Combatting of Terrorism and Violent Extremism with the existing A.U. Peace Fund, as well as how to integrate counterterrorism efforts into a revised African Standby Force concept.

4. **The A.U., in consultation with ECOWAS, the MNJTF, the Accra Initiative and former leaders of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force, should issue a report on lessons learned from ad-hoc regional coalitions and consider adopting its recommendations.** While ad-hoc regional coalitions have emerged as a potentially vital component of Africa's regional security architecture, recent years have exposed their limitations. The A.U. should commission a report re-examining these arrangements and their place in Africa's Peace and Security Architecture, with the aim of adopting good practices, maximizing their strengths and minimizing or addressing any gaps, and increasing their alignment and coordination with other components of Africa's Peace and Security Architecture.
5. **The A.U. should consider adopting common standards and protocols to enable its member states to set up and participate in ad-hoc coalitions addressing violent extremist threats.** Such standards could include protocols for sharing intelligence, conducting joint operations, and initiating hot pursuit rules; rules of engagement; recommended equipment; and pre-deployment training. A common set of standards and protocols, set up under the auspices of the A.U., could enable member states to set up such coalitions without duplicating the existing regional architecture. These standards and protocols could build off those already elaborated as part of the African Standby Force.
6. **Peace operations should consider mandates that enable selective engagement with violent extremist groups.** The consensus among participants was that the reluctance by state and multilateral actors to engage with violent extremist groups was at times counterproductive. For example, engagement with lower and mid-level leaders of violent extremist groups may help encourage them to defect, depriving them of support and helping to isolate foreign elements. In addition, contact with the leadership or members of these groups may help state or external actors better assess and identify their aims. In contexts such as Somalia or the Sahel where violent extremist organizations now control vast swathes of territory, the only way for states to become whole again may well be through eventual political settlements. Engagement will not be appropriate or feasible in every circumstance, but it should not be ruled out if there are opportunities to get key members of violent extremist groups to defect or renounce violence. Both the U.N., through its mediation support unit, and the A.U., through its Mediation and Dialogue Division and institutions such as the Panel of the Wise, have substantial capabilities to facilitate such engagement.
7. **UNSCR 2719 should be used as an opportunity to experiment with innovative approaches to peace operations to address violent extremism.** Peace operations authorized under 2719 might, for example, train, equip, or provide specialized enabling capabilities to host nation forces; provide for police or rule of law services in areas taken from violent extremist groups; align or support existing ad-hoc regional initiatives to address violent extremism; lead DDR or resettlement efforts; or serve as a platform to align local, national, regional and international efforts to address violent extremism.
8. **A "collective bilateral" framework should be considered as a potential complementary framework to address violent extremism in Africa.** With the successful 87-member U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Daesh initiating a West Africa focus group, it is time to consider whether the collective bilateral model may be more broadly applicable. Its focus is on stabilization, building capacity, countering disinformation, intelligence sharing and support to law enforcement. African states and regional organizations should consider whether to join the

Against Daesh coalition or form a similar coalition with external partners to address violent extremist threats across the continent. There is need for greater alignment between African regional and global efforts to address the spread of violent extremism.

9. **The A.U. should pursue innovative means of self-financing.** Local resource mobilization, aligned with external support, will reduce dependency on international donors while enhancing local ownership of peace operations. The recent increase in the A.U. Peace Fund to an estimated \$610 million demonstrates a promising movement towards greater financing of peace operations from within the continent. The nearly \$200 million raised in the past year based on commitments from the private sector highlights even more the importance of finding innovative means of financing. Nevertheless, the Peace Fund is still at a fraction of what it would need to sustain even a modest-sized peace operation. The A.U., in conversation with multilateral actors, member states, and the private sector should continue to consider how innovative investments, dues, contributions, or taxes might finance peace operations.
10. **Peace operations in Africa need to adopt doctrines incorporating – and responding to – the use of emerging technology.** Both the U.N. and African-led peace operations lack comprehensive doctrine concerning how to adopt and how to respond to the increasing use of emerging technology by armed non-state actors. Such a doctrine is urgently needed, not only to enable peace operations to effectively respond to fast-evolving threats, but also to ensure their responses comply with the laws of armed conflict. The doctrine should include policies related to cybersecurity, social media, strategic communications, and unmanned systems. The need for a strategic communications and social media policy enabling peace operations to monitor, assess, and proactively respond to disinformation is particularly urgent.
11. **Peace operations working in areas where violent extremist groups are active need to engage with local communities.** Outreach efforts could include strategic communications on local radio stations, disseminating key narratives through social media, learning from communities about their security needs and concerns, and building relationships with local leaders. These efforts are critical to understanding the perspectives of communities, tailoring security interventions and assistance measures, and helping break the ties between communities and violent extremist groups. As part of this, external actors should focus on building strong ties with local actors, as suspicion and mistrust can often fuel resentment and increase receptivity toward radicalization.
12. **Future peace operations in Africa should adopt an approach that enables governments to address the underlying causes of extremism.** One of the major reasons peace enforcement efforts have come up short is that, driven by an exigent threat, they often lack a whole of government approach that addresses the many dynamics that often contribute to an enabling environment for violent extremist groups. At times, abuses by security forces have exacerbated the threat and fueled recruitment for extremist groups. Peace operations, therefore, should be undertaken as part of a comprehensive national and/or regional strategy to address violent extremism, whose causes vary region by region. They should include civil affairs capabilities that enable them to engage effectively with local communities to collect intelligence, target deradicalization programs, coordinate with civilian-led conflict management efforts, support socio-economic initiatives and recovery efforts, and administer justice. Engaging with stakeholders such as youth is essential to fostering resilience and addressing the underlying drivers of violent extremism.