

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND PEACEKEEPING

JOINT INPUT PAPER TO THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR PEACE OPERATIONS

BY THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH
(UNU-CPR) AND THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME (GI-TOC)

UN MINISTERIAL ON PEACEKEEPING, BERLIN, MAY 2025

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MAY 2025

Introduction: Transnational organized crime's impact on peace operations

Transnational organized crime (TOC) is a major driver of conflict and instability worldwide, and its scale is immense: TOC generates billions of dollars annually through the trafficking of drugs, weapons, fuel, chemicals and other illicit goods.¹ In conflict-affected areas, criminal economies not only inflict local harm and exacerbate violence but also contribute to regional destabilization and transnational trafficking flows. Moreover, the intricate relationship between TOC, corruption and insecurity exacerbates these effects, particularly when high-level corruption enables illicit networks to operate with impunity. As conflicts persist, illicit markets often diversify, attract new actors and become increasingly predatory towards local populations.²

The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index³ shows a strong correlation between areas affected by organized crime and conflict. The implications are particularly severe for peace operations, as this undermines security efforts, increases violence, destabilizes economies and erodes governance, creating conditions in which peacekeeping becomes increasingly difficult. Recognizing this, the UN Security Council has increasingly addressed the issue, holding thematic discussions and referencing TOC in the mandates of peace operations. In 2024, GI-TOC research found that 52 per cent of Security Council resolutions mentioned at least one illicit market, most often in connection with its impact on conflict.⁴

¹ Global Financial Integrity, 2025, Transnational Organized Crime, <https://gfintegrity.org/issue/transnational-crime/>.

² Summer Walker and Mariana Botero, Illicit economies and armed conflict: Ten dynamics that drive instability, GI-TOC, January 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-economies-armed-conflict/>.

³ GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023, <https://ocindex.net/>.

⁴ GI-TOC, 2000–2024: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, GI-TOC, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/sresolutions/>.

Despite being identified as a priority in many mission settings, TOC is often treated as a technical responsibility. It is delegated to police components or subsumed under broader counterterrorism strategies, and rarely integrated into broader political strategies.⁵ In one of the more recent examples, UNU-CPR's 2024 case study on the UN's approach to TOC in Mali during the UN stabilization mission in that country, MINUSMA, finds that, while the mission's mandate prioritized countering TOC as of 2018, its approach focused on terrorist financing, rather than engaging with the broader political economy that sustains criminal networks.⁶ While specialized tools – such as joint intelligence structures like the Joint Mission Analysis Centre and the All Sources Information Fusion Unit, police components and judicial units – were deployed, and collaboration with UNODC was enhanced, efforts remained fragmented.⁷ As UNU-CPR research shows, a similar pattern has emerged in the Central African Republic: while the mandate of the UN mission there (MINUSCA) acknowledged illicit trafficking, the mission considered TOC outside its core functions.⁸

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the UN and regional organizations have implemented various approaches to address the problem, including law enforcement initiatives, judicial responses and sanctions regimes. Some of the key obstacles to these efforts include a lack of coordination and coherence, political roadblocks or insufficient political will, and a siloing of agendas and programming.⁹ The Security Council-sanctioned Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti is the newest configuration of a peace mission that has faced operational, personnel, capacity and financial challenges from the onset.¹⁰ Without integrated strategies, adequate resources and meaningful political engagement, international efforts to address TOC will remain reactive and insufficient, even when technical capacities are theoretically in place.¹¹

Core policy recommendations

The UN Peacekeeping Ministerial is a critical moment to re-examine how peace operations address TOC. Towards this, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by policymakers at the Ministerial in Berlin in May:

Mission-wide coordination and knowledge

- **Establish a TOC focal point to ensure mission-wide TOC coordination:** Addressing TOC effectively requires embedding analysis and policy options across missions. A designated TOC focal point can coordinate internal efforts, provide ongoing threat assessments and support strategic coherence, especially during mission transitions, when knowledge continuity is critical. This could be a team, such as in the modular approach envisioned in recent proposals for future peacekeeping models,¹² or it could be a specific role with the goal of policy and programme integration. Given the dynamic nature of illicit markets and their impact on peace, stability and state legitimacy, TOC should not be treated as a siloed issue, but as a cross-cutting priority in mission mandates.

⁵ Erica Gaston and Fiona Mangan, *Multilateral responses to transnational organized crime and conflict: Global policy considerations and future directions*, UNU-CPR, 2024, pp. 1, 3.

⁶ Erica Gaston, Catharina Nickel, Imane Karimou and Marc Werner, *Peacekeeping responses to transnational organized crime and trafficking: A case study of MINUSMA*, UNU-CPR, 2024, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 20.

⁸ Erica Gaston and Fiona Mangan, *Multilateral responses to transnational organized crime and conflict: Global policy considerations and future directions*, UNU-CPR, 2024, p. 3.

⁹ Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw and Arthur Boutellis, *The elephant in the room: How can peace operations deal with organized crime?*, IPI, June 2013, <https://www.ipinst.org/2013/06/the-elephant-in-the-room-how-can-peace-operations-deal-with-organized-crime>.

¹⁰ For more information, see Romain Le-Cour Grandmaison, Ana Paula Oliveira and Matt Herbert, *A critical moment: Haiti's gang crisis and international responses*, GI-TOC, February 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/haiti-gang-crisis-and-international-responses/>.

¹¹ Erica Gaston, Catharina Nickel, Imane Karimou and Marc Werner, *Peacekeeping responses to transnational organized crime and trafficking: A case study of MINUSMA*, UNU-CPR, 2024, p. 23; Erica Gaston and Fiona Mangan, *Multilateral responses to transnational organized crime and conflict: Global policy considerations and future directions*, UNU-CPR, 2024, p. 3.

¹² El-Ghassim Wane, Paul D. Williams and Ai Kihara-Hunt, *The future of peacekeeping: New models and related capabilities*, United Nations, October 2024, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/future_of_peacekeeping_report_rev30jan_1.pdf.

- **Apply a political economy lens through threat assessments:** Comprehensive organized crime threat assessments should help missions address the crime–conflict nexus in a more strategic way, understanding the wider ecosystem of illicit economies and the links to political transition, humanitarian efforts and regional impacts. These threat assessments should be used strategically and be considered at each phase of a mission – from planning to exit.
- **Integrate TOC into mission mandates:** Mandates should realistically reflect the impact of TOC on peace and security, embedding it as a core element from the outset.

Partnerships for greater expertise and operational capacity

- **Strengthen partnerships with local and regional actors:** Future versions of peacekeeping operations are likely to come less from the UN alone but in partnership between UN organizations, regional bodies and local actors. For example, supporting financial intelligence units, civil society watchdogs and communities engaged in resisting criminal networks can create longer-lasting impacts and foundations for post-conflict peace.¹³

Strengthen existing components

- **Align sanctions and diplomatic tools more effectively:** Missions should explore ways to strategically leverage mediation, judicial mechanisms, and sanctions regimes and their panels of experts. These tools should operate as part of a coordinated political strategy to ensure alignment between peace negotiations, legal measures, sanctions and peacebuilding efforts.¹⁴ Missions could, for example, help create an independent judicial process to prosecute TOC on the guidance of a panel of experts.
- **Maintain a focus on the rule of law:** Justice sector reform, accountability and rule of law are critical components of peace operations and would help to implement SDG 16. They are also critical for combating criminal networks and corruption. Downplaying these components would signal a retreat from holistic responses to crime and conflict.
- **Scale up police and border capacities:** This includes expanding components such as the UN Standing Police Capacity and the Justice and Corrections Standing Capacity, as well as establishing specialized units with expertise in financial crime, border security and the dismantling of transnational networks. Strengthening these areas is key to ensure peace operations have the operational support and technical expertise required to address TOC effectively.

¹³ See Frank Haberstroh and Simon Zaugg, *How financial intelligence units can support the more effective implementation of sanctions regimes*, UNU-CPR, 2023; Catharina Nickel, *Countering transnational crime to secure peace*, UNU-CPR, 2024.

¹⁴ Erica Gaston, Catharina Nickel, Imane Karimou and Marc Werner, *Peacekeeping responses to transnational organized crime and trafficking: A case study of MINUSMA*, UNU-CPR, 2024, p. 28.