Do UN Peacekeepers Reduce Communal Violence?

Experimental Evidence from Mali

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Abstract

Do United Nations (UN) peacekeepers reduce violence between non-state actors? Existing research has shown that UN peacekeepers limit armed group violence during and after civil wars. Yet we know relatively little about the ability of these peacekeepers to contain communal violence, which occurs when land or resource disputes between individuals, families, or clans escalate. Given the rise in atrocities and mass displacements from communal violence across the African continent over the past few years, evaluating the effectiveness of peacekeeping at this level is a pressing concern. I argue that UN patrols deter non-state actors from escalating communal disputes, drawing upon their unique strengths as multinational peacekeeping force. To test my argument, I conduct an experiment in Mali, the site of ongoing ethnic violence managed by troops from the UN and France since 2012. The evidence confirms that communal disputes are less likely to escalate in the presence of UN peacekeepers compared to soldiers from a former colonial power or in the absence of any international force. I conclude from these findings that UN peacekeepers may limit the outbreak of communal violence even in the most challenging settings.

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Introduction

How does the presence of international peacekeepers affect communal violence between non-state actors in conflict settings? Given that communal disputes over local issues such as land use, cattle herding, or access to resources are the main source of instability in Africa (Boone 2014; Krause 2018; Carter and Straus 2019), understanding how international actors can contribute to their resolution is a pressing concern. Uncovering the effect of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers on communal violence is particularly important—research in political science has shown that UN peacekeeping operations are an important tool for ending civil war violence (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Gilligan and Sergenti 2008; Howard 2008). However, much less is known about how UN peacekeepers affect communal violence at the level of the individual, family, or community (Autesserre 2010). Recent work has shown that peacekeeping operations decrease levels of armed group violence at the local level (Ruggeri et al. 2017; Fjelde et al. 2019) and bolster existing formal and informal mechanisms of conflict resolution (Blair 2019; Smidt 2020). Yet we do not know whether UN peacekeepers have a direct effect on communal violence.

I address these question by offering a straightforward experimental test of how international peacekeeping patrols affect the likelihood that a communal dispute will become violent in an active conflict setting with a multidimensional peacekeeping operations. I build on the literature on communal conflict to argue that communities react to UN peacekeeping patrols differently than other international military patrols. UN peacekeeping patrols gather more information on disputes and possess more localized capacity to intervene in ongoing disputes than military operations from single states. In addition, the UN does not have a legacy of colonial intervention, making it a more credible and legitimate enforcer. In turn, UN peacekeepers will decrease the likelihood of communal violence more than non-UN peacekeepers will.

To test my argument, I conducted an original experiment embedded in a survey fielded

in three locations in Mali, the site of large-scale communal violence from 2012 until the time of writing. In addition, troops from France and the UN have been deployed throughout Mali since 2013 to manage ongoing ethnic conflicts. I present respondents with a vignette describing a land dispute between two families from different ethnic groups and ask them if they believe violence is likely to break out. I randomly assign some respondents to a treatment condition in which they are told a peacekeeping patrol, either from the UN or France, discovers the land dispute. I find that peacekeepers produce divergent beliefs about the escalation of the dispute depending on their origin—a lower percentage of respondents believe that communal conflicts will become violent when they are told UN peacekeepers discovers the dispute than when they are told French peacekeepers discover the dispute. These findings suggest that peacekeepers do not elicit the same responses from local populations and do not produce the same community-level outcomes. I elaborate on the implications of these findings in the conclusion.

Theory: Peacekeeping Deters Escalation of Communal Disputes

The primary characteristic that distinguishes communal conflict from other forms of political violence is the absence of the state. The participants are individuals or social groups operating independently of the state. They are often fighting for control over land for agricultural production or cattle herding. The sources of the initial conflicts vary: traditional boundaries of land may come into conflict with formal boundaries of land; civil wars or mass droughts may have displaced groups of people, political parties or armed groups may intentionally seek to ethnicize communal disputes (Krause 2018).

UN peacekeeping operations and military interventions by France and the United Kingdom have increasingly emphasized the resolution of communal disputes in Africa. Existing research has centered on efforts by international actors to bolster local conflict resolution institutions and the rule of law (Blattman et al. 2014; Blair 2019; Smidt 2020). However,

troop patrols that can rapidly deploy from military bases when disputes break out are arguably even more important to peacekeepers' strategy. These patrols seek to deter members of communities from resolving disputes violently (Ruggeri et al. 2017). Some observers have argued that these operations do not actually deal with communal conflicts but, rather, focus exclusively on armed group violence (Autesserre 2010, 2015; Pouligny 2006). Although existing scholarship has offered robust evidence that peacekeepers limit violence against civilians (Hultman et al. 2013; Fjelde et al. 2019), it is not clear whether these findings apply specifically to communal violence or, as these skeptics suggest, solely to violence by armed groups.

Prior research has shown that UN peacekeepers possess special advantages that may make them especially well-suited to dete r the escalation of these disputes. UN peacekeepers in Africa typically possess greater localized capacities and power-projection capabilities than country-led interventions in the same areas (Howard 2019). The UN uses its patrols to collect information about local societies, which may help it resolve disputes (Gordon and Young 2017). By virtue of their mandates, UN peacekeeping operations also do not commit violence against civilians, which will engender greater trust and support from domestic populations than foreign military interventions do (Lyall et al. 2013). Finally, UN peacekeepers come from a diverse set of countries, offering operations a set of complementary skills and the ability to monitor contributors' misconduct in the field (Bove and Ruggeri 2015). Drawing upon different countries can also provide peacekeeping operations with crucial cultural and linguistic knowledge (Bove and Ruggeri 2019) or make peacekeepers seem more impartial than soldiers from a former colonial power (Nomikos 2020).

In sum, I hypothesize that compared to absence of international intervention (1) UN peacekeepers will deter the violent escalation of a communal dispute and (2) soldiers from unilateral military interventions will not.

Research Design

To test my argument, I conducted an experiment in Mali, the site of several ongoing ethnic conflicts managed by the UN and France since 2013. I selected Mali because it generalizes well to other settings for two reasons. First, communal violence is widespread and rising in Mali (Human Rights Watch 2020). Communal violence frequently breaks out because of land disputes between cattle herders and farmers as it does across Sub-Saharan Africa, making it a realistic context for studying the dynamics of communal conflict. Second, the UN presence in Mali is similar in size and mandate to other recent operations with substantial communal violence, including Cote d'Ivoire, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Smidt 2020; Krause 2019; Autesserre 2010; Howard 2019). I describe the case in greater detail in the Online Appendix.

I fielded the survey with 874 Malian respondents sampled over two rounds. I conducted the first round in July-August 2016 in eight randomly selected peripheral neighborhoods of Bamako, the capital of Mali. I conducted the second round in December 2017 in 12 villages in the Markala and San *communes* (districts) in the Segou region of Central Mali.[1] Four enumerators under my supervision conducted tablet-assisted, in-person interviews with the each of the respondents. I outline the recruitment procedure and the implementation protocol in full in the Online Appendix.

The survey begins with a set of basic demographic questions and baseline questions about international actors that were identical for all respondents. Next, all respondents received a vignette describing communal dispute that I designed the vignette to resemble a land dispute over cattle between two ethnic groups:

Before the war, [family 1][2] herded their 80 cows on land which they owned. [Family

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[1]The delay between the two rounds is due to outbreaks of communal violence in Segou, which forced me to postpone the second round in order to ensure the safety of the research team and the participants.

[2]I randomly varied the names of the families between four different names in order to avoid any bias due to specific association with a family name.

Table 1: Summary Statistics and Balance on Demographic Covariates between Treatments

|	Mean			Difference			p-value		
	Control (C)	France (Fr)	UN	Fr-C	UN-C	Fr-UN	Fr-C	UN-C	Fr-UN
Age	34.54	35.40	36.24	0.86	1.70	-0.84	0.43	0.14	0.46
Female	0.33	0.30	0.33	-0.04	-0.01	-0.03	0.34	0.86	0.45
Children	2.84	2.98	2.93	0.14	0.08	0.05	0.61	0.75	0.85
Education (0-9)	3.00	2.98	3.18	-0.01	0.19	-0.20	0.96	0.45	0.43
Employment (0-3)	1.48	1.58	1.55	0.10	0.08	0.03	0.32	0.47	0.80
Victimized	0.30	0.32	0.32	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.72	0.72	1.00

1] had bought the cows over many years and had owned this land for 35 years. In December 2013, [family 1] was forced to leave their land and cows under threat of violence from armed bandits. When they left, [family 2] seized the land and the cows that were left on the land. When [family 1] returned to their land earlier this year, [family 2] refused to give or sell the land or the cows back to them. Some of [family 1] now wants to take back their land and cows by threatening [family 2] using guns.

I randomly assigned respondents to a control group or one of two treatments. Respondents were balanced on demographic covariates across treatments (see Table 1). Respondents in the control group received no further information. Respondents in the first treatment were told that two peacekeepers from the UN in the area discovered the dispute between the two families. Respondents in the other treatment group were told that two peacekeepers from France in the area discovered the dispute. After presenting respondents with the vignette and treatment, I asked them how likely they thought it was that violence would break out. Respondents could answer on a five-point scale but for ease of interpretation, I recode the outcome as a binary variable in which "very likely" or "likely" are coded as a 1.

Results

The results are shown in Figure 1. The points in the figure display the mean proportion of respondents that said the communal dispute in the vignette was likely or very likely to become violent. 0.42 of respondents assigned to a dispute without a peacekeeper present

Figure 1: Assignment to UN treatment reduces likelihood respondents say dispute escalates
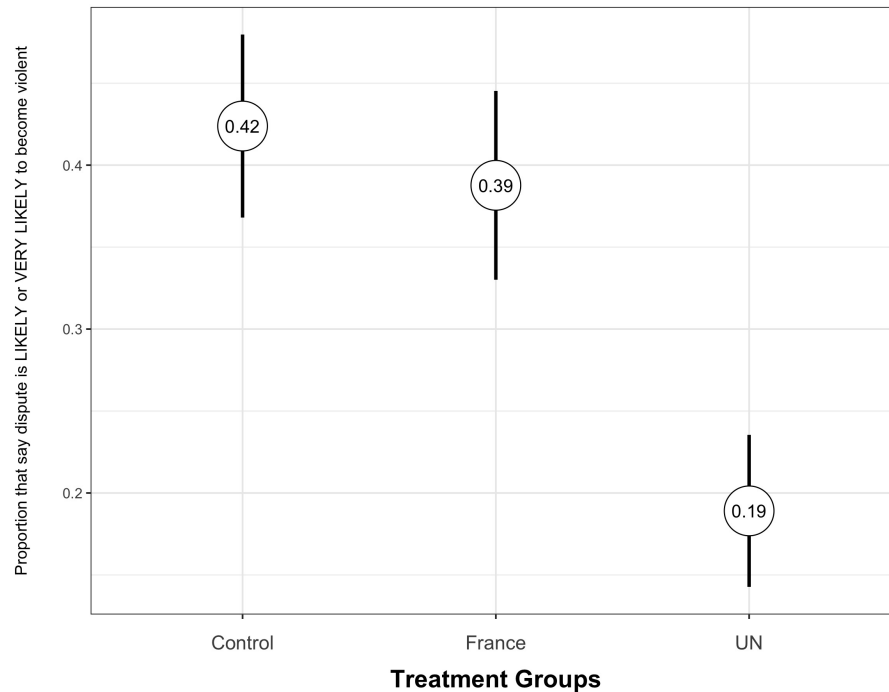
believe that the dispute will become violent. The fact that more than two-fifths of all respondents believe violence will break out suggests how volatile communal disputes in Mali are.

The results suggest that UN peacekeepers reduce the likelihood that a dispute will escalate. I find that a lower proportion of those respondents that were told that UN peacekeepers discovered the dispute (0.19) than those in the control group (0.42). This difference of 0.23 is statistically significant at the 95% level. Additionally, I find that French peacekeepers do not have the same effect on communal violence. 0.39 of respondents assigned to French peacekeeping patrols say that the dispute will become violent. Although this proportion represents a slight decrease compared to no peacekeeping, this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Moreover, assignment to the UN peacekeeping treatment decreases the predicted probability of dispute-escalation by 0.20 compared to assignment to

French peacekeeping. This difference suggests that UN peacekeepers are more effective at containing communal disputes than French peacekeepers.

Discussion

Why are UN peacekeepers effective and why are they more effective than French soldiers? In order to investigate this question in greater depth, I asked respondents in the second round of the survey in Central Mali a series of questions (pre-treatment) about characteristics of UN peacekeepers and French soldiers, based upon existing research. Figure 2 graphs the mean proportion of respondents that say that a given characteristic applies to either French or UN peacekeepers.

The results suggest that perceptions of the UN as not favoring any ethnic groups is the key driver of the effectiveness of UN peacekeepers in preventing the escalation of communal conflict. The only statistically and substantively significant difference across all characteristics is the proportion of respondents that say that UN peacekeepers or French soldiers "do not favor any ethnic group." Whereas nearly 80% of all respondents think of UN peacekeepers as unbiased, fewer than 40% say the same about French soldiers. The results also show that nearly half of all respondents see peacekeepers patrolling and about a quarter have conversations with them, lending credence to existing arguments that contact with populations helps international actors resolve local disputes. However, the survey does not indicate that patrols, especially from the UN, have any specific localized knowledge. Less than a third of all respondents said that peacekeepers knew about their specific local disputes or their traditional leaders. Finally, only 7% of respondents said that UN peacekeepers have sexually exploited women in their village, which might further explain why UN peacekeepers are especially effective in this context (Karim and Beardsley 2017).

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Figure 2: Comparing perceptions of UN peacekeepers and French soldiers in Central Mali.
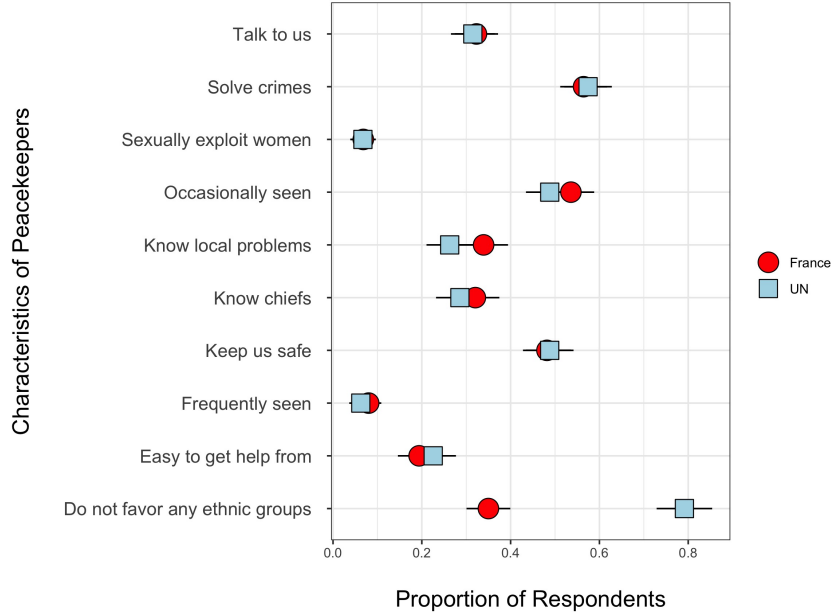
Conclusion

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on peacekeeping and international intervention in conflict settings. Both theoretically and empirically, previous research tends to center on efforts by peacekeepers to reduce armed group violence in the context of a civil war. I focus instead on how peacekeeping troops limit the escalation of communal violence at the individual or group level.

While the findings indicate that international peacekeepers reduce the likelihood that communal disputes become violent, this effect appears to be limited to peacekeepers from the UN, not soldiers from a former colonial power. Moreover, more work needs to be done to uncover the exact mechanisms by which UN peacekeepers effectively contain communal violence. My survey offers some preliminary evidence suggesting that effectiveness is conditioned by perceptions of unbiasedness, contact with local populations, and sexual ex-

ploitation and assault of women. Given that communal conflicts are increasingly dominating political violence in Africa, emphasizing these potential pathways should be an especially important policy priority for international peacekeeping operations.

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