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UN Peacekeeping: Challenges and Reforms for Civilian Protection and Human Rights

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the changing role of United Nations peacekeeping missions, focusing on their transition from conventional military duties to an emphasis on protecting civilians and promoting human rights. Employing a qualitative comparative case study method, it investigates three missions—Rwanda (UNAMIR), Bosnia (UNPROFOR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC/MONUSCO)—through four specific criteria: outcomes related to civilian protection, accountability systems, resource distribution, and engagement with local communities. The results reveal significant progress in protection strategies and an increasing focus on human rights obligations, though significant deficiencies remain. Weak accountability structures, inconsistent enforcement of conduct standards, and ongoing resource deficits continue to weaken mission credibility and trust from local populations. The analysis posits that effective reform necessitates clearer, context-specific objectives; enhanced independent accountability systems; a more equitable distribution of resources that aids both security and recovery efforts; and compulsory, context-aware training in human rights and trauma-informed practices for peacekeepers. By integrating theoretical insights with cross-case empirical evaluation, this study offers practical recommendations for policymakers looking to enhance civilian protection in modern peacekeeping missions.

KEYWORDS

UN peacekeeping; civilian protection; human rights in conflict zones; UN peacekeeping missions; human rights violations in post-conflict areas.

1. Introduction

Established in 1948, the United Nations (UN) has been instrumental in promoting worldwide peace and security, starting with its inaugural peacekeeping operation—the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in Palestine—tasked with overseeing ceasefire agreements between Israel and its neighboring countries. Initially, the focus of UN peacekeeping was on traditional military roles such as monitoring ceasefires and maintaining buffer zones. However, it has gradually transformed into a complex and multifaceted operation that includes civilian protection, human rights advocacy, disarmament efforts, electoral assistance, and post-conflict reconstruction.



In spite of this broadening of scope and objectives, UN peacekeeping missions continue to encounter significant challenges. These issues include insufficient training, logistical and financial limitations, inconsistent mission mandates, and recurring incidents of misconduct among personnel (Di Razza, 2020). The rise of non-state armed groups has further muddled the distinctions between peacekeeping, counterinsurgency, and humanitarian intervention, complicating mission goals and weakening operational cohesion.

The effects of these difficulties have been especially clear in Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). To tackle these issues, this research performs a comparative case study of United Nations missions within these three settings, utilizing secondary qualitative data. This study provides a critical assessment of the development and effectiveness of UN peacekeeping through a comparative analysis of these three missions. The cases were chosen for their historical importance, geographical variety, and the availability of comprehensive documentation regarding peacekeeping interventions.

While previous research has generally explored the development of peacekeeping, limited comparisons have been made regarding how accountability, resource distribution, and local involvement work together to influence the results of missions. It also integrates psychological insights from peace psychology to comprehend the repercussions of trauma on both peacekeepers and civilians, illustrating the importance of human dignity and resilience in post-conflict environments.

The research is driven by the following inquiries:

1. What elements affect the success or failure of UN peacekeeping missions in safeguarding civilians and advancing human rights?
2. How have the operations in Rwanda, Bosnia, and the DRC fared regarding accountability, resource distribution, and community involvement?
3. What changes are needed to improve the effectiveness and trustworthiness of UN peacekeeping in today's conflict settings?

To address these inquiries, the research utilizes a qualitative comparative case-study methodology, relying on secondary data from UN documents, NGO reports, and scholarly literature. By merging insights from liberal peace theory and realist viewpoints, the study links theoretical concepts with empirical findings to enhance understanding of how fundamental political and institutional factors affect peacekeeping outcomes. Finally, this research aims to contribute to scholarly and policy conversations on restructuring UN peacekeeping to better protect civilians and promote human rights in complex modern conflicts.

2. Literature Review

Since its first mission launched in 1948—the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO)—the UN has evolved peacekeeping from a narrowly military function into a comprehensive tool for global governance. Initial missions focused on maintaining neutrality, limiting involvement, and monitoring cease-fires. As conflicts increasingly occurred within states and grew more complex, peacekeeping roles expanded to encompass civilian protection, disarmament, human rights promotion, electoral assistance, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

This transformation is consistent with the principles of Liberal Peace Theory, which associate lasting peace with processes such as democratization, respect for human rights, and the establishment of institutions. However, putting these principles into action has been challenging. Even with over 120,000 personnel deployed annually across 13 missions, UN operations frequently encounter structural issues such as poor coordination, insufficient resources, and inadequate training (Carnegie & Christoph Mikulaschek, 2022). These obstacles highlight the ongoing conflict between the broadening mandates of peacekeeping and its constrained operational capacity—a persistent challenge in modern missions.

2.1. Human Rights and Civilian Protection

The increasing focus on human rights signifies a significant change in international peacekeeping standards. Missions are progressively prioritizing the Protection of Civilians (POC) and Human Rights Promotion (HRP) as crucial components of stabilizing post-conflict environments. However, as noted by Syali (2024) and Sprik et al. (2022), a persistent gap remains between policy and implementation. Human rights and security sector reforms are often pursued separately, which weakens the long-term effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts.

A grave issue remains the ongoing failure to effectively tackle sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers. (Guerrero & Sybil Delaine Rhodes., 2022). Despite the UN's zero-tolerance approach, inadequate jurisdictional mechanisms and the hesitance of troop-contributing countries (TCCs) to prosecute offenders compromise accountability. This disparity between established ideals and enforcement has diminished local trust and tarnished the UN's reputation as a champion of human rights.

2.2. Accountability and Structural Limitations

Accountability remains a fundamental weakness within the structure of UN peacekeeping. Recent data record a 37% decrease in civilian peacekeeping personnel since 2010, which hinders the UN's capability to monitor misconduct and connect with communities. Insufficient oversight and political conflicts between donor nations and TCCs have further entrenched these issues. Predominantly, donor states from the Global North control financial and strategic decisions, while the majority of personnel contributions come from the Global South.

This disparity perpetuates what Duursma (2023) and Sprik et al. (2022) refer to as neo-imperial dynamics, whereby the priorities of powerful nations overshadow local requirements. Such critiques echo a Realist perspective of peacekeeping, interpreting interventions as products influenced by the strategic interests of dominant countries rather than impartial humanitarian objectives. Consequently, missions frequently operate under politically constrained mandates that impede genuine accountability, even in instances of widely recognized misconduct.

2.3. Geopolitical Power and the Global North–South Divide

Global power disparities significantly shape United Nations peacekeeping, despite its frequent portrayal as a neutral and humanitarian initiative. Financial and strategic control tends to be concentrated in a limited number of Western donor nations, whereas countries in the Global South supply most of the peacekeeping personnel. This disparity creates a structural dependency that diminishes the perception of neutrality among host communities (Fleck, 2023). The preeminence of powerful countries enables them to tailor mission mandates to align with their foreign policy objectives rather than addressing the actual needs of local populations. As a result, peacekeeping missions are often seen not as means of collective international support but as extensions of foreign political influence. This situation illustrates the ongoing imbalance between the Global North and South, which continues to influence peacekeeping priorities, resource distribution, and legitimacy within the UN framework.

2.4. Psychological Dimensions

Beyond structural concerns, the psychological and social aspects of peacekeeping are often overlooked. Bellamy (2004) and Berdal (2017) point out that the trauma experienced by both civilians and peacekeepers can influence the outcomes of missions. Distrust, displacement, and collective trauma can hinder reconciliation and the resilience of communities. Peacekeepers, as visible embodiments of international legitimacy, need not only technical skills but also cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and trauma-informed approaches. Incorporating psychological perspectives into training and mission planning can improve trust-building and facilitate long-term recovery.

2.5. Lessons from Key Case Studies

Current studies on Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) typically analyze these missions in isolation, resulting in fragmented insights. The UNAMIR mission in Rwanda highlights the risks associated with political indecision and inadequately funded mandates. The experience in Bosnia illustrates the necessity for coordinated civilian–military collaboration in post-conflict reconstruction, while the DRC case underscores persistent challenges related to legitimacy, resource limitations, and misconduct by peacekeepers.

The existing literature often focuses on operational shortcomings rather than providing a comparative structural and theoretical assessment (Fleck, 2023). A thorough cross-case analysis using consistent evaluation criteria could uncover more profound trends in accountability, local involvement, and the implementation of mandates. Addressing these aspects is crucial for understanding how peacekeeping can more effectively uphold human rights and safeguard civilians in complex conflict situations.

3. Research Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative comparative case study approach to analyze the impact of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations on the protection of civilians and human rights. The comparative methodology facilitates a detailed exploration of both similarities and differences across three significant missions: Rwanda (UNAMIR, 1994), Bosnia (UNPROFOR, 1992–1995), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC/MONUSCO, ongoing). These particular cases were intentionally chosen due to their historical importance, regional variation, and availability of data, along with their relevance in discussions on peacekeeping reform and the protection of human rights.

Case Selection and Rationale

The selected cases illustrate different phases in the development of peacekeeping and highlight recurring structural issues.

- Rwanda (1994): Illustrates the outcomes stemming from constrained mandates and political hesitation in stopping mass violence.
- Bosnia (1992–1995): Shows both successes and shortcomings in the protection of civilians amid intricate political dynamics.
- DRC (2000–present): Demonstrates the ongoing issues of accountability, misconduct, and sustainability in prolonged missions.

Collectively, these cases offer a varied yet cohesive framework for evaluating peacekeeping results across different geopolitical and institutional environments.

Data Collection

This study is based solely on secondary qualitative information, sourced from:

1. Official UN materials—including mission reports, Security Council resolutions, and mandates from the Department of Peace Operations.
2. Human rights organizations—such as reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).
3. Academic literature—comprising peer-reviewed articles, books, and policy assessments regarding UN peacekeeping and human rights.
4. Statistical information—publicly accessible data on mission size, funding, and troop contributions (e.g., Statista, World Bank). The combination of multiple data sources guarantees a thorough and evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations.

Analytical Framework

The analysis utilizes thematic analysis, informed by both deductive and inductive reasoning:

- Deductive reasoning employs established theoretical frameworks—Liberal Peace Theory and Realism—to investigate how peacekeeping mandates, power dynamics, and accountability mechanisms influence mission outcomes.
- Inductive reasoning seeks to identify themes that emerge from the data, particularly regarding local perceptions, community involvement, and the credibility of missions. Themes were manually classified using the four comparison criteria, and recurrent patterns were evaluated via the theoretical lenses of liberal peace and realist viewpoints.

Four central comparative criteria inform the analysis:

- 1. Outcomes related to civilian protection and human rights**
- 2. Mechanisms for accountability**
- 3. Allocation of resources and operational directives**
- 4. Engagement of local communities and trust-building efforts**

These dimensions facilitate a systematic comparison across the three missions, connecting theoretical expectations to observed results.

Triangulation and Validity

To bolster credibility, methodological triangulation is implemented. Findings from UN documents are corroborated with independent reports from academic sources and NGOs. Any contradictory evidence is acknowledged and contextualized instead of disregarded, promoting analytical transparency and reducing bias.

Ethical Considerations

As the study relies solely on secondary sources, there is no direct interaction with human subjects. Nevertheless, all discussions concerning atrocities and human rights violations are approached with care and accuracy. All data are appropriately cited following APA guidelines.

Limitations

The main limitation stems from the dependence on secondary data, which may lack the firsthand insights of peacekeepers or affected civilians. Moreover, the emphasis on three specific cases limits generalizability but enables a thorough contextual comparison. Future research could expand on this framework through field studies, interviews, or mixed-methods approaches to capture lived experiences and psychological aspects of peacekeeping.

4. Findings and Discussion

The research uses Liberal Peace Theory and Realism consistently throughout the three scenarios to analyze how normative aspirations interact with political limits.

This research explores the changing effectiveness of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in safeguarding civilians and advancing human rights through three critical cases: Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Each case represents unique political, social, and operational environments, yet they collectively underscore the ongoing challenges and gradual advancements in peacekeeping practices. The results are structured around four main themes that surfaced from the comparative analysis: civilian protection, accountability, resource allocation, and local involvement. These themes are examined through the frameworks of liberal peace theory and realism, which together provide insight into the interplay between humanitarian principles and political limitations within UN interventions.

The safeguarding of civilians serves as the primary measure of UN peacekeeping success. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 serves as a stark reminder of the devastating outcomes caused by insufficient mandates and de-

layed reactions. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was hindered by a weak mandate under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, inadequate troop numbers, and political reluctance among member states. From a realist standpoint, this failure illustrated the reluctance of powerful nations to allocate resources without strategic interests at play.

The mission's failure to take decisive action exposed the constraints of peacekeeping when limited by political prudence and procedural inflexibility.

Conversely, the UN's involvement in Bosnia in the early 1990s showcased progressive changes but still revealed notable shortcomings. The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was able to create "safe areas" and deliver humanitarian aid, yet these efforts fell short when faced with aggression, culminating in the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. The Bosnia instance exemplifies the mismatch between Liberal Peace Theory's normative goals—securing peace via institutional development and human rights—and the practical obstacles of enforcing them in ethnically split wars. While the mission facilitated humanitarian access and post-war governance under the Dayton Accords, it also revealed the ethical and operational inconsistencies of UN peacekeeping amid active conflict.

The DRC provides a more recent example of both progress and enduring challenges. MONUSCO, recognized as one of the largest and most intricate operations of the UN, has decreased violence in certain regions but still encounters difficulties related to security and coordination. It has made significant strides in decreasing armed violence in certain areas and aiding electoral processes. However, ongoing insecurity, resource limitations, and fragmented political authority continue to obstruct its comprehensive effectiveness. The introduction of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in 2013 marked a transition to a more robust Chapter VII mandate, indicating a gradual evolution of peacekeeping to address contemporary hybrid warfare. Nonetheless, inconsistent execution and poor coordination with local institutions remain significant barriers to lasting civilian protection.

Throughout all three cases, accountability proves to be a crucial challenge. In Rwanda and Bosnia, the lack of immediate accountability for perpetrators of atrocities and peacekeeper misconduct weakened public confidence in international bodies. The subsequent establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) marked important milestones towards post-conflict justice and institutional reform. These tribunals embodied the ideals of liberal peace theory, focusing on the rule of law and human rights, though they often faced criticism for being disconnected from local contexts and slow in achieving justice.

In the DRC, ongoing accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers have compromised the UN's moral authority. Despite the implementation of "zero tolerance" policies and reforms within the Department of Peace Operations, enforcement remains uneven. The absence of transparent oversight mechanisms and unclear jurisdictional boundaries between the UN and troop-contributing nations continues to weaken accountability. This trend reflects a realist dynamic in which state sovereignty and political convenience overshadow moral obligations to uphold global governance standards (Wani, 2021).

Resource distribution significantly influences the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations. Instances in Rwanda and Bosnia revealed that insufficient financial and logistical support hindered prompt actions, showcasing the structural reliance of peacekeeping on contributions from member states. These cases illustrated that inadequately funded missions struggle to provide protection even when there is political will on paper. Conversely, the mission in the DRC benefits from a more substantial and consistent budget; however, issues in coordination and allocation continue to exist. Financial resources are frequently directed towards military stabilization rather than long-term community recovery, highlighting a disparity between immediate security objectives and broader human development goals associated with peacebuilding.

This disconnect highlights the tension between liberal ideals and the practical constraints emphasized by realism.

Community involvement is a crucial factor in determining the success of missions. In Rwanda, community-oriented initiatives such as the Gacaca courts exemplified an approach to justice and reconciliation rooted in local engagement. Despite facing criticism for procedural inadequacies, these initiatives fostered community participation and played a role in rebuilding trust following extensive violence. In Bosnia, the push for interethnic dialogue and institutional reform was primarily led by international entities, resulting in minimal

local ownership and persistent ethnic rifts. In the DRC, a lack of community consultation and inconsistent interactions with local civil society have fueled public skepticism about MONUSCO's role. The absence of genuine inclusion undermines the perceived legitimacy of peacekeeping initiatives and hampers the sustainability of peace.

From a theoretical standpoint, Liberal Peace Theory supports inclusive governance and participatory rebuilding, while Realism warns that the success of peacekeeping efforts often hinges on achieving stability prior to implementing liberal reforms. Evidence from these comparisons indicates that missions that incorporate local knowledge and promote empowerment—such as Rwanda's hybrid justice model—yield more lasting outcomes compared to those predominantly driven by external agendas.

The comparative analysis indicates that although UN peacekeeping has increasingly focused on the protection of civilians and human rights, its efficacy varies widely. The experiences from Rwanda, Bosnia, and the DRC highlight several essential areas for reform:

Strengthening Directives and Quick Action: Missions need well-defined, adaptable directives that are bolstered by prompt political and logistical support.

Improving Accountability: Creating independent oversight mechanisms and enhancing coordination with contributing nations are crucial for maintaining credibility.

Optimizing Resource Allocation: Financial resources should be distributed in a way that equally supports security efforts and fosters community recovery and institution-building.

Fostering Local Collaborations: Peacekeeping efforts should incorporate local leadership, civil society, and traditional approaches to establish trust and guarantee sustainability.

Including Psychological Support: Tackling trauma among peacekeepers and impacted communities can strengthen resilience and foster long-lasting stability.

This comparative perspective reveals that the interplay between normative ideals and political dynamics influences the UN's peacekeeping effectiveness. To achieve effective civilian protection and lasting peace, there need to be not only robust institutional structures but also authentic engagement with the communities that peacekeepers are meant to assist. The lessons learned from Rwanda, Bosnia, and the DRC demonstrate both the possibilities and ongoing challenges of modern peacekeeping amidst a more intricate global security landscape.

5. Recommendations

To improve the efficacy of UN peacekeeping operations in safeguarding civilians and promoting human rights, several interconnected reforms are essential. These suggestions tackle strategic, operational, and structural shortcomings highlighted in earlier missions, emphasizing clearer objectives, sufficient resources, accountability, and community involvement.

- **Specific and Contextual Mandates**

Peacekeeping missions ought to operate under clear, context-specific mandates that prioritize civilian protection and human rights. Vague or politically constrained mandates—such as those observed in Rwanda and the DRC—hinder peacekeepers' capacity to respond promptly to threats. Thus, each mission should incorporate measurable objectives and adaptable strategies aligned with ongoing conflict evaluations.

- **Sufficient Resources and Logistical Support**

Missions must receive ongoing financial and logistical support that goes beyond troop mobilization. Investments in medical assistance, communication technologies, and transportation infrastructure are crucial. The success of well-funded missions, as demonstrated in various post-conflict situations, highlights how sufficient backing can help stabilize vulnerable environments.

- **Training in Cultural Sensitivity and Human Rights**

Peacekeepers should undergo specialized training in cultural, linguistic, and gender-sensitive issues tailored for each mission's context. This preparation builds trust, minimizes misunderstandings, and enhances collabora-

oration with local populations. Incorporating peace psychology and trauma-informed strategies can bolster mission resilience and improve peacekeepers' interactions with affected communities.

- **Strong Accountability and Transparency**

The legitimacy of UN peacekeeping relies on the enforcement of strict accountability measures for misconduct. Independent oversight bodies must be empowered to investigate violations, ensuring transparency and justice for victims. Enhancing ethical oversight will restore trust among host communities and reinforce the UN's dedication to human rights.

- **Engagement with the Community and Local Collaboration**

Authentic interaction with local communities and leaders is vital for sustainable peace. The Gacaca courts in Rwanda illustrate how community-driven justice can promote reconciliation and bolster legitimacy. Peacekeepers should incorporate local perspectives into decision-making processes to enhance mission adaptability and long-term effectiveness.

- **Flexible and Data-Driven Operations**

Peacekeeping needs to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of modern conflicts. Utilizing real-time data analysis, local intelligence, and digital tools can help in anticipating emerging threats. Collaborations with civil society organizations and regional entities can offer crucial insights, enabling missions to remain agile and responsive.

- **Long-Term Political and Financial Support**

Enduring global backing is crucial for sustaining peace once immediate violence diminishes. Stable funding and political support from the UN Security Council and donor nations ensure that missions remain effective through post-conflict reconstruction and state-building efforts.

- **Addressing Psychological and Social Effects**

Both peacekeepers and local communities experience significant psychological challenges in conflict areas. Implementing systematic mental health initiatives and trauma-informed care can improve operational effectiveness, prevent burnout, and aid in societal healing. Acknowledging and addressing these human factors is essential for achieving lasting peace. Acknowledging these human factors is essential for sustainable peace and institutional credibility.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the critical role of UN peacekeeping in fostering peace, protecting civilians, and promoting human rights in complicated conflict situations. Through a comparative examination of Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the study identifies ongoing deficiencies in accountability, resource allocation, and community involvement as significant barriers to mission success. While advancements have been made, contemporary peacekeeping necessitates a renewed dedication to clarity, flexibility, and inclusivity. Missions must be anchored in clearly defined objectives, backed by adequate resources, and informed by the cultural and psychological realities of the host societies. The incorporation of technological advancements, local partnerships, and trauma-sensitive practices can further enhance peacekeeping results.

Ultimately, the future of peacekeeping hinges on cooperation among states, international organizations, and local stakeholders. By merging ethical rigor with operational innovation, the United Nations can reestablish its legitimacy and effectiveness in upholding human dignity and fostering sustainable peace in a continually changing global environment.

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