1 Introduction

Understanding Interventions to Stop Local-Level Violence

> The United Nations stands for the freedom and equality of all peoples, irrespective of race, religion, or ideology.
>
> Ralph Bunche (1904–1971)
> American diplomat and prominent UN official
> Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1950

On February 22, 2020, South Sudanese President Salva Kiir signed a peace agreement with his chief opponent, Riek Machar, pledging an end to the civil war that had killed more than 50,000 people and indirectly led to the deaths of nearly 500,000 civilians since South Sudan declared independence in 2011. Kiir, a member of the Dinka ethnic group, made a show of asking his long-time rival for forgiveness. Machar, a member of the Nuer group, pledged to do his part by joining a unity government as vice president and integrating Nuer rebels into the national military of South Sudan. The United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operation (PKO) in South Sudan (the United Nations Mission in South Sudan or UNMISS) supported the agreement, as did key regional powers. The peace agreement and unity government represented landmark achievements for the UN, which struggled for nearly a decade to bring Kiir and Machar to the negotiating table. Many in the international community and in South Sudan pinned their hopes for ending violence in the country on the settlement.[1]

Unfortunately for its residents, South Sudan remains unstable. Outbreaks of communal violence throughout the country have killed thousands and displaced tens of thousands more since 2020 alone; 2021 was the deadliest year to date, with almost 25,000 people killed. But communal disputes in South Sudan do not *always* become violent; they are frequently resolved amicably, often thanks to the presence of UN

[1] BBC News, "South Sudan rivals Salva Kiir and Riek Machar strike unity deal," February 22, 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51562367; Africa News, "South Sudan's Kiir, Machar agree to form unity government," February 21, 2020, www.africanews.com/2020/02/20/south-sudan-s-kiir-machar-agree-to-form-unity-government//.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

peacekeeping patrols. With more than 10,000 troops in the country, limiting the outbreak of communal violence has become a key focus area of UNMISS. For example, a company of Mongolian peacekeepers set up a temporary operating base in the northern town of Mayom in February 2021 after UN force commanders learned about cattle raids in the area. Patrolling from the base, the peacekeepers monitored ongoing disputes and reacted rapidly when they were likely to escalate. After a dispute in a nearby town they had been monitoring escalated in April 2021, peacekeepers were deployed to the area within three hours to prevent further violence and defused the situation. Similarly, a company of Bangladeshi peacekeepers from UNMISS established a base in August 2020 in the rural town of Tonj following reports of communal disputes in the area. Their regular patrols were remarkably successful at enforcing peaceful interactions between communities (Dumo 2020; UN News 2020). Why did communal violence persist even after the negotiated peace settlement? And why has UN peacekeeping facilitated the peaceful resolution of communal disputes in some parts of South Sudan but not others?

To answer these questions, this book focuses on local-level PKOs designed explicitly to prevent communal violence. I argue that deploying UN peacekeepers to fragile settings fundamentally changes the structural incentives facing communities in conflict. Although UN peacekeeping remains deeply flawed, from UN headquarters to patrols in the field, UN peacekeepers *can* prevent the outbreak of communal conflicts between civilians on the ground. Scholars typically attribute any UN success to its considerable efforts at the negotiating table: Peacekeepers help armed group leaders make lasting agreements that stabilize conflict settings from the top down. Yet such negotiations seem unable to prevent communal violence in places as diverse as South Sudan in East Africa, Mali in West Africa, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Central Africa. This book shifts the analytical lens to the local level to investigate the conditions under which peacekeepers successfully build peace from the bottom up. The book's main argument is that *UN peacekeepers succeed when local populations perceive them to be relatively impartial enforcers who are unconnected to the country of deployment, the conflict, and the parties to the dispute*. Impartial peacekeepers convince all parties that they will punish those who escalate communal disputes regardless of their identity, which increases communities' willingness to cooperate without the fear of violence. Peacekeepers can build peace from the bottom-up because they are outsiders.

Policymakers, pundits, and researchers have all grown increasingly skeptical of UN PKOs in recent years. In a March 18, 2016 *New York Times* op-ed titled "I Love the U.N., but It Is Failing," former UN Assistant Secretary-General Anthony Banbury argued that the UN's

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

approach to peacebuilding does not allow it to address the pressing security crises facing the world today despite being "uniquely placed to meet these challenges" (2016). Banbury laments a bureaucracy that inhibits rapid responses to problems emerging around the globe. The graphic above the article's text features the trademark UN flag's olive branches enveloping a black hole rather than a world map, suggesting that UN PKOs are international quagmires with minimal or no positive impact. At the core of this criticism is the idea that the UN cannot identify and resolve the "real" local issues that generate conflict. Scholars have echoed this sentiment and maintained that the UN fails to adequately consult local actors and relies instead on cookie-cutter approaches that prioritize international best practices over domestic political realities (Autesserre 2015; Campbell 2018). Some have even suggested that UN PKOs may unintentionally drag out violent conflicts by empowering corrupt, warmongering elites (Barma 2016; Nomikos and Villa 2022; Stearns 2022; Nomikos, Şener and Williams 2023). Writing to an audience of policymakers and scholars in *Foreign Affairs*, Séverine Autesserre put it even more bluntly: "The UN can't end wars" (2019).

The Argument in Brief

This book argues that such pessimism about the UN is unwarranted. Critics underestimate the effectiveness of UN PKOs because they overlook peacekeepers' ability to enforce nonviolent solutions to communal disputes. Drawing on insights from political science and other social science disciplines such as psychology and behavioral economics, I develop a new theory to explain how peacekeepers shape peaceful resolutions to communal disputes in fragile settings. I acknowledge that the UN may rely too heavily on top-down peacebuilding approaches that fail to address local issues. However, I argue that under certain conditions, peacekeepers can make civilians more willing to cooperate with one another to resolve disputes peacefully.

My argument derives from a simple insight: Civilian perceptions of peacekeepers affect whether the UN can prevent disputes from escalating. I develop what I call *localized peace enforcement theory* to explain how this works in practice by highlighting three elements from this insight. First, civilians will choose to cooperate to resolve a dispute peacefully if doing so is more beneficial – or less costly – than violent dispute resolution, which is often not the case in conflict settings. Second, locally deployed peacekeeping patrols can increase civilians' willingness to cooperate with members of other groups by lowering the perceived risks and dangers associated with cooperation. Third, peacekeepers' ability to encourage civilians to cooperate is a function of whether locals perceive

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

them as relatively impartial. I argue that perceptions of peacekeeper impartiality explain the considerable variation in the effectiveness of local-level PKOs.

A key implication of my theoretical framework is that UN peacekeepers are uniquely able to limit the escalation of communal disputes because local populations perceive them as being relatively impartial for three reasons. First, the UN is a multilateral organization branded in conflict and postconflict settings as a peacemaker. Unlike former colonial powers or neighboring countries with similar ethnic cleavages, domestic populations do not associate the UN with the interests of specific ethnic, religious, or tribal groups.[2] Therefore, the UN allows individual peacekeepers to conduct local-level operations behind a "veil" of multilateralism (Kahler 1992; Martin 1992). The second reason the UN is perceived as impartial is that it is an especially diverse international organization with 193 sovereign member states. The constituent forces of each mission are constantly rotated so that the nationality and composition of these forces shift over time. Third, the UN's rules of engagement proscribe violence against civilians. These constraints on its operations enhance the UN's reputation for impartiality because when international actors commit violence against individuals from a certain group, this convinces other members of the group that the actor is systematically biased against them (Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013). While these rules do not mean that UN peacekeepers never victimize civilians, they are historically less likely than other international actors – particularly soldiers from militaries deployed unilaterally to conflict settings – to harm civilians. For example, domestic and international observers accused UN peacekeepers of the systematic sexual abuse of minors in the Central African Republic (CAR); however, French soldiers deployed to the area at the same time (independently of the UN) were ultimately found to be the primary perpetrators (Howard 2019*b*).

Contribution of the Book

Prior work has offered three sets of explanations for peacekeeping successes and failures. First, some scholars argue that UN PKOs maintain the peace by deploying military troops and police officers who prevent armed groups from fomenting violence. However, well-resourced peace

[2] Some scholars have pointed out that the UN may be biased in favor of the status quo or incumbent governments. See Benson and Kathman (2014). As I explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, this perceived bias matters less for local-level outcomes than it does for understanding the UN's ability to collaborate with rebel groups.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

operations sometimes fail. Compared to UN PKOs, unilateral foreign interventions typically have more troops, better-trained soldiers, more sophisticated materiel, more financial resources, or all of the above. Moreover, many UN PKOs have similar levels of resources but varying levels of success. The second explanation is that peacekeepers help achieve peace by supporting informal and formal institutions. However, these practices rely on top-down institution building that may not be feasible in many settings in which the UN operates. Indeed, prominent criticisms of international intervention have questioned whether such approaches produce legitimate institutions or reduce the incidence of conflicts at all (Lake 2016; Russell and Sambanis 2022). According to yet another strand of research, peacekeepers must be invested – biased – to succeed (Fearon and Laitin 2004). However, bias is unlikely to help international interveners manage conflicts at the local level since biased peacekeepers will likely fail to influence the behavior of nonfavored groups. Indeed, since biased interveners wish to achieve the best possible outcome for their favored group, nonfavored groups will not take them seriously.

Examining these alternative arguments to explain peacekeeping success highlights how much we still do not understand about peacekeeping at the local level and how little progress has been made to identify which mechanisms make peacekeeping effective from the bottom up. The main shortcoming of these explanations is ultimately that they were not designed to describe how PKOs shape communal disputes. They are predominantly elite-level theories that scholars have extrapolated to the local level. Recent research has begun to explore empirical variation in the deployment of peacekeepers in specific localities (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017; Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020), but we still know very little about what happens when peacekeepers interact with civilians and how those interactions shape the prospects for peace. This book enriches our understanding by investigating the micro-level theoretical foundations of peacekeeping effectiveness.

The book makes three concrete contributions to the study of international interventions: one conceptual, one theoretical, and one empirical. Conceptually, it introduces a new framework for understanding what peacekeepers actually do in conflict and postconflict settings. I describe three regular practices that together constitute *localized peace enforcement*. First, UN peacekeepers conduct patrols authorized to punish the violent resolution of communal disputes. Specifically, the patrols' rules of engagement allow them to use force to defuse communal disputes before they turn violent. *The Handbook for the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping*, the UN's guide on peacekeeping tactics in the field, describes patrolling as "[entailing] credible deterrence actions

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

or engaging in offensive operations to prevent violence against civilians" (p. 141). Second, UN peacekeeping patrols apprehend individuals and groups that might escalate a communal dispute.[3] *The Handbook* describes this practice as "[apprehending] and temporarily [detaining] hostile persons or groups and, where appropriate, hand[ing] them over to the national authorities" (p. 141). In a third routine activity, peacekeepers monitor ongoing disputes through their constant patrolling. They gather information about potential threats of communal violence on these patrols, which they can use to enforce intergroup cooperation or apprehend individuals they suspect might escalate disputes (Gordon and Young 2017; Nomikos 2022). Alternatively, peacekeepers can pass along such intelligence to formal or informal authorities that may not have the resources to gather the information but are better equipped to act upon it.

In a theoretical contribution, the book builds on this conceptual foundation to identify the conditions under which international actors are likely to prevent communal disputes from becoming violent; I use these conditions to formulate my localized peace enforcement theory. The book's argument has important implications for how we understand the international community's role in managing civil war violence beyond sub-Saharan Africa. From Somalia to Iraq, troubled American and UN interventions have undermined confidence in international action of any sort, which outside observers malign as too far removed from the realities of local politics to be effective. By emphasizing how important it is that peacekeepers are perceived as international actors who help resolve communal disputes, this book not only paints peacekeepers in a more positive light; it also forces a reevaluation of the mechanisms by which international actors shape events in conflict settings. However, I also caution against turning peacekeeping missions into counterinsurgency operations.[4] As Chapter 2 documents, the UN's expansion of the scope of PKOs over time has deepened its involvement in conflict settings. If peacekeepers succeed because locals believe that they are impartial, expanding the use of force beyond protecting civilians will likely jeopardize that advantage.

My theory emphasizes the importance of UN peacekeeping and highlights the risks inherent in a heavy-handed approach to international intervention. Several recent high-profile UN reports have advocated a

[3] I use the term "apprehend" to distinguish this action from two related terms: "arrest" denotes a legal authority to criminally prosecute a suspect, while "detention" suggests the temporary suspension of liberty.

[4] Howard (2019*b*) reaches a similar conclusion.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

counterinsurgency approach to operations.[5] This notion is misguided. As I explain in Chapter 3, the strength of UN peace operations vis-à-vis other international interventions is precisely that they are *not* counterinsurgencies. Nowhere is this clearer than in Mali, where some observers have called for the UN to be more aggressive toward insurgents. These cries for action stem from a rise in insurgent violence against UN peacekeepers (Hunnicutt, Nomikos and Williams 2021) that has been so devastating that Banbury goes so far as to call Mali "our most grievous blunder." However, as I show in Chapters 6 and 7, UN peace operations achieved many important gains in Mali before the abrupt end of the peacekeeping operation in 2023. I argue that the mission there succeeded *because* it managed to distinguish its own practices from counterinsurgency operations, including those conducted by French troops also operating in the country. And, as Chapters 8 and 9 discuss, these local successes are not limited to Mali.

Empirically, I focus on UN peacekeepers' efforts to stop civilian-driven communal violence rather than elite-led armed group violence. Endeavors to prevent the outbreak of communal violence feature prominently in policy briefs by nongovernmental organizations, government documents, and UN reports but are almost entirely absent from political science scholarship. Previous studies have demonstrated that UN PKOs are an exceptionally potent tool for ending civil war violence (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Howard 2008). Indeed, prominent scholarship on UN peacekeeping has centered predominantly on the top-down effects of missions to address violence by organized armed groups (Autesserre 2010; Walter, Howard and Fortna 2021). However, conflict research has increasingly emphasized that communal disputes between civilians are central to political violence and successful postconflict reconstruction (Krause 2018; Carter and Straus 2019). Although prior research has recognized the importance of analyzing the effects of peacekeeping at the subnational level (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019) and introduced geocoded measures that capture peacekeepers' deployments (Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2020), much remains to be learned about how peacekeepers maintain order between ordinary citizens in conflict settings.

Communal Violence

Communal disputes over local issues such as land use, cattle herding, and access to resources are a critical source of instability in contemporary

[5] Inter alia, the December 2017 report "Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers" by retired Brazilian General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

politics. The primary difference between communal violence and other forms of political violence is the absence of the state. The actors involved in communal violence are individuals or social groups operating independently of the state with low levels of organizational complexity. Groups typically organize around a common identity, such as race, ethnicity, clan, or tribe (Sundberg, Eck and Kreutz 2012). In sub-Saharan Africa, they often fight for control over land for agricultural production or cattle herding. The sources of the initial conflicts vary: Traditional land boundaries may come into conflict with formal boundaries, civil wars or mass droughts may have displaced groups of people, or political parties or armed groups may seek to ethnicize communal disputes. Communal disputes may arise anywhere within a country, in rural as well as urban settings.[6]

I apply the term "local" to describe direct interactions between individuals or groups of individuals. While local is very often used to describe the country as a unit of analysis, I use it exclusively to denote the communities within a country. For this reason, I employ "communal" interchangeably with "local" when discussing civilian communities. I use "dispute" to describe a disagreement between at least two civilians or civilian-led social groups (e.g., families, clans) residing in the same community. Just as there are different ways to resolve a dispute violently, there are multiple ways to do so peacefully. In conflict and postconflict settings, formal institutions lack the capacity or legitimacy to resolve disputes. Civilians may be able to resolve disputes themselves, especially if there is social cohesion within communities or strong informal dispute resolution institutions (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017).[7] Traditional leaders are critical in this regard, though even their capacity may be limited.

Communal disputes precede civil wars, continue during them, and typically do not end with the formal cessation of hostilities between belligerents (Krause 2019*b*). Communal disputes involving civilians are conceptually distinct from civil wars instigated by elite-led organizations. During civil wars, institutions often lose the capacity or legitimacy to resolve communal disputes. In practice, however, the cleavages in a communal dispute may mirror those in a wider civil war. But in these cases communal disputes are not initially connected to the civil war in the sense that they do not simply constitute civilians fighting on behalf of elites. Even when such disputes escalate and jeopardize a peace agreement,

[6] This definition builds on the conceptual work undertaken by Krause (2018).

[7] Krause (2018) further distinguishes between three social processes of communal nonescalation: depolarization of social identities, consolidation of civilian control, and engagement with armed groups.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

those civilians are not necessarily "spoilers" trying to disrupt the peace negotiations.

Communal clashes not only cause an immediate loss of life and forced displacement; they also spark new wars, lead to the formation and expansion of extremist organizations, and result in humanitarian catastrophes. To make matters worse, rising temperatures due to climate change have made land and water even more scarce, creating new disputes in countries ill equipped to manage them such as the CAR, the DRC, Mali, South Sudan, and Sudan. In each country, international actors successfully brought armed groups to the negotiating table, only to have local-level fighting disrupt the peace (Autesserre 2015; Howard 2019*b*; Krause 2019*b*; Nomikos 2022). But communal violence is not limited to these countries.

Communal disputes are a critical source of instability, violence, and disorder all over the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. They have killed nearly 250,000 people in the region since the turn of the century, more than violence from governments or rebel groups (Figure 1.1(a)). And the problem is getting worse: Figure 1.1(b) documents a clear upward trend in the number of fatalities caused by communal violence.

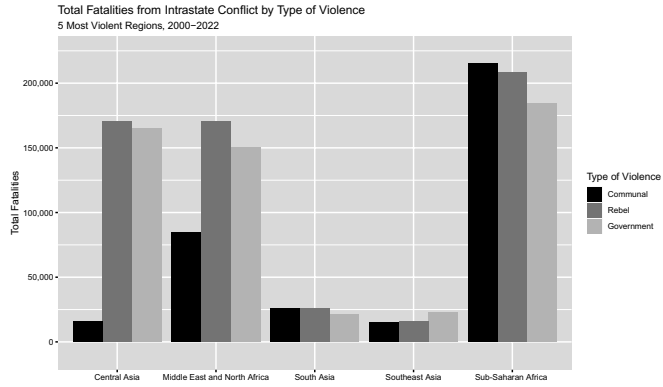
Peacekeeping Operations

In response to these trends, and in keeping with the UN's shift in focus starting in November 2019 to protecting civilians, the international community is increasingly tasking UN peacekeepers with preventing communal violence (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2020).[8] The Security Council mandates for all current multidimensional UN PKOs[9] in sub-Saharan Africa include the objective to reduce and prevent communal conflicts. Though the UN has committed significant resources to local-level PKOs, whether they will succeed remains an open question. The UN has historically been very successful at bringing faction leaders to the negotiating table and stopping fighting between rebel groups in major civil wars (Walter, Howard and Fortna 2021). However, any survey of places with local-level PKOs reveals at least some

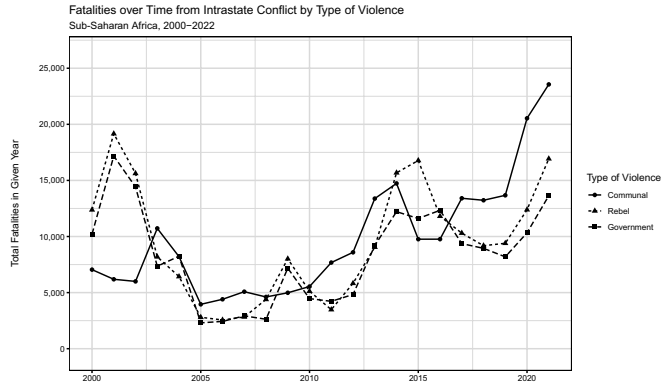
[8] While the UN refers to violence between civilian communities as "intercommunal," I use the term "communal violence," in keeping with the literature (Krause 2018; Smidt 2020*b*).

[9] I use the term "peacekeeping" to refer to the conflict-reducing activities of UN military and police personnel and "multidimensional" to denote any PKO authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. These missions consume the most UN resources and are the most similar to modern military interventions conducted by countries such as France, Britain, and the United States.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002



(a) Fatalities by region and conflict type



(b) Fatalities over time by conflict type

Figure 1.1 Descriptive statistics about communal violence, 2000–2022. Source: ACLED.

degree of communal instability. Although we should not necessarily blame the UN for all lingering tensions, this instability has rightfully called peacekeepers' effectiveness into question.[10] Given that climate change, global migration patterns, and the growth of violent extremism will likely exacerbate communal disputes in the coming years, it is vital to understand how UN peacekeepers can help resolve them.

During the Cold War, the UN typically had five or fewer peacekeeping missions in the field. At the time of writing, it had sixteen. Operations have grown qualitatively as well (Bellamy, Williams and Griffin 2010).

[10] For a prominent critique, see Autesserre (2015).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

UN peacekeeping missions now have larger budgets, more troops, and broader mandates to implement peace processes. In the Cold War years, UN peacekeepers were primarily deployed to monitor ceasefires between countries and, on occasion, rebel group disarmaments. Over the past three decades, peacekeepers have increasingly been deployed to conflict settings to rebuild social trust and restore confidence in local institutions (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2020).

To fully appreciate the importance of the qualitative growth in peace operations, it is important to understand how contemporary operations differ from those in the past. The UN Security Council historically authorized PKOs under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. These types of missions deploy UN personnel (civilian and military) to maintain peaceful relations between belligerent groups following a civil war, primarily in accordance with a negotiated peace accord (Fortna 2008). They primarily target elites – government officials, rebel leaders, and military commanders. In recent years, the UN Security Council has authorized PKOs under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. These missions have a mandate to provide temporary, physical security to a state's citizens in the aftermath of civil war and to create new (or bolster existing) formal or informal institutions that can peacefully resolve new disputes or conflicts that arise.

Peacekeepers are increasingly 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 2020). For this reason, peacekeepers in contemporary missions wield far greater coercive capacity than their predecessors. The increase in PKOs' coercive capacities has coincided with policy reforms that give peacekeepers clear legal authority to fire on armed groups: PKOs are generally authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The expansion of peacekeepers' capacity and legal authority on the ground is further reflected in the adoption of new doctrines designed to more adequately protect civilians.[11] Although PKOs have not fully implemented all of these changes, they have substantially altered the practice of UN peacekeeping in the past decade.

The UN increasingly designs PKOs and their mandates based on the understanding that communal violence is a central part of the conflicts

[11] These doctrinal changes are summarized in the following reports: High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, "Uniting our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership and People," 2015, www.globalr2p.org/resources/report-of-the-high-level-independent-panel-on-peace-operations-on-uniting-our-strengths-for-peace-politics-partnership-and-people/; UN Department of Peacekeeping, *Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We need to change the way we are doing business*, 2017; and United Nations, *Handbook: The Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping*, 2020, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/dpo_poc_handbook_final_as_printed.pdf.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

to which they will be deployed. Peacekeepers seek to prevent spirals that might eventually lead to violence. They also preempt communal violence once threats have been identified and attacks appear to be imminent. And if a threat materializes, peacekeepers respond in an attempt to stop the spiral of violence. Appropriate actions include the use of force "in accordance with the military ROE (rules of engagement) and the police DUF (Directives on Detention, Searches and Use of Force), including to apprehend and temporarily detain hostile persons or groups and, where appropriate, hand them over to the national authorities."[12] Although UN peacekeepers rarely use offensive force, they are mandated or allowed to do so should the need arise. The UN estimates that more than 95 percent of all deployed peacekeepers are mandated to use force to protect civilians, even if this involves using force against a party in a local conflict.

Research Design: Testing the Argument

A central challenge associated with empirically studying the impact of peacekeepers is the difficulty of conceptualizing peace operations and measuring their tangible and intangible influence on individuals' behavior on the ground. Even the UN has scant systematic data on peacekeepers' locations and activities, and the dynamic nature of recent peace operations further complicates the task of assessing them. Perhaps as a result, few political scientists have conducted comparative micro-level research on local-level peace operations designed to prevent communal violence. Prior empirical studies have focused almost exclusively on peacekeepers' ability to deter violence between armed groups (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2020), even those using local-level data (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017; Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019). Those that analyze communal disputes tend to be intensive qualitative case studies (Autesserre 2010) or primarily concerned with civilian peacebuilding programs (Blattman, Hartman and Blair 2014; Smidt 2020*b*).

This book combines micro-level theorizing with an empirical strategy built from the bottom up. In Chapter 3, I develop a formal model of intergroup cooperation with and without international peacekeeping. I use this model to derive a set of hypotheses that offer a series of observable implications at different levels of analysis.

I begin by testing the implications of my localized peace enforcement theory at multiple levels of analysis using qualitative, quantitative, and

[12] United Nations, *Handbook: The Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping*, p. 141.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

experimental data from a single case, Mali – a West African country with widespread communal violence. I justify the choice of Mali as a typical case of modern conflicts, especially on the African continent. The case facilitates a comparison of the effect of two different types of international interventions in the same setting: A French military intervention and subsequent PKO that began in January 2013, and a multidimensional UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) that deployed in April 2013. It also allows me to compare the effectiveness of UN peacekeepers from different nationalities, ethnicities, races, and sociolinguistic backgrounds. I collected qualitative data from forty-eight semistructured interviews with local political, religious, and traditional leaders in Mali as well as secondary sources. These data illustrate the critical role that domestic perceptions of international actors play in determining the success or failure of international interventions in Mali.

Using research designs preregistered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), I also present individual-level evidence consistent with my theory from fieldwork conducted in Mali.[13] I focus on individual responses to peacekeepers from different operations that are perceived as having different levels of bias (those deployed by the UN and France). I conducted a lab-in-the-field experiment with 512 participants to test my argument. This experimental approach allows me to isolate the effect of international peacekeeping while holding constant a set of other factors that may otherwise be correlated with a propensity to cooperate. A lab experiment is particularly well-suited to explore this type of question because it allows me to observe actual cooperative behavior under circumstances that do not introduce additional factors that may bolster or undermine cooperation.

Next, I show that the changes in individual perceptions and beliefs cause shifts in the behavior observed in the lab experiment. I present data from an experiment embedded in an original survey administered to 874 individuals in twenty rural and peri-urban communities in Mali. The experiment presents respondents with a vignette describing a land dispute between two families from different ethnic groups and asks if they believe violence is likely to break out. I randomly assigned some respondents to a treatment condition in which they were told a patrol from an international intervener, either the UN or France, discovered the land dispute.

To complement the experiments, I also constructed an original georeferenced time-series cross-sectional dataset on communal violence in Mali. An analysis of this data shows that UN troops select into areas where disputes are most likely to escalate. To account for these selection

[13] See Nomikos (2022).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

effects, I employ a twofold research design that leverages the historical idiosyncrasies of ethnic politics in Mali to estimate the effect of UN peacekeeping deployments across time and space. I use a geographic regression discontinuity design to compare communal violence on either side of the Burkina Faso–Mali border. This border splits the surrounding region into areas "treated" with UN peacekeeping patrols (on the Mali side) and control areas (on the Burkina Faso side). Although goods and people flow freely across the border, UN peacekeepers must follow international law and remain on the Mali side. I use a series of empirical tests to establish that the border assigns villages to peacekeeping patrols in an as-if random fashion, which allows me to identify the causal effect of UN peacekeeping. Next, I examine the efforts of peacekeepers from two West African countries, Togo and Senegal, to contain communal violence in the same part of Mali. The comparison allows me to control for alternative explanations while highlighting the important role of perceptions of bias even in the absence of a colonial power.

Finally, I show that these patterns apply beyond Mali using a cross-national quantitative analysis of UN PKOs at the local level. Over the past two decades, the UN has become the primary international actor engaged in local-level interventions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. But until now, it has not been possible to compare the success of such operations due to data limitations. To help address this research gap, I introduce the Robust African Deployment of Peacekeeping Operations (RADPKO) dataset that I created for this study. RADPKO is a georeferenced monthly dataset of all sub-Saharan UN peacekeeping deployments engaged in local-level operations in the 21st century: Burundi, CAR, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Darfur, DRC, Liberia, Mali, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Sudan.[14] The dataset contains nearly 400,000 observations, drawing on primary UN documents that I systematically coded to offer unprecedented levels of spatial and geographic insight into the patterns of peacekeepers' deployments. Taken together, the multiple levels of empirical analysis demonstrate in detail how local-level peacekeeping operates.

[14] These are PKOs with a Chapter VII mandate. I excluded PKOs under a Chapter VI mandate because no such operations have been approved in sub-Saharan Africa since 2003–2004 (in Côte d'Ivoire, an operation that was subsequently granted a Chapter VII mandate). Since 1999, the UN has authorized twenty-two PKOs: thirteen Chapter VII missions in sub-Saharan Africa, two Chapter VI missions in sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia/Eritrea and Côte d'Ivoire), three Chapter VII operations outside of Africa (Kosovo and Haiti twice), and four Chapter VI operations in Asia and the Middle East (East Timor/Timor-Leste three times and Syria). I discuss these patterns in more detail in Chapter 2.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

Scope of the Argument

My argument is limited in scope to conflict settings with a history of international intervention and severe ethnic fractionalization. Although many countries fit these parameters, I focus on former European colonies in sub-Saharan Africa for three reasons. First, as Figure 1.1 illustrates, communal disputes are widespread in this part of the world. Second, all new UN PKOs authorized in the 21st century have been in this region, including some of the largest missions in UN history. Finally, due to the history of colonialism in these settings, local populations compare new international operations, implicitly or explicitly, to former colonial occupations (Pouligny 2006; Talentino 2007; Pierre 2020).

The scope of my argument regarding peacekeeping applies to any international actor intervening militarily in a fragile setting with communal disputes. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 is general in nature and not limited to any specific actor. While many different types of actors intervene, the empirical chapters assess the comparative effectiveness of two sets of actors: (1) Chapter 6 compares peacekeepers from the UN and those from a former colonial power and (2) Chapters 7 and 8 examine the effectiveness of UN peacekeepers from different nationalities within the same operation. I focus on these interventions because, unlike troops from regional organizations such as the African Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), UN peacekeepers are authorized to use force solely in self-defense or to protect civilians. Furthermore, Western colonial powers dominate other regional organizations such as the European Union or NATO, which are accordingly perceived similarly to colonizers during military interventions. Additionally, former colonial powers account for the vast majority of unilateral military interventions in existing conflicts in Africa (e.g., the United Kingdom in Sierra Leone, France in Côte d'Ivoire). However, even if a power that never possessed a formal colony on a particular continent – such as the United States in sub-Saharan Africa or a historically neutral power such as Sweden – intervenes, locals are very unlikely to perceive their troops as impartial for long. This is because countries typically launch military operations in alliance with local ethnic groups, leading the wider population to associate the foreign interveners with those groups (Sambanis, Schulhofer-Wohl and Shayo 2012). Even if populations do not initially perceive interveners as biased, local residents will interpret violence by a foreign intervener against members of their own social group as a sign of more systemic bias against all members of that group (Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013).

Finally, I argue that in the context of communal disputes, enforcement is the primary (but not only) channel through which peacekeepers

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

maintain the peace. I acknowledge that peacekeeping troops also project power in other ways. Lise Howard (2019*b*) documents the use of persuasion, inducement, and coercion across different UN peacekeeping contexts. I suggest that the mechanisms that explain the effectiveness of PKOs at the local level differ fundamentally from those at the country level, including these uses of power. Similarly, my argument complements rather than contradicts work that shows how UN PKOs resolve communal disputes using civilian development projects (Smidt 2020*a*).

An important caveat is that UN peacekeepers' ability to limit escalation is probabilistic, not deterministic, because they are not a unified entity. I assume that on balance, UN peacekeepers will be perceived as more impartial than those from single countries; I do not claim they will be recognized as entirely impartial. Nor do I claim that the UN is never biased in favor of a particular party to the conflict at the negotiating table; it typically favors the elected government in peace negotiations. I instead contend that these interactions between leaders of political factions are fundamentally different in nature from those between neighbors living in the same community. Finally, I do not assume that all UN peacekeepers are perceived in the same way; domestic populations will likely consider those from particular contributing countries to be more impartial than others. Peacekeepers come from a diverse array of member states; large proportions are from neighboring countries that are at least somewhat culturally proximate to the peacekept populations, which makes it harder for them to signal their impartiality.

Plan of the Book

This book enriches our understanding of international politics by investigating the micro-level theoretical foundations of peacekeeping effectiveness. I propose and develop localized peace enforcement theory to explain peacekeeping at the local level. I derive hypotheses from the theory and outline its observable implications, which I then test at three levels of analysis: individual, subnational, and cross-national. The book is divided into three parts.

Part I: Localized Peace Enforcement Theory

Part I begins with this chapter, which has explained the book's motivating puzzles and outlined its theoretical and empirical strategies. *Chapter 2* expands the discussion of the book's motivation, providing detail about the evolution of peacekeeping, the importance of communal conflict, and the literature on peacekeeping.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical connective tissue linking the concepts introduced in the first two chapters to the peacekeeping practices designed to reduce communal violence examined in the following chapters. I argue that when domestic populations perceive interveners as relatively impartial, these intervening outside forces can successfully promote intergroup cooperation. I suggest that multilateralism, legacies of colonialism, and exposure to violence shape perceptions of impartiality. I explain how intergroup cooperation lays the foundation for the peaceful resolution of communal disputes from the bottom up. The chapter concludes by differentiating my argument from both top-down approaches to intervention and from the view that interveners can only succeed if they are invested in a specific outcome that favors a particular side.

The following chapters test the observable implications of my theory at three levels of analysis, beginning with individual and subnational units of analysis in Mali before moving to the cross-national level. *Chapter 4* outlines the research design for these chapters and explains the data collection strategy for all of my analyses. It also discusses the selection of Mali as a case study for local-level peacekeeping.

Part II: Applying the Theory to a Case Study – Mali

Part II examines peacekeeping in Mali, a West African country with widespread communal violence. *Chapter 5* provides background information on Mali using a detailed qualitative case study of international interventions in the country from 2013 through 2023. Drawing on forty-eight semistructured interviews with local political, religious, and traditional leaders in Mali as well as secondary sources, the chapter illustrates the critical role that domestic perceptions of international actors have played in determining the success or failure of international interventions in Mali.

Chapter 6 presents individual-level evidence from a lab-in-the-field experiment and a survey experiment consistent with my theory from fieldwork conducted in Mali.[15] The lab experiment demonstrates that whereas UN peacekeepers increase individuals' willingness to cooperate across ethnic lines, French soldiers do not. I provide additional evidence that this is due to perceptions of UN impartiality rather than a set of possible alternatives. The survey findings indicate that peacekeepers' origins shape respondents' beliefs about whether the dispute will become violent: Those who were told the UN discovered the dispute were half as

[15] See Nomikos (2022).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

likely to believe violence would erupt as those who were told French troops or no intervener discovered it. Interviews with respondents and a formal mediation analysis suggest that this difference can be attributed to varying perceptions of the impartiality of the UN and France. These findings suggest that all peacekeepers are not created equal: They do not elicit the same responses from local populations and do not produce the same community-level outcomes.

Chapter 7 applies the experimental evidence from the preceding chapter to an in-depth investigation of UN PKOs in Mali. I use a geographic regression discontinuity design to compare communal violence on either side of the Burkina Faso–Mali border and find that peacekeeping reduces the likelihood of communal violence. Next, I examine the efforts of peacekeepers from two West African countries, Togo and Senegal, to contain communal violence in the same part of Mali. This comparison allows me to control for alternative explanations while highlighting the important role of perceptions of bias even without the presence of a colonial power. The chapter concludes by discussing the results and the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Part III: Implications for Academics and Policymakers

Part III expands the scope of the book beyond Mali. In Part II, I documented how UN PKOs in Mali have increased individuals' willingness to cooperate with members of other ethnic groups living in their communities, and that this willingness helps facilitate peace at the community and district levels. *Chapter 8* presents a cross-national study of UN efforts to prevent communal violence using the deployment of peacekeeping patrols rather than civilian conflict resolution programs. According to an analysis of nearly 400,000 observations from the RADPKO dataset, peacekeeping contingents that domestic populations consider impartial are more likely to succeed than those perceived to favor a particular group or faction.

Chapter 9 builds on these findings and concludes the book by highlighting implications that are relevant for academic researchers as well as policymakers and practitioners.

The primary scholarly implication of my book's findings is that researchers in international relations, conflict studies, peace science, and political science writ large have focused too much on top-down violence and the problem of credible commitment between armed groups, and not nearly enough on bottom-up violence and the problem of cooperation between civilians. These findings suggest at least three areas for future research. First, a more comprehensive analysis of the sources of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002

perceptions of bias in conflict settings would productively inform scholarship and practice. Second, future work should investigate the conditions under which communal peace aggregates up to the national level. Third, scholars should examine whether governments and their partners succeed in leveraging gains from localized peace enforcement into states with robust institutions.

The book shows that impartial peacekeepers can help prevent the outbreak of communal violence. This has two critical implications for the practice of peacekeeping. First, given the importance of perceptions, *policymakers must ensure that PKOs are impartial*. It is international actors perceived by local populations as relatively impartial that can best promote intergroup cooperation and facilitate the peaceful resolution of communal disputes. Second, given that communal peace in my analysis relies on the presence of UN peacekeepers, *the international community must design peaceful transitions out of PKOs*. The effectiveness of localized peace enforcement relies on long-term statebuilding to lock in short-term gains from intergroup cooperation. I conclude the book by discussing each implication in turn.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 09:41:03, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.002