

Part I

Localized Peace Enforcement Theory

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/.

4 Interventions to Stop Local-Level Violence

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

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, war-mongering elites (Barma 2016; Nomikos and Villa 2022; Stearns 2022; Nomikos, Şener and Williams 2023). Writing to an audience of policy-makers 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

6 Interventions to Stop Local-Level Violence

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 2019b).

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.

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

8 Interventions to Stop Local-Level Violence

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 (2019b) reaches a similar conclusion.

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 (Hunnicut, 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 (Hunnicut 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.

10 Interventions to Stop Local-Level Violence

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 2019b). 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.

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 PKOs⁹ 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.