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DEVELOPMENT DISSERTATION BRIEF

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# FROM CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION? THE UNITED NATIONS' ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

# From Confrontation to Cooperation? The United Nations' Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups

Jenniina Kotajoki

Development Dissertation Brief, 2025:04

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

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## Sammanfattning

Icke-statliga väpnade grupper (non-state armed groups; NSAG:s), såsom rebell- och milisgrupper, är centrala aktörer i samtida konflikter och spelar en allt viktigare roll i internationell politik. Att samarbeta med NSAG:s är en utmaning för statscentrerade internationella organisationer, icke-statliga organisationer eller stater, men aktörer i konfliktmiljöer och de som ansvarar för att upprätthålla säkerhet måste förhålla sig till deras inflytande. Denna brief bygger på en avslutad doktorsavhandling som undersöker hur, varför och under vilka förutsättningar Förenta nationerna (FN) interagerar med NSAG.

Genom fyra essäer analyserar avhandlingen både den globala dynamiken i FN:s säkerhetsråd och interaktioner på lokal nivå inom FN:s fredsoperationer, med särskilt fokus på Mali och Libanon. Resultaten visar att FN ofta interagerar icke-tvingande med NSAG:s inom olika tematiska områden, även mitt under konflikt och politisk instabilitet. Med icke-tvingande avses t.ex. att samarbetet inte är villkorat. Diplomatskt engagemang på hög nivå genom säkerhetsrådets praxis att ”namnge och skamma” NSAG:s är nästan lika frekvent som att namnge och skamma stater. Denna praxis fungerar både som ett normativt åtagande och som ett strategiskt verktyg i global styrning, medan FN:s vilja att bygga relationer med civila på lokal nivå formar interaktionen med NSAG.

Resultaten betonar vidare vikten av att inkludera NSAG:s, tillsammans med andra lokala aktörer, i fredsbevarande insatser. Sammantaget bidrar denna avhandling till ökad förståelse av hur internationella organisationer bemöter konflikter med icke-tvingande medel.

## Abstract

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs), such as rebel and militia groups, are key actors in contemporary conflicts and play an increasingly significant role in international politics. While engaging non-coercively with NSAGs is challenging for state-centric international organizations, non-governmental organisations or states, actors in conflict settings and those responsible for maintaining security must contend with their influence. This brief builds on a completed doctoral dissertation that examines how, why, and under what conditions the United Nations (UN) engages with NSAGs. Through four essays the dissertation analyzes both global UN Security Council dynamics and local-level interactions in peace operations focusing especially on the cases of Mali and Lebanon. The findings highlight that UN peacekeepers often non-coercively interact with NSAGs across various thematic fields even amid conflict and political instability. In high-level diplomatic engagement through the Security Council's practice of naming and shaming NSAG is almost as frequent as naming and shaming states. Naming and shaming serves both as a normative commitment and a strategic tool in global governance while at the local-level the UN's willingness to build relationships with civilians shapes interactions with NSAGs. The findings further highlight the importance of including NSAGs, along with other local actors, in peacekeeping efforts. Collectively, the dissertation contributes to understanding how international organizations respond to conflicts through non-coercive means.

# 1 Introduction

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are central actors in contemporary conflicts. The vast majority of modern conflicts involve NSAGs rather than inter-state warfare, with fatalities resulting from these conflicts reaching historically high levels (Davies et al. 2024). NSAGs, including rebel and militia groups, are responsible for most deliberate civilian killings and frequently contribute to food crises, displacement, and livelihood disruptions (Davies et al. 2024; Fletcher 2024). Despite their violent tactics, NSAGs often control territories, establish institutions, and maintain legitimacy among civilian populations. In 2024, an estimated 210 million people lived in areas under the control of armed groups (Bamber-Zryd 2024). While NSAGs shape daily life in conflict zones, groups such as Hamas, the Houthis, and Hezbollah demonstrate their growing significance in international politics. These actors can strain bilateral relations, disrupt global trade, and paralyze multilateralism. However, some NSAGs also engage in diplomacy and comply with international law (Huang 2016; Jo 2015). For international organizations operating in conflict contexts, protecting civilians, and contributing to international security, engaging with NSAGs is crucial. These interactions with NSAGs affect not only the access and effectiveness of inter-national peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development efforts but also perceptions of neutrality, impartiality, and legitimacy—both among international audiences and the populations such organizations aim to serve.

Despite the potential benefits of interacting with NSAGs, such engagement may also impose costs on international organizations. Using coercion and military force requires substantial resources and is often domestically unpopular among member states. Furthermore, United Nations (UN) interventions, for instance, have been found to rarely succeed through coercion such as use of force in peace operations (Howard 2019; Matanock and Lichtenheld 2022). Non-coercive engagement, however, risks legitimizing armed groups that challenge state sovereignty. Many governments view these groups as pariahs that

should be excluded from international politics. State-centric international organizations, which rely on donor governments for funding and require host state consent for operations, are especially sensitive to the risks of NSAG legitimization or facing allegations of support. The “global war on terrorism” has further complicated engagement efforts, often to the detriment of civilian populations suffering from the effects of armed conflict (Pejic, Herbert, and Rodenhäuser 2021).

The dissertation contributes to our understanding of interactions between international organizations and NSAGs by focusing on the UN. It examines how, why, and under what conditions the UN engages with NSAGs. The focus is on the UN's non-coercive engagement—interactions that do not involve the use or threat of force to induce behavioural change.

It consists of four independent but interrelated essays. All four essays include novel data collected specifically for this research. The research relies on existing publicly available material, fieldwork, and original survey work to generate both qualitative and quantitative data, which I then utilize to systematically examine interactions between the UN and NSAGs. Furthermore, I incorporate secondary sources to complement the primary data. The dissertation includes both a quantitative cross-case approach and case studies focusing on Mali and Lebanon. By applying both qualitative and quantitative methods, the findings contribute to the broader research questions on UN-NSAG engagement.

## **2 Non-state Armed Groups (NSAGs)**

The dissertation adopts a broad understanding of NSAGs. These are organizations that are both willing and capable of using violence to achieve their objectives, remain outside formalized state institutions or forces, and thus possess autonomy in political and military operations (Hofmann and Schneekener 2011). The concept encompasses a variety of actors often referred to as rebel



groups, militias, and “terrorists”. While some NSAGs challenge governments militarily and provide public services such as healthcare and education, others are best described as ethnic self-defense groups allied with state forces.

The dissertation examines different types of NSAGs. Essay I analyzes groups in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire based on UN reporting, applying a broad definition of NSAGs that includes rebels, militias, and, in the case of Mali, so-called terrorists. Essay II applies a quantitative method and focuses on groups engaged in civil conflict against a government, where the conflict results in at least 25 battle-related deaths per year. Essay III examines Hezbollah, a Shiite Muslim political party and NSAG. While Hezbollah is often considered a unique case due to its dual role in Lebanese politics and its military capacity independent of the state, all NSAGs have distinct characteristics. By studying the local-level dynamics of the UN’s engagement with Hezbollah, Essay III enables us to draw parallels to other groups and provides insights into engagement with different types of conflict parties. Lastly, Essay IV unpacks the concept of NSAGs by exploring how UN military peacekeepers in Mali perceive and assess these groups. Together, these essays highlight how NSAGs’ specific tactics, their local relationships, and the UN’s capacity to assess them play a key role in understanding the UN’s engagement with NSAGs.

### **3 The Contexts**

The dissertation examines the UN’s engagement with NSAGs by analyzing both diplomatic tactics of UN Security Council (UNSC) member states and interactions on the ground in peace operations. In studying interactions in peace operations, I focus primarily on two countries: Mali (Essay I and Essay IV) and Lebanon (Essay III). Côte d’Ivoire is also addressed in Essay I.

The UNSC is the most influential global arena for international politics and one of the six principal organs of the UN, mandated to maintain international peace and security. Since 1965, the UNSC has consisted of fifteen member states, including five permanent members (P5): the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia. The non-permanent members are elected on a regional basis for two-year terms. Both the P5 and elected members hold significant power, shaping the UNSC's agenda, scheduling meetings, and influencing major decisions and actions (Allen and Yuen 2022). Unlike other UN organs, only the UNSC can make decisions that other member states are obligated to implement under the Charter.

Through its resolutions, the UNSC mandates peace operations, which are considered to be the most impactful and large-scale activities undertaken by the UN to maintain international peace and security (see e.g., Hyde 2020). UN peace operations have been deployed in different types of contexts. The peace-keeping cases presented in the dissertation differ substantially from one another.

### **3.1 Mali, Lebanon and Côte d'Ivoire**

MINUSMA in Mali, one of the large and complex “big four” missions mandated in 2013, was authorized to use all necessary measures to “stabilize” the country. However, it withdrew from Mali by the end of 2023 after the Government of Mali unexpectedly requested its departure in June of that year (Jézéquel and Mäga 2021).

Lebanon, on the other hand, hosts one of the longest running UN peace operations, with its mandate expanded in 2006 following the war between Israel and Hezbollah. However, the mission is only deployed on the Lebanese side of the contentious border and has been often accused of ineffectiveness.

UNOCI, the UN's peace operation in Côte d'Ivoire, established in 2004 after the civil war that began in 2000, operated in a country divided between a government-controlled south and a rebel-held north. Widely considered a successfully completed mission, it largely fulfilled its mandated tasks.

Despite their differences, all three are modern multidimensional missions, making it feasible to examine interactions across various thematic areas, such as human rights and political process, as explored in Essay I. Furthermore, drawing conclusions based on empirical analyses from different types of cases enhances the generalizability of the findings.

The three cases also differ substantially in their conflict dynamics. However, like many other modern conflict contexts, all three have featured a strong presence of NSAGs. In addition to smaller groupings, Côte d'Ivoire and Lebanon each had one relatively dominant NSAG during the periods of analysis, whereas in Mali, several armed groups with varying goals have cooperated, merged, and fought since the onset of the current conflict in 2012. Both Mali and Lebanon have hosted NSAGs that several governments have designated as “terrorist groups,” complicating efforts by international actors to engage with them. The terrorist designation, combined with the absence of peace agreements or disarmament, makes Mali and Lebanon particularly challenging cases for observing non-coercive engagement between the UN and these groups, as highlighted in Essay III. Nonetheless, I argue that the findings from Essays I and III are broadly applicable to other multidimensional peacekeeping settings.

The empirical realities in the two main case studies of the dissertation—Mali and Lebanon—have changed significantly over the course of this research. MINUSMA was asked to leave Mali, and the Swedish MINUSMA contingent studied in Essay IV, contrary to initial expectations, became the last operational Swedish contingent in the mission. In Lebanon, after a period of relatively low conflict activity, hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel escalated in 2023,

leading to an Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon. This escalation is linked to the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023 as well as Israel's unprecedented targeting of civilians and other acts consistent with characteristics of genocide (Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices 2024). While these tragic developments posed methodological and data collection challenges, they underscore the significance of the dissertation. The findings can hopefully contribute to a deeper understanding of how international actors can more effectively engage with NSAGs to mitigate violence and protect civilian lives.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Essay I: From Confrontation to Cooperation: Describing Non-State Armed Group–UN Interactions in Peace Operations**

Essay I, “From Confrontation to Cooperation: Describing Non-State Armed Group–UN Interactions in Peace Operations,” published at *International Studies Review* in 2024, examines interactions between the UN and NSAGs in peace operations. It formulates a novel conceptual typology of NSAG–UN interactions in the context of a peace operation. The typological framework enables us to understand the interactions that may take place, looking at both the theme or programmatic area of the interaction (including human rights, humanitarian needs and governance, security, and political processes) and the type of interaction (ranging from confrontation to cooperation). Based on the typology, interaction activities between the UN and NSAGs in two peacekeeping operations—the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)—are systematically documented and described.

While both cases show confrontation in the security field, UNOCI also commonly cooperated with NSAGs on security-related issues while MINUSMA instead cooperated with NSAGs primarily regarding the political process. As an example, the UNOCI police component provided training for security auxiliaries recruited from the ranks of the FN. MINUSMA representatives actively engaged with the armed actors bilaterally and, for instance, the Special Representative's diplomatic efforts contributed to the signing of a preliminary agreement in June 2013 by the transitional Government and the armed groups in the northern regions to hold presidential election and inclusive peace talks.

In general, confrontational interactions in both missions are less prevalent than previously highlighted. The analysis further proposes factors that may explain such variation, including institutional arrangements and NSAG characteristics. The conceptual framework presented in this paper is crucial in advancing knowledge about an empirical phenomenon that we know little about and that has important implications for different forms of “local” engagement in peace operations and the effectiveness of UN policies and practices.

## **4.2      Essay II: Naming and Shaming Non-State Armed Groups at the United Nations Security Council**

Essay II, “Naming and Shaming Non-State Armed Groups at the United Nations Security Council,” shifts the focus to high-level diplomatic engagement by systematically analyzing the practice of naming and shaming NSAGs. By focusing on the UNSC and leveraging novel data, my co-author Caroline M. Brandt and I demonstrate that naming and shaming is a prevalent practice at the UNSC, accounting for over a third of all admonishments issued between 1995 and 2014. We develop and test two explanatory theories. The first suggests that strategic partnerships drive states to name and shame NSAGs, while the second posits that states condemn NSAGs to signal their commitment to

global norms protecting civilians from violence and supporting the multilateral system. We argue the UNSC's permanent and elected members use naming and shaming for different purposes. Our findings indicate that strategic partnerships between UNSC member states and the governments fighting NSAGs influence the P5's decisions to name and shame. However, the elected members are most likely to publicly condemn NSAGs that deliberately target civilians, suggesting that global norms provide a better explanation for their behavior. Our findings highlight the significant role NSAGs play in global governance and suggest that naming and shaming may serve as both a strategic signal of commitment to shared values and a tool for powerful states to advance their strategic interests through international organizations. This study opens new avenues for research on the naming and shaming of non-state actors.

#### **4.3      Essay III: Winning Hearts and Minds Through Armed Groups? Explaining the UN's Non-Coercive Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups**

Essay III, "Winning Hearts and Minds Through Armed Groups? Explaining the UN's Non-Coercive Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups", focuses on explaining non-coercive engagement between the UN and NSAGs in peace operations. Despite the associated challenges, such engagement may provide avenues for international organizations to address NSAGs across various policy fields and contribute to peace. This essay theorizes the conditions under which UN peace operations engage non-coercively with NSAGs, arguing that the relationships between the UN, civilians, and NSAGs at the local level play a key role in understanding engagement. It posits that the UN's willingness to access and build relationships with local civilian populations may foster non-coercive engagement with NSAGs under three conditions:

- 1) when NSAGs govern
- 2) when they have support among the local civilian populations
- 3) and when the UN fears resistance from populations closely tied to NSAGs.

Empirically, this essay examines these three mechanisms through a case study of Southern Lebanon. Drawing on interviews, UN documentation, and secondary sources, it demonstrates that local-level relationships may facilitate non-coercive engagement between the UN and NSAGs, ranging from coordination to cooperation. The findings show that in Southern Lebanon, Hezbollah often acted as a gatekeeper having the capacity to restrict contact between UNIFIL, the UN's Interim force in Lebanon, and local civilians. Some humanitarian activities required direct cooperation with Hezbollah officials not least because Hezbollah itself was engaged in related governance activities, while fear of resistance mainly led UNIFIL to implicitly bargain over its activities with armed groups and their supporters. Beyond operational purposes, UNIFIL's willingness to build trust and the need to maintain relations to the entire population forced UNIFIL to collaborate with local authorities they knew were politically affiliated with Hezbollah.

The analysis underscores how NSAGs' non-violent tactics have international implications, provides insights on the mechanisms through which peacekeeping functions, and highlights the role of relationships between international organizations and non-state actors in shaping social orders in conflict-affected contexts.

#### **4.4 Essay IV: United Nations Peacekeepers' Perceptions of the 'Local': Evidence from Military Personnel in Mali**

Essay IV, “United Nations Peacekeepers’ Perceptions of the 'Local': Evidence from Military Personnel in Mali,” published at International Peacekeeping in 2025, explores how peacekeeping military personnel perceive local actors, including NSAGs, and the conditions under which engagement with them takes place. Using survey data and interviews with Swedish military personnel deployed to MINUSMA, the article investigates how military peacekeepers understand local actors and their inclusion, focusing both on local civilian actors and NSAGs within the context of MINUSMA’s stabilization mandate. The findings reveal that Swedish peacekeepers’ primarily view local actors through the lens of operational necessity, emphasizing armed actors that are crucial to their tasks. Furthermore, the assessment of different actors takes place primarily in the operational context. Although individual peacekeepers recognize the importance of including local actors and are relatively unaffected by the mission’s overarching mandate, engagement in practice remains challenging. This is due to both the nature of peacekeeping and the difficulties in differentiating between different actors.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The dissertation shows that NSAGs play a significant role in global governance while also shaping how international actors operate in local conflict contexts. While cooperation and engagement between states have been central to understanding international peace and security, the four essays demonstrate that analyzing non-coercive tactics in relation to non-state actors can advance our understanding of both international politics and local conflict dynamics. Although notions of state sovereignty remain a core principle of the UN and other international organizations, UNSC member states diplomatically respond



to NSAG violence. Furthermore, beyond violent confrontations (Duursma 2019; Lindberg-Bromley 2017), peacekeepers in conflict contexts coordinate and cooperate with NSAGs across various policy areas.

The dissertation also highlights that global norms on civilian protection, operational considerations, and relationships between the NSAGs and local communities are key for understanding interactions between the UN and NSAGs. However, the essays also underscore how states' strategic interests and the UN's relationships with these states impact its ability to engage non-coercively with NSAGs. This research illustrates how the UN and other international organizations can advance their operational goals through non-coercive means. At the same time, the findings speak to broader debates about the UN's legitimacy and effectiveness (von Billerbeck 2016; Whalan 2013). These insights extend beyond the cases studied in the dissertation and are especially relevant as the multilateral system faces mounting criticism for inefficiency and lack of legitimacy—at a time when the need for effective, impartial, and accountable responses to conflict and human suffering is unprecedentedly high.

## **5 Conclusions**

The dissertation demonstrates that NSAGs are important for the work of international organizations and for global governance more broadly. Although NSAGs influence local and international politics through violence, international organizations can choose to respond to such tactics non-coercively and consider the non-violent tactics that NSAGs often employ locally. Drawing on novel data and a systematic examination of the UN's non-coercive tactics in both the UNSC and peacekeeping contexts, I show that the UN frequently opts for non-coercive engagement. This is despite the fact that the UN is especially sensitive to state-centric politics.

These findings expand our understanding of the tactics that state-centric international organizations, or for instance non-governmental organizations dependent on states as donors, rely on when addressing peace and security and help clarify the factors that contribute to the success of international interventions in conflict settings. While future research should investigate the effectiveness of different types of engagement, the dissertation contributes to a broader scholarly, policy, and practical work on the significance of non-coercive tactics, “soft power,” and strategic use of nonviolence at different levels in civilian protection, peacebuilding, and international affairs more generally (e.g., Sharp 1973, Nye 2005).

The findings of the dissertation highlight the critical roles NSAGs play at the local level in conflict settings. These dynamics have important implications for international organizations operating in conflict-affected areas. The embeddedness of NSAGs within local civilian populations and their relationships with civilians partly explain the UN's engagement with NSAGs despite the associated costs. Additionally, groups with transnational ties or national political ambitions often cultivate important subnational relationships and structures that influence the work of international organizations or other similar organizations, especially those engaged in operational tasks rather than high-level political processes. Understanding NSAGs and other key actors at the local level is crucial for international organizations, regardless of whether such actors are typically considered “local.” Although the dissertation focuses primarily on the UN and NSAGs, its findings also underscore the role of states' strategic interests and their relationships with both the UN and NSAGs in shaping the UN's engagement with these groups. Future research should comprehensively address how these different relationships contribute to the formation of non-coercive engagement strategies.

## **5.1 Implications for international donors and aid?**

Given the prevalence of NSAGs and their influence over populations and institutions in conflict settings, it is evident that various international actors aiming to address community needs in such contexts must also engage with NSAGs. However, the international community is often hesitant to acknowledge this reality due to the political and, in some cases, legal consequences of interacting with these groups (Modirzadeh, Lewis, and Bruderlein 2011). While I illustrate that the UN engages non-coercively with NSAGs across various conflict settings—and that states and international organizations at high-level diplomatic forums recognize the need to address NSAGs—decisions to interact or engage at the local level are often made tactically and rely on individual capacities. To support more effective engagement, states and international organizations should invest in developing tools and approaches that enable strategic, long-term engagement.

While strategic engagement with NSAGs may be particularly challenging for the UN, the findings of the dissertation suggest that leveraging protection norms and other shared international rules or standards could facilitate engagement. Furthermore, the ability to respond to NSAG tactics is vital for upholding these frameworks. While the UN has interacted with NSAGs across different policy areas, recent developments in world politics and the multilateral system suggest that the UN may not be able to maintain a central role in political engagement or even security-driven approaches. However, sustained interactions in humanitarian needs, governance, and human rights could provide a way to foster positive change and remain relevant in an evolving conflict and geopolitical landscape. At the global level, diplomatic responses may offer the UN opportunities to signal commitment to shared principles and find avenues for cooperation. As consensus-based decisions and action become increasingly difficult, individual states play a growing role in upholding the mandates and norms of international organizations, responding non-coercively to violence

and human rights violations, and persuading other states to take meaningful action in multilateral forums. Alternatively, the UN may need to be willing to delegate engagement responsibilities to other actors. Acknowledging and responding to local realities in conflict settings has important operational implications but is also essential for maintaining the organization's legitimacy and ensuring the continued relevance of multilateralism.

For countries that provide official development assistance, humanitarian aid or deploy personnel to operations to conflict areas where NSAGs are active, deep knowledge and understanding of the local context is crucial for ensuring that aid and support interventions reach their intended recipients, create long term, sustainable development, and do not undermine peace processes or unintentionally worsen existing situations by exacerbating inequalities, generating conflicts or legitimizing actors that do not have support locally. While donors may be especially worried about resources falling into the hands of armed actors, understanding local power balances, legitimacy dynamics and maintain trust is crucial for effective operations and for avoiding being perceived as biased.

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Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are central in many conflicts. The dissertation summarized here explores how the UN interacts with NSAGs at different levels, for example in Mali, Lebanon and Côte d'Ivoire. Interactions with armed groups affect the possibilities for humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, but can also influence perceptions of neutrality, impartiality, and legitimacy, leading to difficult trade-offs.

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Icke-statliga väpnade grupper är centrala i många konflikter. Avhandlingen som sammanfattas här undersöker hur FN interagerar med väpnade grupper på olika nivåer, till exempel i Mali, Libanon och Elfenbenskusten. Interaktioner med väpnade grupper påverkar möjligheterna till humanitära- och utvecklings-och fredsbyggande insatser, men kan också påverka uppfattningar om neutralitet, opartiskhet och legitimitet, vilket leder till svåra avvägningar.

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