Non-Combatants or Counter-Insurgents?
The Strategic Logic of Violence against UN Peacekeeping

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Abstract

Despite the wealth of academic research on United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, we know remarkably little about the causes of violence against peacekeepers. The dramatic increase in peacekeeper casualties over the past decade make this omission particularly problematic. This article demonstrates that violence against peacekeepers stems from strategic motivations. Peacekeepers in multidimensional PKOs serve as substitute providers of governance and security, working to bolster perceived state capacity and legitimacy in areas where the government cannot send its own forces. Insurgents target peacekeepers in expectation of a PKO unit's capacity to win over the support of local civilians. We argue that insurgents rely on three primary heuristics to predict the downstream efficacy of peacekeeping forces: personnel composition, peacekeeper nationality, and local levels of insurgent control. We test our theory using an original dataset of geocoded UN multidimensional peacekeeping deployments peacekeeping deployments. Using primary documents sourced directly from the UN covering 10 multidimensional peacekeeping operations from 1999-2018, we present comprehensive time-series data on UN peacekeeper deployment location. We find preliminary evidence that peacekeepers are targeted because of their cultural similarity with noncombatants and, in some cases, because they patrol areas where insurgents have political control.

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Introduction

On April 20th, 2019, an improvised explosive device (IED) hit a convoy of United Nations vehicles traveling on a road between the towns of Douentza and Boni in the Mopti region of Central Mali. The IED killed one Egyptian peacekeeper and wounded four others.[1] Peacekeepers responded by killing one of the alleged assailants and arresting nine. As UN peacekeeping operations have become more robust and localized over time, violence against peacekeepers has increased as well. Peacekeeper fatalities have increased since the 1990s. Over 1000 peacekeepers were killed in action between 2010 and 2018, as compared to 768 peacekeeper fatalities between 1990 and 1998, despite UN deployment to Bosnia and Rwanda, two infamously violent conflicts, during the 1990s. Yet there exists substantial sub-national geographic variation in patterns of violence. What explains this variation? Existing approaches examine rebel violence as part of national-level strategy to make gains in a conflict against an incumbent government (Ruggeri, Gizelis and Dorussen 2013; Salverda 2013; Fjelde, Hultman and Lindberg Bromley 2016). Yet these accounts do not focus on the strategic implications of peacekeeping within the broader context of modern insurgencies, namely that rebel groups should resist the efforts of peacekeepers that can undermine their position with civilians in their localities.

We argue that much of the violence against peacekeepers stems from strategic motivations. Despite attempts by United Nations peacekeeper to appear impartial and act in an unbiased fashion, their deployment affects the relationship between insurgent rebel groups, the state, and civilians. Peacekeepers in multidimensional PKOs provide security and stability in a conflict or post-conflict setting where the government does not have the capacity to send its security sector forces. By serving as substitute providers of security, peacekeepers can bolster the perceived capacity and legitimacy of the government. In doing so, they de-

[1] https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/04/1037031

crease the incentives for civilians to support rebel groups. With their connection to civilians under threat, insurgents target peacekeepers as a means of forcing them out of particular regions in an effort to undermine support for the government.

We identify three potential logics that may drive insurgent strategies that target peacekeepers. First, insurgents might target peacekeepers with shared ethnolinguistic identities as the population since these peacekeepers will have advantages in conducting counter-insurgent operations. Second, insurgents might target operations with extensive police deployments more extensively since police are at the center of UN local-level information gathering. Third, insurgents might target peacekeepers more in areas where they have consolidated political control.

We test our argument using a novel dataset of UN deployments to multidimensional peacekeeping operations as well as a sub-national case study of the UN peacekeeping operation to Mali. We find preliminary evidence in the cross-national data peacekeepers are targeted because of their cultural similarity with noncombatants. However, the sub-national case study suggests that peacekeepers are targeted in areas where insurgents have greater political control. We briefly discuss some potential reasons for this divergent finding.

Theory: Peacekeepers as Counter-Insurgency

Civil wars are a contest between incumbent governments and insurgent rebel forces that seek to expel government security forces from contested territories (Kalyvas 2006). Governments are often aided in their efforts to eradicate insurgencies by international armed forces, either militaries from other states or peacekeeping troops. Insurgents and counter-insurgents rely upon convincing civilians to support them. For insurgents, sympathetic civilians can provide supplies and refuge from the government. For counter-insurgents, collaborationist civilians can provide critical information about the whereabouts of insurgents. Civilians

decide whether to support insurgents or governments depending on the ability of each actor to provide public goods. The fundamental and foundational public good is security and stability.

After many civil wars, central governments lack the capacity to provide security and stability throughout an entire state. The UN authorizes the deployment of multidimensional peacekeeping operations to substitute for the state in these cases. In the long-term, these peacekeeping missions support the development of a security sector that can independently maintain the stability of the territory of the state (Karim and Gorman 2016) and promote the rule of law (Blair 2019). In the short-term, however, these missions rely upon international troops to prevent violence from breaking out and spreading.

In the past two decades, multidimensional UN peacekeeping operations have increased both qualitatively and quantitatively (Bellamy, Williams and Griffin 2010). Existing studies have shown that peacekeepers can maintain order, provide security, and promote stability. Cross-national research has found that UN peacekeepers bring conflicts to an end (Doyle and Sambanis 2006), increase duration of peace (Fortna 2008), keep the peace after conflict ends (Gilligan and Sergenti 2008), and reduce armed group victimization (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2013). Recent research has shown that these findings extend to localized operations that reduce the duration of conflict episodes (Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis 2017), reduce the likelihood of civilian victimization by rebel groups (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019), increase intergroup cooperation (Nomikos 2019*b*), and lower the likelihood of intercommunal violence (Nomikos 2019*a*). Yet single-case studies have cast doubt upon these claims (Autesserre 2015; Costalli 2013; Mvukiyehe and Samii 2010). Critics point to rising casualty numbers in UN peacekeeping operations as important evidence of the UN's struggles. We explore the possibility that UN peacekeepers are being targeted at higher rates because they are increasingly serving as counterinsurgents indirectly opposing armed opposition groups.

Counterinsurgency & the New Normal of Peacekeeping Operations

The United States government de nes counterinsurgency (COIN) operations as comprehensive civilian and military e orts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes (Kilcullen, Porter and Burgos 2009, 12). The core goal of COIN is political: it aims to re-establish state control over contested territories and the populations within via a broad mandate coordinating economic, political, and military activities. The breadth of the COIN mandate re ects the challenges state actors and their proxies experience in wresting political control from insurgent groups, many of whom have either coerced or co-opted the support of civilians in the absence of strong state authority.

To ful ll this mandate, COIN actors leverage an array of strategies including but not limited to: supporting local and national governance reform, providing basic goods and services, extending security, and distributing economic aid. For example, the United States military spent $3.7 billion USD on the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) during the American deployment in Afghanistan from 2004 until 2014. CERP was an essential component of the US COIN strategy in Afghanistan, supporting a wide range of reconstruction activities like building infrastructure, delivering agricultural aid, and supporting activities to restore the rule of law (SIGAR 2014, 7).

The promise of pairing military with civilian, economic, and political activities is two-fold. First, COIN actors hope that their multifaceted strategy will address the set of grievances which initially mobilized insurgents against the government. If insurgency emerges because the central government fails to extend basic services and political rights to certain groups, then COIN activities providing these basic services and monitoring governance reform designed to protect basic political freedoms should reduce con ict. Second, COIN activities aim to facilitate cooperation between citizens and state actors and to interrupt cooperation between citizens and insurgent groups. Increasing citizens' willingness to share information with state actors is particularly important, since information on insurgents' activities can

boost the e ectiveness of COIN operations. COIN actors simultaneously extend public goods projects like improved infrastructure and security to increase information sharing. The former demonstrates the bene ts of cooperating with state actors, and the latter reduces the potential costs of doing so while insurgent groups remain active.

While COIN typically involves coordination between civilian and military authorities e.g., a host government and a foreign military force our argument is predicated on the observation that non-traditional actors have engaged increasingly in COIN over the last twenty years. Speci cally, multidimensional peacekeeping missions authorized under a Chapter VII mandate are both equipped with the tools of counterinsurgency and, in some settings, conduct COIN operations to build trust for the mission and restore con dence in the central government.

The local turn in Chapter VII peacekeeping re ects a focus on sustaining trust and information sharing between peacekeepers and communities which are proximate to insurgent activities (Gordon and Young 2017). To this point, Chapter VII peacekeeping missions are authorized to provide basic services through DPKO-branded Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) explicitly designed to boost con dence in the mission and increase information sharing with peacekeepers (UN 2012). Thinking towards the broader political objective of COIN, the Chapter VII mandate deploys UN policing units in activities designed to rebuild the state-security apparatus and demonstrate the rule of law, such as monitoring elections in consolidated areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo and recruiting members to the Central African Republic's national police force.

Simply put, UN peacekeepers are engaging in COIN when deployed to active con icts where non-state armed groups directly challenge the authority of the central government. While extant research aptly notes this shift (Friis 2010) and, more recently, outlines its potential consequences (Howard 2019) theories of peacekeeping e ectiveness to date have not systematically considered how peacekeepers' roles as counterinsurgents might a ect patterns

of con ict. We argue that the e ort UN peacekeepers contribute to COIN activities is associated with patterns of con ict that are distinct from those we would observe if peacekeepers truly were unbiased third parties.

To test this claim, we speci cally focus on the targeting of UN peacekeepers by non-state armed groups. Our claim is that these groups increasingly target UN peacekeepers either as peacekeepers contribute more e ort to COIN activities or when DPKO activities increase the relative costs of coercing or co-opting political support from civilians for insurgent groups.

The Strategic Logic of Peacekeeping Targeting

Logic 1: Shared Identity

Traditional counterinsurgents derive their e ectiveness from their ability to gather information from the civilian population. If insurgents depend on the civilian population for logistical and material support, then counterinsurgents will be most e ective when they are able to e ectively discern which members of the civilian population sympathize with or actively support the insurgents (Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Kalyvas 2006). While counterinsurgents throughout history have evaluated the e cacy of a variety of di erent tactics, some research suggests that the social identities of counterinsurgents may have a large impact on their e ectiveness.

Counterinsurgency teams composed of pro-Russian Chechens in the Second Chechen War were more e ective at preventing subsequent insurgent attacks than Russian ones. Coethnic ties allowed Chechen teams access to local networks of information and to more credibly threaten noncompliant behavior (Lyall 2010). However, insurgents do not need to share an ethnicity with civilian populations to bene ts from these cultural ties. People from similar cultural backgrounds may be able to access similar bene ts based on related but not shared backgrounds. PKOs with lower linguistic and religious distances between their members

and the population of the country they are deployed in are associated with lower rates of one sided violence (Bove and Ruggeri 2019). Peacekeepers that are culturally closer to the civilian populations are more e ective at preventing one sided violence because they can elicit information and cooperation from local populations; these are skills that also make for highly e ective counterinsurgents.

If peacekeepers serve at the pleasure of the state because the government controls access to the remote areas where civilians need protection (Fjelde, Hultman and Nilsson 2019), then any e ort they exert toward reducing civilian targeting in active con ict means they are acting as de facto counterinsurgents. Accordingly, any characteristics of PKO personnel that make them more e ective counterinsurgents give insurgents an increased incentive to target UN personnel.

Following this logic, we would expect increased levels of attacks against UN peacekeepers when the composition of a mission is less culturally distant to the population of the country they are operating in. When peacekeepers are able to e ectively gather information from local populations, they will be more successful in counterinsurgency operations. If peacekeepers are acting as counterinsurgents, we should observe more attacks on peacekeepers when the personnel of a PKO are culturally closer to the citizens of the area they are operating in than when they are distant.

Logic 2: Policing

When peacekeepers in Chapter VII deployments in ongoing insurgencies provide public services, their actions grant increased legitimacy to the state. Rather than act as neutral arbiters between combatants, these PKOs serve to prop up the state against a non-state challenger. Thus, any functions of the state that peacekeepers ful ll will improve public perception of the state. In the battle for the loyalties of the civilian population, this is a great boon to counterinsurgency e orts.

While the UN performs many di erent functions of government service delivery in different missions, policing is one of the most ubiquitous. As of 2020, UN police are deployed to 11 peacekeeping missions around the globe (UN 2020). UN police have a uniquely small footprint that allows them to integrate with civilian populations (Nomikos 2019a). By integrating with civilian populations, UN police greatly increase the intelligence gathering capabilities of the mission, which in turn can improve counterinsurgent e ectiveness.

Policing draws attention to the counterinsurgency activities of UN peacekeepers in multiple ways. First, policing entails the provision of public safety to citizens and communicates the state monopoly on violence in a nation state (Weber 1965). When UN police operate in a given area, they reassure civilians of the presence and e cacy of the state, reducing the likelihood that they will turn to armed groups to seek public goods. Second, policing requires regular interactions with local civilian populations. These interactions provide many opportunities for insurgents or their sympathizers to glean information that may then be used to to target peacekeepers. In contrast, peacekeepers acting more as monitors and intermediaries may not come in contact with insurgent information gather networks as frequently.

Logic 3: Rebel Governance

In their role as counterinsurgents, peacekeepers might in uence insurgents' strategies for gaining political control such that the targeting of peacekeepers becomes more likely. Existing research on rebel governance during civil con ict points to three strategies insurgent groups use to establish political control. First, insurgent groups can compete directly with central government forces in open con ict (Kalyvas 2006). Second, insurgent groups can attempt to co-opt political support from citizens through the provision of basic goods and services, like security and infrastructure (Arjona, Kas r and Mampilly 2015). Co-opting political support serves to the reinforce the legitimacy of insurgent governance, as the service provision is coupled tightly individual perceptions of legitimacy Brinkerho , Wetterberg

and Dunn (2012); Mcloughlin (2014). Third, insurgent groups can coerce political support from citizens (Kalyvas 2006). Coercion challenges the central government's monopoly on violence, eventually weakening citizens' support for the government if state actors cannot prevent continued attacks.

Multidimensional peacekeeping missions are designed to increase the absolute costs of all three strategies. UN peacekeepers are deployed to augment the capacity of state security forces, and therefore make open con ict with the central government more costly. Indeed, this is the core function of conventional peacekeeping deployments (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008). To this point, existing research demonstrates that additional UN military troops are associated with fewer battle eld deaths (Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2014). Similar research too suggests that multidimensional peacekeeping deployments increase the cost of coercion. Hultman, Kathman and Shannon (2013) show that even modest deployments of UN military troops and police can reduce the likelihood of civilian targeting during con ict. And while no empirical test of DPKO-backed public goods projects exist, other research suggests that both humanitarian aid (Narang and Stanton 2017) and programs to win hearts and minds (Sexton 2016; Crost, Benjamin and Felter 2016) might frustrate insurgents' e orts to co-opt political support.

Comparing the relative costs of the strategies insurgents have to govern reveals speci c conditions under which the targeting of peacekeepers by insurgent groups should increase. We hypothesize that if UN peacekeepers are counterinsurgents, then coercion should be more likely in places where insurgents groups have not consolidated political control. If we assume that UN peacekeepers always have a competitive advantage in co-opting political with their multi-million dollar QIPs budgets (UN 2019) and mandate to coordinate the provision of international aid (UN 2010, 30, 43) in areas where the state maintains some authority, then insurgent groups are left with two strategies: direct competition and coercion. Given these circumstances, insurgent groups should bene t more from targeting civilians than

from clashing directly with UN forces, for at least two reasons. First, the political bene ts of successfully targeting non-combatants in these locations are signi cant, since doing so erodes civilians' beliefs that the central government is an e ective provider of security (Koren 2017). Second, the cost of direct competition with UN peacekeepers should be higher near government strongholds, all else equal. Ruggeri, Dorussen and Gizelis (2018) show that UN peacekeepers are more likely to be deployed in accessible urban areas where it is easier for weak states to project power (Herbst 2000). Peacekeepers in these settings likely have greater capacity than those deployed in remote areas, not least because they can encourage additional information sharing through more frequent patrolling (Gordon and Young 2017).

Conversely, we hypothesize that if UN peacekeepers are acting as counterinsurgents, they will be targeted more frequently in areas where insurgents have consolidated political control. To the extent that territorial control provides insurgents groups with greater capacity to mobilize popular support, the incentives for coercion decrease (Wood 2014). Indeed, indiscriminately targeting civilians even those who just passively accept insurgent governance can undermine citizens' long-term support for insurgents Kalyvas (2006). Under these circumstances, insurgents may prefer less coercive forms of control such as mutually-bene cial systems of governance that regulate access to basic goods and services (Stewart and Liou 2017). Attacking other groups out tted to extend service provision in support of the central government thus reinforces insurgents' ability to maintain political control without costly coercion.[2] Therefore, if UN peacekeepers are acting as counterinsurgents, we should observe more frequent attacks against them in areas where insurgent groups have consolidated control, relative to areas where political control is contested or remains in the hands of the state.

[2]Qualitative evidence about the conditions of humanitarian access to territories non-state armed groups control in Mali con rms this logic, albeit anecdotally (ICG 2019)