

# NON-COMBATANTS OR COUNTERINSURGENTS? The Strategic Logic of Violence against UN Peacekeeping

Patrick Hunnicutt\*

William G. Nomikos†

Rob Williams‡

## Abstract

Given the abundance of evidence that United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKOs) promote peace in conflict settings, we know remarkably little about what explains violence against peacekeepers themselves. We argue that armed groups target PKOs in response to peacekeepers' interactions with civilians away from the battlefield. Contemporary PKOs function as surrogates for the state, providing civilians with governance and security in areas of limited statehood. Armed groups competing with the government for control over the local population thus target peacekeepers where their ability to gain civilian support is the greatest. Using cross-national data on attacks against UN peacekeepers deployed to Africa from 1999-2019, we find a robust relationship between the deployment of additional UN policing patrols and the targeting of peacekeepers. This pattern holds even when we account for possible selection bias that may arise from the deployment of police into certain areas. We investigate the causal mechanisms underlying this relationship with an in-depth statistical and qualitative case study of peacekeeper targeting in Mali, a critical case for understanding this type of violence. Our analysis reveals that armed groups attack UN PKOs in areas with frequent UN police patrols because UN police succeed in integrating themselves within the civilian population, gather information on the location of armed groups, and frustrate rebel governance.

This version: July 6, 2021

[Latest version](#)

**Keywords:** UN peacekeeping, conflict, civil wars, insurgency, Mali

**Word Count:** 13,817

---

\*Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, University of California, Santa Barbara.

†Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis.

‡Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy, Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis.

## Introduction

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is central to our understanding of the dynamics of modern conflict. Prior research provides considerable evidence that UN peacekeepers effectively mitigate violence and build peace.<sup>1</sup> Deploying UN peacekeepers to war zones reduces the duration of conflict episodes,<sup>2</sup> mitigates violence,<sup>3</sup> boosts local economic development,<sup>4</sup> and protects civilians from rebel abuse.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one recent review characterizes the relationship between peacekeeping and peace as “extraordinary.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet recent surges in the intentional targeting of UN peacekeepers suggests their capacity to mitigate conflict exacts a high cost. Since 2010, armed groups have intentionally killed over 300 peacekeepers in the line of duty, a twofold increase compared to the previous decade.<sup>7</sup> This statistic is especially striking given that peacekeepers are meant to be impartial actors.<sup>8</sup> Practically speaking, attacks on peacekeepers have shaken the confidence of critical troop-contributing countries that fear losing personnel to armed group violence in peacekeeping operations (PKOs). In response, the UN Secretary-General commissioned a report in 2017 to provide “no-nonsense, practical, short and long-term actions to reduce fatalities.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the wealth of research on the effectiveness of UN PKOs, little is known about what causes of violence against peacekeepers. Existing scholarship suggests that armed

---

<sup>1</sup>For seminal studies, see [Doyle and Sambanis 2006](#); [Fortna 2008](#); [Gilligan and Sergenti 2008](#). For reviews, see [Fortna and Howard 2008](#); [Walter, Howard and Fortna 2019](#).

<sup>2</sup>[Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013, 2014, 2019](#)

<sup>4</sup>[Bove, Salvatore and Elia 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup>[Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019](#); [Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020](#)

<sup>6</sup>[Walter, Howard and Fortna 2019](#)

<sup>7</sup>Since we define intentional targeting as anything that the UN itself codes as a malicious act, this is a conservative estimate. If we include events not explicitly coded as malicious that are also *likely* intentional, the number rises to almost 500 peacekeepers killed since 2010. See <https://psdata.un.org>. As further evidence, consider that peacekeepers have suffered an annual rate of 22 combat fatalities per year in the 21st century compared to 14 per year in the 20th century.

<sup>8</sup>[Benson and Kathman 2014](#); [Rhoads 2016](#); [Nomikos 2021 b,a](#)

<sup>9</sup>“Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We need to change the way we are doing business.” Within the UN, the watershed report is widely known as the “dos Santos Cruz” report after its author, Lieutenant General (Retired) Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz of Brazil.

groups attack peacekeepers as part of a broader strategy to gain a more favorable peace settlement.<sup>10</sup> While informative, this work cannot explain violence against peacekeepers deployed to modern insurgencies where armed groups may have no interest in negotiating with the government.<sup>11</sup> This omission is problematic, given that insurgencies are increasingly common in the settings where UN PKOs deploy.<sup>12</sup>

There is, then, a pressing need to understand why armed groups attack peacekeepers. We argue that much of the violence against peacekeepers stems from armed groups' strategic efforts to compete with the government for control over the civilian population.<sup>13</sup> Armed groups that cannot defeat government forces in contested territories can either coerce (e.g., attack civilians) or co-opt (e.g., provide civilians with public services) local political support. Contemporary UN peacekeeping missions deploy with significant capacity to protect the lives<sup>14</sup> and livelihoods<sup>15</sup> of civilians. This capacity, which manifests as active patrolling,<sup>16</sup> facilitating the delivery of public goods and services,<sup>17</sup> bolstering the rule of law,<sup>18</sup> and training domestic security forces<sup>19</sup> undercuts armed groups' efforts to coerce or to co-opt civilians' support. Armed groups subsequently treat peacekeeping operations as if they were counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns, using violence against peacekeepers to limit their interactions with the civilian population.

We test our argument through a cross-national, within-country statistical analysis using a novel dataset of attacks against UN peacekeepers in Chapter VII multidimensional oper-

---

<sup>10</sup>Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen 2013; Salverda 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016

<sup>11</sup>Kalyvas and Balcells 2010

<sup>12</sup>Kaldor 2013; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018; Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020

<sup>13</sup>Although we prefer the term "armed group," we use the terms insurgents, insurgent groups, rebels, and rebel groups interchangeably to denote armed groups in what Kalyvas and Balcells call irregular wars (or insurgencies).

<sup>14</sup>Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2019

<sup>15</sup>Beber et al. 2019

<sup>16</sup>Cil et al. 2020

<sup>17</sup>Sheehan 2011

<sup>18</sup>Di Salvatore 2019; Blair 2020

<sup>19</sup>Karim and Gorman 2016; Huber and Karim 2018; Karim 2020a

ations<sup>20</sup> paired with a sub-national examination of violence against peacekeepers in Mali, a critical case for understanding the evolving nature of these attacks. Our analysis reveals that armed groups target PKOs where UN police have a strong presence. Contrary to our theoretical expectations, we find no indication that peacekeepers are targeted because of their cultural similarity to civilians. In order to account for potential bias arising from omitted variables, we formally model the PKO selection process, provide a simulation-based sensitivity analysis, and leverage an instrumental variable design. We further process-trace potential causal mechanisms underlying these patterns in a micro-level analysis of violence in central Mali, a hotspot for attacks against UN peacekeepers in recent years.<sup>21</sup> The qualitative analysis shows that armed groups in Mali target the UN as part of a broader effort to gain the support of the local population, in line with our explanation but not other alternatives.

Our study adds important nuance to the literature on UN peacekeeping by highlighting a more complex relationship between armed groups and peacekeepers than scholars have previously presented. Although prior studies have documented peacekeepers' ability to protect civilians,<sup>22</sup> critics point to rising peacekeeping casualties numbers as evidence of the UN's failure. We argue the opposite: armed groups target UN peacekeepers because they view them as viable competitors for civilians' support. In this way, our findings also extend existing scholarship on the strategic behavior of armed groups in conflict settings. Past research has focused on how government agencies, militaries, and humanitarian workers affect the strategic calculations of armed groups vying for civilians' hearts and minds.<sup>23</sup> To our knowledge, this article is the first to explicitly theorize and systematically test how peacekeepers affect these calculations as well.

---

<sup>20</sup>These missions are alternatively called "Chapter VII," robust, or multidimensional peacekeeping operations.

<sup>21</sup>We specifically focus on the Douentza *cercle*—a second-order administrative unit in Mali's Mopti region.

<sup>22</sup>Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020

<sup>23</sup>Kalyvas 2006; Narang and Stanton 2017; Balcells 2017; Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020

## The Evolution of Modern Peacekeeping

More than ever before, peacekeepers are deployed in the middle of civil wars with active insurgencies, armed groups that employ terrorist tactics, and rebel organizations that recruit transnationally.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, doctrinal changes and expansive mandates have brought PKOs closer than ever before to full-fledged COIN operations.<sup>25</sup> As a result, peacekeepers in contemporary missions wield far greater coercive capacity than their predecessors. For instance, the UN peacekeeping missions in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) have attack helicopters and artillery units at their disposal to support the infantry they deploy in large numbers.<sup>26</sup>

PKOs typically use these capacities to support the government. MINUSCA launched “peace caravans” that “[brought] high-level government officials to areas at risk or affected by violence for direct talks with the population and local officials” in 2017.<sup>27</sup> Missions now rely more heavily on frequent patrolling to gather information from civilians on the whereabouts of armed groups, which enables them to deter civilian victimization.<sup>28</sup> Peacekeepers also help restore the rule of law and secure civilian access to public goods and services.<sup>29</sup> For instance, when civilians in the Kidal region of Mali expressed an immediate need for medicine in October 2015, peacekeepers swiftly intervened to provide \$32,000 worth of supplies through a local non-governmental organization as part of a UN-branded Quick Impact Projects.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2019

<sup>25</sup>Friis 2010; Howard 2019*a*. The United States government defines COIN operations as “comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes” Kilcullen, Porter and Burgos 2009, 12. The core goal of COIN operations is political: they seek to re-establish state control over contested territories and populations via a broad mandate coordinating economic, political, and military activities.

<sup>26</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/congo-violence-idINKBN1CEOSU> and <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/05/557252-armed-group-attacks-civilians-un-central-african-republic-overnight-peacekeeper>, both accessed 16 June 2021.

<sup>27</sup>S/2017/865, 7

<sup>28</sup>Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019

<sup>29</sup>Blair 2019, 2020; Karim 2020*a*

<sup>30</sup>See page 2 of October 2015 report at <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/archives-2015>, accessed 17 June, 2021.

Noting the similarities between modern peacekeeping missions and COIN operations also helps explain why armed groups are increasingly deploying complex insurgent tactics against PKOs. Ambushes of peacekeeping patrols, mortar and rocket attacks on UN bases, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on UN convoy routes have become more commonplace and more fatal over the last decade. These attacks are meant to inhibit peacekeepers' access to civilians, and are perpetrated by rebels who perceive peacekeepers as proxies for the state<sup>31</sup> rather than impartial third parties deployed to enforce peace agreements.

The increase in PKOs' coercive capacities has coincided with policy reform providing peacekeepers the clear legal authority to fire upon armed groups. This reform stems from the growth of UN peacekeeping operations authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In particular, the expansion of the capacity and legal authority of peacekeepers on the ground is reflected in the adoption of new doctrines designed to more adequately protect civilians.<sup>32</sup> Although PKOs have not fully implemented all of these changes, they have resulted in a substantial shift in the practice of UN peacekeeping in the past decade. For example, in response to the emergence of the M23 Movement in 2012, the Security Council authorized the creation of a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) within MONUSCO to undertake the "peace-enforcement tasks of preventing the expansion of, neutralizing and disarming armed groups."<sup>33</sup> The Brigade supported Congolese armed forces in multiple engagements with M23, deploying infantry, mortars, artillery, and attack helicopters in the clashes.<sup>34</sup> Despite the defeat of M23 in late 2013, the Brigade continues to operate. Alongside the FIB's offensive duties, its mission included "creating an environment conducive to the restoration

---

<sup>31</sup>Howard 2019b

<sup>32</sup>These doctrinal changes are summarized in the following reports: "2015 Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations," "Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We need to change the way we are doing business," and "Handbook: The Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>33</sup>S/2013/119, 14

<sup>34</sup>S/2013/581, 4; S/2013/757, 8

of State authority.”<sup>35</sup>

## A New Logic of Violence against UN Peacekeepers

We develop a new theory of peacekeeper targeting that reflects the changes to PKOs, their capacities, and mandates. Existing studies argue that the balance of power between armed groups and government forces on the battlefield affects the targeting of peacekeepers. In “conventional” or “symmetric non-conventional” civil wars, both armed groups and the government use violence to jockey for a better position at the negotiating table.<sup>36</sup> The deployment of peacekeepers can make it harder for armed groups to convert any competitive advantage they enjoy on the battlefield into a better settlement since peacekeepers tend to protect weak actors that have agreed to peace terms. Therefore, armed groups whose fighting capacity exceeds that of the government may be more likely to target UN peacekeepers.<sup>37</sup> Attacking peacekeepers can also help armed groups improve their bargaining position as they sustain battlefield losses to government forces.<sup>38</sup> By a similar logic, relatively weak armed groups appear more likely to cooperate with peacekeepers whose deployment offers protection from the government and makes commitments to peace credible.<sup>39</sup>

These accounts offer important insights into the strategic nature of peacekeeper targeting but do not reflect the co-evolution of conflict and UN PKOs over the last two decades, as described in the previous section. UN peacekeepers no longer are easy targets that armed groups can costlessly attack to improve their bargaining position. Moreover, contemporary PKOs are unlikely to capitulate in response to violence from armed actors. The UN Security Council continues to renew the mandates of the missions to the Central African Republic, DRC, Mali, and South Sudan despite rising peacekeeping casualties in all four countries.

---

<sup>35</sup>S/2013/119, 14

<sup>36</sup>Kalyvas and Balcells 2010

<sup>37</sup>Salverda 2013

<sup>38</sup>Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016

<sup>39</sup>Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen 2013

The recent UN peacekeeping withdrawals from Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Darfur occurred after deployments lasting nearly fifteen years in each case. Relatedly, armed groups who attack peacekeepers attract special international condemnation and tend to be excluded from externally-brokered peace negotiations, even though governments have historically offered concessions to armed groups willing to use terrorist tactics.<sup>40</sup> In this section, we clarify the strategic incentives armed groups have to attack peacekeepers given the state of modern PKOs we highlighted above.

### *Peacekeepers and the Competition for Civilian Support*

Our general theoretical proposition is that *armed groups target peacekeepers whose presence undermines their attempts to garner civilian support*. We start by assuming that both armed groups and government forces seek to control the civilian population during civil war.<sup>41</sup> Civilians can provide armed groups with supplies and refuge from the government, and the government with critical information about the whereabouts of armed groups.<sup>42</sup>

Short of completely removing government forces from contested territories, armed groups have two strategies to consolidate their control over civilians. First, armed groups can commit violence against civilians to compel their political support. An extensive body of research outlines the conditions under which armed groups are most likely to govern coercively, including: when their organizational structures collapse,<sup>43</sup> as competition over control of the civilian population increases,<sup>44</sup> and after they seize territory previously controlled by government forces.<sup>45</sup> Second, armed groups can try co-opting local political support through the provision of public goods and services, like security and infrastructure.<sup>46</sup> Whether armed groups

---

<sup>40</sup>Thomas 2014

<sup>41</sup>Kalyvas 2006

<sup>42</sup>Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020

<sup>43</sup>Weinstein 2007

<sup>44</sup>Metelits 2010; Wood and Kathman 2015

<sup>45</sup>Oswald et al. 2020

<sup>46</sup>Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015



co-opt civilians’ support depends on their ultimate strategic goal, civilians’ pre-conflict relationship with the state, and interactions between a number of factors that are endogenous to conflict—including the presence of international actors whose activities limit the ability of armed groups to provide services.<sup>47</sup>

Contemporary PKOs frustrate armed groups attempts to coerce and co-opt civilian support, such that targeting peacekeepers becomes a viable strategy for armed groups to limit the reach of the government. Existing research has identified Chapter VII PKOs’ ability to upend rebel governance, sometimes to the degree that armed groups actively obstruct them.<sup>48</sup> Peacekeepers are particularly effective at protecting civilians from non-state armed groups during civil war.<sup>49</sup> They also help de-escalate the communal violence<sup>50</sup> that armed groups frequently exploit to boost recruitment.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, peacekeepers deployed under a Chapter VII mandate engage in operations explicitly designed to restore the capacity and reach of the state, such as training state security forces.<sup>52</sup>

We specifically argue that armed groups are more likely to target PKOs in areas where peacekeepers have the greatest capacity to act as counterinsurgents. Two types of peacekeeping personnel should be especially well-suited at securing the collaboration of local civilians, and thus present a serious threat to rebel governance: (1) peacekeepers with social, cultural, and linguistic similarities to the local population and (2) UN police. We address each of these in turn.

---

<sup>47</sup>Mampilly 2012; Stewart 2018; Mampilly and Stewart 2021

<sup>48</sup>Duursma 2019

<sup>49</sup>Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020

<sup>50</sup>Smidt 2020; Nomikos 2021 *b, a*

<sup>51</sup>See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/mali-islamist-armed-group-abuses-banditry-surge>, accessed 22 June, 2021.

<sup>52</sup>Blair 2019, 2020

## *Overlapping Social Identities*

First, we expect more attacks against PKOs when the social identities of UN peacekeepers overlap with those of civilians. Effective counterinsurgents are able to simultaneously discern which civilians are actively supporting insurgents and to facilitate information sharing between civilians and government forces.<sup>53</sup> Counterinsurgency research suggests that counterinsurgents' social identities may greatly influence their effectiveness along these dimensions. For example, COIN teams composed of pro-Russian Chechens in the Second Chechen War were more effective at preventing subsequent insurgent attacks than Russian teams. Coethnic ties gave Chechen teams access to local information networks and enabled them to more credibly threaten noncompliant behavior.<sup>54</sup> The United States Joint Chiefs of Staff stress that American troops should be informed on the social and cultural norms in their operating area when combating insurgencies, reflecting the notion that counterinsurgents are more effective when they share some identity with civilians.<sup>55</sup>

Deployed peacekeepers may similarly benefit from sharing various social identities with civilians. Existing research argues that peacekeepers who speak the same language or practice the same religion are better equipped to elicit information from civilians and prevent one-sided violence; and substantiate these claims at the mission-level.<sup>56</sup> Sharing some social identity with the civilian population may also boost the legitimacy of UN peacekeepers, further improving their ability to mitigate conflict.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the UN acknowledges the value of deploying culturally and linguistically diverse peacekeepers who can engage with civilians. Both the Department of Peace Operations' Infantry Battalion Manual and Civil Affairs Handbook discuss the importance of culturally aware and linguistically competent

---

<sup>53</sup>Kalyvas 2006

<sup>54</sup>Lyall 2010

<sup>55</sup>See page III-7 at [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_24pa.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24pa.pdf), accessed 26 May, 2021.

<sup>56</sup>Bove and Ruggeri 2019; Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri 2020

<sup>57</sup>Duursma 2020

personnel.

Applying our theoretical logic to these types of peacekeepers, armed actors should then respond strategically to deployments containing large numbers of peacekeepers with similar identities to local populations. Since such peacekeepers will be the most effective at undermining efforts to secure civilian support, armed groups will seek them out in order to bolster their own standing with the population. This logic leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** *Armed groups are more likely to target PKOs in areas where peacekeeping personnel and civilians have overlapping social identities.*

### *UN Police Patrols*

Police forces are an important tool of counterinsurgency that can gather intelligence on insurgent activities and enforce the rule of law. These functions inhibit the activities of insurgents by both directly increasing the chance of being targeted by security forces and increasing the difficulty of co-opting civilians. Police are most effective during the initial stages of an uprising, when their position within local communities enables them to provide early warning about insurgent group formation and mobilization.<sup>58</sup> However, they still serve essential roles as counterinsurgents once a conflict has begun. When police operate behind the front lines in contested areas, their presence ostensibly provides citizens with public safety, reducing the likelihood that citizens will support rebel groups<sup>59</sup>, improving confidence in the state,<sup>60</sup> and reinforcing the state's monopoly on violence.<sup>61</sup>

UN peacekeeping police attached to Chapter VII PKOs operate to the same effect: they have a uniquely small operational footprint that allows them to easily integrate with and gather information from different civilian populations.<sup>62</sup> As a result, UN police help restore

---

<sup>58</sup>Byman 2008

<sup>59</sup>Fearon and Laitin 2003

<sup>60</sup>Karim 2020*b*

<sup>61</sup>Blair 2020

<sup>62</sup>UN 2020; Nomikos 2021*b*

the rule of law<sup>63</sup>, mitigate crime,<sup>64</sup> and deter sexual violence.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, UN police are extremely effective at protecting civilians from armed groups, relative to other types of UN peacekeepers. Hultman, Kathman and Shannon find that the deploying 1,000 UN police offers the same level of protection to civilians—in terms of reducing the extent of one-sided violence—as deploying 10,000 UN peacekeeping troops.<sup>66</sup> These quantitative findings accord with qualitative research showing that UN police with the authority to arrest criminals were the only peacekeepers to successfully apply coercive force in the Central African Republic.<sup>67</sup>

**Hypothesis 2** *Armed groups are more likely to target PKOs in areas where large contingents of UN peacekeeping police are deployed.*

## Data

To test our argument, we examine empirical trends in armed group targeting of peacekeepers in Chapter VII UN PKOs deployed to Africa. This section describes the structure of our data and the following section outlines our research design and identification strategy.

### *Unit of Analysis and Sample*

Our dataset covers the entire population of countries in Africa with Chapter VII peacekeeping operations from 1999 to 2019. We chose this sample because it includes all countries with active conflicts to which the UN deployed peacekeepers authorized under multidimensional mandates that would make them targets for armed groups according to our theory. The sample also excludes countries with PKOs authorized under less expansive mandates. We take a country’s second-order administrative unit (hereafter “ADM2”) as our spatial unit of analysis, which should capture the local dynamics of the peacekeepers’ interactions with

---

<sup>63</sup>Blair 2020

<sup>64</sup>Di Salvatore 2019

<sup>65</sup>Johansson and Hultman 2019

<sup>66</sup>Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013, 2019

<sup>67</sup>Howard 2019b

civilians and insurgents while minimizing the effect of measurement error in event data that can be exacerbated at lower levels of aggregation.<sup>68</sup> Temporally, we aggregate our data up to the month.

We also consider the narrower sample of countries with Chapter VII UN PKOs that were active in Africa as of January 1, 2020.<sup>69</sup> Focusing on this sample offers a more precise test of our hypotheses because recently authorized Chapter VII PKOs face increasing pressure to act like counterinsurgents, particularly regarding their willingness to use force.<sup>70</sup> These missions are most likely to engage in day-to-day operations supporting the domestic government against armed groups and the expansion of state authority. For example, a unit of peacekeepers from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania is specifically tasked with “neutralizing” armed groups whose presence specifically threatens state authority and civilian security in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>71</sup> Suggestive of their importance, these mission take up the greatest part of the UN’s peacekeeping resources—77% of all uniformed personnel (53,000 troops and police) and 69% of the total peacekeeping budget (\$4.5 billion) in the fiscal year 2019-2020.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, we focus exclusively on attacks against peacekeepers deployed as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This sub-national analysis provides an even more precise and rigorous test for our theory. Given that more peacekeepers have died in Mali than in any other ongoing peacekeeping setting, it represents a critical case for understanding why armed groups target peacekeepers.

---

<sup>68</sup>[Cook and Weidmann 2020](#)

<sup>69</sup>Six Chapter VII PKOs were active in Africa as of January 1, 2020: the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA).

<sup>70</sup>[Howard 2019a](#)

<sup>71</sup>See UN Resolution 2098 (2013), page 6.

<sup>72</sup>This is a conservative estimate of these missions’ importance to the UN since they do not include UNAMID.

Furthermore, limiting our sample to ADM2-months in Mali allows us to better address various inferential challenges, as we explain in greater detail below. In addition to quantitatively testing our hypotheses, we qualitatively analyze specific instances of peacekeeper targeting near the Malian *cercle* of Douentza to help substantiate our broader theoretical claim that peacekeepers are targeted when their operations prevent armed groups from consolidating civilian support.

*Dependent Variable: Peacekeeper Targeting*

Our outcome of interest is peacekeeper targeting. We operationalize targeting using geolocated data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project.<sup>73</sup> These data contain information on the parties associated with individual conflict events. They also generally describe each event in a `notes` field, which we use to assist in our coding of peacekeeper targeting. Events that denote the establishment of new peacekeeping bases, protests, and riots are excluded from our analysis, as are conflict events that cannot be geolocated to the ADM2 level. We use the ACLED database rather than the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED)<sup>74</sup> because the former contains 4.16 times as many observations as the GED in our geographic and temporal sample (excluding nonviolent events), indicating better—albeit noisier—coverage of the level of conflict activity. The ACLED data also provide detailed information about events more consistently, which helps us determine whether an event constitutes peacekeeper targeting.

We code peacekeeper targeting in three steps. First, we identify all instances for which ACLED lists one of the Chapter VII peacekeeping missions in our sample as party to the conflict event.<sup>75</sup> This yields 1,187 potential instances of peacekeeper targeting. Second, two authors separately review each event to determine whether it truly captured instances

---

<sup>73</sup>[Raleigh et al. 2010](#)

<sup>74</sup>[Sundberg and Melander 2013](#)

<sup>75</sup>Specifically, we conduct a regular expression search for the Chapter VII peacekeeping mission acronyms in the four `actor` fields in ACLED.

of armed groups deliberately targeting peacekeepers. Then, a third author independently adjudicates the 6.57% of observations (78 observations) for which the two authors made different coding decisions.<sup>76</sup> This results in our final count of 491 instances of peacekeeper targeting by armed actors.<sup>77</sup> In a third step, we use this list of events to code for the binary onset of an attack against peacekeepers in a given ADM2-month.<sup>78</sup>

### *Independent Variables*

We argue that armed groups are most likely to target PKOs composed of personnel who either share an identity with the host country’s civilian population (Hypothesis 1) or are UN peacekeeping police (Hypothesis 2). To measure the variables underlying these hypotheses, we use the Robust Africa Deployments of Peacekeeping Operations (RADPKO) dataset, which provides local-level data on the deployment of UN peacekeepers by personnel type (troops/police), gender, and nationality.<sup>79</sup> The Geo-PKO dataset provides broader coverage and a more detailed breakdown of military troops, but we opt to use RADPKO due to our focus on Africa and UN police.<sup>80</sup>

We operationalize shared identity in two ways. First, for all three samples, we take the count of peacekeepers deployed from contributing countries that are geographically con-

---

<sup>76</sup>Events with insufficient information to assess intentionality are not treated as instances of peacekeeper targeting. Other events are excluded for several reasons, including intervention in an ongoing event: “At least one militia member was killed during a clash between as many as 100 Kamwina Nsapu fighters and Congolese soldiers in Tshimbulu. MONUSCO forces were deployed to reinforce the Congolese soldiers and also came under fire” (DRC10948); supporting military operations against a rebel group: “On April 16, the FARDC clashed with the ADF in the region of Garlic, 50km north of the city of Beni. 2 helicopters belonging to MONUSCO supported the FARDC with airstrikes” (DRC12187); autonomously conducting military operations: “United Nations peacekeeping forces in Central African Republic retook strategic points of Bangassou Monday after armed rebels attacked over the weekend” (CEN3517); or friendly fire incidents: “Chadian peacekeeper opened fire on his colleagues, killing two and injuring one” (MLI1168). Identifiers in parentheses are from the `event_id_cnty` field in ACLED. See Appendix I for more details on these coding procedures.

<sup>77</sup>We use recently released UN data on monthly peacekeeper fatalities as well as data from [Henke 2017](#) to confirm the prima facie construct validity of our dependent variable. See Appendix H.

<sup>78</sup>We also measured the count of targeting events per ADM2-month (count) for robustness. We show in Appendix D that our results remain robust to this different operationalization.

<sup>79</sup>[Hunnicuttt and Nomikos 2020](#)

<sup>80</sup>[Cil et al. 2020](#)

tiguous with the country of deployment. Second, for our sub-national analysis of Mali, we summarize the total number of peacekeepers deployed from Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries since these are likely to be most socio-culturally proximate to social groups in Mali. Both measures draw on research showing that peacekeepers from contributing countries that are geographically proximate to the host country should be able to form closer and more trusting relationships with local inhabitants, all else equal.<sup>81</sup> The same research finds that peacekeepers' linguistic and religious distances to civilians conditions their efficacy.<sup>82</sup>

In order to operationalize the presence of UN police patrols in a given locality, we summarize all UN police deployed per ADM2-month from all contributing countries.

## Research Design: Identification and Estimation

Changes in the local deployment of peacekeepers may be correlated with observable and unobservable factors that independently explain why armed groups target peacekeepers. One major threat to inference is that shifts in the broader conflict environment may explain both where peacekeepers are deployed and why armed groups target them. If peacekeeping missions are more likely to deploy UN police or culturally similar peacekeeping troops to particularly violent areas, and it is easier for armed groups to attack peacekeepers in these areas, then any correlation we observe between types of peacekeepers and armed group targeting may be spurious.

*Ex ante*, we expect that selection effects of this kind will bias our results downward toward

---

<sup>81</sup>Bove and Ruggeri 2019; Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri 2020

<sup>82</sup>Bove and Ruggeri 2019. Both measures of distance are operationalized as a score ranging from 0 (personnel are culturally identical to the local population) to 1 (personnel are as culturally distant from the local population as possible). This construction prevents us from calculating and imputing the linguistic/religious distance of peacekeepers for ADM2-months in our sample in which no personnel are deployed. For this reason, we do not use this measure in our main analysis. However, we replicate our analyses using these measures of distance only among ADM2-months in our sample in which peacekeeping personnel are deployed. We report these results in Appendix F.



zero. Research has shown that peacekeepers deploy to the frontlines of conflict as a general rule.<sup>83</sup> However, UN force commanders typically prefer to send troops from UN member states like the Netherlands or Canada that have prior COIN experience, not culturally similar troops or UN police, to the most violent areas where armed groups might attack.<sup>84</sup> This deployment pattern suggests that UN police and peacekeepers whose social identity overlaps with civilians select out of areas where armed groups are more likely to target peacekeepers. As such, the nature of our analysis would bias against finding a positive relationship between the hypothesized deployment patterns—shared identity and policing—and targeting.

Nonetheless, we adopt three empirical strategies to address the potential threats to inference in our analysis. First, we explicitly model the temporal and spatial process by which peacekeepers select into patrolling some areas but not others. Second, we use a simulation-based sensitivity analysis to estimate the bias that an omitted variable would need to induce in order to change our results. Third, we exploit plausibly exogenous variation in the total supply of UN peacekeepers deployed to Chapter VII PKOs in Africa in an instrumental variable regression.

### *Modeling the PKO Deployment Process*

Following convention, we use Coarsened Exact Matching<sup>85</sup> to pre-process our sample along three factors that research and practice show determine where and how UN peacekeepers are deployed: pre-deployment levels of violence, development, and proximity to major cities.<sup>86</sup> These factors affect where peacekeeping bases are initially sited because they predict both the need for peacekeeping as a source of security and the logistical challenges the UN will

---

<sup>83</sup>Fortna 2008; Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018

<sup>84</sup>Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri 2020

<sup>85</sup>Iacus, King and Porro 2012

<sup>86</sup>Measures of accessibility are taken from AidData’s GeoQuery tool. We approximate local development using measures of nighttime luminosity from the Defense Meteorological Program Operational Line-Scan System dataset of nighttime light emission.

face when establishing a base.<sup>87</sup> Figures C1-C3 in Appendix C display the post-matching covariate balance of units in our cross-national and Malian samples.

In addition to pre-processing our data, we adjust our estimation for three time-varying factors that could be endogenous to the relationship between the local deployment of particular peacekeeping personnel and targeting. First, we specify a lagged binary indicator of targeting, since peacekeepers who are better equipped to engage in COIN may be disproportionately deployed to peacekeeping bases that have recently been targeted. We also specify a lagged count of all conflict events per ADM2, as targeting may coincide with a general rise in violence that elicits an increase in the local presence of peacekeepers. Finally, we control for the number of UN troops, lagged by one month, deployed per ADM2. Doing so helps address concerns that UN police or peacekeepers from geographically contiguous contributing countries are targeted more frequently because they deploy to larger peacekeeping bases.

When applicable, we also specify two sets of fixed effects. First, we include mission-level fixed effects in our cross-national analysis to adjust for time-invariant, unobservable features of missions that might explain both local peacekeeping deployments and the targeting of peacekeepers. The UN Security Council often identifies peacebuilding outcomes that are unique to individual missions, such as encouraging UN peacekeepers to help reclaim rubber plantations from ex-combatants in Liberia. Specifying these fixed effects ensures that variation in the particular peacebuilding activities missions undertake does not bias our analysis. Second, we include fixed effects recording the quarter and year of a mission's deployment to account for variation in mission-level factors, like mandate changes, that may uniformly affect local trends in targeting across each ADM2.

Attacks on peacekeepers could systematically follow temporal patterns. For example, targeting may become more frequent as missions progress because armed groups increasingly recognize its strategic value over time. For this reason, we include various time trends to

---

<sup>87</sup>Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018; Blair 2019

ensure that we explicitly model any residual temporal dependence between our units of analysis.<sup>88</sup>

We estimate the association between peacekeepers and their targeting as follows:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \gamma PKO_{k,i,t-l} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta} + t + t^2 + t^3 + \nu_m + \theta_r + \delta_q + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

where  $\gamma$  is the association of the  $k^{th}$  measure of UN peacekeeping in administrative unit  $i$  one month prior to month  $t$ ;  $\boldsymbol{\beta}$  captures the association of the aforementioned covariates specified in  $\mathbf{X}$ ;  $t$ ,  $t^2$ , and  $t^3$  are linear, exponential, and cubic time trends;  $\theta_m$  are mission-level fixed effects (when applicable); and  $\delta_q$  are quarter-year fixed effects. As a robustness check, we also estimate the effect of our key explanatory variables using a series of similarly-specified logistic and negative-binomial regressions since our outcome variable is either binary or a count. Tables E1-E4 in Appendix E demonstrate that our results are not sensitive to using a different functional form.

### *Simulation-based Sensitivity Analysis*

Given that we cannot fully model the process by which different Chapter VII PKOs deploy peacekeepers, we use a simulation-based sensitivity analysis to estimate how “strong” omitted variables would need to be to overturn our results.<sup>89</sup> In short, this analysis simulates how an estimated treatment effect would change if an omitted variable were to explain “ $X$ -percent” more residual variance in the treatment and outcome than does a theoretically relevant covariate that the researcher specifies. Such an exercise is particularly useful for this study because it provides more precise evidence against which we can interrogate the conditional ignorability assumption our selection-on-observables approach invokes.

---

<sup>88</sup>[Carter and Signorino 2010](#)

<sup>89</sup>[Cinelli and Hazlett 2020](#)

### *Instrumental Variable, UN Police*

To complement the sensitivity analysis, we leverage variation in geography and the “continental supply” of peacekeepers to generate plausibly exogenous variation in the local deployment of UN police to Mali.<sup>90</sup> Specifically, we interact the monthly count of UN peacekeeping police deployed to all Chapter VII PKOs in African with each Malian ADM2’s linear distance to the national capital to instrument the number of UN police deployed per ADM2-month. This approach follows Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis, who argue that variation in the total supply of peacekeepers to Africa is both exogenous to local conflict dynamics and heterogeneously affects subnational deployment patterns.<sup>91</sup> More proximate ADM2s might be more likely to receive additional peacekeepers than would more distant ADM2s if the total supply of peacekeepers to African increased—or might be less likely to experience a “shortage” in peacekeepers if the continental supply of peacekeepers decreased—because it should be easier for peacekeeping missions to deploy personnel near the national capital.

In using this instrumental variable, we importantly assume that only the local deployment of peacekeepers links the differential exposure of ADM2s to changes in the total supply of peacekeepers to local conflict. We address potential violations of these assumptions below.

## **Cross-National Analysis**

To begin our analysis, we highlight several trends in the incidence of peacekeeper targeting across all Chapter VII peacekeeping missions in our sample. We then present the main results from our cross-national, within-country empirical evaluation of the hypotheses.

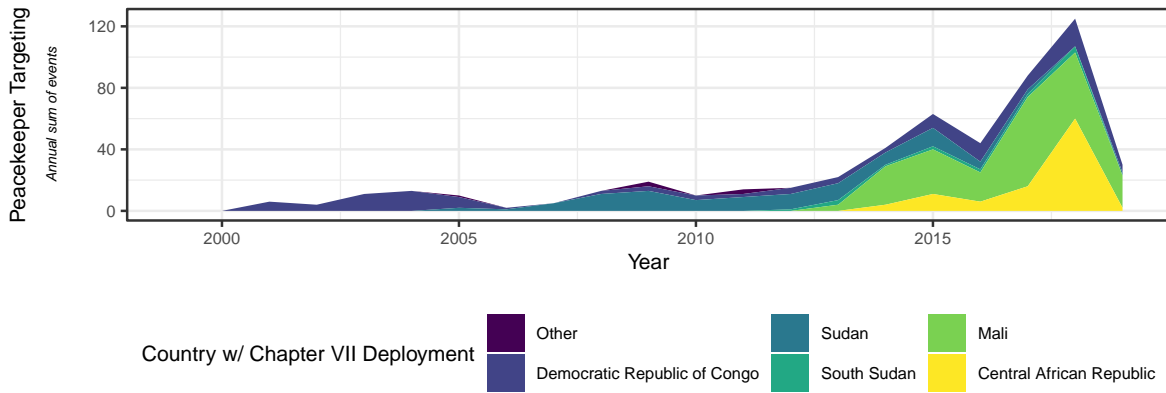
---

<sup>90</sup>We focus exclusively on Mali because the core assumptions of this identification strategy are more tenable within a single case.

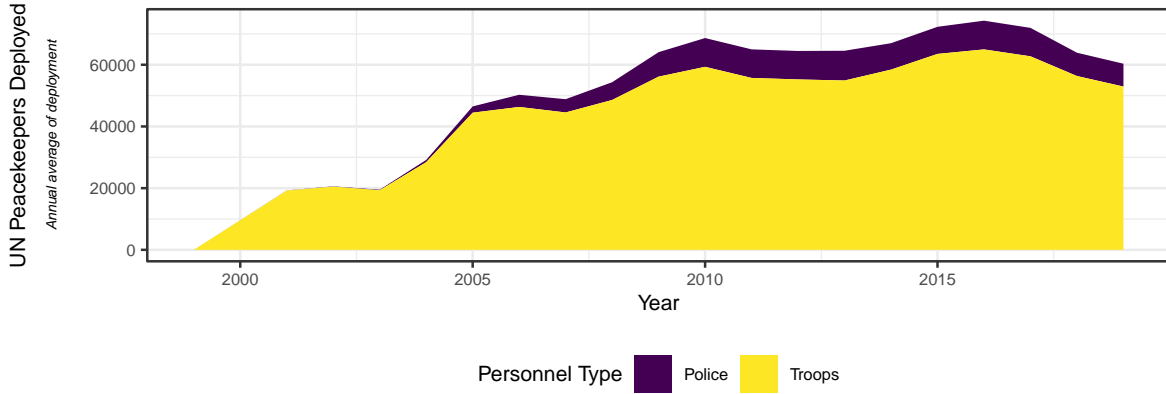
<sup>91</sup>[Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017](#)

**Figure 1:** Trends in Chapter VII UN Peacekeeping over Time

(a) Targeting of Peacekeepers, 1999-2019



(b) Deployment of Peacekeepers, 1999-2019



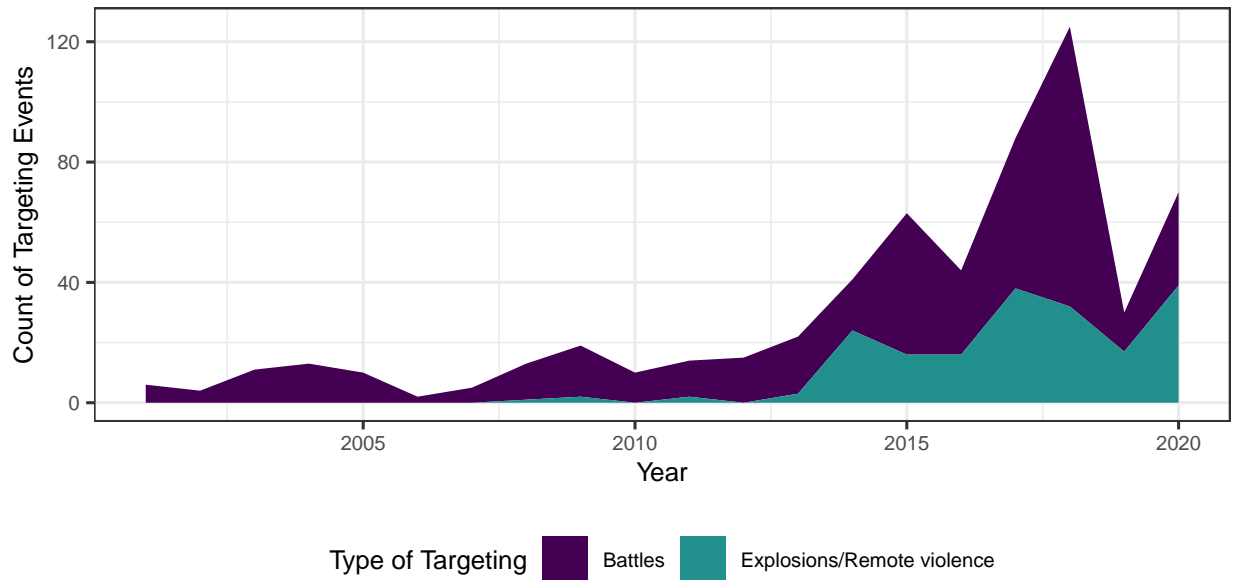
*Trends in Targeting*

First, our data suggest that the incidence of peacekeeper targeting among Chapter VII missions deployed to Africa has increased exponentially in the last 10 years (Figure 1a). Peacekeepers deployed to these missions were targeted 7 times per year from 1999 to 2009, 42 times per year between 2010 and 2019, and 64 times per year between 2015 and 2019.

In a second trend, the bulk of peacekeeper targeting is concentrated in the five African countries hosting a Chapter VII peacekeeping deployment in 2021: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, South Sudan, and Sudan.<sup>92</sup> Peacekeeper targeting in

<sup>92</sup>For Sudan, the figure aggregates across three missions: the United Nations Mission in Sudan up until

**Figure 2:** Types of peacekeeper targeting used against active Chapter VII missions.



Mali and the Central African Republic accounts for nearly 60 percent of the total targeting events in Africa since 1999, even though these two countries have hosted Chapter VII missions less than ten years. By contrast, the Chapter VII missions deployed to Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire only constitute 1 percent of the total peacekeeper targeting in our sample despite the fact that they hosted PKOs for almost fifteen years.

Third, the increase in targeting does not appear to purely be a function of mission size. For example, the PKOs in Sierra Leone and Mali had comparable numbers of peacekeepers at the peaks of their deployments but account for very different proportions of the total targeting events included in our sample—17,477 personnel (less than 1% of events) and 14,624 personnel (nearly 40% of events), respectively. More broadly, Figure 1b shows that the total number of peacekeeping troops (excluding police) deployed to Chapter VII operations has remained constant since 2010, even though violence against peacekeepers has exponentially increased during this period.

---

2011, the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur through the end of 2020, and the ongoing United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei.

Finally, how armed groups target peacekeepers also appears to shift in our sample over time. Armed groups are increasingly employing insurgent tactics and technologies of violence against peacekeepers. For example, Islamic extremist militants detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Kidal region of northern Mali on August 20, 2019, injuring several Guinean peacekeepers riding in a UN vehicle. While these sorts of attacks are almost absent from our sample from 1999 until 2013, they make up at least a quarter of all peacekeeper targeting events from 2015 until 2020 and exceed the number of conventional attacks against peacekeepers in 2020, the most recent year in our sample (Figure 2).

Combined, these trends make clear that the targeting of peacekeepers has increased in the past ten years, primarily among the active Chapter VII deployments. This pattern comports with the foundational logic underlying our theory, namely that armed groups are more likely to target peacekeepers as their latent capacity to act as counterinsurgents increases.

### *Main Results*

We next test whether the subnational composition of deployed peacekeeping personnel is associated with the variation in peacekeeper targeting we describe above. Our first hypothesis is that armed groups are more likely to target PKOs in areas where peacekeepers and civilians have overlapping social identities. According to our second hypothesis, armed groups should also be more likely to target PKOs as the local deployment of UN police increases. Both types of personnel plausibly increase PKO's capacities to engage in COIN, thereby making them more attractive targets for strategic armed groups looking to undermine the government.

We find no evidence to support our first hypothesis. The association between the number of peacekeepers deployed from geographically contiguous contributing countries and the onset of targeting is signed counter to our expectations and is statistically indistinguishable from zero, as we report in the first three columns of Table 1. This null result remains when we focus exclusively on the active set of Chapter VII PKOs whose personnel have additional

**Table 1:** Main Cross-national Results, Hypothesis 1 (Shared Social Identity)

	All Missions			Active Missions		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
Contiguous Peacekeepers <sub>t-1</sub> (1000s)	-0.001 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.010)
UN Troops <sub>t-1</sub> (1000s)	0.013** (0.005)	0.013** (0.005)	0.014** (0.005)	0.017** (0.005)	0.016** (0.005)	0.015** (0.005)
Nighttime Luminosity	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Travel Time to Major City	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Pre-Deployment Conflict	0.002** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)
PKO Targeting <sub>t-1</sub>	0.087* (0.040)	0.085* (0.040)	0.082* (0.036)	0.136*** (0.041)	0.135** (0.041)	0.126** (0.041)
Conflict <sub>t-1</sub>	0.004** (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)
(Intercept)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.003)		0.010* (0.004)	0.000 (0.005)	
Time Trends	-	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Fixed Effects	-	-	Yes	-	-	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.070	0.071	0.100	0.036	0.037	0.050
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.069	0.071	0.098	0.035	0.035	0.043
Num. obs.	32991	32991	32991	8657	8657	8657

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

capacity to act as counterinsurgents, reported in the last three columns of the table. Both sets of results are robust to operationalizing peacekeeper targeting as a count rather than a binary indicator (Table D.1 in Appendix D), using logistic regression models (Table E.1 in Appendix E), and negative binomial models with the count measure (Table E.2 in Appendix E). and when we change the model to a negative binomial We also find similarly inconclusive evidence when we operationalize shared social identity as the linguistic and religious distance of peacekeepers from civilians (Table F.1 in Appendix F).



**Table 2:** Main Cross-national Results, Hypothesis 2 (UN Policing)

	All Missions			Active Missions		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
UN Police <sub>t-1</sub> (100s)	0.003 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	0.017*** (0.005)	0.017*** (0.005)	0.017*** (0.005)
UN Troops <sub>t-1</sub> (1000s)	0.012* (0.005)	0.011* (0.005)	0.011* (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)
Nighttime Luminosity	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)
Travel Time to Major City	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Pre-Deployment Conflict	0.001** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)	0.002** (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
PKO Targeting <sub>t-1</sub>	0.087* (0.040)	0.085* (0.040)	0.082* (0.036)	0.129** (0.041)	0.128** (0.040)	0.119** (0.040)
Conflict <sub>t-1</sub>	0.004** (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)
(Intercept)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.009*** (0.003)		0.010* (0.004)	0.000 (0.005)	
Time Trends	-	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Fixed Effects	-	-	Yes	-	-	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.070	0.071	0.101	0.041	0.042	0.055
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.070	0.071	0.098	0.041	0.041	0.049
Num. obs.	32991	32991	32991	8657	8657	8657

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

We find only marginal evidence to support our second hypothesis when using the full sample of Chapter VII peacekeeping missions deployed to Africa. While the association between UN police and the onset of peacekeeper targeting is positive, it is neither statistically nor substantively significant. We report these results in the first three columns of Table 2.

Among the sample of PKOs that began after 1999 and remained in place through 2019, we find more compelling evidence in support of our second hypothesis. Table 2 shows that the

deployment of an additional 100 UN police is associated with a 1.7-percentage-point increase in the probability of targeting. This estimate is robust to operationalizing the dependent variable as a count rather than a binary indicator (Table D.2 in Appendix D), using logistic regression models (Table E.3 in Appendix E), and negative binomial models with the count measure (Table E.4 in Appendix E).

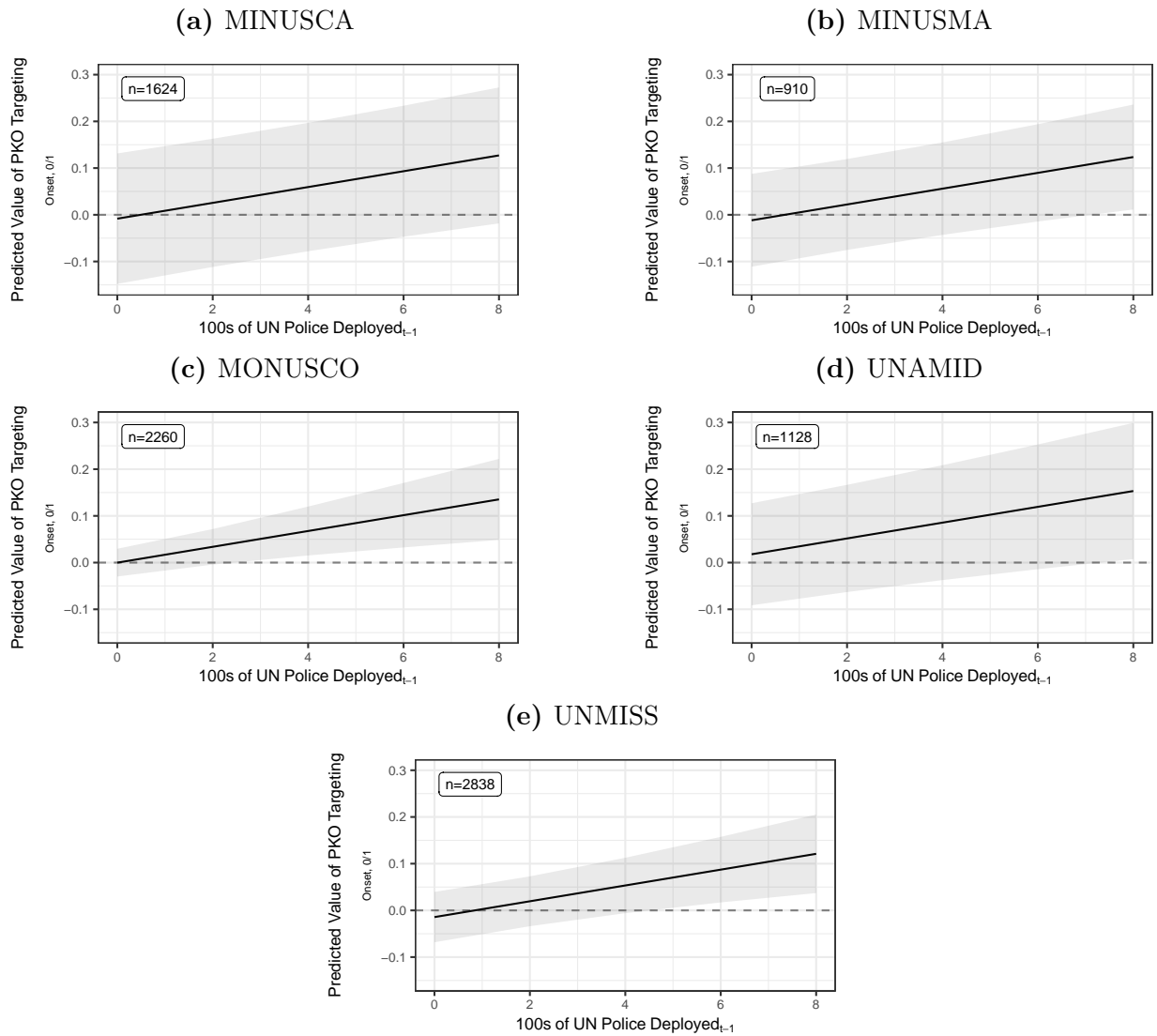
That the magnitude and precision of the association between UN police and PKO targeting increases when we focus exclusively on the sample of active Chapter VII PKOs in Africa is consistent with our general theoretical framework. As we discussed above, these missions are deployed to protracted asymmetric conflicts during which their personnel have coordinated extensively with state security forces. Under these conditions, it is more likely that armed groups perceive and treat UN peacekeepers as *de facto* extensions of state authority.

We provide two heuristics to help the reader interpret the substantive significance of our main result. First, Figure 3 visualizes the marginal effect of deploying additional UN police to a given ADM2 in a given month on the predicted probability of PKO targeting among the active Chapter VII deployments in our sample. Each panel shows how the predicted probability that armed groups will target UN peacekeepers (*y*-axis) rises as the number of deployed police in a locality increases from 0 to 800 (*x*-axis).<sup>93</sup> In every setting, armed groups are more likely to attack peacekeepers as the number of UN police deploy to an area. For example, in South Sudan (Figure 3e) the predicted probability that armed groups will strike peacekeepers is statistically indistinguishable from zero when there are 100 or fewer UN police. However, the predicted probability of an attack rises to more than 10-percentage-points as the number of police increases to 500 or more. Given that there are almost 2,000 UN police deployed in South Sudan at one time, this suggest a substantively significant relationship with far-reaching implications for the practice of peacekeeping.

---

<sup>93</sup>For each panel, we hold mission constant at the displayed acronym and all other covariates at their mean values.

**Figure 3:** Marginal effect of UN police on the probability of PKO targeting among active Chapter VII deployments



*Note:* 95% percent confidence intervals are displayed.

Second, we re-estimate our primary specification with a re-scaled measure of UN police that approximates the size of the contingents in which UN police are frequently deployed. These contingents, called “Formed Police Units” (FPUs), typically contain 140 personnel. We estimate that deploying an FPU-sized contingent of UN police is associated with a 2.4-percentage-point increase in the probability of being targeted. Even larger shifts in the

deployment of UN police seem plausible in certain active missions. For example, eight FPU were deployed to the Central African Republic in September 2016, and ten FPUs were active in Mali in December 2019.<sup>94</sup> Our analysis suggests that a re-deployment of even a few of these FPUs to a given area would be associated with a substantially heightened increase in the probability that armed groups would target peacekeepers in that area *every month that the FPUs remain*.

## Exploring Causal Mechanisms in Mali

Our cross-national analysis provides mixed evidence that attacks against UN peacekeepers reflect how PKOs frustrate armed groups' efforts to control the civilian population. Although we find a positive relationship between the deployment of UN police and attacks on peacekeepers, we fail to uncover any evidence that armed groups attack peacekeepers as their social identity converges on that of the civilian population. However, comparing across multiple peacekeeping missions—each of which faces unique conflict environments that require different day-to-day operations—limits our ability to make precise inferences about causal mechanisms. As such, we extend our results by analyzing the targeting of peacekeepers in Mali. Mali is a critical case for understanding why armed groups target peacekeepers. Although the mandate, size, and budget of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has not been substantially different from those of similar operations, it has experienced more maliciously inflicted fatalities than any other mission in UN history.<sup>95</sup> Explaining the underlying logic of these attacks in Mali could thus offer important insight into the targeting of UN peacekeepers elsewhere.

---

<sup>94</sup>[Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020](#)

<sup>95</sup>See Appendix H for a fuller accounting of malicious UN fatalities.

## *Context*

In January 2012, a coalition of armed groups recruiting primarily from the Tuareg minority group launched a rebellion against the government of Mali. The armed groups splintered in late 2012, forming Islamic extremist and secular separatist factions. In January 2013, France launched a military intervention against a coalition of Islamic extremist faction, ultimately known as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).<sup>96</sup> The separatist groups, eventually known as the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), aligned themselves with France and signed a peace agreement to end hostilities with the government in June 2015. JNIM exploited the government's weakness at this time to recruit beyond the Tuareg ethnic group.<sup>97</sup>

The UN Security Council approved a peacekeeping mission to Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013. The original mandate was multidimensional and included several statebuilding provisions that involved UN peacekeeping troops as well as police. From its initial deployment, MINUSMA's primary role was nominally to support the signing and enforcement of the 2015 peace agreement between the CMA and the government and its allies.<sup>98</sup> In this sense, its mandate does not differ substantially from other multidimensional PKOs such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, or the Central African Republic.<sup>99</sup>

In recent years, however, MINUSMA has increasingly come under attack by JNIM, which has launched a full-scale insurgency against the Malian government.<sup>100</sup> In contrast to the trends in targeting across all missions in our sample, the targeting of peacekeepers has been a ubiquitous feature of peacekeeping in Mali. On average, peacekeepers attached to MINUSMA have been targeted 2.27 times per month over the mission's tenure, and were targeted more than 3 times per month between 2017 and 2019. By comparison, peacekeepers

---

<sup>96</sup>This group includes domestic armed groups such as Ansar Dine and al-Mouribatoun as well as transnational groups such as al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. See [Wing 2013, 2014](#).

<sup>97</sup>[Pezard and Shurkin 2015](#)

<sup>98</sup>[Pezard and Shurkin 2015](#)

<sup>99</sup>[Howard 2019b](#); [Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri 2020](#)

<sup>100</sup>[Nomikos 2020](#)

deployed to the Central African Republic were targeted approximately 1.5 times per month, and those in the 11 other deployments in our sample experienced less than one attack per month on average.

MINUSMA engages in operations that take direct cues from COIN. For instance, the mission deployed with a special intelligence unit designed in light of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force’s experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>101</sup> This intelligence unit worked closely with French forces in Mali, at times assembling and distributing “targeting packs” of armed actors it perceived as threats to the mission.<sup>102</sup> MINUSMA’s close coordination with government forces has left some analysts questioning whether the mission is becoming an active party to the conflict.<sup>103</sup> Relatedly, anecdotal evidence suggests that armed groups in Mali actively perceive MINUSMA personnel as counterinsurgents who work closely with France and the Malian government to gather information from civilians.<sup>104</sup>

#### *Statistical Analysis of Armed Group Attacks on Peacekeepers in Mali*

Figure 4 visualizes patterns of peacekeeper targeting in Mali. Dark grey lines denote (labeled) first-order administrative divisions called *regions* while light grey ones denote major roads.<sup>105</sup> We use the RADPKO dataset to identify the location of UN bases, represented by the black points on the map. All conflict events not involving UN personnel are represented by the contour density plot underlying the points—the denser the fill of each contour, the greater the number of conflict events. In all areas, attacks on peacekeepers are strongly correlated with general levels of conflict violence, demonstrating the importance of accounting for levels of conflict in our analyses. We plot three different types of violence against UN personnel:

---

<sup>101</sup>[Nordlie and Lindboe 2017](#)

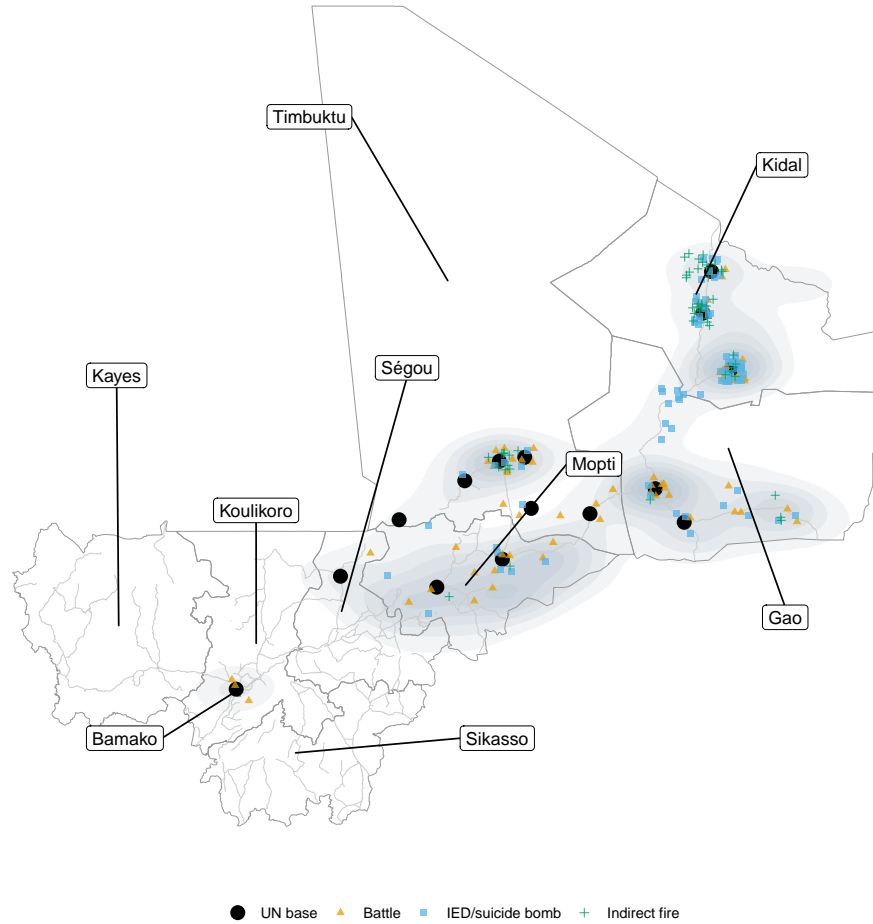
<sup>102</sup>[Karlsrud 2017](#)

<sup>103</sup>[Marín 2017](#)

<sup>104</sup>[ICG 2019](#)

<sup>105</sup>In 2012, Mali passed a law to expand from eight to nineteen regions, in addition to Bamako. However, the process has been very slow. In 2016, Ménaka *region* was created from existing districts previously in Gao and Taoudénit *region* from existing districts previously in Timbuktu. See [Nomikos 2020](#). For conceptual purposes, we present the map with the eight *regions* present throughout the conflict.

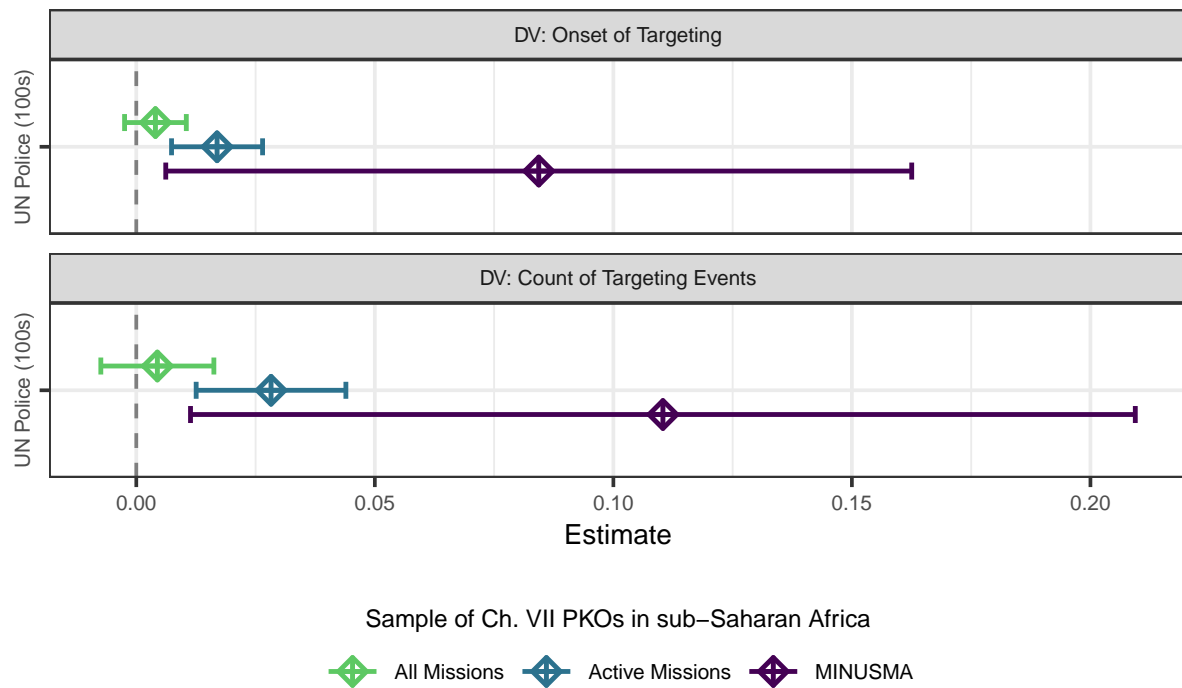
**Figure 4:** Geographic Distribution of Violence in Mali, 2012-2020



armed clashes are denoted by yellow triangles, IEDs and suicide bombings are represented by blue squares, and indirect fire attacks using rockets and mortars are depicted by green crosses. Attacks in northern Mali (Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao *regions*) consist primarily of vehicle-borne IED and mortar attacks on UN bases, with a scattering of IED attacks on UN vehicles on roadways. By contrast, attacks on UN peacekeepers in Mopti feature a variety of tactics and are less concentrated around UN bases.

We now turn to the results of our statistical analysis of sub-national data from Mali. Similar to our cross-national results, we find no evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1, namely that peacekeepers who plausibly share some identity with Malian civilians are related to

**Figure 5:** UN peacekeeping police attached to MINUSMA are associated with additional targeting.



*Note:* results are estimated via separate OLS regressions. 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

targeting. This null result persists whether we operationalize targeting as a binary measure of occurrence or a count of attacks (Tables D.2, D.4 in Appendix D). It also remains when we use different model specification (Tables E.1, E.2 in Appendix E). Finally, the null is also robust to alternative operationalizations of shared identity, including using the monthly deployment of peacekeepers from contributing countries that are ECOWAS member states, linguistic proximity, or religious proximity to measure the overlap in social identity (Table F.1 in Appendix F).

However, we find even stronger support for Hypothesis 2 in the MINUSMA sample compared to our cross-national sample. The deployment of an additional 100 UN police is associated with a 8.7-percentage-point increase in the onset of peacekeeper targeting. We graph this coefficient estimate with 95% confidence interval alongside the other two samples



for ease of comparison in Figure 5.<sup>106</sup> For example, this point estimate suggests that MINUSMA’s deployment of 140 Egyptian police to its Douentza base in June 2017 would be associated with an increase in the predicted probability of targeting by 12-percentage-points for a given month.

We implement a simulation-based sensitivity analysis to explore how robust this result is to potential confounding from omitted variables.<sup>107</sup> The analysis estimates two quantities to help researchers assess the internal validity of their results. The first quantity,  $RV_{q=1}$ , represents the amount of residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome that an omitted variable would need to explain in order to change the sign of the correlation between UN police and the onset of targeting we estimate among in Mali. The second quantity,  $RV_{q=1,\alpha=0.05}$ , represents the amount of residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome that an omitted variable would need to explain in order to nullify our point estimates at the conventional level of statistical significance.

We find that an omitted variable would need to explain more than 5.8% of the residual variance in the local deployment of UN police and the onset of targeting in Mali to nullify the positive relationship between UN police and targeting we estimate. For ease of interpretation, we benchmark our analysis to two covariates that should be highly endogenous to the deployment of peacekeepers and attacks against them: (1) the lagged count of violent conflict events in the ADM2-month *preceding* the ADM2-month of analysis and (2) the lagged binary indicator of whether armed groups attacked peacekeepers in the ADM2-month *preceding* the ADM2-month of analysis.

Figure 6 visualizes the results of the sensitivity analysis using these benchmarks.<sup>108</sup> On both plots, the dashed red line represents the level of confounding past which the association between UN police and the onset of PKO targeting (plotted as a black triangle) would no

---

<sup>106</sup>We report full results of these models in Appendix D.

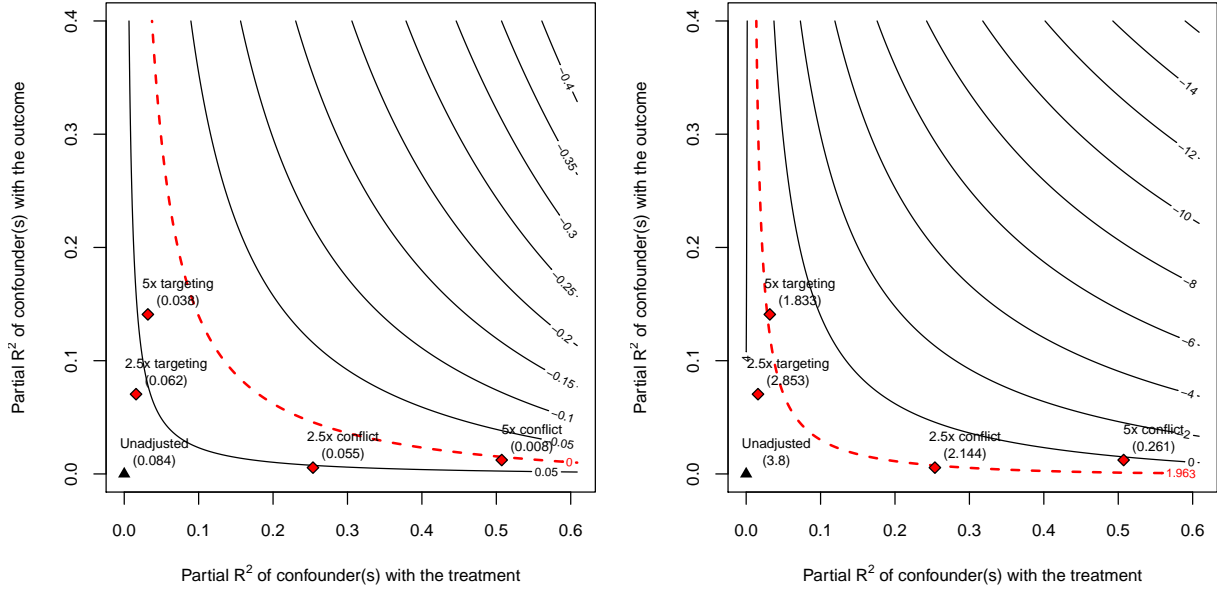
<sup>107</sup>[Cinelli and Hazlett 2020](#)

<sup>108</sup>Figure compiled using the `sensemakr` package in R.

**Figure 6:** Sensitivity of Results to Unobserved Confounding, Hypothesis 2 (policing)

*Outcome: Peacekeeper Targeting (0/1)*

Treatment	Est.	Std. Error	$RV_{q=1}$	$RV_{q=1, \alpha=0.05}$
UN Police <sub>t-1</sub> (100s)	0.084	0.022	0.117	0.058



(a) Change in estimate given confounding X-times stronger      (b) Change in *t*-statistic given confounding X-times stronger

longer be substantively or statistically significant at conventional levels. The red diamonds in panel (a) indicate how the estimates of the results would change if an omitted variable 2.5 or 5-times stronger than the lag of conflict (x-axis) or the lag of PKO targeting (y-axis) were included in our estimating equation. The association between UN police and targeting we estimate among ADM2-months in Mali would remain positive even if an omitted variable induced 5-times more bias than would removing either the lag of conflict or the lag of targeting from our model specification.

The red diamonds in panel (b) demonstrate how the *t*-statistic of the results would change if an omitted variable 2.5 or 5-times stronger than the lag of conflict (x-axis) or the lag of PKO targeting (y-axis) were included in our estimating equation. An omitted variable 5-times as strong as the lag of targeting would only just render our results statistically

insignificant at conventional levels. The positive association between UN police and targeting we estimate would remain statistically significant even in the presence of an omitted variable approximately 2.75-times more confounding than the lag of conflict.

That our main result is only sensitive to omitted variables that explain 2.75 times more residual variance in the deployment of UN police and PKO targeting than does the lag of conflict increases our confidence that the positive association between UN police and PKO targeting we estimate is not spurious. Figure 4 suggests that armed groups frequently target peacekeepers near conflict hot-spots in Mali. Moreover, existing research demonstrates that recent shifts in the conflict environment are highly deterministic of where and how UN peacekeepers are subnationally deployed, particularly after controlling for the logistical barriers to deployment (e.g., accessibility) that we focus on when pre-processing our data.<sup>109</sup> As such, there is unlikely to be an omitted variable that would render our results substantively or statistically insignificant. Collectively, this sensitivity analysis supports a more robust and specific interpretation of our result.

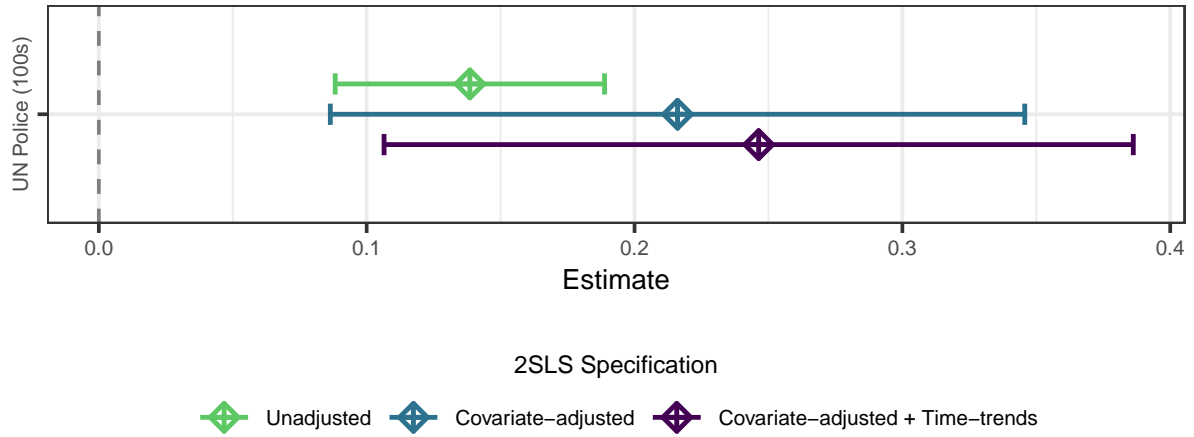
To further probe the robustness of this result, we also use an instrumental variable strategy to estimate the plausible effect of changes in the local deployment of UN police to their targeting by armed groups in Mali.<sup>110</sup> We generate the instrument by interacting the monthly count of UN peacekeeping police deployed across all African Chapter VII peacekeeping missions with the linear distance of ADM2s to Mali’s capital city of Bamako. This interaction term offers an instrument that is plausibly exogenous to spatial and temporal factors that may otherwise confound our inferences. To account for temporal endogeneity, variation in the continental supply of peacekeepers in the month of analysis is exogenous to local conflict dynamics in the Malian ADM2. To account for spatial endogeneity, MINUSMA faces greater logistical challenges (e.g., fewer airports and serviceable roads) when deploying peacekeepers

---

<sup>109</sup>Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018; Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020

<sup>110</sup>For a similar approach used cross-nationally, see Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017.

**Figure 7: 2SLS Results, Hypothesis 2 (Policing)**



*Note:* results estimated via three separate 2SLS regressions. 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

to ADM2s that are further away from Bamako. Combined, more distant ADM2s may be more likely to experience as-if random reductions in the local deployment of peacekeepers when the continental supply of peacekeeping police runs short.

We find consistent evidence to support Hypothesis 2 when instrumenting the local deployment of UN police as described above. UN police are positively associated with an increase in peacekeeper targeting among the pre-processed sample of ADM2s in Mali ( $est.= 0.246$ ,  $p-value= 0.005$ ). This result holds even when we specify lagged measures of UN troop deployment and development as covariates, and when we include different time trends to account for temporal dependence in the targeting of peacekeepers. We report the coefficient estimates from these models in Figure 7.<sup>111</sup>

The credibility of these estimates rests on the assumption that continental shortfalls in the supply of UN police conditionally affect armed groups' decisions to target PKOs only through their impact on the local deployment of UN police. One plausible violation of this assumption would be if continental shortfalls in UN peacekeepers were correlated with

<sup>111</sup>See Appendix G for full results and diagnostics.

an exogenous shock that heterogeneously affected local levels of development in Mali. For instance, a global economic recession might explain why UN member states contribute less to Chapter VII PKOs in Africa. If the local economic effects of this global recession were felt more harshly in ADM2s that were distant from Bamako—for the same reasons that it is harder for the UN to deploy peacekeepers in more remote locations—and local economic conditions are correlated with the onset of targeting, then the instrument would not be valid.

We offer two responses to this potential violation of the exclusion restriction. First, we adjust our two-stage least-squares regressions for local levels of development. Figure 7 shows that doing so has no effect on the substantive or statistical significance of our results. Second, we find that neither the instrument nor its constituent elements—the supply of UN policy or distance to Bamako—predict local levels of development (see Table G.3 in Appendix G). In other words, there is no reason to expect that the effects of a global economic recession would be felt more harshly in ADM2s further away from Bamako.

While we interrogate one plausible violation of the exclusion restriction, we caution readers against interpreting Figure 7 as conclusive causal evidence because other violations may exist. However, that the association between UN police and peacekeeper is consistent across all of our empirical strategies lends further credence to our argument that armed groups target peacekeepers in areas where they have greater capacity to act as counterinsurgents.

### *Qualitative Analysis of PKO Targeting in Central Mali*

We conclude by qualitatively investigating attacks against UN peacekeepers in the area surrounding Douentza, a small town in central Mali. Our statistical analysis offers robust evidence of a positive relationship between the deployment of UN police and the intentional targeting of UN peacekeepers. Yet these patterns do not provide explicit evidence of our causal mechanism; namely, that armed groups strategically target peacekeepers who frustrate their efforts to gain the support of civilians. In this section, we look for “clues” that we

would expect to see if the mechanism operates as we theorize.<sup>112</sup> We choose Douentza as an illustrative case of our theory.

Broadly, the nature of armed group attacks against peacekeepers in Douentza aligns with the two main empirical findings of our study: a null association between shared identity and PKO targeting and a positive association between UN police deployment and PKO targeting. Attacks in Douentza further confirm the positive relationship between UN police deployment and the targeting of peacekeepers, holding all other factors constant. Figure 8a shows that armed groups attacked peacekeepers in Douentza just once between 2013 and 2017 but then 11 times between 2017 and 2020. This increase in targeting coincides with the deployment of a formed police unit of Egyptian peacekeepers to the UN base in Douentza.

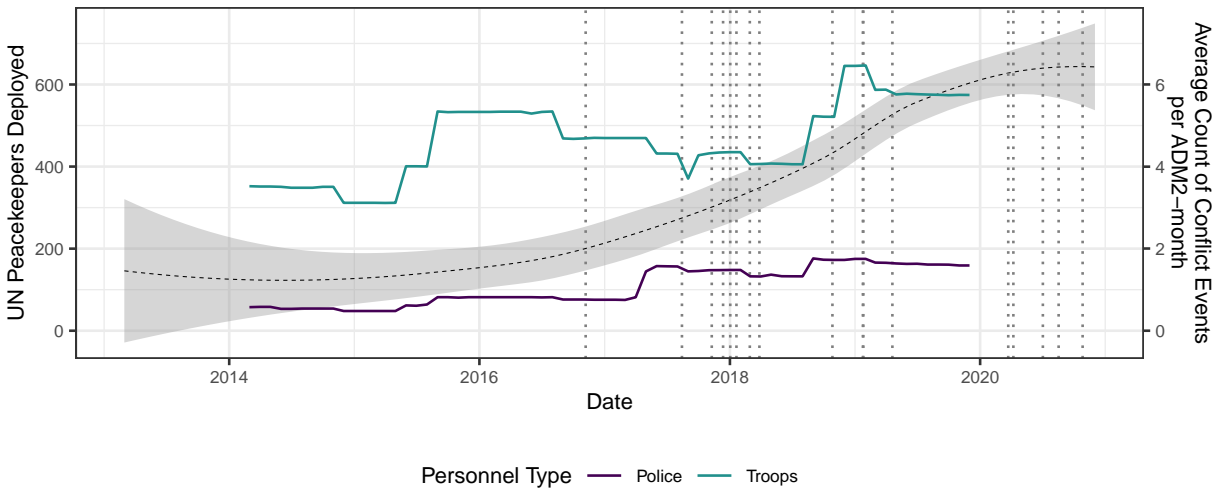
Armed groups in Douentza also do not appear to target peacekeepers who share some social identity to the host population more often than those who do not. From 2013 to 2020, there was no substantial shift in the composition of peacekeepers deployed to Douentza besides the addition of (culturally distant) Egyptian UN police. The UN deployed between 500 and 700 troops to Douentza, all from Togo or Senegal. Peacekeepers from these two Francophone West African countries should have broadly overlapping social identities relative to the local population. Yet there was not a substantial number of attacks on peacekeepers in the region until the Egyptian police joined the Togolese and Senegese troops.

Turning specifically to empirical clues which support our theoretical mechanism, we find that attacks on peacekeepers in Douentza appear to be part of a larger competition between armed groups, the government, and its international allies for the hearts and minds of Malian citizens. The first clue is the importance of UN peacekeepers to other UN programs designed to shore up civilian support. An especially effective strategy for the UN is to provide humanitarian aid through the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and its subsidiary organizations. MINUSMA deploys security patrols alongside the humanitarian convoys meant

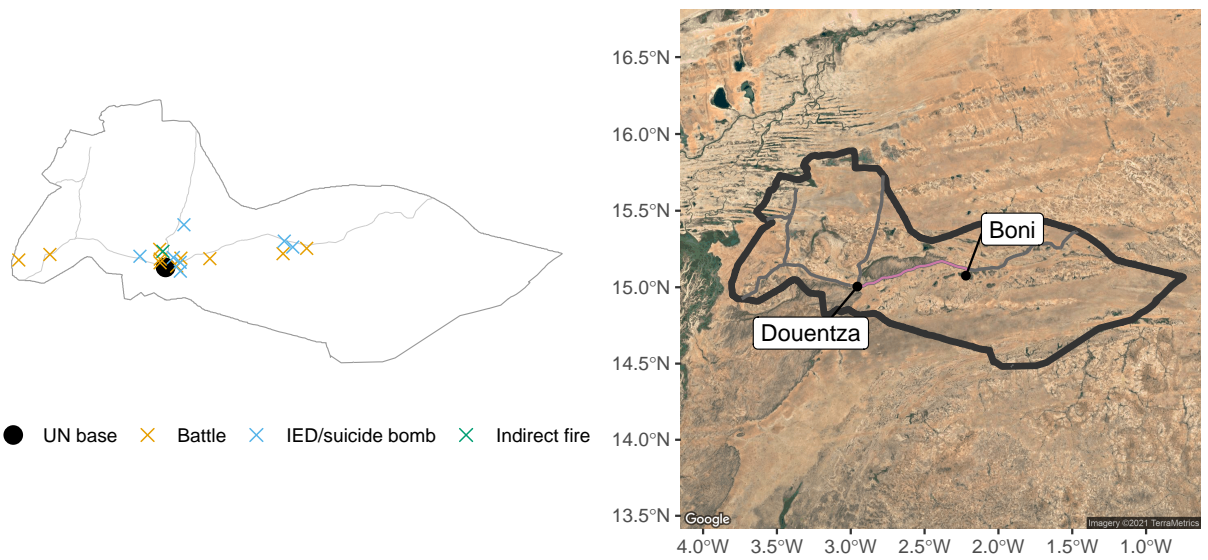
---

<sup>112</sup>[Humphreys and Jacobs 2015](#)

**Figure 8:** Peacekeeper Targeting in Douentza, Central Mali, 2014-2020



(a) Time-series



(b) Event locations

(c) Satellite imagery

*Note:* the dotted horizontal lines in Figure 8a mark individual attacks against peacekeepers in Douentza. The dashed LOESS-line in Figure 8a represents the average number of conflict events per month in Douentza, corresponding to the secondary y-axis.

to locally deliver aid, in part because these convoys come under near-constant attack by armed groups. For example, the vast majority of peacekeeper targeting in central Mali has

occurred along the road between Douentza and Boni, a small town to the east. This road is the UN’s lifeline for the supply of UNDP aid to the area, and is critical for gaining the support of a population skeptical of international intervention. Well aware of its importance, the armed group JNIM has frequently targeted the supply road. For example, in 2019 a MINUSMA vehicle protecting a UNDP delivery struck an IED planted by JNIM along the road, killing an Egyptian police officer. Armed groups often bribe civilians drivers to tip off the UN’s supply routes and schedules, further indicating that attacks against MINUSMA are both intentional and designed to interrupt the mission’s efforts to co-opt civilian support.<sup>113</sup>

Another clue that our mechanism explains the targeting of peacekeepers is MINUSMA’s investment in temporary operating bases in Douentza—staging areas from which peacekeepers patrol when they are not at one of the twelve major peacekeeping bases in Mali. These bases allow peacekeepers to embed themselves within communities beyond major population centers, ultimately to gather better information from civilians regarding community disputes and the whereabouts of armed groups. Noticing the activities they facilitate, armed groups have consistently attacked MINUSMA’s temporary operating bases with brutal efficiency. On February 10th, 2021, a suicide bomber drove a truck filled with explosives into a MINUSMA temporary operating base in the village of Kerena, located south of the Douentza-Boni road (see Figure 8b). The attack killed one peacekeeper and wounded twenty-eight others.

An additional clue is that MINUSMA has explicitly supported state security forces in Douentza. For instance, through its Quick Impact Project program, the mission provided approximately \$70,000 USD to help equip local units of the Malian Gendarmerie and National Guard. These projects began in June 2018, coinciding with the exponential increase the targeting of peacekeepers in Douentza that Figure 8a makes transparent.

A final clue that the targeting of UN peacekeepers is part of a broader insurgent strategy is the behavior of armed groups toward civilians. When attacks on peacekeepers have led

---

<sup>113</sup>Cold-Ravnkilde, Albrecht and Haugegaard 2017



to the accidental killing of civilians, JNIM has issued formal apologies, demonstrating a real concern for the opinions of civilians. For example, when a JNIM mine killed more than a dozen civilians, JNIM issued a public apology to the families of those killed:

It is with great sadness and sorrow that we received the news of the killing of a group of our brothers and our sons in a party that was traveling between Douentza and Boni in central Mali. We would like to affirm to the Ummah [Islamic community] and to the families of those killed that we put ourselves under Shari'a's governance, thus we are prepared to defend the implications of Shari'a on this unintended error.<sup>114</sup>

This apology is particularly striking because domestic armed groups often face a much lower penalty for inflicting civilian casualties than international forces.<sup>115</sup>

Apologies such as these align with armed groups' broader operational patterns in central Mali. Consider the tactics of the Islamic extremist organization Katiba Macina, an armed group within the JNIM coalition that recruits primarily from local ethnic groups. The group patrols roads and rivers in rural areas to prevent government forces from venturing out of urban centers, prevents the flow of goods and services into villages they suspect to be collaborating with government forces, strategically restricts the access of humanitarian groups to villages under its control, and rewards individuals who are sympathetic to their cause.<sup>116</sup> In a recent interview, Katiba Macina's leader describes MINUSMA as a *de facto* extension of French forces and the Malian government, suggesting peacekeepers attached to MINUSMA are not excluded from the kinds of attacks the group uses to limit the reach of the state.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, the patterns of attacks on peacekeepers in Douentza is inconsistent with several alternative explanations. First, as we discussed above, there is no evidence that armed groups explicitly target peacekeepers in the area because of overlapping social identities

---

<sup>114</sup>Weiss 2019

<sup>115</sup>Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013

<sup>116</sup>ICG 2019

<sup>117</sup>ICG 2019

(Hypothesis 1). In fact, armed groups rarely attacked peacekeepers before 2017 even though the UN peacekeepers in the area were from Togo and Senegal, two Francophone West African countries. Second, the increase in attacks against peacekeepers was not merely a result of the increased presence of peacekeepers. In fact, the overall numbers of peacekeepers deployed to Douentza has remained relatively constant since 2015. Finally, the increase in attacks against peacekeepers cannot be explained by armed group losses.<sup>118</sup> Insurgent groups such as JNIM have grown in power and have had more victories over time in Douentza; they are not attacking peacekeepers out of desperation or frustration. In conjunction with the clues we find in favor of the policing mechanisms, the lack of evidence in favor of these alternatives further increases our confidence in the theory.

## Conclusion

Attacks on UN peacekeepers threaten the stability of fragile settings where UN PKOs deploy. For UN member states who contribute personnel to ongoing PKOs, such attacks impact domestic political considerations and push leaders to withdraw resources, personnel, and funding from missions.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, the targeting of peacekeepers calls into question the role of impartiality as a foundational norm of UN peacekeeping. Why would armed groups attack peacekeepers if they are impartial? We offer important insights into this question by developing a theoretical framework centered on the idea that armed groups perceive peacekeepers as rivals in a competition for civilian support. We evaluate the implications of this theory using new cross-national data on attacks against peacekeepers as well as an in-depth case study of violence in Mali.

We find broad support for our argument that armed groups target UN peacekeepers as part of a larger strategy to win over civilian support. Specifically, our cross-national

---

<sup>118</sup>Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016

<sup>119</sup>Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015

results suggest that armed groups target areas with frequent UN police patrols, which gather valuable information about local criminal activity, the onset of communal disputes, and the location of armed groups.<sup>120</sup> One interpretation of these findings is that armed groups are attacking peacekeepers where UN personnel deploy in greater numbers. Another is that they target peacekeepers that might be culturally similar to civilians, as many peacekeepers in these areas tend to be. Existing scholarship has alternatively suggested that armed groups attack peacekeepers to gain the upper hand in peace negotiations.<sup>121</sup> We find little evidence in favor of these explanations.

Instead, our analysis of attacks against MINUSMA in Mali indicates that armed groups target peacekeepers in order to gain the upper hand against domestic governments that compete for the support of civilians. The scope of our theory extends beyond Mali. For example, in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA worked with the government's Ministry of Territorial Administration to facilitate deploying hundreds of civil servants to remote areas of the country, moving "427 of them to the prefectures of Nana-Mambéré, Nana-Grébizi, Basse-Kotto, Ouaka, Ouham and Mambéré-Kadéï."<sup>122</sup> Even as UNAMID was winding down in 2020, "seeds and agricultural implements were distributed to 300 households in the villages of Tukaylat and Kuaim."<sup>123</sup> These activities closely mirror the types of "hearts and minds" operations that counterinsurgents engage in elsewhere.<sup>124</sup> It is not surprising that armed actors view peacekeepers as agents of the state when public UN reports list these activities under the heading of "Extension of State Authority."

Our analysis supports and extends existing research on the interaction between domestic governments, rebel armed groups, and UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>125</sup> UN missions deploy

---

<sup>120</sup>Gordon and Young 2017; Di Salvatore 2019; Nomikos 2021 *b*

<sup>121</sup>Salverda 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016

<sup>122</sup>S/2016/305, 9-10

<sup>123</sup>S/2020/202, 7

<sup>124</sup>Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020

<sup>125</sup>Benson and Kathman 2014; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019

to asymmetric conflicts and work to stabilize the state, often providing basic public services where the state is not able to. Such actions place peacekeepers in the crosshairs of armed groups locked in a struggle with the state for the loyalty of civilian populations. PKOs rely on government approval to access and operate in specific areas, so they may find it more difficult to hold the government accountable and prevent government abuses.<sup>126</sup> This dependence further highlights the ways in which PKOs must align their interests with governments, and in doing so, act more as counterinsurgents in support of the regime than impartial noncombatants—which places them at risk of attack.

The deployment of peacekeeping personnel is subject to policy intervention. The evidence in this paper should help decision-makers in member states and UN force commanders understand the nature of violence against peacekeepers, which has proliferated over the past decade. Outside observers may be puzzled that armed groups would attack impartial peacekeepers. Yet we show that this is part of a strategic logic designed to win conflicts in fragile settings over the long-term. If the UN wants to protect its peacekeepers, it should prioritize areas where police are most visible. Pairing patrols with explosive experts that can clear improvised explosive devices, for example, may mitigate casualties. Ultimately, however, the targeting of peacekeepers may be an unavoidable part of the enterprise of modern peacekeeping operations. Peacekeepers may literally be the victims of their own success—the more they help restore peace in fragile settings, the greater the incentive for armed groups to target them.

---

<sup>126</sup>[Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019](#); [Nomikos and Villa 2021](#)

## References

- Arjona, Ana, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, eds. 2015. *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Balcells, Laia. 2017. *Rivalry and Revenge*. Cambridge University Press.
- Beber, Bernd, Michael J Gilligan, Jenny Guardado and Sabrina Karim. 2019. “The Promise and Peril of Peacekeeping Economies.” *International Studies Quarterly* 63(2):364–379.
- Benson, Michelle and Jacob D Kathman. 2014. “United Nations Bias and Force Commitments in Civil Conflicts.” *The Journal of Politics* 76(02):350–363.
- Berman, Eli, Joseph H Felter and Jacob N Shapiro. 2020. *Small wars, big data: the information revolution in modern conflict*. Princeton University Press.
- Blair, Robert A. 2019. “International Intervention and the Rule of Law after Civil War: Evidence from Liberia.” *International Organization* 73(2):365–398.
- Blair, Robert A. 2020. *Peacekeeping, Policing, and the Rule of Law after Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bove, Vincenzo and Andrea Ruggeri. 2019. “Peacekeeping Effectiveness and Blue Helmets’ Distance from Locals.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67(3):1630–1655.
- Bove, Vincenzo, Chiara Ruffa and Andrea Ruggeri. 2020. *Composing Peace: Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping*. Oxford University Press.
- Bove, Vincenzo, Jessica Di Salvatore and Leandro Elia. 2021. “UN Peacekeeping and Households’ Well-Being in Civil Wars.” *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Byman, Daniel. 2008. “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31(2):165–200.

- Carnegie, Allison and Christoph Mikulaschek. 2020. "The Promise of Peacekeeping: Protecting Civilians in Civil Wars." *International Organization* 74(4):810–832.
- Carter, David B. and Curtis S. Signorino. 2010. "Back to the Future: Modeling Time Dependence in Binary Data." *Political Analysis* 18(3):271–292.
- Cil, Deniz, Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman and Desirée Nilsson. 2020. "Mapping Blue Helmets: Introducing the Geocoded Peacekeeping Operations (Geo-PKO) Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 57(2):360–370.
- Cinelli, Carlos and Chad Hazlett. 2020. "Making sense of sensitivity: Extending omitted variable bias." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series B (Statistical Methodology)* 82(1):39–67.
- Cold-Ravnkilde, Signe Marie, Peter Albrecht and Rikke Haugegaard. 2017. SECURING THE DANGEROUS UN CONVOYS IN MALI: Inequality in MINUSMA #3. Technical report Danish Institute for International Studies.  
**URL:** <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13245>
- Cook, Scott J. and Nils B. Weidmann. 2020. "Lost in Aggregation: Spatial aggregation and event data." *Working paper* .
- Di Salvatore, Jessica. 2019. "Peacekeepers against Criminal Violence—Unintended Effects of Peacekeeping Operations?" *American Journal of Political Science* 63(4):840–858.
- Doyle, Michael and Nicholas Sambanis. 2006. *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Duursma, Allard. 2019. "Obstruction and intimidation of peacekeepers: How armed actors undermine civilian protection efforts." *Journal of Peace Research* 56(2):234–248.

- Duursma, Allard. 2020. "African Solutions to African Challenges: The Role of Legitimacy in Mediating Civil Wars in Africa." *International Organization* 74(2):295–330.
- Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." *The American Political Science Review* 97(1):75–90.
- Fjelde, Hanne, Lisa Hultman and Desirée Nilsson. 2019. "Protection Through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians." *International Organization* 73(1):103–131.
- Fjelde, Hanne, Lisa Hultman and Sara Lindberg Bromley. 2016. "Offsetting Losses: Bargaining Power and Rebel Attacks on Peacekeepers." *International Studies Quarterly* 60(4):611–623.
- Fortna, Virginia Page. 2008. *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents Choices after Civil War*. Princeton University Press.
- Fortna, Virginia Page and Lise Morjé Howard. 2008. "Pitfalls and prospects in the peacekeeping literature." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 11:283–301.
- Friis, Karsten. 2010. "Peacekeeping and Counter-insurgency — Two of a Kind?" *International Peacekeeping* 17(1):46–66.
- Gilligan, Michael J and Ernest J Sergenti. 2008. "Do UN interventions cause peace? Using matching to improve causal inference." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3(2):89–122.
- Gordon, Grant M and Lauren E Young. 2017. "Cooperation, information, and keeping the peace: Civilian engagement with peacekeepers in Haiti." *Journal of Peace Research* 54(1):64–79.
- Henke, Marina E. 2017. "UN fatalities 1948–2015: A new dataset." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 0(0).

- Howard, Lise. 2019a. "Peacekeeping is Not Counterinsurgency." *International Peacekeeping* 26(5):545–548.
- Howard, Lise Morjé. 2019b. *Power in peacekeeping*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huber, Laura and Sabrina Karim. 2018. "The Internationalization of Security Sector Gender Reforms in Post-Conflict Countries." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35(3):263–279.
- Hultman, Lisa, Jacob D Kathman and Megan Shannon. 2019. *Peacekeeping in the Midst of War*. Oxford University Press.
- Hultman, Lisa, Jacob Kathman and Megan Shannon. 2013. "United Nations peacekeeping and civilian protection in civil war." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(4):875–891.
- Hultman, Lisa, Jacob Kathman and Megan Shannon. 2014. "Beyond keeping peace: United Nations effectiveness in the midst of fighting." *American Political Science Review* 108(4):737–753.
- Humphreys, Macartan and Alan M Jacobs. 2015. "Mixing methods: A Bayesian approach." *American Political Science Review* pp. 653–673.
- Hunnicut, Patrick and William G. Nomikos. 2020. "Nationality, Gender, and Deployments at the Local Level: Introducing the RADPKO Dataset." *International Peacekeeping* 27(4):645–672.
- Iacus, Stefano M., Gary King and Giuseppe Porro. 2012. "Causal Inference Without Balance Checking: Coarsened Exact Matching." *Political Analysis* 20(1):1–24.
- ICG. 2019. Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists. Technical report International Crisis Group.



- Johansson, Karin and Lisa Hultman. 2019. "UN Peacekeeping and Protection from Sexual Violence." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(7):1656–1681.
- Kaldor, Mary. 2013. *New and old wars: Organised violence in a global era*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Kalyvas, Stathis. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kalyvas, Stathis N and Laia Balcells. 2010. "International system and technologies of rebellion: How the end of the Cold War shaped internal conflict." *American Political Science Review* pp. 415–429.
- Karim, Sabrina. 2020a. "The Legacy of Peacekeeping on the Liberian Security Sector." *International Peacekeeping* 27(1):58–64.
- Karim, Sabrina. 2020b. "Relational State Building in Areas of Limited Statehood: Experimental Evidence on the Attitudes of the Police." *American Political Science Review* 114(2):536–551.
- Karim, Sabrina and Ryan Gorman. 2016. "Building a More Competent Security Sector: The Case of UNMIL and the Liberian National Police." *International Peacekeeping* 23(1):158–191.
- Karlsrud, John. 2017. "Towards UN Counter-Terrorism Operations?" *Third World Quarterly* 38(6):1215–1231.
- Kilcullen, David, Matt Porter and Carlos Burgos. 2009. U.S. Government: Counterinsurgency Guide. Technical report United States Government.  
**URL:** <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>

- Lyall, Jason. 2010. "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War." *American Political Science Review* 104(01):1–20.
- Lyall, Jason, Graeme Blair and Kosuke Imai. 2013. "Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 107(04):679–705.
- Mampilly, Zachariah Cherian. 2012. *Rebel rulers: Insurgent governance and civilian life during war*. Cornell University Press.
- Mampilly, Zachariah and Megan A Stewart. 2021. "A typology of rebel political institutional arrangements." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(1):15–45.
- Marín, Alejandro Pozo. 2017. Perilous terrain: Humanitarian action at risk in Mali. Technical report Médecins Sans Frontières.  
**URL:** [https://arhp.msf.es/sites/default/files/Case-Study-03-Mali\\_EN.pdf](https://arhp.msf.es/sites/default/files/Case-Study-03-Mali_EN.pdf)
- Marinov, Nikolay, William G Nomikos and Josh Robbins. 2015. "Does electoral proximity affect security policy?" *The Journal of Politics* 77(3):762–773.
- Metelits, Claire. 2010. *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior*. New York: New York University Press.
- Narang, Neil and Jessica Stanton. 2017. "A Strategic Logic of Attacking Aid Workers: Evidence from Violence in Afghanistan." *International Studies Quarterly* 61(1):38–51.
- Nomikos, William. 2020. "Mali Country Report: Risks from the EU's Southern Border." *EU-LISTCO Project*.
- Nomikos, William G. 2021a. "Peace is in the Eye of the Beholder: How Perceptions of Impartiality Shape Peacekeeping Outcomes." *SocArXiv*.  
**URL:** <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/q5snx/>

- Nomikos, William G. 2021*b*. “Peacekeeping and the Enforcement of Intergroup Cooperation: Evidence from Mali.” *Journal of Politics* .
- Nomikos, William G. and Danielle N. Villa. 2021. “Unintended Consequences: Reconsidering the Effects of UN Peacekeeping on State-sponsored Violence.” *International Peacekeeping* .
- Nordlie, David and Morten Lindboe. 2017. Intelligence in United Nations Peace Operations: A Case Study of the All Sources Information Fusion Unit in MINUSMA. Technical report A joint publication of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment and the Norwegian Defence International Centre.
- Oswald, Christian, Melanie Sauter, Sigrid Weber and Rob Williams. 2020. “Under the Roof of Rebels: Civilian Targeting After Territorial Takeover in Sierra Leone.” *International Studies Quarterly* 64(2):295–305.
- Pezard, Stephanie and Michael Shurkin. 2015. *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement*. RAND Corporation.
- Raleigh, Clionadh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen. 2010. “Introducing ACLED – Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.” *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5):651–660.
- Rhoads, Emily Paddon. 2016. *Taking sides in peacekeeping: impartiality and the future of the United Nations*. Oxford University Press.
- Risse, Thomas and Eric Stollenwerk. 2018. “Legitimacy in areas of limited statehood.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21:403–418.

- Ruggeri, Andrea, Han Dorussen and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis. 2017. "Winning the peace locally: UN peacekeeping and local conflict." *International organization* 71(1):163–185.
- Ruggeri, Andrea, Han Dorussen and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis. 2018. "On the frontline every day? Subnational deployment of United Nations peacekeepers." *British Journal of Political Science* 48(4):1005–1025.
- Ruggeri, Andrea, Theodora-Ismene Gizelis and Han Dorussen. 2013. "Managing mistrust: An analysis of cooperation with UN peacekeeping in Africa." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57(3):387–409.
- Salverda, Nynke. 2013. "Blue helmets as targets: A quantitative analysis of rebel violence against peacekeepers, 1989–2003." *Journal of Peace Research* 50(6):707–720.
- Sheehan, Nadège. 2011. *The Economics of UN Peacekeeping*. Routledge.
- Smidt, Hannah M. 2020. "United Nations peacekeeping locally: enabling conflict resolution, reducing communal violence." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64(2-3):344–372.
- Stewart, Megan A. 2018. "Civil War as State-Making: Strategic Governance in Civil War." *International Organization* 72(1):205–226.
- Sundberg, Ralph and Erik Melander. 2013. "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 50(4):523–532.
- Thomas, Jakana. 2014. "Rewarding bad behavior: How governments respond to terrorism in civil war." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4):804–818.
- UN. 2020. "UN Police." <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/un-police>. accessed: 2020-08-20.

- Walter, Barbara F, Lise Morje Howard and Virginia Page Fortna. 2019. "The Extraordinary Relationship between Peacekeeping and Peace." *British Journal of Political Science* pp. 1–18.
- Weinstein, Jeremy. 2007. *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiss, Caleb. 2019. "JNIM Apologizes for killing civilians in central Mali." *Rethinking social inquiry: Diverse tools, shared standards* .  
**URL:** <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/09/jnim-apologizes-for-killing-civilians-in-central-mali.php>
- Wing, Susanna. 2013. "Making Sense of Mali." *Foreign Affairs* .
- Wing, Susanna. 2014. "French Intervention in Mali."
- Wood, Reed M. and Jacob D. Kathman. 2015. "Competing for the Crown: Inter-Rebel Competition and Civilian Targeting in Civil War." *Political Research Quarterly* 68(1):167–179.