

# POLICYBRIEF

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## Multilateral Responses to Transnational Organized Crime and Conflict: Global Policy Considerations and Future Directions

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### Summary of Policy Recommendations

- **Reconceptualize peace operation tools** in ways that would better respond to transnational organized crime, including elevating it as a priority task or considering transnationally operational missions.
- **Position UN entities and missions** for more informed political economy-focused responses, including through cultivating staff expertise related to anti-corruption and financial crime, and improving whole-of-mission intelligence capacity.
- **Protect and reinforce** transnational monitoring and enforcement tools, including revamping sanctions regimes, protecting and buttressing panels of experts and supporting civil society or private sector information flows and watchdog activities.
- **Consider issues related to organized crime and trafficking in prevention and peacebuilding**, including in national prevention strategies, in mediation and good offices, and in peacebuilding forums and programming.

Writing in 2013, several prominent scholars in the field likened transnational organized crime to the “elephant in the room” in peace operations contexts, “impossible to overlook, but too big to deal with.”<sup>1</sup> Ten years on that metaphor still largely holds true, even as transnational organized crime has by many standards become an even greater contributor to conflict and global governance goals. Yet a coherent and effective response is still lacking.

Transnational organized crime and associated illicit activities have been seen as a driver of conflict across multiple regions, and a key factor undermining both local and global governance. In conflict-affected areas from Afghanistan to Sudan and Colombia, illicit trafficking and organized crime networks have provided funding, arms, and other resources for armed groups.<sup>2</sup> Even more concerning, the growth of these organized crime networks can shape political economy dynamics in ways that drive competition and conflict. As a result of these factors, the presence of such criminal networks and of organized crime has been linked to a higher risk of

conflict outbreak, and longer conflict duration.<sup>3</sup> Although in some cases, organized elements might cooperate with and facilitate peace efforts, they have more commonly been seen as “spoilers,” contributing to sources of violence and directly or indirectly sabotaging peace prospects.<sup>4</sup>

In numerous countries—from Afghanistan to Syria, Iraq, and Somalia—armed group capture of illicit markets has fueled the activities of insurgents and terrorist groups, and contributed to pernicious war economies that undermine possibilities for peace and stable governance.<sup>5</sup> In the last decade and a half, the intermingling of militarized illicit trafficking rings, transnational armed groups, and other conflict stressors has dramatically destabilized large parts of the Sahel and West Africa, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities caused by weak governance and poverty. Most recently in Haiti in February 2024 a coalition of armed gangs took control of the capital, ultimately forcing the reconstitution of a new Government.<sup>6</sup>

However, the so-called crime-conflict nexus has not been limited to areas beset by active armed conflict. In January 2024, the Government of Ecuador declared a state of “internal armed conflict” against criminal groups and “narcoterrorists,” which have been linked to a skyrocketing murder rate.<sup>7</sup> In the last decade, violence attributed to organized crime has been on a par with, or in some years, exceeded violence motivated by politics and extremism.<sup>8</sup> In Mexico, violence surrounding gang and cartel control of lucrative illicit economies has left over thirty-thousand people dead each year since 2018.<sup>9</sup> United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres’s policy brief, *A New Agenda for Peace*, observed that violence by “organized criminal groups, gangs, terrorists or violent extremists, even outside of armed conflicts, threatens lives and livelihoods around the world,” pointing out that the death toll linked to organized crime exceeds those linked to armed conflict in recent years.<sup>10</sup>

This policy brief is part of a year-long research project exploring the impact of transnational organized crime in conflict-affected and fragile States, and the effectiveness of multilateral responses to counter it. Two other companion case studies explored how transnational organized crime has affected conflict and governance dynamics in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, and considered how multilateral initiatives, including but not limited to UN peacekeeping operations in both countries, have responded. This policy brief draws from those case study findings, as well as a survey of existing literature and consultations with

experts in the field on the impact of transnational organized crime on peace and security issues globally, and potential policy responses and future directions.

## Recognizing and Addressing Transnational Organized Crime: Past Policy Responses

A range of international institutions, bodies, and multilateral mechanisms have recognized the challenges posed by transnational organized crime. In 2023 and 2022, more than half (53 and 55 per cent respectively) of UN Security Council resolutions contained some reference to elements of organized crime.<sup>11</sup> It has also been a recurring theme in discussions on prevention and peacebuilding responses before the Peacebuilding Commission.<sup>12</sup> Since adopting the 2000 resolution that created the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC, or the Palermo Convention), the General Assembly has continued to call attention to the threat posed by transnational organized crime and the need for greater cooperation to address it.<sup>13</sup>

A range of Member States, multilateral institutions, and non-governmental organizations or private sector actors and regulators have taken actions that might be seen as part of countering transnational organized crime. Responding to different forms, sectors or elements of organized crime is part of the mandate of 79 of 102 UN entities or bodies.<sup>14</sup> Targeted sanctions to counter organized crime have increasingly appeared in sanctions regimes, whether those linked to the UN or other regional organizations or Member States. Outside of the sphere of UN activities, many States have cooperated multilaterally to support activities that counter transnational organized crime and associated trafficking rings in conflict-affected States, ranging from cooperating in international regulatory or interdiction mechanisms to providing foreign and development assistance related to countering trafficking and associated criminality in States where this is prominent. The following subsections offer a snapshot of some of the most prominent types of multilateral efforts countering transnational organized crime in conflict settings, to offer some background on the subsequent discussion of future policy proposals and reforms.

### UN Peace Operations

UN entities and missions have also increasingly registered this issue and built some form of response into their mandate or activities. A particularly important trend to

highlight is growing attention to this issue within peace operations. One 2018 study found that eight of the UN's 35 peacekeeping, special political missions, and special envoys at the time had "operational organized crime functions."<sup>15</sup> The range of responses this has encompassed has varied and includes UN policing components assuming responsibility for domestic law enforcement functions in Timor-Leste and Kosovo; a robust anti-gang strategy by peacekeepers and police as part of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH); significant support to rule of law and security sector strengthening, anti-trafficking legislation, and other technical support in Mali and the Central African Republic; and other regional initiatives enhancing national coordination on border management, forensics, counter money-laundering, and criminal justice efforts, such as the West Coast Africa Initiative.<sup>16</sup>

While these examples illustrate the increasing attention to countering the negative effects of transnational organized crime, it is important to note the still limited nature of these efforts. Reflecting common critiques, one international expert observed that countering transnational organized crime tends

to be featured as an "add-on" within peace operations, rather than treated as a core element of the conflict prevention and violence mitigation strategy.<sup>17</sup> One expert who had evaluated MINUSTAH's anti-gang strategy (often held up as a model of what a stronger approach could look like) described it as "robust but sporadically prioritized."<sup>18</sup>

The responses to transnational organized crime in the two case studies examined for this project, in CAR and Mali, illustrate this broader trend. Countering transnational organized crime was never considered a central part of the mandate for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) nor within the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), respectively.<sup>19</sup> While recognized as a conflict driver and key governance issue within CAR and Mali, in both case study contexts (as in most UN mission settings), transnational organized crime has more often been treated as a "technical task" delegated to police components or other specialized agencies (see Box A for further discussion).<sup>20</sup> Even within those more technical efforts, countering transnational

### Box A: Transnational Organized Crime in Peace Operations: Snapshots from Two Case Studies

**CAR:** While MINUSCA's authorizing mandates have included language acknowledging the role of illicit cross-border trafficking and organized crime in sustaining conflict, in practice, the mission has generally regarded activities aimed at disrupting armed group financing, or addressing illicit trafficking modalities, as beyond its mandate. MINUSCA staff have provided broad support in related areas, including DDR, weapons and ammunition management, local mediation, and security sector reform. UN entities such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Mine Action Service and the International Organization for Migration have also played a role in targeted interventions and technical assistance that might touch upon transnational organized crime concerns, but have not focused on it as a core issue.<sup>21</sup> The result has been that multilateral interventions to address armed group involvement in transnational organized crime and its role in sustaining violence have lacked an overarching strategy in CAR and have not been accorded the degree of resources and attention that would be necessary to counter the ways that profits generated by criminal networks served as a conflict driver.

**Mali:** From the earliest resolutions authorizing MINUSMA, the Security Council highlighted the threats posed by transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking, and from 2018, countering these activities was one of MINUSMA's priority tasks.<sup>22</sup> In addition to broad-based support to the security, policing, and rule of law sectors, MINUSMA hosted specialized judicial and police teams related to countering organized crime and trafficking, and included advanced intelligence and analysis units that could provide tailored analysis on these and other political economy dynamics.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, countering organized crime and trafficking was always treated as a peripheral task or contextual factor. Where it was dealt with, it tended to be treated as part of a countering terrorism strategy or responded to through technical assistance and capacity-building—one issue among many within efforts to strengthen the Malian police and judiciary. As a result, these efforts were underresourced for the scale of the challenge, and never really got to the core political and governance dynamics that made organized crime such a pernicious part of the conflict cycles in Mali.

organized crime was one factor among others in the rule of law, policing, and corrections sector. As a result, the efforts that were brought to bear were often underresourced and lacked sufficient political will to be effective.

## Sanctions Regimes

There has also been increasing attention to illicit trafficking and organized crime within sanctions regimes, both those mandated by the Security Council and by other regional organizations and Member States. Over the past two decades, the Security Council has incorporated listing criteria related to illicit trafficking and organized crime within sanctions regimes. As of 2023, sanctions regimes that had listing requirements related to elements of trafficking and organized crime included the sanctions regime in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ([1533](#)), Libya ([1970](#)), Afghanistan ([1988](#)), CAR ([2127](#)), Mali ([2374](#)), and South Sudan ([2206](#)).<sup>24</sup> The sanctions regimes that were created in CAR and Mali illustrate this trend:

- **Mali:** The designation criteria established for the Mali sanctions regime (2017–2023) included those financing such activities through “the proceeds from organized crime, including the production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and their precursors originating in or transiting through Mali, the trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, the smuggling and trafficking of arms as well as the trafficking in cultural property.” Several of the decisions to designate individuals under the Mali sanctions regime in 2018 and 2019 were made explicitly on the basis of their involvement in drugs, oil, and human trafficking.
- **CAR:** The sanctions regime in CAR includes listing criteria for “having directly or indirectly supplied, sold, or transferred to armed groups or criminal networks in the CAR, or as having been the recipient of arms or any related materiel, or any technical advice, training, or assistance, including financing and financial assistance, related to violent activities of armed groups or criminal networks in the CAR.”<sup>27</sup> To date, no person or entity has been placed on the sanctions list based solely on their role in arms trafficking within or to CAR, although some of those listed may also have involvement in illicit activities.

A notable trend within these sanctions regimes has been greater consideration of criminal actors and trafficking rings as a threat to peace and security in themselves, rather than

requiring a linkage with terrorist activities or other conflict actors.<sup>28</sup> For example, the Haiti sanctions regime established in October 2022 characterized the following as actions that threaten the peace, stability, or security of Haiti (and are sufficient for listing on the regime):

- “Engaging in, directly or indirectly, or supporting criminal activities and violence involving armed groups and criminal networks that promote violence,” and;
- “Supporting illicit trafficking and diversion of arms and related material, or illicit financial flows related thereto.”<sup>29</sup>

There has been active debate on whether targeted sanctions are a sufficient tool to counter or limit the activities of criminal groups, particularly when these are local actors operating in countries where most of their assets and operating activities are illicit or “informal” and difficult to reach with formal proscriptive measures. Nonetheless, while many independent experts question the effectiveness of targeted sanctions regimes, many have applauded the watchdog or accountability functions played by the associated panels of experts. These panels have documented trends in transnational organized crime and trafficking sectors, and identified their role in contributing to conflict drivers, as well as the role that both State and non-State actors have played in facilitating these networks. For example, in addition to contributing to the listing of several individuals, the Mali Panel of Experts reports repeatedly documented the link between organized crime and increased insecurity and threats to the peace process, and ways that State actors and foreign non-State actors were involved in facilitating this. The CAR Panel’s reporting has revealed the role of key armed group leaders as traffickers and brokers, impacting conflict dynamics both in CAR and in neighbouring countries, Sudan and South Sudan.<sup>30</sup> Going forward, rising geopolitical tensions and Security Council divisions may limit the institution, functioning, and effect of UN sanctions regimes and/or the watchdog role played by panel of experts reporting (see Box B for further discussion).

Beyond UN sanctions, a number of Member States and regional organizations have developed targeted sanctions regimes that include criteria related to transnational organized crime and trafficking. The United States was the earliest to adopt this approach, with Treasury Department sanctions related to narcotics trafficking in Colombia since 1994. Since then, the range of US sanctions that relate to organized crime or illicit trafficking has expanded both

geographically and across sectors, albeit often more focused on those parts of the sector with a link to counter-terrorism.<sup>31</sup> Other multilateral and bilateral sanctions regimes—for example, those of the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK)—have also more recently begun to include listing criteria related to illicit trafficking or criminal activities, often in parallel with the introduction of these designations by the UN sanctions regime. For example, UK sanctions for Mali include as a basis “the production in Mali of narcotic drugs and their precursors; the smuggling or trafficking into, through or from Mali of persons, cultural property, arms or material related to arms, or narcotic drugs and their precursors.” EU sanctions have applied sanctions on

those involved in human trafficking in Libya, those involved in natural resource exploitation and trafficking related to the conflict in the DRC, those involved in drug trafficking in Syria, and “serious financial misconduct” in Lebanon.<sup>32</sup> While some argue that these bilateral or multilateral sanctions can be an important lever, there have been critiques that they have not been strategically deployed, have often been too narrow in their focus (i.e. arising only in connection with counter-terrorism sanctions), are too ad hoc and disconnected from other prosecutorial and diplomatic tools to have deterrent or enforcement effect, or, when applied to non-State armed groups may be limited in the degree of resources they are able to reach and target.<sup>33</sup>

## Box B: The Future of UN Sanctions and Panels of Experts

Although UN sanctions have generally been designed with the aim of supporting the political settlement of conflicts, more recently organized crime and trafficking dynamics have gained greater attention within sanctions regimes. However, use of these regimes, and of their corresponding panel of experts, has become increasingly fraught, raising the question of how much this tool can be relied upon going forward. Consensus around how to shape and monitor the implementation of sanctions regimes has become more strained as multilateralism has come under threat, and in some places, touched upon sensitive transnational organized crime interests. Fewer sanctions-related resolutions have been adopted unanimously, with abstentions during votes on resolutions in the CAR, Libya, South Sudan, and Sudan in 2023. Russia, and to a lesser extent China, have increasingly delayed and vetoed the appointment of panels of experts who monitor violations of UN sanctions, demanding better geographic balance of experts, amongst other things.

The effect has been to disrupt consistency in coverage, access, and quality of panel of experts reports, particularly in countries where Russia-linked transnational organized crime and arms embargo violations have been alleged. For example, Russia vetoed the appointments of experienced experts in the CAR and Mali and placed holds on their respective panels between 2021 and 2023, and successfully pushed for the lifting of an arms embargo on CAR security forces and the termination of the Mali sanctions regime in 2023. More

recently, in March 2024, Russia vetoed the renewal of the Panel of Experts on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), leaving sanctions in place but no monitoring mechanism, after the Panel stated that it was examining evidence that Russia purchased weapons from DPRK for use in Ukraine.<sup>34</sup>

The *New Agenda for Peace* references the ongoing importance of Security Council sanctions in addressing threats to international peace and security, but cautions against sanctions negatively impacting political dialogue and peace processes—a concern that some analysts consider misplaced in the transnational organized crime space, criticizing the UN’s tendency to place a premium on inclusion even where evidenced involvement of armed groups and political actors in illicit economic activities make them spoilers to peace.<sup>35</sup> It does, however, create space to reinforce the role that sanctions regimes can play in providing detailed information on how transnational organized crime undercuts peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Given the increased resistance faced by panels of experts, some argue that the most potent accountability or watchdog function that will remain will be that provided by research and civil society organizations, though notably without the weight of a Security Council resolution to encourage State actions in response.

## Other Bilateral and Multilateral Efforts

While a full detailing of the range of bilateral and multilateral efforts to counter transnational organized crime in specific jurisdictions is beyond the scope of this brief, it is important to note some of the other key regulatory, enforcement, and assistance approaches.

The most prominent international mechanism is the UNTOC, and its three supplementary protocols. With 192 parties as of October 2023, the UNTOC is among the most widely ratified treaty instruments. Among the many provisions, State parties commit to criminalizing participation in organized crime, money laundering, and corruption under their domestic laws, introducing measures for extradition and law enforcement and legal cooperation, and providing assistance and training to support national authorities' capacities to counter transnational organized crime. Observers credit UNTOC and its protocols with bringing anti-corruption and anti-trafficking efforts closer together.<sup>36</sup> Yet it has failed to have the overall corraling and coordinating effect, truly catalysing coordinated multilateral efforts that many hoped for.<sup>37</sup> One expert who has closely followed UNTOC developments during the last twenty years argued that "UNTOC is a failure. All evidence points in that direction. It's just a talk shop. ... the key issue is that States don't want a tough mechanism on organized crime."<sup>38</sup>

Beyond UNTOC, there are other transnational regulatory mechanisms or enforcement regimes that might impact the operating space of organized criminal groups, often linked to specific sectors that relate to transnational organized crime.<sup>39</sup> One example relevant to conflict-affected areas are efforts to prevent illicit trade in "conflict minerals." The Kimberley Process galvanized a response to rebel groups' use of so-called "blood diamonds" to fund war, but flawed design and implementation have ultimately resulted in limited impact in stopping armed groups from profiting from the diamond trade.<sup>40</sup> Since its adoption in 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's *Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict Affected and High-Risk Areas* has become a leading industry standard for companies aiming to demonstrate their commitment to mineral supply chain transparency and integrity. It has provided a useful framework for advancing responsible mineral sourcing practices, but ultimately it remains voluntary in nature and has been criticized for primarily targeting downstream actors rather than upstream actors such as mineral producers and traders. That said, it has

inspired other domestic and regional organizations to introduce regulations, guidelines, and legislation on tackling the trade in conflict minerals, some of which are legally binding, including in the European Union, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, China, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>41</sup>

Individual States have also set up regulatory standards and used donor conditionality to exert pressure on certain forms of trafficking or on contributors to transnational organized crime. One notable example of this surfaced in the research for the CAR case study, with US laws requiring aid cuts if standards on trafficking in persons were not met, prompting significant government legislative and operational efforts to counter human trafficking. These efforts to utilize donor conditionality to address elements of trafficking or organized crime, or simply to allow these considerations to inform foreign assistance decisions are contingent on greater awareness, mapping, and understanding of these dynamics. Some donors have also taken steps to better integrate analysis of organized crime and trafficking dynamics in their policies and programming in conflict-affected and fragile States, and have offered bilateral cooperation and support to governments facing such dynamics. The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, for example, uses a Serious and Organised Crime Joint Analysis tool to map out organized crime dynamics, and to weigh the benefits and risks of potential interventions. Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development urges the use of a crime-sensitive approach to programme development and the need to "scale up" interventions to meaningfully tackle the political dimensions of organized crime.<sup>42</sup> The EU has stepped up its funding of organized crime analysis, notably providing significant funding to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC)—the leading civil society organization working to develop a better understanding of organized crime, illicit trafficking, and its impacts—and particularly its observatories in Africa, including North Africa and the Sahel.<sup>43</sup> These more integrated approaches dovetail with cooperation on the above-mentioned transnational regulation and transparency efforts in conflict-affected States, as well as other regional or national interdiction and counter-crime efforts.<sup>44</sup>

## Overall Reflections on Multilateral Efforts

Notwithstanding—or perhaps because of—this diversity of efforts, the overall impression of multilateral efforts to counter transnational organized crime has been that they

have not yet risen to the level of a coherent strategy or approach, and thus have failed to stem the many ways that these dynamics exacerbate conflict and fragility. Summarizing the sentiments of many experts interviewed, a GITOC paper concluded that efforts on transnational organized crime remain “largely fragmented, reactive, inadequate and unevaluated.”<sup>45</sup> Worse, the same paper argued, measures to respond to transnational organized crime have “slipped down the international agenda.”<sup>46</sup>

Experts interviewed primarily attributed the lack of progress to two factors: the lack of sole responsibility and Member State conflicts of interest. For example, one expert who has focused on organized crime dynamics within peace operations observed that within many mission or country contexts, “Responding to transnational organized crime needs a holistic response. It needs a range of actors involved. But the problem is that if it’s no one’s *prime* responsibility, it just doesn’t get covered.”<sup>47</sup> However, an even more fundamental challenge to keeping this issue on the international agenda, this expert and others argue, was that for many States, doing something on organized crime could run counter to their interests: “Member states with skin in the game put up resistance to seeing their interests cut off,” he noted. As a result, “With organized crime, the inertia is real and quite deliberately maintained.”<sup>48</sup>

## Efforts to Kickstart Multilateral Cooperation on Transnational Organized Crime

While developing more effective responses to transnational organized crime is no easy task, the present moment does present some opportunities for recalibrating the approach. In the last few years, there have been a number of multilateral policy initiatives and platforms attempting to respond to changing political and conflict dynamics, and improve global governance and the way that multilateral institutions, bodies, and efforts respond to threats to peace and security. In 2021, Secretary-General António Guterres released *Our Common Agenda*, a series of policy briefs designed to spur a rethink and reform of different instruments of multilateral governance and to “turbocharge” efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>49</sup> *Our Common Agenda* was also designed to lay the groundwork for the 2024 Summit of the Future, billeted as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity” to bring together Member States, the business community, civil society, and other global leaders to strengthen multilateral cooperation and systems of governance in ways that better respond to global shocks and threats.<sup>50</sup>

One of the eleven key issue areas across this Common Agenda and Summit of the Future initiative was to better respond to evolving threats to peace and security, with a vision for this summarized in an issue brief entitled *A New Agenda for Peace*. Within the brief, threats by “criminal groups” is highlighted as one of a series of converging or “interlocking” transnational threats that go beyond any one State’s ability to manage, thus implicitly requiring a multilateral response.<sup>51</sup> The brief also linked progress on countering transnational organized crime with SDG 16’s commitment to significantly address “all forms of violence”: “Fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies must start with the eradication of violence and reduction of illicit arms and ammunition. ... Violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups, gangs, terrorists, or violent extremists, even outside of conflict environments, threatens lives and livelihoods across the world.”<sup>52</sup>

Beyond the specific references to organized crime and associated illicit practices, the *New Agenda for Peace* urged a rethink of the multilateral tools used to respond to peace and security, including those associated with peace operations. In subsequent discussions about the future of peace operations, leading up to both the Summit of the Future and the 2025 Peacekeeping Ministerial, the need to better address transnational threats—notably transnational organized crime—has been a recurring talking point among Member States and non-governmental organizations participating in these discussions.

Beyond the peace operations tool specifically, the last few years have also seen a greater degree of reflection on multilateral responses that attempt to take root causes into account, that encourage greater attention to the political economy surrounding conflict and fragility, and that incorporate a greater focus on preventive steps.<sup>53</sup> This can be seen not only in some of the key ideas embedded within the *New Agenda for Peace*, but also in development and stabilization responses within other Member States, which have placed increasing focus on the multiple factors feeding instability and more prevention-oriented strategies in fragile States.<sup>54</sup>

Drawing upon interviews with a range of global experts reflecting on multilateral responses to transnational organized crime and related themes of responding to transnational threats in peace operations, in addition to findings from case studies of responses to transnational organized crime in the two conflict contexts of CAR and Mali, some **common ideas for reorienting responses** emerged:

## 1. Reconceptualize peace operations tools in ways that would respond to transnational organized crime and other transnational threats

Recent challenges in a number of UN missions have spawned a rethink on the nature of peace operations and a consideration of alternate models. On the one hand the *New Agenda for Peace* implicitly downgraded the peace operations tool, urging both the Security Council and the General Assembly to “undertake a reflection on the limits and future of peacekeeping.”<sup>55</sup> This was perhaps not surprising given its release in a context in which three of the five remaining large-scale, multidimensional peacekeeping operations were in phases of exit and transition (some quite contentiously so). While the declining willingness to support peace operations, and the more tendentious environment created by shifting multilateral political dynamics, may limit some of the tools available to respond to transnational organized crime in certain conflict settings, the overall openness to rethinking tools for responding to sources of conflict and instability may create new opportunities for thinking about multilateral responses and collective action differently.

Future peace operations may take the form of focused interventions and partnerships, with the UN potentially supporting, shaping, or greenlighting bilateral or regional interventions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.<sup>56</sup> However, in addition to rethinking who might carry out such operations, experts urged using this moment to rethink the approach that peace operations take, and the tools they might apply, in particular, as regards transnational threats and economic drivers of conflict, such as those associated with transnational organized crime and trafficking. Examples could include:

- **Considering regional or transnationally-mandated missions** oriented (at least in part) around transnational organized crime as one of the key mandated issues. In the past, peacekeeping models and even some of the more robust Special Political Missions (SPMs) have tended to be authorized for a single country. There has been a greater range of regionally-mandated Special Envoys or research and coordination-focused SPMs (for example, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa), but these have tended to lack the mandate, resources, and capacities that would enable a robust, fully operationalized response to transnational organized crime and trafficking networks. Some experts suggested that in an era in which threats are predominantly global and

transnational, the **fundamental model of peace operations should also evolve to become more transnational and cross-border in its operations.** This idea might work in conjunction with increasing interest in regional organizations leading future peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations, although the experience of past models along these lines (including those discussed in the Mali case study) suggest that more must be done to address sustainable resourcing, to enable swift action and response, and to ensure that “transnational” action goes beyond limited cross-border inter-operability. It is also worth acknowledging that any such initiatives would have to balance getting the politics right too. Mandate negotiation would require navigating politically-sensitive regional cooperation issues in order to gain the consent and commitment of multiple host States.

- Developing models for **specialized missions focused on transnational organized crime or trafficking** as lead priorities. Some have argued that the future of peace operations necessarily involves more tailored missions, pruning down “Christmas tree” mandates and focusing missions on a few priority areas. Among these, one approach would be to refocus mission priorities to give greater weight to political economy drivers such as trafficking and criminal networks. The need for capacity and models that can be quickly deployed to provide this expertise are currently on display in Haiti. Enacting such an approach would likely require a more fundamental re-think of mission capacities and resourcing, evidence from the two case studies in Mali and CAR suggested. In their current form and composition, responding to political economy dynamics has not been part of the core toolkit and comparative advantage of peacekeeping missions. Deeper expertise and approaches may be required for peace operations to develop the sort of sector-specific strategies and nuanced responses necessary for mounting stronger responses to transnational organized crime.
- Even where the overall mission of peace operations is not re-oriented around transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking, there may be a need to develop enhanced criminal justice sector support with a dedicated organized crime focus. Peace operations (whether led by the UN or other regional or multilateral actors) may also benefit from **cultivating specialized expertise**, such as on **anti-corruption, intelligence analysis and financial crime.** Some of these could be brought to bear through the creation of specialized police and/or judicial units. For example, an **increased use of Special Police Teams** within missions that provide capacity-building support for host



country police could bring dedicated expertise on policing transnational organized crime concerns. Ideally this would be teamed with expert capacity-building for the prosecution service, judicial reform, and support to the corrections sector to address detention requirements.

This would likely depend on individual Member States sponsoring these special units (as has been the case in past practice) on a more regular basis.

- Beyond greater support for these specialized units, it would also be important to think about how to cultivate this expertise and bring those with diverse backgrounds into a range of regular mission roles and functions. Doing so might contribute to more strategic thinking about how to fully leverage the mission and non-mission tools available—whether other sanctions regimes, or criminal justice and diplomatic approaches—in a manner that is complimentary and maximizes the impact that each of these tools can collectively have on the criminal ecosystem.<sup>59</sup> **Deeper staff expertise and capacity in these specialized areas may be required for peace operations to develop the sector-specific strategies and nuanced responses necessary** for mounting stronger responses to transnational organized crime across missions.
- Considering **new modes of virtual or hybrid peace operations**, with a greater emphasis on how Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies can be used in collaboration with transnational regulatory and global governance mechanisms to better respond to transnational criminal activities and trafficking networks. This could include expanded or enhanced multilateral interventions through financial surveillance and enforcement tools, for example on anti-money laundering, anti-corruption, or in the cryptocurrency space. This might overlap with emerging proposals for “special technological missions” or UN missions with a greater cyber focus.

## 2. Positioning UN entities and missions for more informed political economy-focused responses

Since at least the early 2000s, one of the main themes of recommendations for improving responses to transnational organized crime, particularly in peace operations settings, has been improving analysis and intelligence surrounding illicit activities.<sup>60</sup> Such recommendations were in step with broader recommendations for peacekeeping reform from the 2000 Brahimi Report (Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations) onward, suggesting that peace operations required integrated field intelligence capacity in order to understand and respond to complex threats.<sup>61</sup> More recently,

a major theme of the *New Agenda for Peace* has been to emphasize political economy considerations in conflict prevention and responses, and also a greater emphasis on exploring, but also utilizing, new technologies. Examples of further steps in this vein include:

- Increase the **intelligence-generating capacity of UN peace operations**, including through expanded infrastructure and scope of work of Joint Mission Analysis Centers, the development of more tactical intelligence fusion centres (as with the All Sources Information Fusion Unit in Mali), UN Police (UNPOL) Crime Analysis Units, Explosive Ordinance forensics teams and the use of monitoring and surveillance technologies such as camera-equipped aerostat balloons, hover masts mounted on vehicles and drones. However, as emphasized in the two case studies in Mali and CAR, what is often missing is not just technical knowledge and intelligence- or information-gathering capacity, but uptake of this information within mission planning and strategy. This might require both more comprehensive whole-of-mission collection strategies (that help unlock information siloes and ensure clear information flow) and the political will to take these issues seriously as part of the political mandate.
- In alignment with calls for exploring new modes of virtual or hybrid peace operations, **take greater advantage of the political economy insights made available through AI and digital technologies**, including those that enable better tracking and monitoring of transnational criminal activities and trafficking dynamics. These additional insights and a shift toward virtual or hybrid strategies might apply both for future peace operations and other UN regional monitoring and advising activities.
- Experts also noted the **increased trend toward civil society monitoring and reporting**, with watchdog groups such as Bellingcat, or other country-specific monitoring groups lending actionable intelligence and credible documentation through crowd-sourcing, open-source intelligence assessments and digital surveillance. The UN has so far been ill-poised to take advantage of these resources, but may need to do so going forward, not only to inform its political economy analysis, but to defend itself in situations where mission positions are subject to misinformation or disinformation. UN headquarters, missions and agencies may also benefit from developing clearer policies and practices around how to coordinate and cooperate with civil society monitoring and reporting groups working in these spaces in order to improve information-sharing and alignment.

Consider ways to **reinforce the uptake of this more political economy-focused analysis** and intelligence within the main activities and objectives of UN missions; while some advances have already been made in expanding some of the above tactical and operational intelligence assets, the case studies in Mali and CAR suggest a common lack of use within missions. Many have suggested pairing greater emphasis on these issues in overall mission mandates and objectives, with a human resources and operational strategy more focused on recruiting those with expertise in relevant political economy dynamics.<sup>62</sup>

### 3. Protecting and reinforcing transnational monitoring and enforcement tools

Sanctions regimes are seen as a potentially powerful tool in countering transnational organized crime, both for the way that sanctions can constrain economic drivers of conflict (including illicit trafficking in arms and other conflict contributors) and because the associated panels of experts provide a sort of political economy intelligence that can better inform Security Council and mission responses.<sup>63</sup> They also function as a layer of accountability, important for a sector with a transnational and illicit nature that hinders other checks and enforcement tools. However, while organized crime and trafficking dynamics have gained greater attention within Security Council-mandated sanctions regimes, the sanctions regimes themselves and their corresponding panel of experts have become an increasingly contentious issue.<sup>64</sup> Given existing divisions within the Security Council, it is not clear how much this tool can be relied upon going forward.

In addition, not only the UN Security Council, but also other regional organizations and individual Member States have increasingly used sanctions as a policy tool to try to pressure regimes that back-pedal on international commitments, or to try to isolate individuals or groups undermining peace and security. While these have also increasingly taken issues of transnational crime, trafficking and corruption into consideration, they have not always been well aligned with other global strategies in ways that are likely to yield results. Given these dynamics, experts suggested exploring some of the following:

- Within existing or newly proposed sanctions regimes, greater attention to ways that **sanctions regimes target illicit economic activity**, and how they shape criminal

economies as a whole. This includes thinking through the ways that individual listings influence larger political economy and trafficking dynamics and may affect the behaviour not only of designated traffickers but also associates embedded within State institutions.

- **Shore up the authority and use of sanctions regimes and panels of experts.** While not possible in all areas (given Security Council divisions), experts noted that even some less controversial sanctions regimes have not been updated to changing circumstances in ways that make them able to be used as a policy and enforcement tool, including in countries where trafficking and transnational organized crime remains an issue (e.g., in Afghanistan). In contexts where sanctions panels are still active, it might be worthwhile to ensure that they are staffed to investigate issues related to organized crime and illicit trafficking (as relevant to the context). A specific expert billet dedicated to these issues may even be appropriate in some situations.
- To the extent that sanctions regimes are instituted, there should be greater attention to **coordinating information between panels of experts and peace operations** and ensuring that sanctions regimes and peace operations are mutually reinforcing.<sup>65</sup> Doing so will have to balance competing visions for how sanctions are applied in ways that could exclude certain stakeholders, including some in the mediation field who are concerned that sanctions negatively impact political dialogue and peace processes; against evidence that the involvement of armed groups and political actors in illicit economic activities make them spoilers to peace.
- Greater **attention to safety and security concerns** for existing panels of experts, who have faced increasing security threats and incidents in carrying out their duties. This is particularly relevant in investigating sensitive transnational organized crime concerns.<sup>66</sup>
- **Consider the impact, and coordination of, sanctions recommended by or imposed by actors other than the Security Council.** This might include those by regional organizations or individual Member States, although an issue has been that these are less effective where they are not coordinated and synchronized with each other. Others point to so-called informal or private sector sanctions, which rely on boycotting or restrictions taken voluntarily by the private sector or other public institutions, often on the basis of increased civil society documentation and advocacy. Another noteworthy possible area of expansion would be to follow the practice of some States and the EU who are increasingly also open to receiving designation packages containing

evidence, documentation or salient information that an individual or entity meets the designation criteria of a particular regime from civil society, allowing panels and Member States to take such information into account in their proposals for listing.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4. Linkages with prevention and peacebuilding

As highlighted by the recent dynamics in Ecuador (among other countries), threats stemming from transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking can contribute to serious civic and political instability, tilting toward full-scale armed conflict situations with the involvement of criminal actors on one, or even on all sides. Many of these pernicious dynamics take place in countries where the predominant mode of support by the multilateral system is peacebuilding and development aid. In addition, both the *New Agenda for Peace* and other key policy initiatives have given greater primacy to preventive responses, even within stable environments. Lack of preventive measures has been a key issue in the organized crime space, with many experts arguing that escalation in arms or human trafficking were foreseeable dynamics that could have been forestalled or at least significantly minimized with earlier attention.<sup>68</sup> Upcoming policy discussions and exchanges, for example the *2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review* may offer additional opportunities to reflect on how transnational threats such as organized crime can be better addressed through peacebuilding and conflict prevention. To strengthen linkages with prevention and peacebuilding, experts recommend:

- Pushing for greater attention to **transnational organized crime and trafficking within any national prevention strategies**, could be an important way to take forward the recommendations of the *New Agenda for Peace*.
- **Boosting good offices for prevention, including on threats stemming from organized crime.** The Secretary-General's *New Agenda for Peace* report recommended "boosting preventive diplomacy in an era of divisions."<sup>69</sup> While there may be declining space and appetite for large-scale peacemaking, the *New Agenda for Peace* report highlighted the viability of the Secretary-General's good offices role to reduce tensions and mitigate the effects of conflict, as seen in the recent Black Sea Grain Initiative. Good offices for peacebuilding and prevention may be particularly tractable in the political economy space, where UN good offices may be used to advance regional cooperation and coordination on transnational threats. This enhanced peacebuilding role for good offices might also help to highlight issues that need

greater preventive efforts, overcoming the political will hurdle that has often limited preventive action.

- **Greater attention to transnational organized crime and trafficking networks within peacebuilding forums and operations.** Interviews with UN agencies and local partners in the CAR and Mali case studies suggested that because responses to transnational organized crime have tended to be compartmentalized as a specialized area of policing work, they are often overlooked when it comes to broader UN and donor funding for peacebuilding or left to specialized agencies such as UNODC and the United Nations Development Programme.
- **Enabling regional organization leadership on trafficking and transnational organized crime.** In keeping with larger policy trends toward identifying a complementary and stronger role for regional organizations in peace and security, it may be fruitful to explore the way that regional organizations might lead on countering transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking. Regional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union, have long called for greater attention to these transnational threats, and have tried to operationalize mechanisms for regional diplomacy and coordination, including some with a specific focus on organized crime related issues (for example, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, or smuggling issues across West Africa). At the same time that the UN system and Member States are considering how to better operationalize regional organizations' efforts in peace operations, they might also give attention to their ability to lead in the prevention and peacebuilding space, including on transnational organized crime.
- **Reorienting discussions of transnational organized crime and any responses around a root causes logic.** Some policy discussions on enhancing prevention have keyed into the need to consider economic issues as the root causes of conflict, including inequality, corruption, and unequal access to resources.<sup>70</sup> Many of these issues intersect with patterns of exploitation and predation within illicit trafficking and exploitation of natural resources, and are the underlying reason why transnational organized crime is inextricably linked to conflict and instability. Reorienting the way that transnational organized crime is approached, and viewing these elements as interconnected with other root causes of conflict (including rights abuses and inequality), may engender more sustainable and holistic responses, better synched with larger peacebuilding and prevention strategies.

## Endnotes

- 1 Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw, and Arthur Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2013), p.1.
- 2 See, e.g., Cataline Uribe Burcher, "Organized crime, Colombia's peace spoiler?," *openDemocracy*, 27 August 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/organized-crime-colombias-peace-spoiler/>; Antonio Giustozzi, "War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen," *International Peacekeeping* Vol.14 No.1 (2007): 75–89; J. R. Mailey, *The war of thieves: Illicit networks, commoditized violence and the arc of state collapse in Sudan* (Geneva: GITOC, 2024). Accessible at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-networks-commoditized-violence-state-collapse-sudan-conflict/>.
- 3 James Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 41 No. 3 (2003): 275–301; World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011); Paula Miraglia, Rolando Ochoa, and Ivan Briscoe, *Transnational Organised Crime and Fragile States* (Paris: OECD, 2012).
- 4 James Cockayne and Daniel Pfister, *Peace Operations and Organised Crime* (Geneva: IPI/GCSP, 2008); Phil Williams, "Organized Crime and Corruption in Iraq," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* Vol. 16 No. 1 (2009); James Cockayne and Adam Lupel, *Peace Operations and Organized Crime - Enemies or Allies?* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 153–174.
- 5 David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security* Vol. 31 No. 3 (2006): 74–106; Christina Steenkamp, "The Crime-conflict Nexus and the Civil War in Syria," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* Vol. 6 No. 1 (2017); Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Fighting the Nexus of Organized Crime and Violent Conflict while Enhancing Human Security," *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability* eds. Phil Williams and Vanda Felbab-Brown (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute - US Army War College, 2012).
- 6 Haiti provides a particularly interesting, albeit devastating example, of the frustrated multilateral efforts to address organized crime and its nexus to violence. The previous UN mission, MINUSTAH (2004 to 2017), was one of the earliest examples of a peacekeeping mission engaged in significant anti-gang and anti-criminal efforts (including through novel intelligence surveillance and military operations). Its failure to address the underlying root causes and systemic features contributing to the underlying crime-conflict nexus contributed to the violence wracking Haiti in the present moment. For more on the previous mission, see Walter Kemp et al, *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?*, pp. 32-45.
- 7 The homicide statistics in 2023 were estimated at 7,878, by one estimate a 9-fold increase from the rate in 2018. Felipe Botero Escobar, "Organized crime declares war: The road to chaos in Ecuador," *GITOC policy brief*, February 2024, p. 1. Accessible at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-road-to-chaos-ecuador/>.
- 8 Therese Pettersson, Stina Hogbladh, and Magnus Oberg, "Organized violence, 1989–2018 and peace agreements," *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 56, No. 4 (2019). See also the tracking of "non-state violence" in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, accessible at: <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.
- 9 Mexico: Confronting Deadly Political and Criminal Power Struggles in an Election Year, Conflict Watchlist, ACLED, 17 January 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/mexico/>; Criminal Violence in Mexico, Center for Preventive Action, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 February 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico>.
- 10 United Nations, "A New Agenda for Peace," *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9* (New York, July 2023), pp. 4-5. Accessible at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>.
- 11 "2000-2023: Charting Organized Crime on the UN Security Council Agenda: An interactive tool charting organized crime references in Council resolutions," *GITOC*, 19 March 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/scresolutions/>. A previous GITOC study had identified references to organized crime in 35 per cent of Security Council resolutions between 2000 and 2018. Ibid.
- 12 See, e.g., Peacebuilding Commission, "Chair's Summary of the Ambassadorial-level meeting on the Sahel," *United Nations*, 23 June 2023. Accessible at: [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/230623\\_chair\\_summary\\_on\\_the\\_pbc\\_meeting\\_on\\_the\\_sahel.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/230623_chair_summary_on_the_pbc_meeting_on_the_sahel.pdf).
- 13 See, e.g., United Nations General Assembly, International Day for the Prevention of and Fight against All Forms of Transnational Organized Crime, *A/78/L.45* (22 February, 2024). For a copy of the UNTOC convention and other background material, see "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto," UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.
- 14 Summer Walker and Tuesday Reitano, *Fragmented but Far-reaching - The UN System's mandate and response to organized crime* (Geneva: GITOC, 2019), p.1.
- 15 Tuesday Reitano, "Statement to the UN Security Council Delivered for the Security Council Briefing UN Peacekeeping Operations: Police Commissioners," *GITOC*, November 2018, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Global-Initiative-Briefing-to-the-UN-Security-Council-1.pdf>. This was roughly in keeping with a previous 2013 study that found that ten of the 28 UN peace operations at that time (including peacekeeping missions, special political and peacebuilding missions) have mandates that referenced organized crime. See: Walter Kemp et al., *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?*, p.7.
- 16 See case studies on Haiti, Kosovo and Guinea Bissau in Walter Kemp et al., *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?* For more on the West African Coast Initiative, see "West African Coast Initiative," *UNPOL*, last accessed on 30 April 2024, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/police/initiatives/waci.shtml>. Discussion of these initiatives in the CAR and Mali is included in the case studies developed for this project: Fiona Mangan, *Conflict and transnational organized crime in the Central African Republic: A Critical Turning Point?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, forthcoming 2024); Erica Gaston, Catharina Nickel, Imane Karimou and Marc Werner, *Peacekeeping Responses to Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking: A Case Study of MINUSMA Efforts in Mali (2013 - 2023)* (New York: United Nations University, forthcoming 2024).
- 17 Interview with international expert on transnational organized crime and regulatory responses, by Microsoft Teams, 11 April 2024, interview #39.
- 18 Email from an expert in transnational organized crime, 4 June 2024.
- 19 This is despite language in the MINUSMA mandate (from initial authorization of the mission in 2013) on considering the "serious threats posed by transnational organized crime in the Sahel region" and the designation of supporting criminal justice responses for "terrorism-related crimes, mass atrocities and transnational organized crime activities" as one of MINUSMA's priority tasks from 2018 on. See, e.g.

- United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2100, adopted by the Security Council at the 6952nd meeting, United Nations, 25 April 2013, [S/RES/2100](#), preamble; United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2432, adopted by the Security Council at the 8336th meeting,” 30 August 2018, [S/RES/2432](#), para. 38 (iii). The references are less prominent in the MINUSCA mandate. MINUSCA mandates acknowledge the role of illicit cross-border trafficking and organized crime in sustaining conflict and directs the mission to support the Government of the CAR to address cross-border illicit trade in natural resources, through a prioritized division of labour with the United Nations Country Team and relevant partners. See: United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2709, adopted by the Security Council at the 9476th meeting, United Nations, 15 November 2023, [S/RES/2709](#), preamble and para. 36(b)(i). In practice, the mission has, however, generally regarded any role in developing strategies or conducting operations aimed at disrupting armed group financing patterns, or directly addressing illicit trafficking modalities, as beyond its mandate.
- 20 See comparison of mandates in DRC, Mali, and CAR in Marina Caparini, *Conflict, Governance and Organized Crime: Complex Challenges for UN Stabilization Operations* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2022), pp. 36–37; Charles T. Hunt, “Rhetoric versus reality in the rise of policing in UN peace operations: ‘More blue, less green?’” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 73 No. 6 (2019): 614–615.
- 21 Even UNODC—the UN’s specialized agency with the global lead on transnational crime—did not initially have funding to work on organized crime in CAR.
- 22 See: [S/RES/2432](#) (2018), para. 38 (iii). This language and the priority focus continued in subsequent mandates, up until the last authorizing resolution in 2022. See, e.g., [S/RES/2432](#) (2018), para. 38(iii); [S/RES/2480](#) (2019), para. 28(a)(iii); [S/RES/2531](#) (2020), para. 29 (iv); [S/RES/2584](#) (2021), para. 30(iv); [S/RES/2640](#) (2022), para 26(iv).
- 23 This included a specialized judicial unit created in 2016; from 2018, specialized police teams within MINUSMA, including with mandates related to detecting and prosecuting those involved in organized crime; special analytical and intelligence units (a joint mission analysis center (JMAC), and an intelligence fusion cell known as the All Sources Information Fusion Unit); and a sanctions regime that included specific listing criteria related to organized crime. There were also significant efforts by UN Country Team members, including by agencies like UNODC, UNDP and IOM. In 2018, the Security Council resolution authorizing MINUSMA explicitly emphasized UNODC’s role in helping counter conflict drivers associated with organized crime and trafficking. For more see Gaston et al, *Multilateral Responses to Transnational Organized Crime in Mali: Missed Opportunities and Global Gaps* (forthcoming 2024); Charlie Hunt, *Specialized Police Teams in UN Peace Operations: A Survey of Progress and Challenges* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2024); Arthur Boutellis, “MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali’s Crises,” *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (Routledge, 2023).
- 24 Charles Cater, “UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict,” *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* eds. Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 86–106. A helpful timeline of such listing criteria is included in: Matt Herbert and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone: The Evolution of Targeted Sanctions Usage Against Organized Crime* (Geneva: GITOC, 2023), p. 26.
- 25 United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2374, adopted by the Security Council at the 8040th meeting, on 5 September 2017, [S/RES/2374](#), para 8(c).
- 26 United Nations Security Council “Press release: Statement by Security Council 2374 Committee concerning Mali Sanctions Regime/Sanctions List,” 20 December 2018. Accessible at: <https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13638.doc.htm>; United Nations Security Council, “Press release: Security Council 2374 Committee Adds Five Entries to Its Sanctions List,” 10 July 2019. Accessible at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13878.doc.htm>; United Nations, Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali, [S/2018/581](#) (2018).
- 27 United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2399, adopted by the Security Council at the 8169th meeting,” United Nations, 30 January 2018, [S/RES/2399](#), paras. 20, 21. Accessible at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/025/70/pdf/n1802570.pdf?token=4b8mk8GdlluraDgHtz&fe=true>.
- 28 Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone*, pp. 29–30.
- 29 [S/RES/2653](#) (2022), paras. 15–16.
- 30 See, e.g., Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, December 2019, [S/2019/930](#), paras. 77–78. Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, January 2021, [S/2021/87](#), paras. 23–36 and annex 3.6.
- 31 Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone*, pp. 10–17; Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, “Hard Targets: Identifying a Framework of Objectives for Targeted Sanctions on Illicit Economies,” *Sanctions and Organized Crime Initiative Series* (Geneva: GITOC, 2023), pp. 5–6.
- 32 Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone*, pp. 38–39.
- 33 Many of these critiques are covered in greater detail in Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone*.; Matt Herbert, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Beneditez de Lugo, “Hard Targets: Identifying a Framework of Objectives for Targeted Sanctions on Illicit Economies;” Erica Gaston, “Targeted Sanctions Are Trendy, but Not Very Effective,” *World Politics Review*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/magnitsky-sanctions-won-t-work-without-strategy/>.
- 34 “December 2023 – Monthly Forecast,” *Security Council Report*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-12/in-hindsight-un-security-council-sanctions.php>; Colum Lynch, “Sunset for U.N. Sanctions?” *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/14/sanctions-united-nations-expert-panels-russia-china-africa-western-countries/>; “Russian veto points to ‘grim future’ for North Korea sanctions enforcement,” *Reuters*, 29 March 2024, [https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-veto-points-grim-future-north-korea-sanctions-enforcement-2024-03-29/#:~:text=SEOUL%2C%20March%2029%20\(Reuters\),of%20the%20panel%20told%20Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-veto-points-grim-future-north-korea-sanctions-enforcement-2024-03-29/#:~:text=SEOUL%2C%20March%2029%20(Reuters),of%20the%20panel%20told%20Reuters).
- 35 United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*, pp. 30–31; Mark Shaw and Walter Kemp, *Spotting the Spoilers* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2012).
- 36 Ian Tennant, “Fulfilling the Promise of Palermo? A Political History of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime,” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2020): 53–71. Accessible at: <https://jied.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/jied.90>; GITOC, *Transnational Organized Crime – An Impediment to Fulfilling ‘Our Common Agenda’* (Geneva: GITOC, 2022). Accessible at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TOC-An-impediment-to-fulfilling-our-common-agenda-GITOC-UNTOCWatch.pdf>.
- 37 GITOC, *Transnational Organized Crime – An Impediment to Fulfilling ‘Our Common Agenda.’*
- 38 Interview with international expert on transnational organized crime and regulatory responses, 11 April 2024, by Microsoft Teams, interview #39.
- 39 Other examples might include the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which is a global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog, or International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), an intergovernmental organization that manages global policing and

- investigation databases, and other programmes that facilitate global, regional, or bilateral cooperation to counter organized crime and counter-terrorism.
- 40 Liz Ford, "Global Witness quits Kimberley Process in protest at 'diamond laundering'," *The Guardian*, 5 December 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2011/dec/05/kimberley-process-global-witness-withdraws>; Eleanor Beevor, "A Blunt Tool for a Delicate Task," *Sanctions and Organized Crime Initiative: 2024 Series* (Geneva: GITOC, 2024). Accessible at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Eleanor-Beevor-A-blunt-tool-for-a-delicate-task-Kimberley-Process-and-illicit-markets-in-CARGI-TOC-March-2024.pdf>.
- 41 Lotte Hoex, Jean-Sébastien Sépulchre, and Marianne Moor, *The EU Conflict Minerals Regulation – High Stakes, Disappointing Results* (Antwerp/Goma/Utrecht: IPIS, PAX, 2023).
- 42 For some discussion of these issues in relation to UK and US programming, see UK Stabilisation Unit, *Countering Violent Extremism in Fragile and Conflict Affected States* (UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2008); USAID, *Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: Assessing Relationships through a Review of USAID Programs* (USAID, 2015).
- 43 See GITOC website: <https://globalinitiative.net/about-us/our-story/>; Interview with international expert on transnational organized crime and regulatory responses, 11 April 2024, by Microsoft Teams, interview #39.
- 44 There were examples of this transnational to local cooperation – often facilitated by the initiative of particular Member States – in both the case studies in CAR and Mali. For example, with the G5 Sahel Task Force in Mali synched in with INTERPOL to encourage greater regional data sharing and intelligence. Lawrence E. Cline, "Trying to Coordinate Force in the Sahel: The G5 Sahel," *Small Wars Journal*, 26 October 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/trying-coordinate-force-sahel-g5-sahel>.
- 45 GITOC, *Transnational Organized Crime – An Impediment to Fulfilling 'Our Common Agenda.'*
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Interview with international analyst, by Microsoft Team, 11 April 2024, interview #38.
- 48 Interview with international analyst, by Microsoft Team, 11 April 2024, interview #38.
- 49 One of the key recommendations of *Our Common Agenda* was "reshaping our responses to all forms of violence," including violence from criminal groups. See: *United Nations, Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General* (2021), p. 60. The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), which was designed to help elaborate the propositions in *Our Common Agenda*, produced a series of invited contributions and papers, some of which also offered ideas for realizing responses to all forms of violence, including transnational threats. See: "Resources," *HLAB – High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism*, last accessed on 30 April 2024, <https://highleveladvisoryboard.org/resources/>.
- 50 "The Summit of the Future," *United Nations*, last accessed on 30 April 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>; "Summit of the Future: What would it deliver?," *United Nations*, last accessed on 30 April 2024, <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-summit-of-the-future-what-would-it-deliver.pdf>. Despite that, the Summit of the Future takes its point of departure from the priorities in the *Our Common Agenda* report, including its discussion on prevention of all forms of violence. Some experts interviewed observed that it had been difficult to persuade Member States to consider concrete language related to transnational organized crime within the Pact for the Future.
- 51 United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*, pp. 4–5.
- 52 Ibid, p. 15.
- 53 United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018). Prevention is also one of the core priorities of the *New Agenda for Peace*. See, e.g., United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*, pp. 16–23.
- 54 See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* (2020). Accessible at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2020-United-States-Strategy-to-Prevent-Conflict-and-Promote-Stability-2.pdf>; United States, H.R.2116 – Global Fragility Act, passed 20 May 2019, Library of Congress, [https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2116#:~:text=Passed%20House%20\(05%2F20%2F2019\),;Global%20Fragility%20Act&text=This%20bill%20directs%20the%20Department,funds%20to%20support%20such%20efforts](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2116#:~:text=Passed%20House%20(05%2F20%2F2019),;Global%20Fragility%20Act&text=This%20bill%20directs%20the%20Department,funds%20to%20support%20such%20efforts).
- 55 Ibid, p. 24.
- 56 Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter sets out the UN Security Council's powers to maintain peace. It allows the Council to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression" and to take military and nonmilitary action to "restore international peace and security". For full text, see: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-7>.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Charlie Hunt, *Specialized Police Teams in UN Peace Operations: A Survey of Progress and Challenges*.
- 59 Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, Ana Paula Oliveira and Matt Herbert, *A Critical Moment: Haiti's Gang Crisis and International Responses* (Geneva: GITOC, 2019), p. 38–41.
- 60 See, e.g., Walter Kemp et al. *The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?*, p. 68.
- 61 See, e.g. United Nations, Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, [A/55/305 – S/2000/809](https://www.un.org/peace/operations/panel-report) (2000), para. 51; United Nations, Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnerships and people, [A/70/95-S/2015/446](https://www.un.org/peace/operations/panel-report) (2015), para. 119. For more on this theme, see A. Walter Dorn, *Keeping Watch: Monitoring, Technology and Innovation in UN Peace Operations* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2011).
- 62 A critique that manifested both in interviews with UN staff and in the literature was that UN recruitment policies and operational approaches do not lend themselves toward hiring those with expertise in political economy analysis, much less in particular sectors relevant to countering organized crime and illicit trafficking. For more information, see Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman, *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations* (London: Routledge, 2023).
- 63 Charles Cater, "UN Sanctions, Panels of Experts and the Political Economy of Intrastate Conflict," pp. 86–106.
- 64 Fewer sanctions-related resolutions have been adopted unanimously, with abstentions during votes on the Central African Republic, Libya, South Sudan, and Sudan resolutions in 2023. Russia, and to a lesser extent China, have increasingly delayed and vetoed the appointment of panels of experts who monitor violations of UN sanctions, demanding better geographic balance of experts, amongst other things. The effect has been to disrupt consistency in coverage, access and quality of panel of expert reports, particularly in countries where Russia-linked transnational organized crime and arms embargo violations have been alleged. For example, Russia has attempted to hold up panel appointments, terminate the Mali sanctions regime, and disrupt the DPRK panel. See: "In Hindsight: UN Security Council Sanctions," Security Council Report, December 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-12/in-hindsight-un-security-council-sanctions.php>; Colum Lynch, "Sunset for UN Sanctions?" *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2021,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/14/sanctions-united-nations-expert-panels-russia-china-africa-western-countries/>; "Russian veto points to 'grim future' for North Korea sanctions enforcement," *Reuters*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-veto-points-grim-future-north-korea-sanctions-enforcement-2024-03-29/>.

- 65 For examples of these issues and proposals to address it see Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, Anna Paula Oliveira, Matt Herbert, *A Critical Moment: Haiti's Gang Crisis and International Responses*; Mats Berdal and Jake Sherman, *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peace Operations*, pp. 318–319.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 67 Matt Herbert and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone*,

pp. 32–33.

- 68 One expert, for example, pointed to the Mali sanctions regime itself, noting that an arms embargo was instituted in Mali only after significant arms flows had flooded the north of the country (not just with small arms and light weapons, but with significant quantities of heavy and advanced weapons). Experts also pointed to the case of Ecuador itself as one where there were ample warning signs in advance of the current levels of intensified violence, but little political will to act earlier.
- 69 United Nations, *A New Agenda for Peace*.
- 70 United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*.

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