A Strategic Logic of Violence against UN Peacekeepers

Patrick Hunnicutt*

William G. Nomikos†

Rob Williams‡

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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.

*Assistant Professor, Environmental Science and Policy, Chapman University.

†Corresponding Author. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis. Email: wnomikos@wustl.edu. Website: williamgnomikos.com. Twitter: [@wnomikos](https://twitter.com/wnomikos).

‡Postdoctoral Fellow, Weidenbaum Center, Washington University in St. Louis.

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Introduction

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is central to our understanding of the dynamics of modern conflict. Prior research provides considerable evidence that UN peacekeepers build peace (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Gilligan and Sergenti 2008). Deploying UN peacekeepers to war zones reduces the duration of conflict episodes (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017), mitigates violence (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013, 2014, 2019), boosts local economic development (Bove, Salvatore and Elia 2021) and protects civilians from rebel abuse (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020). Indeed, one recent review characterizes the relationship between peacekeeping and peace as “extraordinary” (Walter, Howard and Fortna 2019).

Yet recent surges in the intentional targeting of UN peacekeepers suggests their capacity to prevent violence 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 (UN Peace & Security Data Hub). This statistic is especially striking given that peacekeepers are meant to be impartial actors (Benson and Kathman 2014; Rhoads 2016; Nomikos 2021*b,a*). 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 to provide “no-nonsense, practical, short and long-term actions to reduce fatalities” (dos Santos Cruz 2017).

Despite the wealth of research on the effectiveness of UN PKOs, little is known about what causes violence against peacekeepers. Existing scholarship suggests that armed groups attack peacekeepers as part of a broader strategy to gain a more favorable peace settlement (Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen 2013; Salverda 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016). 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 (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). This omission is problematic, given that insurgencies are increasingly common in the settings where UN PKOs deploy (Kaldor 2013; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018; Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020).

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.¹ 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 (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2019) and livelihoods (Beber et al. 2019) of civilians. Particularly vital is the deployment of UN police, which bolsters the rule of law (Di Salvatore 2019; Blair 2020) and trains domestic security forces (Karim and Gorman 2016; Huber and Karim 2018; Karim 2020a), thereby undercutting armed groups' efforts to coerce or to co-opt civilians' support. Armed groups subsequently target peacekeeping operations with significant police contingents, employing 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 operations 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 increase their attacks on peacekeepers in response to the deployment of UN police contingents. However, we also find that violence against peacekeepers decreases once there are sufficient police deployed to collect intelligence relevant to civilian support of

¹We use insurgents and rebels interchangeably to denote armed groups in what Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) call irregular wars.

the insurgency or if police deploy alongside peacekeeping troops capable of protecting them. 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.² 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 (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020), 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 (Kalyvas 2006; Narang and Stanton 2017; Balcells 2017; Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020). To our knowledge, this article is the first to explicitly theorize and systematically test how peacekeepers affect these calculations as well.

²We specifically focus on the Douentza *cercle*—a second-order administrative unit in Mali's Mopti region.

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 (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2019). At the same time, doctrinal changes and expansive mandates have brought PKOs closer than ever before to full-fledged COIN operations (Friis 2010; Howard 2019a). 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.³

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 2017.⁴ 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 (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019). Peacekeepers also help restore the rule of law and secure civilian access to public goods and services (Blair 2019, 2020; Karim 2020a). 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.⁵ 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

³<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.

⁴S/2017/865, 7

⁵See page 2 of October 2015 report at <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/archives-2015>, accessed 17 June, 2021.

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 ([Howard 2019b](#)) 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 ([dos Santos Cruz 2017](#)). 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."⁶ The Brigade supported Congolese armed forces in multiple engagements with M23, deploying infantry, mortars, artillery, and attack helicopters in the clashes.⁷ 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 of State authority."⁸

⁶S/2013/119, 14

⁷S/2013/581, 4; S/2013/757, 8

⁸S/2013/119, 14

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 (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). 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 (Salverda 2013). Attacking peacekeepers can also help armed groups improve their bargaining position as they sustain battlefield losses to government forces (Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016). 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 (Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen 2013). Building on this argument, Di Salvatore, Polo and Ruggeri (2022) find that peacekeepers alter the balance of power in a way that may provoke escalation to terrorism as the previously stronger group tries to retain their power advantage. They also find that stronger groups are also more likely to attack peacekeepers than weak groups who are relatively less disrupted by PKOs’ presence.

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. 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 (Thomas 2014).

In this section, we clarify the strategic incentives armed groups have to attack peacekeepers given the state of modern PKOs we highlighted above. 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 (Kalyvas 2006). Civilians can provide armed groups with supplies and refuge from the government, and the government with critical information about the whereabouts of armed groups (Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020).

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 (Weinstein 2007), as competition over control of the civilian population increases (Metelits 2010; Wood and Kathman 2015), and after they seize territory previously controlled by government forces (Oswald et al. 2020). Second, armed groups can try co-opting local political support through the provision of public goods and services, like security and infrastructure (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015). Whether armed groups co-opt civilians' support depends on their ultimate strategic goal, civilians' pre-conflict relationship with the state, and interactions between a number of fac-

tors that are endogenous to conflict—including the presence of international actors whose activities limit the ability of armed groups to provide services (Mampilly 2012; Stewart 2018; Mampilly and Stewart 2021).

Our claim here is that securing local support is an important but, critically, not the only goal of targeting peacekeepers. For example, rebel groups might attack peacekeepers to prevent the UN from patrolling key areas, to show resolve in a conflict, to demonstrate their strength as a means of improving their position at the negotiating table, or to force Blue Helmets to become more risk averse. Nonetheless, 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 (Duursma 2019). Peacekeepers are particularly effective at protecting civilians from non-state armed groups during civil war (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Carnegie and Mikulaschek 2020). They also help de-escalate the communal violence (Smidt 2020; Nomikos 2021^{b,a}) that armed groups frequently exploit to boost recruitment. 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 (Blair 2019, 2020).

Police forces are also 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 (Byman 2008). 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 (Fearon and Laitin 2003), improving confidence in the state (Karim 2020b) and reinforcing the state’s monopoly on violence (Blair 2020).

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 (UN 2020; Nomikos 2021b). As a result, UN police help restore the rule of law (Blair 2020), mitigate crime (Di Salvatore 2019) and deter sexual violence (Johansson and Hultman 2019). Moreover, UN police are extremely effective at protecting civilians from armed groups, relative to other types of UN peacekeepers. Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013) 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 (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013, 2019). 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 (Howard 2019b).

For this reason, UN police personnel should be especially well-suited at securing the collaboration of local civilians, and thus present a serious threat to rebel governance. As a result, we expect insurgents to target peacekeepers more when operations increase the deployment of UN police.

Hypothesis 1 *There exists a positive relationship between the deployment of UN police and future violence against peacekeepers.*

However, we also hypothesize that this violence will decrease once UN police deployment reaches a certain threshold of effectiveness. At this level of deployment, UN police can collect enough information from local populations as to reduce violence against peacekeepers. They can pass this information on to local authorities or UN peacekeeping troops to prevent insurgent activity. The decrease in violence after this threshold should manifest in an

inverted U-shaped relationship between UN police deployment levels and violence against peacekeepers.

Hypothesis 2 *There exists an inverted U-shaped relationship between the deployment of UN police and future violence against peacekeepers.*

Finally, we also anticipate an interaction between the deployment of UN police and UN peacekeeping troops. Troops can protect UN police from the outset, thus enabling them to collect violence-reducing intelligence at lower deployment levels. In other words, while insurgents may wish to attack peacekeepers for strategic purposes, they are unable to do so for practical reasons. As a result, we theorize that an increase in UN police deployed alongside UN peacekeeping troops will be associated with a decrease in violence against peacekeepers.

Hypothesis 3 *There exists a negative relationship between the deployment of UN police alongside UN peacekeeping troops and future violence against peacekeepers.*

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 population of interest is peacekeepers that are likely targets of insurgent violence in active conflict settings. For this reason, we narrow our sample to the five UN peacekeeping operations deployed amidst ongoing fighting: 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), and the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). These missions, known within UN circles as “the Big 5,” account for the vast majority of instances of attacks against UN peacekeepers, both historically and over the past decade.

Although the narrower sampling frame potentially limits the generalizability of our findings, we choose it relative to a broader sample for three reasons. First, the narrower sample offers a more precise test of our theory. Extending the sample to all Chapter VII UN Peacekeeping Operations would also include cases in which armed insurgents were never present or active during the duration of the mission. Those UN PKOs included in our sample are most likely to engage in day-to-day operations supporting the domestic government against armed groups and the expansion of state authority. Second, given the doctrinal shifts in UN peacekeeping operations over the past decade, peacekeeping operations moving forward will likely more closely resemble this set of operations than any other group of peacekeeping missions. Finally, these five missions account for the vast majority of resources that the UN devotes to peacekeeping. 77% of all uniformed personnel (53,000 troops and police) and 69% of the total peacekeeping budget (\$4.5 billion) were deployed to these missions in the fiscal year 2019-2020. As a result, limiting our sample to these five countries still allows us to retain a large degree of external validity while maximizing the internal validity of the research design.

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 civilians and insurgents while minimizing the effect of measurement error in event data that can be exacerbated at lower levels of aggregation ([Cook and Weidmann 2020](#)). Temporally, we aggregate our data up to the month since this will reduce measurement error

surrounding the precise time and date that an event occurred.

We also present a secondary analysis where we focus exclusively on attacks against peacekeepers deployed as part of UN peacekeeping operations in Mali. This sub-national assessment 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. 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 ([Raleigh et al. 2010](#)). 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) ([Sundberg and Melander 2013](#)) 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.

Since each of the authors of this study reviews *every* event as we describe below, we also minimize potential measurement error related to the construction of the ACLED dataset.

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. This yields 1,187 potential instances of peacekeeper targeting. Second, two authors separately review each event to determine whether it truly captured instances of armed groups deliberately targeting peacekeepers. Then, a third author independently adjudicates the 78 observations for which the two authors made different coding decisions. This results in our final count of 491 instances of peacekeeper targeting by armed actors.⁹ 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.¹⁰

Our data suggest that the incidence of peacekeeper targeting among the population of Chapter VII missions deployed to Africa has increased exponentially in the last 10 years (Figure 1a). Moreover, the bulk of peacekeeper targeting is concentrated in the five African countries that we focus on: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, South Sudan, and Sudan. Peacekeeper targeting in 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. Moreover, 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)

⁹We 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.

¹⁰We also measured the count of targeting events per ADM2-month for robustness (see Appendix D).

Figure 1: Trends in Chapter VII UN Peacekeeping over Time

(a) Targeting of Peacekeepers, 1999-2019

(b) Deployment of Peacekeepers, 1999-2019

and 14,624 personnel (nearly 40% of events), respectively.

Independent Variable: UN Peacekeeping Personnel

We use the Robust Africa Deployments of Peacekeeping Operations (RADPKO) dataset to measure the local deployment of UN police across the five UN PKOs in our sample. RADPKO provides local-level data on the deployment of UN peacekeepers by personnel type (troops/police), gender, and nationality (Hunnicut and Nomikos 2020). 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 (Cil et al. 2020).

The count of UN police, lagged by a single month, is our primary independent variable of interest for Hypothesis 1. We square the lagged count of UN police to test Hypothesis 2. Then, we interact the lagged count of UN police with the lagged count of UN peacekeeping troops to test Hypothesis 3.

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 to particularly violent areas where it is easier for armed groups to attack peacekeepers, 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 zero. Research has shown that peacekeepers deploy to the frontlines of conflict as a general rule (Fortna 2008; Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018). However, UN force commanders typically prefer to send troops from UN member states like the Netherlands or Canada that have prior COIN experience, not UN police, to the most violent areas where armed groups might attack (Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri 2020). This deployment pattern suggests that UN police 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 policing and the targeting of peacekeepers.

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.

We use Coarsened Exact Matching ([Iacus, King and Porro 2012](#)) to pre-process our sample along four factors that research and practice show determine where and how UN peacekeepers are deployed: pre-deployment levels of violence, development, terrain, and proximity to major cities.¹¹ 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 face when establishing a base ([Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018](#); [Blair 2019](#)). We report full balance statistics in the Appendix.

In addition to pre-processing our data, we adjust our estimation for time-varying factors that could be endogenous to the relationship between the local deployment of particular peacekeeping personnel and targeting. First, we specify lagged counts of targeting and conflict, since peacekeepers who are better equipped to engage in COIN may be disproportionately deployed to peacekeeping bases that either have recently been targeted or are positioned in high-conflict areas. For similar reasons, we additionally control for the lagged counts of targeting and conflict in spatially-adjacent ADM2s. We also 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.

One possibility is that violence against peacekeepers is driven by shifts within the broader conflict, particularly changes in territorial control by the combatants. To account for this possibility we construct a variable that measures the trajectory of a conflict in the prior

¹¹Measures 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.

month, using information on changes in territory from ACLED. We code each event in the data as 1 when an armed group takes territory, -1 when the government retakes territory, and 0 if an event did not result in the transfer of territory, then take the average of all events in an ADM2 in the previous month. The trajectory variable thus ranges between 1 (every battle in the prior month resulted in rebel territorial seizure) and 0 (every battle in the prior month resulted in government territorial recapture). Including trajectory in our regression models allows us to control for the possibility that broader shifts within the conflict affect armed group targeting of peacekeepers.

When applicable, we also specify three sets of fixed effects. First, we include mission-level fixed effects 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. We also specify fixed effects corresponding to countries' first-order administrative units (ADM1), given that individual PKOs may regionally differentiate the specific peacebuilding activities they deploy within a given country. Finally, 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 ensure that we explicitly model any residual temporal dependence between our units of analysis ([Carter and Signorino 2010](#))

We estimate the association between UN Police and peacekeeper targeting as follows:

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

where γ 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; ν_m are mission-level fixed effects (when applicable); θ_r are ADM1 fixed effects; and δ_q are quarter-year fixed effects.¹² To test Hypothesis 2, we additionally include the squared, lagged count of UN police. To test Hypothesis 3, we include an interaction term containing the lagged counts of UN police and UN troops.

Cross-National Analysis

Main Results

Our first hypothesis is that the local deployment of UN peacekeeping police will be positively associated with the onset of subsequent peacekeeper targeting since UN police are especially well-suited to secure the collaboration of civilians. We find strong support for this hypothesis. As the first row of Table 1 shows, the local deployment of police is substantially and statistically significantly associated with the onset of targeting throughout all of our model specifications. This result holds whether we operationalize peacekeeper targeting as the total count of events per ADM2-month as in models (a)-(c) or as a binary onset as in models (d)-(f).

One unit of our policing variable (100 UN police personnel) corresponds approximately to the size of the contingents in which UN police are frequently deployed. These contingents, called “Formed Police Units” (FPUs), contain up to 140 personnel. We estimate that

¹²Due to quasi-perfect separation, we use ordinary least squares rather than logistic regression and negative binomial.

Table 1: Local deployments of UN police are associated with an increased probability of peacekeeper targeting.

	DV: Peacekeeper Targeting (Count)			DV: Peacekeeper Targeting (0/1)		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
UN Police _{t-1}	0.008*** (0.003)	0.024*** (0.006)	0.019*** (0.007)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.018*** (0.005)	0.015** (0.006)
UN Police _{t-1} ²		-0.001*** (0.000)			-0.001* (0.000)	
UN Troops _{t-1}	0.004 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.009)	0.005 (0.009)	0.002 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.003 (0.006)
UN Police _{t-1} × UN Troops _{t-1}			-0.004* (0.002)			-0.002 (0.002)
Targeting _{t-1}	0.132*** (0.051)	0.130** (0.050)	0.131*** (0.051)	0.092*** (0.033)	0.091*** (0.033)	0.092*** (0.033)
Adjacent Targeting _{t-1}	0.038 (0.027)	0.039 (0.027)	0.039 (0.027)	0.025* (0.014)	0.025* (0.014)	0.025* (0.014)
Conflict _{t-1}	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Adjacent Conflict _{t-1}	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Trajectory _{t-1}	0.022 (0.041)	0.021 (0.041)	0.020 (0.041)	0.008 (0.037)	0.007 (0.037)	0.007 (0.037)
Pre-deployment NTL	0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Terrain	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Accessibility	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	0.012** (0.005)	0.012** (0.005)	0.012** (0.005)	0.007** (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)
(Intercept)	-0.128 (0.146)	-0.134 (0.146)		-0.022 (0.115)	-0.026 (0.115)	
Num. obs.	9865	9865	9865	9865	9865	9865

Note: All models include time trends, ADM1 fixed effects, mission fixed effects, and quarter-year fixed effects. Heteroskedastic-robust standard errors are specified. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Figure 2: The local deployment of UN police is non-linearly associated with the subsequent targeting of UN peacekeepers.

Note: marginal effects plot using coefficient estimates from model (b) in Table 1. All continuous covariates held at mean. Ribbon indicates 95% confidence interval.

deploying an FPU-sized contingent of UN police is associated with a 1.2-percentage-point increase in the probability of being targeted *for each month in which they are deployed to a locality*. Even larger shifts in the deployment of UN police seem plausible in certain missions. For example, eight FPUs were deployed to the Central African Republic in September 2016, and ten FPUs were active in Mali in December 2019 (Hunnicut and Nomikos 2020). Our analysis suggests that a re-deployment of even a few of these FPUs to a given area would be associated with a heightened increase in the probability that armed groups would target peacekeepers in that area every month that the FPUs remain.

We next test whether the relationship between local deployments of UN police and the onset of peacekeeper targeting is non-linear, as specified in Hypothesis 2. We also find support that local deployments of UN police are positively related with the onset of peacekeeper targeting up to some threshold of deployment, past which the relationship becomes negative,

as shown in the second row of Table 1. The local deployment of UN police is associated with an increase in count of attacks against peacekeepers, while the deployment of UN police, squared, is associated with a small decrease in the count of peacekeeper targeting (model (b)). This result holds when we alternatively operationalize peacekeeper targeting as binary onset of violence (model e).

Figure 2 graphs the non-linear relationship between the deployment of police and subsequent predicted count of attacks against peacekeepers using the results presented in model (b) of Table 1. As the figure shows, an increase of UN police deployment in a given locality is associated with an increase in predicted attacks up until 1200 or so police are deployed. At this point, any increase in deployed police is associated with a decrease in subsequent targeting of peacekeeping.

Finally, we test whether the co-deployment of UN peacekeeping troops attenuates the negative relationship between local deployments of UN police and targeting (Hypothesis 3). As Table 1 shows, the evidence is mostly in line with this hypothesis as well. We find that increasing the deployment of UN police absent the co-deployment of UN troops is strongly associated with an increase in the subsequent targeting. We also find that the coefficient attached to the interaction between UN police and UN troops is negatively signed, as hypothesized, though it is only weakly statistically significant ($p < 0.1$). Nonetheless, the magnitude and direction of the coefficient suggests a conditional relationship between UN police, troops, and peacekeeper targeting: the increase in targeting brought about by deploying UN police decreases somewhat when co-deployed with UN peacekeeping troops.

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 (Cinelli and Hazlett 2020). 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.

We find that an omitted variable would need to explain more than 6.1% of the residual variance in the local deployment of UN police and the onset of peacekeeper targeting to nullify the positive relationship between UN police and targeting we estimate. For ease of interpretation, we benchmark our analysis against one covariates that should be highly endogenous to the deployment of peacekeepers and attacks against them: the lagged count of peacekeeper targeting events per ADM2-month.

Figure 3 visualizes the results of the sensitivity analysis using these benchmarks.¹³ 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 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 5 or 10-times stronger than the lag of peacekeeper targeting (y-axis) were included in our estimating equation. The association between UN police and targeting we estimate would remain positive even if an omitted variable induced 10-times more bias than would removing the lag of targeting from our model specification. Similarly, the red diamonds in panel (b) demonstrate how the *t-statistic* of the results would change if an omitted variable 5 or 10-times stronger than the lag of peacekeeper targeting (y-axis) were included in our estimating equation. An omitted variable 10-times as strong as the lag of targeting would not nullify the positive correlation between UN police and targeting we estimate at the conventional

¹³Figure compiled using the `sensemakr` package in R.

Figure 3: Sensitivity of Estimated UN Police Effect to Unobserved Confounding

level of statistical significance.

That our main result is only sensitive to omitted variables that explain 10 times more residual variance in the deployment of UN police and PKO targeting than does the lag of

peacekeeper targeting increases our confidence that the positive association between UN police and PKO targeting we estimate is not spurious. 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 (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2018; Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020). 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.

Instrumental Variable Analysis

To further triangulate a causal interpretation of our estimates, we use an instrumental variable analysis to re-estimate the relationship between UN police and peacekeeper targeting. We leverage variation in geography and the “continental supply” of peacekeepers to generate plausibly exogenous variation in the local deployment of UN police. Specifically, we interact the monthly count of UN peacekeeping police deployed to all Chapter VII PKOs in African with each ADM2’s minimum travel time to the nearest provincial capital to instrument the number of UN police deployed per ADM2-month. This approach follows Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis (2017), 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 (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017). 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.

Figure 4 graphs the estimated two-stage least-squares coefficients attached to UN police

Figure 4: 2SLS Results, Hypothesis 1

Note: results estimated via 6 separate 2SLS regressions. 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

across six different model specifications. We find strong support for Hypothesis 1 when instrumenting the local deployment of UN police.¹⁴ That is, UN police are positively associated with an increase in peacekeeper targeting across all ADM2s in our sample, whether we operationalize targeting as a count of attacks or a binary onset. This result holds when we include various time trends to account for temporal dependence in the targeting of peacekeepers.

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 an exogenous shock that heterogeneously affected local levels of conflict. For instance, a global economic recession might explain why UN member states contribute less to Chapter VII PKOs in Africa. If the local political effects of this global recession were felt more harshly in ADM2s that were distant from the capital—for the same reasons that it is harder for the

¹⁴We limit our analysis to Hypothesis 1 because it is the primary hypothesis of our interest for our analysis. Further, we cannot guarantee the validity of the instrument for a quadratic term (Hypothesis 2) or an interaction (Hypothesis 3).

UN to deploy peacekeepers in more remote locations—and local conflict is 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 the lagged count of conflict events. Figure 4 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 police or minimum travel time to the nearest provincial capital—predict local levels of conflict (see Appendix). In other words, there is no reason to expect that the conflict-related effects of a global economic recession would be felt more intensely in remote ADM2s other than through the local deployment of UN police.

Overall, we cautions readers against interpreting Figure 4 as conclusive causal evidence because other violations of the exclusion restriction may exist. However, that the association between UN police and peacekeeper targeting 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.

Exploring Causal Mechanisms in Mali

Our cross-national analysis indicate that attacks against UN peacekeepers reflect how PKOs frustrate armed groups’ efforts to control the civilian population. We find that the strong positive association between UN police and targeting may be both non-linear and conditional on the co-deployment of UN peacekeeping troops. 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. Al-

though 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. Explaining the underlying logic of these attacks in Mali could thus offer important insight into the targeting of UN peacekeepers elsewhere.

MINUSMA has increasingly come under attack by a coalition of Islamic extremist factions known as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), which has launched a full-scale insurgency against the Malian government (Nomikos 2020). In response, 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 (Nordlie and Lindboe 2017). 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 (Karlsrud 2017). MINUSMA's close coordination with government forces has left some analysts questioning whether the mission is becoming an active party to the conflict (Marín 2017). 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 (ICG 2019).

Results

Figure 5 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. We use the RADPKO dataset to identify the location of UN bases, represented by the black points on the map. The denser the fill of each contour in the Figure, 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

Figure 5: Geographic Distribution of Violence in Mali, 2012-2020

in our analyses.

Similar to our cross-national results, we find that the local deployment of UN police is robustly associated with an increase in armed group attacks against peacekeepers in the subsequent ADM2-month (Table 2). We also find strong support for Hypothesis 3: UN troops appear to negatively moderate the otherwise positive association between UN police and subsequent peacekeeper targeting. These findings hold regardless of model specification.

However, our we uncover no evidence that the relationship between UN police and targeting is non-linear (Hypothesis 2).

What explains these divergent results? Our second hypothesis stipulates that once the local capacity of UN police to elicit information on armed groups' activities exceeds some threshold, UN forces should have sufficient information to successfully preempt targeting attempts (e.g., disabling roadside IEDs). This threshold may be unrealistically high for UN police to surpass in Mali. That UN troops appear to strongly moderate the positive association between UN police and targeting in Mali is consistent with this interpretation. UN troops have more coercive capacity than UN police, operating with support from attack helicopters and artillery when necessary. Our results suggest that the physical deterrence these technologies provide alone is capable of stemming peacekeeper targeting in areas UN police are deployed in Mali, reflecting the intensity and extent of recent conflict between insurgent groups like JNIM and MINUSMA.

Indeed, Figure 6 provides a heuristic to interpret the significance of the conditional relationship between UN police, troops, and targeting in Mali. Each panel visualizes the marginal effect of deploying additional UN police on predicted subsequent attacks against peacekeepers at different levels of co-deployment of UN peacekeeping troops, holding all covariates at their mean or reference category values. Panel (a) sets the co-deployment of UN troops to 0 personnel, panel (b) sets the co-deployment of UN troops to 300 personnel, panel (c) sets the co-deployment of UN troops to 600 personnel, and panel (d) sets the co-deployment of UN troops to 900 personnel.

Figure 6 shows that strengthening the presence of UN troops plausibly increases the cost of peacekeeper targeting such that armed groups becoming less responsive to larger local deployments of UN police. Of particular importance are panels (b) and (c), which show that redeployments of UN troops which are consistent with the actual presence of peacekeeping personnel in Mali can stem targeting in ADM2s where UN police are operating. Since its

Table 2: Local deployments of UN police are associated with an increase in peacekeeper targeting in Mali.

	DV: Peacekeeper Targeting (Count)			DV: Peacekeeper Targeting (0/1)		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
UN Police _{t-1}	0.163*** (0.063)	0.184* (0.103)	0.307** (0.123)	0.118** (0.046)	0.148* (0.081)	0.246*** (0.093)
UN Police _{t-1} ²		-0.009 (0.036)			-0.013 (0.028)	
UN Troops _{t-1}	-0.170** (0.073)	-0.181** (0.088)	-0.168** (0.072)	-0.123** (0.056)	-0.137** (0.068)	-0.121** (0.055)
UN Police _{t-1} × UN Troops _{t-1}			-0.201* (0.114)			-0.178** (0.083)
Targeting _{t-1}	0.104 (0.109)	0.104 (0.109)	0.095 (0.106)	0.084 (0.080)	0.083 (0.079)	0.075 (0.077)
Adjacent Targeting _{t-1}	-0.003 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.015)	-0.005 (0.015)	0.001 (0.014)	0.000 (0.014)	-0.001 (0.014)
Conflict _{t-1}	0.007 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)	0.006 (0.010)	0.004 (0.006)	0.004 (0.006)	0.003 (0.006)
Adjacent Conflict _{t-1}	-0.004* (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)
Trajectory _{t-1}	-0.090** (0.040)	-0.090** (0.039)	-0.083** (0.037)	-0.079** (0.033)	-0.080** (0.032)	-0.073** (0.031)
Pre-deployment NTL	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)
Terrain	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Accessibility	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	0.005 (0.015)	0.002 (0.017)	-0.019 (0.020)	0.006 (0.015)	0.002 (0.016)	-0.015 (0.018)
Num. obs.	1794	1794	1794	1794	1794	1794

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Note: All models include time trends, ADM1 fixed effects, and quarter-year fixed effects. Heteroskedastic-robust standard errors are specified. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

authorization in 2013, the average number of troops MINUSMA has deployed to ADM2s containing contingents of UN police is 439, with a standard deviation of 181. Shifting the co-deployment of UN troops from one standard deviation below this mean value to one standard deviation above it—represented by moving from panel (b) to panel (c)—reduces the predicted count of attacks against peacekeepers by an average of 10 percentage points, across the range of recorded values for the ADM2-level presence of UN police in Mali.

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 ([Humphreys and Jacobs 2015](#)) We choose Douentza as an illustrative case of our theory.

Broadly, the nature of armed group attacks against peacekeepers in Douentza further confirm the positive relationship between UN police deployment and the targeting of peacekeepers, holding all other factors constant. Figure 7a 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.

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

Figure 6: Increasing the co-deployment of UN troops attenuates the positive association between UN police and peacekeeper targeting in Mali.

(a) Marginal effect of UN police on targeting, holding UN troops at 0.

(b) Marginal effect of UN police on targeting, holding UN troops at 300.

(c) Marginal effect of UN police on targeting, holding UN troops at 600.

(d) Marginal effect of UN police on targeting, holding UN troops at 900.

Note: Rug plots on the x-axis visualize distribution of local UN police deployments per ADM2-month in Mali.

Figure 7: Peacekeeper Targeting in Douentza, Central Mali, 2014-2020

(a) Time-series

(b) Event locations

(c) Satellite imagery

Note: the dotted horizontal lines in Figure 7a mark individual attacks against peacekeepers in Douentza. The dashed LOESS-line in Figure 7a represents the average number of conflict events per month in Douentza, corresponding to the secondary y-axis.

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 or-

ganizations. MINUSMA deploys security patrols alongside the humanitarian convoys meant 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 (Cold-Ravnkilde, Albrecht and Haugegaard 2017).

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 7b). 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 7a 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 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 (Weiss 2019).

This apology is particularly striking because domestic armed groups often face a much lower penalty for inflicting civilian casualties than international forces (Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013)

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 (ICG 2019). 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 (ICG 2019).

Furthermore, the patterns of attacks on peacekeepers in Douentza is inconsistent with several alternative explanations. First, even if armed groups behave strategically, it might be the case that they believe that culturally proximate peacekeepers are better able to gather

information related to the insurgency and increased their attacks in Douentza accordingly. However, there is no evidence that armed groups explicitly target peacekeepers that are more culturally proximate. 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. 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. 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 Senegalese troops.

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 ([Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016](#)). 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 ([Marinov, Nomikos and Robbins 2015](#)). 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 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 ([Gordon and Young 2017](#); [Di Salvatore 2019](#); [Nomikos 2021 b](#)). 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 proximate 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 ([Salverda 2013](#); [Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016](#)). 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.”¹⁵ Even as UNAMID was winding down in 2020, “seeds and agricultural implements were distributed to 300 households in the villages

¹⁵S/2016/305, 9-10

of Tukaylat and Kuaim.”¹⁶ These activities closely mirror the types of “hearts and minds” operations that counterinsurgents engage in elsewhere (Berman, Felter and Shapiro 2020) 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 (Benson and Kathman 2014; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019). UN missions deploy 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 (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019; Nomikos and Villa 2021). 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

¹⁶S/2020/202, 7

more they help restore peace in fragile settings, the greater the incentive for armed groups to target them.

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