7 Communal Peace

Subnational Tests of Escalation Dynamics

> The UN peacekeeper and I spoke about his work in Mali and all the countries that make up MINUSMA.
>
> 27-year-old woman from Tomboctou recalling a conversation with a peacekeeper
> Author interview, August 8, 2016

The two years following the deployment of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in Mali led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2015 between the government and the major non-Islamic extremist armed groups. Yet as violence began to decrease in the North, it rose to unprecedented levels in the center of the country. By 2016, communal disputes had begun to overwhelm the state's capacity to maintain order. Analysts have offered this spread of violence as proof of the UN's failures in Mali. Yet communal violence has risen all over West Africa. Would the instability in Mali be even worse without the presence of the UN? And what explains the temporal and spatial variation in patterns of violence?

To answer these questions, this chapter applies localized peace enforcement theory to a subnational analysis of patterns of dispute escalation in Mali. In Chapter 6, I demonstrated that peacekeepers change people's beliefs about dispute resolution (Hypotheses 1a–b) and that UN peacekeepers increase people's willingness to cooperate across ethnic lines (Hypotheses 2a–c). In this chapter, I offer evidence that UN peacekeepers actually reduce the likelihood that disputes will become violent. Specifically, to investigate whether these findings generalize to real-world operations, I examine UN peacekeeping efforts to prevent the onset of communal violence in the central Malian region of Mopti. Altogether, the analysis presented in this chapter provides evidence in favor of Hypothesis 3.

I begin by revisiting the theory and developing a series of observable implications from the hypotheses at the subnational level of analysis. As described in greater detail in Chapter 4, I then outline a two-step research design chosen to leverage the historical idiosyncrasies of ethnic politics in Mali to estimate how peacekeeping capacity and bias

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

have affected dispute escalation across time and space. First, I use a geographic regression discontinuity design (GRDD) and draw upon an original, georeferenced dataset on peacekeeping deployments and disputes in Mali from 2013 to 2020 to compare dispute escalation on either side of the Burkina Faso–Mali border. The border splits villages with similar demographic makeups and colonial histories into areas "treated" with UN peacekeeping patrols (on the Mali side) and "control" areas without peacekeeping (on the Burkina Faso 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. The findings indicate that peacekeeping reduces the likelihood of communal violence.

In a second step, I delve deeper into the data with an analysis of UN peacekeepers from different countries deployed to the same regions of Mali, and uncover further evidence in line with the implications of the hypothesis. Rather than comparing UN peacekeeping in countries with versus without a peacekeeping operation (PKO), I compare UN peacekeepers from different contributing countries *deployed to the same area*. The case study of Mopti facilitates a comparative analysis because UN patrols in the region are composed of troops from a small set of countries, primarily Togo and Senegal. Examining peacekeeping in Mopti also allows me to directly test a critical implication of the theoretical mechanism – that UN peacekeepers from a contributing country without similar identity cleavages will be more effective than those with similar identity cleavages to the domestic population. The final section considers these findings in the context of increasing instability in Mali. These results demonstrate that local-level peacekeeping in Mali has succeeded independently of other, less successful, peacebuilding strategies including security sector reform and negotiated peace settlements that have systematically excluded key armed groups.

Observable Implications from the Escalation Hypothesis

Chapter 3 introduced my localized peace enforcement theory and derived three sets of hypotheses. Whereas Hypotheses 1a–b and 2a–c focus on the implications for *individuals* involved in a dispute, Hypothesis 3 (the Escalation Hypothesis) concerns the outbreak of violence at the *community* level. In this chapter, I analyze the observable implications of this hypothesis using the case of local-level UN peacekeeping in Mali. In this section, I outline these implications before presenting the empirical evidence in the remainder of the chapter.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that impartial peacekeepers are more likely to reduce the onset of communal violence compared to no peacekeepers or

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

biased peacekeepers by making civilians more willing to cooperate with members of different social groups.

Peacekeepers' ability to influence citizens' incentives to cooperate depends on both their capacity and, as I showed in Chapter 6, whether local residents perceive them as impartial. The theoretical model outlined in Chapter 3 indicates that capacity and perceptions matter. However, the generalized framework tells us little about what capacity looks like in the field or how perceptions are shaped on the ground. Capacity is not merely a function of the size of a peacekeeping deployment. Qualitative research has detected substantial variation across space and time in the capacity of peacekeeping patrols (Howard 2019*b*), which are best conceived as a dosage treatment in a given area rather than a single treatment. Thus, we must account for the fact that some areas in effect receive a heavier "dose" of peacekeeping due to the number of peacekeepers present, which depends on the distance to the nearest UN base, both in raw distance and in terms of the availability of roads and bridges that facilitate patrolling. However, the treatment also varies with the season: Bridges over rivers and streams have less impact in dry seasons than in rainy seasons, when the infrastructure strongly influences the success of PKOs. As Fearon and Laitin (2003) demonstrate, the same factors that tend to decrease the likelihood of peacekeeper presence are also conducive to insurgencies, which creates a negative cycle.

Like capacity, perceptions of impartiality are complicated and reflect multiple factors. In Chapter 6, I compared the UN to France in an ideal-type test case of biased versus impartial peacekeeping. However, there is substantial variation within the UN as well. As Chapter 2 discussed, UN peacekeepers come from different countries, and national affiliation can affect locals' perceptions. Some of these differences are obvious: Locals are more likely to connect peacekeepers from predominantly white, European countries to colonial powers, for instance. Others are less obvious. For example, while peacekeepers from Belgium, Canada, Guinea, and Tunisia are all likely to speak and understand French, differences in their dialects may communicate differences in perceived class status to a population in the Eastern Congo, which is far removed from all four countries.

Furthermore, the area's history and ethnic makeup are also likely to affect how peacekeepers are perceived. An ethnic minority may be suspicious of peacekeepers from one country but not another due to their coethnics' status in the country. For example, as I discuss in greater detail below in a comparison of Togolese and Senegalese peacekeeping efforts in Mali, members of the Fulani ethnic group in Mali view peacekeepers

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

from these countries differently because the Fulani have more influence in Senegal's national politics.

My theory implies that the greater the capacity of UN peacekeepers *who local populations perceive as impartial*, the less likely communal violence is to break out, all else equal. Similarly, there is no relationship between the capacity of UN peacekeepers *who local populations consider biased* and the likelihood that communal violence will break out.

Comparing Communal Violence in Mali and Burkina Faso

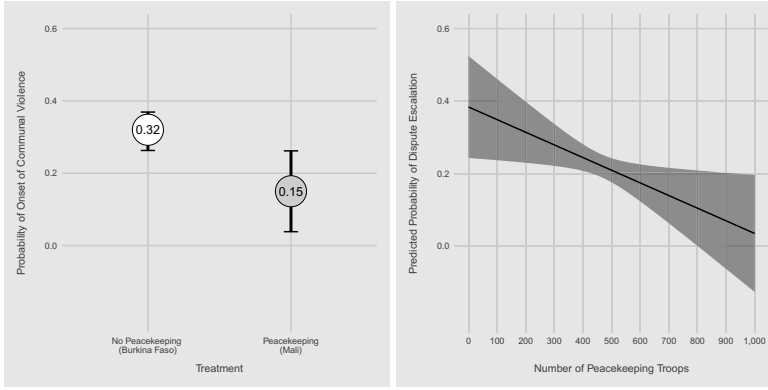
To analyze the relationship between peacekeepers' nationality and their ability to prevent communal violence, I use a time-series cross-sectional dataset of peacekeeping deployments to Mali (see Chapter 4 for more detail on the data collection). The primary analysis focuses on Mopti in central Mali, the region that experiences the highest levels of communal violence. The dependent variable is a binary coding of the onset of communal violence from multiple event-based datasets. Since I conceptualize communal conflict primarily as violence that does not involve the state, I operationalize it in a similar manner: I code a *commune*-month as having communal conflict if violence occurs between two nonstate actors in that month in that *commune*.

As I described in Chapter 4, I leverage the fact that an international border between Mali and Burkina Faso separates an area of pervasive communal disputes to test Hypothesis 3. I use a GRDD to identify the effect of peacekeeping patrols. GRDDs measure the local average treatment effect at a geographic boundary that splits observations into treated and control areas as-if randomly. This approach requires restricting observations close to the boundary and measuring a running variable that indicates each village's distance from the boundary. Since peacekeepers cannot cross into Burkina Faso, comparing grids on either side of the border allows us to measure the impact of peacekeepers on the Mali side.

The geographic unit of analysis is a grid cell approximately 10 km $\times$ 10 km, and the temporal unit is the year-month (e.g., from January 2014 as the first unit to December 2020 as the last unit). I use grids rather than villages because communal violence sometimes breaks out in unmarked rural areas in this region. To create the treatment variable, I restrict the sample to grids within 100 km of the border area.

This binary treatment variable, however, disregards a potentially important variation: It treats treatment grids identically even though they may not receive the same amount of patrolling. For this reason, I also

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008



(a) By treatment (b) By Number of UN troops

Figure 7.1 Peacekeeping treatment effect, GRDD

include measures of the number of peacekeepers at the nearest UN base and the distance from the center of the grid to the nearest UN base.

Figure 7.1 displays the results of the GRDD analysis. Figure 7.1(a) depicts the predicted proportion of grids that will experience outbreaks of violence in any given month in Burkina Faso (white circle) versus Mali (blue circle). These estimates predict that about a third of all grids on the Burkina Faso side of the border (0.32) – but fewer than half those on the Mali side (0.15) – will experience communal violence.

Since the only difference between the two areas is the presence of UN peacekeeping on the Malian side, these results demonstrate that UN peacekeepers reduce violence by more than half (by 0.17). This is a substantively and statistically significant difference. The fact that 0.15 of the areas in Mali still experienced communal violence grabs headlines and casts doubt on the efficacy of UN peacekeeping. However, the comparison to a counterfactual case that is otherwise similar (areas just over the border in Burkina Faso) suggests that peacekeepers prevent a significant amount of violence and human suffering.

The relationship between communal violence and peacekeepers' capacity also supports my hypotheses. The median number of peacekeepers on patrol in a given area of Mali was 355 (range 250–750). Figure 7.1(b) graphs the predicted proportion of communal violence as a function of the number of peacekeepers deployed to a given area (grid). With no troops in the area (the far left of the figure), we would expect violence in about 0.40 of the grids. This predicted probability of dispute escalation decreases steadily as a function of the number of peacekeepers until it is statistically indistinguishable from 0 after the UN deploys 800

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

or more peacekeepers. Since the UN rarely deploys more than 800 peacekeepers in any one locality on the Malian side of the border, I use this as an upper limit.

In support of Hypothesis 3, the findings displayed in Figure 7.1 demonstrate that UN peacekeepers decrease communal violence and suggest that they are more effective in greater numbers. However, localized peace enforcement theory emphasizes that capacity works in conjunction with perceptions of peacekeepers' impartiality. I explore this element of the theory in greater detail in the next section.

A Closer Look at Peacekeepers' Nationality

The GRDD findings indicate that the presence of UN peacekeepers makes communal disputes less likely to become violent. To determine *how* they do this, I examine the entire region of Mopti, which contains the Mali side of the border area examined in the GRDD. Rather than comparing UN peacekeeping in a country with a PKO (Mali) to a country without one (Burkina Faso), I compare the actions of some UN peacekeepers from one country to those from another country *within Mali*.

The explanatory variables are counts of UN peacekeeping troops from Togo and Senegal. I use data from the RADPKO dataset to measure the number of peacekeepers deployed from both countries in a *commune*-month in Mopti. I estimate the association between peacekeepers and the onset of violence using logistic regression models since the outcome is a binary variable. To mitigate omitted variable bias, I adjust for a set of potential covariates that might be associated with both deployment patterns and the onset of conflict (see Chapter 4).

Table 7.1 reports the results of the main empirical estimations. Model 1 includes only counts of the number of Togolese and Senegalese peacekeepers. In Model 2, I adjust for the fact that there is temporal dependence between units (i.e., each unit is related to other observations of the same unit at different times).[1] In Model 3, I adjust for time trends and a set of domestic covariates, including the type of terrain, which are likely to be associated with both levels of peacekeeping troops and violence. In Model 4, I adjust for time and covariates, and include fixed effects at the *cercle* level to help account for potential differences between regions that other observable indicators may not capture. I primarily rely on the estimates from this model to analyze the relationship between peacekeeping and communal violence because it accounts for temporal and spatial variation as well as potential covariates.

[1] I use a cubic polynomial as recommended by Carter and Signorino (2010).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

Table 7.1 *Logit regression results, communal violence onset in Mopti region, Mali*

	Onset of Communal Violence				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Togo Troops (1,000s)	−3.969***	−3.474***	−3.874***	−3.407**	−4.774***
	(0.954)	(0.964)	(1.009)	(1.039)	(0.918)
Senegal Troops (1,000s)	0.319	0.549	−0.293	0.203	4.740*
	(1.759)	(1.641)	(1.286)	(1.281)	(2.130)
Cercle Fixed Effects	*NO*	*NO*	*NO*	*NO*	*YES*
Domestic Controls	*NO*	*YES*	*NO*	*YES*	*YES*
Time Trend Adjusted	*NO*	*NO*	*YES*	*YES*	*YES*
Observations	3,656	3,656	3,656	3,656	3,656

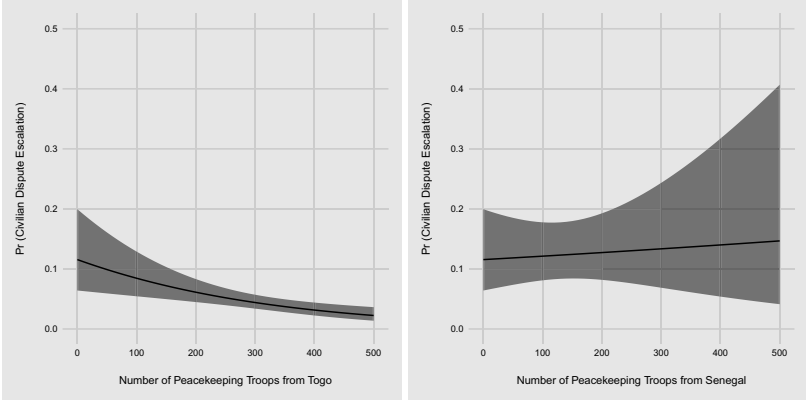
Note: Robust, *cercle*-clustered standard errors. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

Across all models, the magnitude and direction of the estimated coefficients remain consistent, which suggests two robust patterns. First, across all models, Togolese peacekeepers are negatively associated with levels of communal violence at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.001$). Second, across all models, Senegalese peacekeepers are *not* negatively associated with levels of communal violence, which suggests they have a different relationship with violence than their Togolese counterparts. Moreover, there is some evidence that Senegalese peacekeepers are positively associated with violence once we estimate fixed-effects models. This suggests, in line with my theory, that biased peacekeepers do not help decrease levels of violence.

For ease of interpretation, I use the results reported in Table 7.1 to estimate the predicted probabilities of the onset of communal violence (see Figure 7.2).[2] Figure 7.2(a) shows that an increase in the number of Togolese peacekeepers deployed to a given area in a given month from 0 to 500 is associated with a decrease in the predicted probability of communal violence from 0.14 (95 percent confidence interval: [0.08, 0.23]) to 0.02 ([0.01, 0.03]). Figure 7.2(b) indicates that a similar increase in Senegalese peacekeepers is not associated with a statistically significant change in the predicted probability of communal violence. Comparing the two panels shows that a change from 500 Senegalese peacekeepers to 500 Togolese peacekeepers is associated with a drop in the predicted probability of communal violence from 0.15 [0.05, 0.41] to 0.02 [0.01, 0.03].

[2] Coefficients from Model 1. Controls held at their mean.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008



(a) Togolese peacekeepers (b) Senegalese peacekeepers

Figure 7.2 Predicted probability of communal violence, by nationality of UN peacekeepers

Returning to actual deployment levels, as visualized in Figure 4.9, offers another way to understand the significance of the results. In March 2014, the UN deployed 352 Togolese peacekeeping troops to the UN base near the *commune* of Douentza in Mopti.[3] This increase is associated with a drop in the predicted probability of communal violence in Douentza from 0.14 [0.08, 0.23] to 0.04 [0.03, 0.05]. In August 2016, the UN raised Togolese troop levels again in Douentza to 534, which my model predicts would be associated with a decrease in the predicted probability of communal violence from 0.04 [0.03, 0.05] to 0.02 [0.01, 0.03]. For comparison, consider the deployment of Senegalese peacekeepers to the capital *commune* of Mopti, also named Mopti. In September 2017, the UN sent 118 Senegalese peacekeepers to Mopti *commune*, and increased that number to 653 in December 2019. My findings suggest that these changes in deployment levels would not be associated with any changes in the predicted probability of communal violence, which would remain around 0.14 [0.07, 0.23].

Table 7.2 reports the results of the placebo test described in Chapter 4. I ran the same models as before with the same peacekeeper types but using data from the Kidal region rather than the Mopti region. I find no robust patterns across the models. The deployment of Togolese peacekeepers is associated with a statistically significant decrease in the onset of communal violence in only two of the five models. Although there is a

[3] Troop numbers from the RADPKO website.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

Table 7.2 *Logit regression results, communal violence onset in Kidal region, Mali*

	Onset of Communal Violence				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Togo Troops (1,000s)	−0.257	−8.618***	1.981	−9.574**	−7.732
	(0.854)	(1.853)	(2.001)	(3.518)	(4.476)
Senegal Troops (1,000s)	−1.854	−2.761	−2.674	−2.655	−2.931
	(1.796)	(2.353)	(2.329)	(3.005)	(3.000)
Cercle Fixed Effects	*NO*	*NO*	*NO*	*NO*	*YES*
Domestic Controls	*NO*	*YES*	*NO*	*YES*	*YES*
Time Trend Adjusted	*NO*	*NO*	*YES*	*YES*	*YES*
Observations	804	804	804	804	804

Note: Robust, *cercle*-clustered standard errors. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

negative relationship between the deployment of Senegalese peacekeepers and the onset of communal violence, it is not statistically significant in any of the models.

The Kidal region is home to an active insurgency that has made it one of the most violent areas to which UN peacekeepers have ever deployed, which likely explains the inconsistency of the results reported in Table 7.2. Power relations between different Malian ethnic groups in Kidal, which differ in important ways from Mopti, likely account for the similarities between the associated effects of peacekeepers from Togo and Senegal. I theorized that Senegalese peacekeepers would be especially ineffective in Mopti because the Fulani, a key minority group in Mopti, have an influential role in national politics in Senegal but not in Togo. Since the Fulani are less central to society, governance, and conflict in Kidal than they are in Mopti, the differences between Togo and Senegal that affect peacekeeping outcomes according to my theory are not present in Kidal.

Therefore, if my theory is correct, Togolese and Senegalese peacekeepers should both be equally effective (or ineffective). At the very least, the difference in peacekeeping effectiveness should be more muted in Kidal than in Mopti. As Table 7.2 shows, there are no robust patterns across Models 1–5.

The results of the placebo test are largely in line with Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri's (2020) recent case study of MINUSMA. In general, they report that Malians perceived the missions as relatively impartial because of the great diversity of peacekeeping contributors. Moreover, they find that contributing countries' cultural similarities with Mali account for

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

some of the effectiveness of peacekeepers on the ground (p. 163). However, they also caution that Malians perceived some of the troop contingents from neighboring countries as biased, which explains some of the challenges of peacekeeping in the country.

Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has identified a real-world case of effective local-level peacekeeping: UN peacekeepers in Mali have limited the escalation of communal disputes. The effectiveness of UN peacekeeping is highlighted in comparison to challenges faced by Burkina Faso, which has no UN peacekeepers. Social scientists typically hesitate to make cross-country comparisons because countries differ in multiple ways. For instance, it is difficult to compare the outcomes of PKOs in South Sudan to those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo because the ethnic makeup, terrain, and colonial histories, among countless other factors, differ between the two countries. The same is true of Mali and Burkina Faso *as a whole*. However, in the border area discussed here, there is no significant difference between the two countries. The international border between them is drawn as-if randomly, and the two border areas are similar in every way except one – peacekeeping. Thus, we can be confident that UN peacekeepers account for the differences in the levels of communal violence we observe.

The analysis also highlights the importance of perceptions of impartiality, as evidenced by the success of Togolese deployments to central Mali. Given that Togolese peacekeepers have done such a good job in Mopti, what explains the continued instability in that area and elsewhere? It is most likely a confluence of seven factors. First, the Mali operation is in difficult terrain; some places lack infrastructure such as bridges and roads. Second, Mali is closer to a conflict than a postconflict setting. It is still experiencing active fighting from a multifront civil war. Third, armed groups (such as those affiliated with Al Qaeda) are omnipresent in Mali, which discourages peace agreements. Fourth, the length of the UN operation may have caused some people to lose faith in the otherwise successful mission, reasoning that it would have ended by now if it were effective. Fifth, in parts of Mali that do not regularly experience violence, some resent the presence of peacekeepers. Sixth, the presence of white peacekeepers from Western European countries, especially in the north of Mali, evokes the memory of colonialism and exacerbates existing tensions, as does the presence of Senegalese troops because they represent the same identity cleavages as those of Mali. Finally, because parts of Mali have been so violent, UN peacekeepers have been more heavily involved in combat there than anywhere else. Local residents may

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008

therefore be more likely to believe peacekeepers are targeting civilians or are involved in counterinsurgency operations.

According to localized peace enforcement theory, peacekeeping will succeed and aggregate upward *all else equal*. Yet in the Malian case, all else is *not* equal: Many other facets of Malian politics have changed in conjunction with the deployment of UN peacekeepers. However, we should not discard the theory, but instead use it to help understand the limitations of peacekeeping. The empirical analysis demonstrates that the failures of UN peacekeeping in Mali are not necessarily at the local level. The continued involvement of armed groups indicates that civilians are desperate and no longer believe that disputes can be peacefully resolved. This further suggests a severe lack of state legitimacy, security sector capacity and professionalization, and rule of law. More importantly, armed group escalation of communal disputes highlights the national-level peace agreement's failure to limit the presence of armed groups in the first place.

The final part of the book extends the analytical framework beyond Mali. Chapter 8 provides a cross-national assessment of peacekeeping efforts using original data on UN peacekeeping deployments. Consistent with the observable implications of Hypothesis 3, I demonstrate that increases in the number of peacekeeping troops deployed to local communities are strongly positively associated with decreases in the onset of communal violence. The analysis is also consistent with the primary mechanism undergirding my theory – that peacekeepers' effectiveness is based on local perceptions of their impartiality. I tally the number of peacekeepers from former colonial powers and neighboring countries deployed to each area and show that there is no relationship between the deployment of these two types of peacekeepers and communal violence. I also detect a strong negative association between all other types of peacekeepers, grouped together, and the onset of communal violence. Finally, I explain why these patterns are inconsistent with other explanations of UN peacekeeping success.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 14:02:41, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009432139.008