Building a Better Peace Operation:
Lessons from the Brahimi Report Process

prepared for the UN Foundation by
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In early 2000, shortly after the release of UN-commissioned reports on the 1995 massacres at Srebrenica and on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the administrative leadership of the United Nations determined that UN peace operations needed serious reevaluation, "with a view to minimizing as far as possible the likelihood of such tragedies occurring again in the future." The Secretary-General asked Under-Secretary-General Lakhdar Brahimi to chair a panel of experts who were to supervise the work of an "author" whose study and recommendations were to be both conceptual and operational in focus, and "cover the full spectrum of UN activities in the general area of peace and security, from prevention to post-conflict peace-building, including observation missions, peacekeeping and enforcement."[1] The Panel was selected and the writing team appointed from late February to early March. The S-G announced the study on March 7; the writer and writing team gathered on March 14; and the Panel met for the first of three sessions on March 21.

The author or writer (whose final moniker was "project director") was initially allotted two "research assistants" who developed into co-writers--one a UN staff member with considerable field experience, based in New York, who set up 200 staff interviews within the system and drafted substantial segments of the report; the other, knowledgeable in information technology (IT) applications, based at the Stimson Center in Washington, who drafted the initial IT segments. A Scoville Fellow with a law degree, also based at Stimson, assisted with aspects of the report that dealt with the issue of "applicable law" in UN transitional civil administration. A top-notch personal assistant to Mr. Brahimi with extensive "38th Floor" experience and a wide network of contacts was essential in making the UN machinery work for the team. Willingness of UN personnel to share, in off-the-record interviews, their experiences, their views of what worked and did not in peace operations, and how what did not work might be fixed, was also essential to the creation of a knowledgeable and relevant report.

The Brahimi Report did address both the conceptual and the operational elements of peace operations, as called for in its terms of reference, but focused--given the limited time available to it--more closely on peacekeeping in complex settings of recent internal conflict. In the interest of trying to fix what ailed those operations, most issues related to prevention, peacebuilding, and enforcement understood as the *imposition* of peace were left to other teams and other venues. It emphasized that UN operations in dangerous "trans-conflict" (not quite post-conflict) settings need both the ability to defend themselves and the ability to defend the peace they have been sent to implement.

A few lessons that can be drawn from the Brahimi Report process might be grouped under the following headings: Respect the past without being bound to it; ground the conceptual analysis; stay in touch at many levels; determine the must-haves and the no-go zones; know your audience; recognize the critical role of the Chair; find and stick to a "hook" for release of the work; and put as much or more effort into implementation as into the original report.

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[1] From the Terms of Reference.

Be respectful of but not bound to the past

The writing team interviewed more than it read. The interviews were critical to giving the writing team confidence that its recommendations pointed in the right direction. Readings did include prior academic and UN studies on similar subjects, especially a 1997 report on improving UN peacekeeping by Under-Secretary-General Marrack Goulding. The Goulding and Brahimi reports reached several similar conclusions but Goulding's was lost sight of in the larger currents of reform generated early in Kofi Annan's first term, at a time when UN peacekeeping was in the doldrums, excepting one robust operation in eastern Croatia (UNTAES). There was no immediate risk of big-time failure *in the field* to compel policy makers' attention to peacekeeping reforms. By late 1999-early 2000, however, there were many such risks. Unreformed, UN peace operations were again taking off in new directions (in Kosovo and East Timor) and with considerable risk (in Congo and Sierra Leone).

Ultimately, the Brahimi Report drew together a lot of common wisdom and gave a license to change to those within the system who desired change, at a time when its issues were deemed crucial and change deemed essential. The final report took some hits from the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations for not focusing more on *their* prior recommendations. However, policy recommendations within Special Committee reports often carry their own negations within the same or a following paragraph unless they are the product of consensus. The follow-up implementation of the Brahimi Report paid greater and more explicit attention to the Special Committee's annual reports, however.

Ground the conceptual analysis but at risk of resistance if the analysis is too explicit

The writing team began with a major effort to define terms to be used in the report. The political implications of major changes in definitions of terms and the creation of new categories of operations—even if more descriptive of what the UN actually did in the field—led the Panel to opt for simplified definitions of peacekeeping for purposes of the report. Lack of clarity as to the scope of "conflict prevention" and "peacebuilding" and lack of a UN-wide working definition of either term led the team to define these terms for purposes of the report as well. The report also defined, for the first time, the meaning of "rapid deployment," giving specific operational content to a desired goal long left undefined. Although the team was asked to specify and analyze what went right or wrong with UN operations, preliminary performance assessments of specific cases and topics were more than the system preferred to see and these were generalized into what ultimately appeared in paragraphs 15–28 of the report.

The High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change will face a similar need to define key terms (e.g., the meaning of "collective security" in the 21st century) and will face similar difficulties in producing specific assessments of cases that point to the need for change without seriously irritating one or more powerful parties involved in those cases.

Stay in touch at many levels

The Brahimi team kept channels of communication open to member states at several levels, to UN leadership (the "38th floor"), and to key points within the bureaucracy. In an informal division of labor, the Chair maintained contact with the Secretary-General, and the Chef de Cabinet and Deputy Secretary-General served as ex-officio members of the Panel; the Chair kept in touch with member state delegations at the level of Permanent Representative (PermRep), especially the ambassadors of the permanent members of the Security Council. The writing team maintained contact with key delegations at the working level, often in informal meetings. A number of member states presented non-papers to the Chair with ideas for consideration by the Panel; several of these were detailed and well-thought-out and a number were incorporated into the report.

The Brahimi team drafted cables to all UN peacekeeping operations, inviting them to describe the three things that worked best in their operations and the three issues that gave them the most heartburn. The team understood this to be the first time that Headquarters had systematically queried the opinion of its field operations on such matters. Such queries now appear to be more routine. Formal replies from the missions tended to be coordinated through the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in charge of the operation and, as such, tended to reflect the character of the mission management. The then-dysfunctional operation in Sierra Leone sent a reply that was essentially substance-free; the multi-pillar operation in Kosovo (two pillars run by the UN, one by OSCE, and one by the EU) sent separate, uncoordinated replies from each pillar, reflecting the organizational independence of each; while the integrated mission in East Timor sent a lengthy, thoughtful, equally integrated reply reflecting the role and intellect of its SRSG, the late Sergio Vieira de Mello. With more time, the team might have solicited replies from working level members of the field teams; such input was generated from UNMIK in Kosovo, where the team conducted interviews for several days, and would have been generated from other missions with more time to do so.

Given the scope of its mandate, the High Level Panel has a much larger potential pool of contributors, which could be difficult to manage. Nonetheless, it might well benefit from an electronic "drop box" to which groups and individuals can contribute ideas, solicited or unsolicited, with someone reasonably knowledgeable screening the interesting stuff from the mundane or crank.

Bear in mind that the UN system is a literal and figurative glass house and that access by individuals and organizations outside the drafting team to controversial recommendations, while ideally managed or constrained until such recommendations can be refined and better defended, is very hard to achieve and maintain.

Determine the must-haves and the no-go zones

The Brahimi Report had to address the political and operational challenges confronting UN peacekeeping. There were, however, some issues that seemed so politically charged as to risk diverting attention from everything else if addressed in any detail by the report. These included Security Council reform, arrearages in the payment of UN dues, changes in UN scales of assessment, and the concept of "humanitarian intervention." Although avoiding another Srebrenica or Rwanda was an objective of the Panel's work, the capabilities of UN-led operations contemplated by the Report did not extend to the forceful imposition of peace in such dire circumstances. Rather, the report hoped to make the UN better able to accept a handover of responsibility from an enforcement mission and to deal effectively with the aftermath of violence, that is, better "prepared to confront the lingering forces of war and violence, with the ability and determination to defeat them."

Other important issues not dealt with by the Brahimi Report were the subject of parallel studies or policy efforts, including conflict prevention (subject of a study led by the UN Department of Political Affairs), AIDS (the subject of Security Council attention as the Brahimi team did its work), and security of UN field personnel (the subject of a then-forthcoming report by the office of the UN Security Coordinator).

Know your audience and aim to create a buzz about the product

The immediate nominal audience for the Brahimi Report was heads of state preparing to attend the September 2000 Millennium Summit in New York. However, the report also aimed its recommendations at the UN bureaucracy--at those who would promote and embrace effective change as well as those inclined to resist it. The report thus mixed recommendations for change within the system with suggestions and cautions to UN member states, on both the level of "political will" and the level of operational capabilities. In general, recommendations aimed at the bureaucracy have been better-

implemented than those aimed at states, in part because internal implementation was a coordinated effort led at a high level within the Secretariat.

Role of the Chair

The Chair is absolutely critical to the effectiveness of this kind of panel. The Chair can be relatively passive, analytically active, politically active, or both. As Chairman, Amb. Brahimi was "both," reviewing and contributing to all report drafts, engaging member states, the 38th floor, and Panel members. In meetings with PermReps, the Chair could gauge the limits of the politically possible and apply that sense to drafts of the report, recommending changes that could avoid political minefields on the one hand, or address especially strongly-held views, on the other.

The Chair solicited the Panelists' short list of what they cared about most. When these issues were not adequately reflected in report drafts, staff heard about it either in email feedback or at the Panel's final, marathon meeting in New York, where the penultimate report draft was reviewed line by line. (This last process had the effect of building consensus and ownership by the Panel of a report that was drafted largely by staff.) Email made it possible for panel members to review early drafts of the report from their home countries and greatly accelerated the report's completion. Thus Panel members were able to review two full drafts of the report in early and mid-July before convening in New York to review a revised draft in late July. The production timeline would have been impossible to meet without email. If there had been more time to work, the Panel members' ties in their states and regions would have enabled the writing team to convene regional meetings of policymakers and scholars to solicit ideas and feedback. The study effort came in for some third-party criticism later for not having done that.

The writing team had the benefit of the Chair's presence in New York for most of the drafting process; this enabled immediate and more nuanced feedback on draft language than would have been possible by email, enabled the Chair to maintain closer control of the process, and gave continuing cover to the writing team. It would have been very difficult to produce a comparable report with an absentee or less-engaged chairman.

Find and stick to a release hook, with enough lead time to work but not enough to lose focus

As noted, the Millennium Summit was the production deadline for the Brahimi Report. Its actual delivery date (August 21) was two months later than initially planned and just three weeks before the Summit. The compressed timeline left too little time for review by capitals before the Summit. Moreover, sending the report directly to capitals bypassed standard diplomatic channels and ruffled some New York PermReps whose support for later implementation efforts would have been helpful. Still, from start to finish, the Brahimi Report was created in about five and a half months. More issues could have been addressed and more field operations visited had their been more time, but perhaps at risk of a less taut product that tried to cover too much ground.

Put as much or more effort into implementation as into the original report

Far more staff hours were put into the implementation reports--substantive and financial--that followed just 60 days after release of the Brahimi Report than were put into the original report but the original report gave them a touchstone, and political cover. Because the first implementation report came late in the life of the 55th General Assembly, the review process (Special Committee to Fourth Committee, and Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions to Fifth Committee, or ACABQ) was truncated and the more radical proposals fleshed out in the first implementation report (such as the Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat) ran aground in the ACABQ. The comprehensive management review that began six months after the release of the Brahimi Report met a longstanding

request of the Special Committee and gave reformers additional, detailed material with which to work. The internal implementation process maintained as good a head of steam as it did because the Deputy Secretary-General managed implementation throughout, because a change- and management-oriented analyst-diplomat was appointed to head the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and because talented and dedicated UN staff were available to pull together inputs from a dozen directions and knit them into coherent implementation documents.

Final thoughts

To be successful, a panel of this kind must have a strong, engaged chairman who manages the panel and supports/advises/corrects staff work, supported by an experienced, engaged, intelligent personal assistant and with active support from UN leadership and key member states. Such panels must, at the same time, avoid the appearance of toeing any state's or group's political line even as they take advice from all quarters and selectively apply it. The chair must be willing to deal directly with the sponsors of uncooperative or non-performing panel members, must be open to panel members' inputs, but must also be willing to impose discipline upon the panel's deliberations. A chair unwilling or unable to effectively manage the panel's work invites panel anarchy likely only to be the worse because of the prominent personalities involved. A solid draft report from the writing team will reinforce the chair's ability to maintain discipline. A solid report requires a solid grounding in both field experience (either direct or derived through extensive interviews) and in the structure and cultures of the institutions about which it is making recommendations. Both are essential components of credibility for those recommendations. Finally, a wise chair and drafting team will steer clear of obvious credibility-killing issues. As the Brahimi Report shows, a great deal of useful change can be promoted without also promoting measures that invoke automatic, fatal political opposition.