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United Nations Peacekeepers' Perceptions of the 'Local': Evidence from Military Personnel in Mali

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of United Nations (UN) interventions relies on peacekeepers' capacity to engage with local actors, and UN policies increasingly underline the need to include local actors in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. However, little is known about how military peacekeepers themselves understand this goal and perceive local actors. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a survey and interviews with Swedish military personnel deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This article investigates how the Swedish military peacekeepers understand local actors and their inclusion, focusing on both local civilian actors and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the context of MINUSMA's stabilization mandate. This article highlights that the Swedish peacekeepers' understanding of local actors focuses on armed actors that are crucial for the tasks of the peacekeepers, with assessments of different actors taking place mainly in the operational context. Furthermore, the findings reveal that, although individual peacekeepers consider the inclusion of local actors important and are relatively unaffected by the mandate of the mission, engagement with local actors in practice is often challenging due to both the tasks of the peacekeepers and the difficulties of differentiating between actors.

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KEYWORDS Peacekeeping; local; United Nations; armed groups; military personnel

1. Introduction

In conflict zones, the United Nations (UN) peacekeepers collectively constitute one of the largest deployed forces in the world.[1] The relations and interactions that UN peacekeepers have with a variety of 'local actors' have important implications for the daily livese of civilians in conflict-contexts

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[1]Howard and Dayal, "The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping."

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and play a pivotal role in peacekeeping success.[2] There is widespread consensus within the UN about the necessity of 'local ownership' or local engagement in peace operations.[3] However, we know less about what the 'the local' means from the perspective of UN peacekeepers and, thus, what the premises of local engagement are. Furthermore, while the 'local turn' in peacebuilding and peacekeeping has been a response to top-down, securitized and state-centric approaches,[4] UN peace operations have simultaneously increased support for stabilization and statebuilding.[5] As a result, UN missions are criticized of contributing to the self-interests of authoritarian states and abandoning the peacekeeping principle of impartiality by strengthening state monopolies on violence.[6] Although these developments are expected to hinder the inclusion of local actors in the UN's work,[7] the actions of peacekeepers on the ground determine how these dynamics play out in practice. Yet, we know little about how peacekeepers understand and negotiate the inclusion of different local actors in the context of supporting state authorities.

To contribute to our understanding of the factors that may enable or hinder 'local ownership' or engagement, I conducted a survey and in-depth interviews with a Swedish contingent deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA was one of the UN's stabilization missions focused on restoring and extending state authority throughout Mali's territory, including localities where the state has historically been absent and where various local non-state actors hold power. Previous research has studied the civilian aspects of local engagement but we know less about how military personnel perceive 'the local' despite their constituting the vast majority of UN peacekeepers.[8] A growing body of research has started to investigate how military peacekeepers' knowledge, perceptions and beliefs shape mandate implementation,[9] cooperation among peacekeepers,[10] and military effectiveness.[11] I build on these two strands of scholarly work and describe different components of military peacekeepers' perceptions of local actors and their inclusion in the UN's work.

[2]Ruggeri, Dorussen, and Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally"; Smidt, "United Nations Peacekeeping Locally"; Duursma, "Making Disorder More Manageable"; Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen From Below*; Whalan, *How Peace Operations Work*.
[3]von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership*; Campbell, "UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding."
[4]Mac Ginty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building."
[5]Hunt, "All Necessary Means to What Ends?"
[6]Karlsrud, "The UN at War"; Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism."
[7]Curran and Hunt, "Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding"
[8]As of December 2023, 75%: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data.
[9]Ruffa, "What Peacekeepers Think and Do"; Ruffa, *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations*.
[10]Rietjens and Ruffa, "Understanding Coherence in UN Peacekeeping."
[11]Jenne, "Narratives Around Civil–Military Cooperation."

This article provides a theoretically guided descriptive analysis of Swedish military peacekeepers' perceptions. First, I investigate how MINUSMA peacekeepers understand local civilian actors and non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Building on existing research, I posit that actors that are especially capable of shaping international actors' work at sub-national levels should be included in the idea of 'the local'. Many NSAGs are involved in national processes and have transnational ties, but may be perceived as local by peacekeepers. Although the role of NSAGs as key actors in the UN's non-hostile local engagement has received limited attention in previous research, they are expected to play an important role as local actors in the peacekeepers' work. Second, I examine how peacekeepers view the inclusion of civilian actors and NSAGs. I argue that operational needs underpin the inclusion of local actors and the views of military peacekeepers. UN peacekeepers recognize that both civilian and armed local actors can contribute to the UN's operations by providing security and information. Third, this article further explores how Swedish UN peacekeepers perceive their role and impartiality in the context of the Malian conflict. It also examines how peacekeepers negotiate the inclusion of different local actors in their work while supporting state authorities. The survey and interview data are used to analyse these theoretical insights.

This article contributes to existing scholarly work in several ways. First, this research adopts an actor-oriented approach to UN peacekeeping and policies on local engagement or 'ownership'. By presenting novel data on UN peacekeepers' views, I explain how those who implement the UN's tasks understand the complex set of local actors they are mandated to engage with. The findings show that the Swedish peacekeepers have a pragmatic view of local actors and primarily learn about the local conflict dynamics and different NSAGs operationally on the ground. However, based on the findings, it is often difficult to distinguish between civilians, armed groups, and different NSAGs both in theory and in practice. These empirical insights are crucial for understanding the factors that may hinder or enable local engagement and could inform, among others things, the training needs of UN military personnel. Furthermore, highlighting the perspectives of military peacekeepers broadens our understanding of local engagement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding and sheds light on the factors that shape the relationships between different actors involved in peacekeeping. The findings complement recent research that has surveyed the 'peace-kept' and their views on the UN and its interventions,[12] as well

[12]Gordon and Young, "Cooperation, Information, and Keeping the Peace"; Mvukiyehe and Samii, "Peacekeeping and Development in Fragile States"; Nomikos, "Peacekeeping and the Enforcement of Intergroup Cooperation."

as examined primarily civilian actors' views on local ownership and inclusion.[13]

Second, by building on existing research, I consider the concept of local actors to include not only local civilian actors but also NSAGs, which often hold power in contexts where peacekeepers are deployed. In previous research the role of NSAGs as a part of 'the local' has not been thoroughly theorized or empirically analysed beyond specific peacekeeping activities,[14] despite many existing definitions of the concept involving or applying to NSAGs. Instead, the interactions between peacekeepers and NSAGs at the local level are often addressed in a literature focusing on the groups' violent or obstructive tactics.[15] The findings highlight that, from the perspective of the Swedish peacekeepers, NSAGs play important roles in the work of the UN beyond their use of violence. Despite the difficulties of differentiating between them, NSAGs are considered as key local actors, they can provide information and security, and influence the relations between the UN and civilians. Recent UN policies, including those related to the protection of civilians, emphasise the need to engage with NSAGs,[16] highlighting the importance of recognising such actors as primary stakeholders in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding. This article provides insights based on which such engagement can be improved and theorizing developed. The findings also underline that the interlinked nature of civilians and armed groups should be increasingly recognized in the analyses of local engagement.

Third, by focusing on the local engagement of peacekeepers while strengthening state authority, this article reveals the interplay between these two often contradictory tasks. The findings show that military peacekeepers' tasks to fight armed groups as a part of stabilization missions, related training, and relatively short deployment periods may hinder their ability to develop a nuanced understanding of and approach to local actors, including different NSAGs. While supporting government actors can complicate local engagement in specific localities, the mission's mandate did not play a large role for the Swedish peacekeepers and they had limited knowledge of it. All in all, the empirical insights in this article can contribute to research on the mechanisms through which peacekeeping works[17] and offer explanations for local-level variation in its success,[18] especially in the context of stabilization.

[13]Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*; Hellmüller, "The Power of Perceptions"; von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership*.
[14]Duursma, "Making Disorder More Manageable."
[15]Lindberg Bromley, "Keeping Peace While Under Fire"; Duursma, "Obstruction and Intimidation of Peacekeepers."
[16]*DPO Policy on The Protection of Civilians*.
[17]Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping*; Bove, Ruffa, and Ruggeri, *Composing Peace*; Matanock and Lichtenheld, "How Does International Intervention Work"
[18]Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection Through Presence."

2. Theoretical Expectations

2.1. Who are the Locals?

Local ownership and the inclusion of local actors are crucial from a normative standpoint. In international peacebuilding, local involvement is often considered 'the right thing to do'.[19] Extensive literature has criticized UN interventions for failing to apply contextually adapted approaches proposing that a lack of local ownership undermines the accountability, credibility and legitimacy of UN peacekeeping among diverse local stakeholders.[20] However, existing research on local ownership in peacebuilding, or on the absence thereof, lacks a shared understanding of what the local consists of.[21] Same applies to the UN's understanding of the local.[22] Autesserre refers to local as the sub-national arena including 'the level of an individual, family, clan, district, province, and ethnic group when it is not a national-level one'.[23] Similar approaches that focus on the local as a unit of analysis are often applied in the quantitative work on peacekeeping.[24]

Although a broad and ambiguous understanding of local actors arguably allows for a continual reconstruction and reinterpretation of the concept, there is also a risk of essentialising the local and overlooking the heterogeneity of actors and interests that the concept absorbs.[25] Excluding armed groups from the analyses of the 'local' can be understood in this context. However, if agency and the level of analysis play an important role in understanding local actors, those that are especially capable of influencing international actors' work sub-nationally should be included in the idea of the local. Research on concepts such as the hybridity of peacebuilding and the friction between local and international actors highlights that the local is constantly made and remade in interactions with external actors.[26] Additionally, the concept of local ownership implies that the local should shape how the UN implements its tasks.[27] These approaches underline the agency and capacity of local actors to resist, modify or support international efforts.[28] In essence, an understanding of the local can be grounded in the agency of sub-actors to shape international efforts.

[19]Simangan, "A Case for a Normative Local Involvement."
[20]Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*; von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership*; Whalan, *How Peace Operations Work*; Newby, *Peacekeeping in South Lebanon*.
[21]Lilja and Höglund, "The Role of the External in Local Peacebuilding."
[22]Campbell, "UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding."
[23]Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success."
[24]Ruggeri, Dorussen, and Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally"; Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection Through Presence."
[25]Bräuchler and Naucke, "Peacebuilding and Conceptualisations of the Local."
[26]Hellmüller, "The Power of Perceptions"; Lilja and Höglund, "The Role of the External in Local Peacebuilding."
[27]von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership*.
[28]Mac Ginty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building"; Bräuchler and Naucke, "Peacebuilding and Conceptualisations of the Local."

In conflict-affected contexts where UN peace operations are deployed, these often include armed actors. UN peace operations are mandated when the state is unable to maintain security and public order and sub-nationally peacekeepers deploy to areas where NSAGs are present.[29] NSAGs can be understood as distinctive organizations that are willing and capable to use violence to pursue their objectives and are not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police, or special forces. NSAGs include militias that are supported by state actors, but they possess a certain degree of autonomy in areas like politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure.[30] NSAGs often obstruct the work of peacekeepers and resist them through violence,[31] but they also exert agency through non-violent tactics. NSAGs, such as rebel and militia groups, often are supported by civilian populations, organize them for public purposes, and provide security, resources, and services locally.[32] In activities that concern local governance, UN peacekeepers cooperate with rebel actors,[33] but also interact with different types of NSAGs when it comes to local politics, security, as well as human rights.[34] Given the 'local' power and agency of NSAGs, they should be included in our understanding of local actors.

Although the academic literature often refers to civilian actors when analysing the 'local' from a normative perspective, the UN has included armed groups in the idea of local. The UN has highlighted that the 'effectiveness of United Nations field operations are increasingly contingent on UN staff's capacity to analyse and strategically engage NSAGs'[35] and in UN policies 'the term 'local' includes even armed actors in the war-affected country'.[36] Despite the political sensitivity and possible difficulties in accessing NSAGs, engagement with NSAGs is important for the UN from a pragmatic perspective. Given the important role they play in the peacekeeper's operational environment and the tasks of the peacekeepers, *UN military peacekeepers in particular are expected to consider different types of armed actors, including non-state groups, as key local actors.*

Although making a clear distinction between armed actors and civilians may seem straightforward in theory, insurgents and local populations may also be 'one and the same'.[37] When fighting takes place within the

[29]Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson, "Protection Through Presence."
[30]Hofmann and Schneckener, "Engaging Non-State Armed Actors in State- and Peace-Building," 2.
[31]Lindberg Bromley, "Keeping Peace While Under Fire"; Duursma, "Obstruction and Intimidation of Peacekeepers."
[32]Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War*; Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*; Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.
[33]Ruggeri, Gizelis, and Dorussen, "Managing {Mistrust}."
[34]Kotajoki, "From Confrontation to Cooperation."
[35]McQuinn and Oliva, *Preliminary Scoping Report*, 1.
[36]Campbell, "UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding."
[37]Coggins, "Rebel Diplomacy," 109.

communities of the insurgents, when armed groups rely on the support of the populations they control, and when insurgents coerce civilians to cooperate, the motivations, attitudes, and behaviours of the 'local population' and the warring parties become intertwined. As Coggins posits in relation to insurgencies 'farmers work the fields during the day and go to fight in the hills at night'[38] showing that members of rebel groups can well be key 'local actors'. The types of NSAGs vary ranging from organized entities with structured political and military commands to communal self-defence groups. Due to the often intertwined nature of armed groups and civilians, *it is expected to be challenging for peacekeepers to distinguish between civilians and armed groups.*

2.2. Inclusion of Actors

The agency of different local actors can impact the work of peacekeepers in various ways. Previous research has highlighted that peacekeeping missions rely on local populations for intelligence-gathering capabilities and local support.[39] I posit that both civilians and NSAGs can impact peacekeepers' operations, especially in areas related to security and information provision.

First, although peacekeepers and local actors might be separated culturally and economically,[40] the very existence of a peacekeeping mission relies on some level of control over the local security environment to operate. Peacekeeping missions invest significant resources in force protection and have limited capacities to coerce local actors to comply.[41] Thus, the mission relies on other local actors to provide security, access, and the safe delivery of supplies necessary for the mission. Examples of widespread anti-UN protests in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the summer of 2022 leading to deaths of peacekeepers illustrate the need that the UN has for local support and security. There are also examples of the UN relying on armed non-state actors for security and access, such as in the case of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and Hezbollah.[42]

Second, the mechanisms through which peacekeeping works such as monitoring to induce credible commitment, deterring violence through credible presence and mediation are implemented locally[43] and require engagement and exchange of information with local actors. At the operational level, peacekeepers can deter violence and apply de-escalation

[38]Ibid., 109.
[39]Bove and Ruggeri, "Peacekeeping Effectiveness and Blue Helmets' Distance."
[40]Jennings and Bøås, "Transactions and Interactions"; Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*.
[41]Matanock and Lichtenheld, "How Does International Intervention Work"; Bode and Karlsrud, "Implementation in Practice"; United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, *Evaluation of the Implementation*.
[42]Murphy, "Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Civilian Protection."
[43]Ruggeri, Dorussen, and Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally."

strategies 'based on enhanced communication and contact with potentially violent actors'.[44] The UN's Protection of Civilians policy highlights the role of dialogue and communication with NSAGs in protection of civilians activities[45] and mediation crucial for local violence reduction requires access and information exchange with these actors.[46] When it comes to civilian actors, through information gathering and accurate situational awareness, peacekeepers can inform political initiatives and the mission's planning efforts. Information about sources of political instability, grievances, and conflict dynamics that civilians can provide are crucial for addressing the root causes of conflict and building sustainable peace. The UN Peacekeeping Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Staff Handbook suggests that 'every soldier is a sensor', and interactions between peacekeeping unit patrols and the local population can provide valuable information on local issues.[47]

Given the benefits that both civilian actors and NSAGs can bring to the UN's work, *I expect that the peacekeepers recognise the impact of local actors when it comes to both security provision and information despite the political challenges of inclusion.*

2.3. Local Actors and Their Inclusion in the Context of Stabilisation

It has been argued that stabilization has been 'uploaded' into the UN's intervention frameworks.[48] Stabilization is 'about using military means to stabilize a country, often with all necessary means to neutralize potential 'spoilers' to a conflict'.[49] In policy and practice it is conflated with extending state authority.[50] Stabilization is especially prevalent in the UN's recent missions such as in Mali.

Stabilization efforts have been found to be in contradiction with the UN's peacebuilding agenda including local engagement,[51] as well as with the peacekeeping principles of impartiality and non-use of force.[52] Previous research has illustrated how these contradictions manifest at the strategic level, but they also have implications for the UN's work in practice. UN peacekeepers need to both understand and navigate their own role in relation to these principles and approaches and, on the ground, implement these frameworks.

[44] *DPKO/DFS Guidelines*, 13.
[45] *DPO Policy on The Protection of Civilians*.
[46] Duursma, "Making Disorder More Manageable."
[47] *Peacekeeping-Intelligence, Surveillance*, 37.
[48] Curran and Hunt, "Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding in UN Peacekeeping Operations"; Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding."
[49] Karlsrud, "The UN at War," 42.
[50] Curran and Hunt, "Stabilization at the Expense of Peacebuilding in UN Peacekeeping Operations"
[51] Ibid.
[52] Karlsrud, "The UN at War"; Hunt, "All Necessary Means to What Ends?"

First, the peacekeepers who are tasked with extending and re-establishing state administration or authority may struggle to grasp their own role within the conflict-context. On the one hand, peacekeepers may hold impartial views in line with the principles of peacekeeping and, on the other hand, feel that they need to side with the government due to the strategies and mandates focusing on state support. In practice, although the UN peacekeepers may benefit from understanding diverse local actors and including them in their work, especially in areas where they cannot partner with the government or state supporters, the inclusion of local actors may be challenging. If the population holds grievances against the government or challenges its legitimacy and the UN is perceived partial, NSAGs and other local actors may be unwilling to engage with UN peacekeepers. Thus, the relationships between the UN, NSAGs, civilians and the government are all intertwined. *I expect that the relationships between the UN and key conflict actors will cause operational challenges for the peacekeepers although the peacekeepers themselves would hold impartial views.*

Second, in the context of the stabilization framework, the peacekeepers may encounter conflicting attitudes and tasks especially in relation to armed groups. Stabilization has been linked to counter-terrorism and UN peacekeeping operations becoming a tool to fight armed opposition.[53] For instance, MINUSMA was mandated to 'prevent the return of active armed elements to key population centres'[54] and operated in cooperation with the French Serval force, which in 2014 transformed into regional counter-terrorism operation Barkhane offensively targeting armed groups in Mali.[55] At the same time, as presented above, armed groups often provide security, services, and political alternatives to civilians in conflict contexts and can contribute to the work of peacekeepers through information provision and security. Furthermore, armed groups may be perceived as local actors that the UN is expected to non-coercively engage with. MINUSMA reportedly coordinated and cooperated with Tuareg pro-independence and pro-government groups not only to advance the political process but also to improve human rights compliance and humanitarian assistance at the local level.[56] Drawing on survey and interview evidence, this article describes how UN military peacekeepers perceive NSAGs, their different roles, as well as acknowledge differences across groups. *I expect that especially in the context of stabilisation, the peacekeepers face challenges in forming views on armed groups due to the contradictions between the roles that armed groups may play in the local contexts and the tasks of the peacekeepers in relation to them.*

[53]Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding."
[54]United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2584 (2021)*.
[55]Karlsrud, "The UN at War"; Charbonneau, "Intervention in Mali."
[56]Kotajoki, "From Confrontation to Cooperation."

3. The Context of MINUSMA

The current crises in Mali started in 2012 when the Tuareg rebellion of the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) shortly occupied large parts of northern Mali. Soon after, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its offshoot the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine – all groups named as terrorist organizations by the UN – took control of the key population centres in the area, including Gao and Timbuktu. The president in Bamako was deposed in a military coup. Various northern groups eventually grouped themselves into two main camps – the Platform and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) – and signed a peace agreement with the Malian government in June 2015. However, north and central Mali have continued to be dominated by disparate armed groupings, including Islamists, and the government has recently been ousted in coups in 2020 and 2021.

MINUSMA, authorized in 2013, was one of the UN's large and complex 'big four' peacekeeping missions mandated to use all necessary measures to 'stabilise' Mali. Its mandate focused on supporting the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation and the political transition, as well as protecting civilians and human rights, supporting stabilization, restoring state authority, and enabling delivery of humanitarian assistance.[57] The mandate of MINUSMA also emphasised the need for local engagement for instance by highlighting the need to ensure 'strengthened coordination – with local and regional communities, groups and military and civilian authorities' when it comes to strengthening state authority. Additionally, it highlighted the need to 'strengthen community engagement and protection mechanisms, including interaction with civilians, community outreach, reconciliation, mediation, support to the resolution of local and intercommunal conflicts and public information' with regard to the protection of civilians.[58]

MINUSMA has been perceived as partial, among other reasons, due to its support for the government and its counter-terrorism approaches.[59] In addition to supporting the development of a liberal Malian state, the mission supports and exchanges information with the Malian Defense and Security Forces.[60] However, at the same time, MINUSMA's mandated tasks – such as first supporting the signing of the peace agreement and later supporting its implementation – required coordination and cooperation with NSAGs, including rebels fighting against the government.[61] MINUSMA has, for instance, taken part in mixed observation and

[57]United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2584 (2021)*.
[58]United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2584 (2021)*,10.
[59]Karlsrud, "From Liberal Peacebuilding."
[60]Gauthier Vela, "MINUSMA and the Militarization of UN Peacekeeping."
[61]Kotajoki, "From Confrontation to Cooperation."

monitoring teams including representatives of the Malian Defence and Security Forces and NSAGs belonging to the Platform and the Coordination.[62]

Initially, the government of Mali wanted the UN to take a more 'robust' approach to combat armed groups. Despite MINUSMA's support for the Malian armed forces and for restoring state authority throughout the national territory, MINUSMA's relationship with the government was not without problems. Since the beginning of the mission, the government was concerned about MINUSMA's activities legitimizing the NSAGs especially when it comes to the pro-independence groups.[63] Following the latest coup d'état in May 2021, the relations between the UN and Malian transitional government further deteriorated, not least due to allegations of human rights abuses by the government itself and its alignment with Russia and the private security company Wagner. However, many were surprised when the government requested the withdrawal of the mission consisting of more than 13,000 peacekeepers in June 2023.[64] The mission subsequently completed its drawdown during 2023.

4. Swedish MINUSMA Contingent and Local Actors

MINUSMA was an important element of 'the European return to UN peacekeeping'[65] and marked a spike in Western troop contributions to peace operations.[66] The main component of the recent Swedish contribution to MINUSMA consisted of a contingent placed in Gao as a part of a mobile task force (MTF). The rotation of different contingents was six months. The contingent studied here was a mechanized infantry company (reconnaissance) consisting of 154 troops and a related staff deployed to Gao in June 2022. In early 2022, the government of Sweden decided to end its contribution to MINUSMA and Sweden withdrew its troops in the spring of 2023.[67] The contribution was originally planned to end in 2024. The contingent studied in the article was the last fully operationally active Swedish contribution to MINUSMA.

According to the contingent commander of the Swedish troops, the most important tasks of the Swedish contingent were to disrupt the terrorist networks in eastern Mali and protect the civilian population.[68] While the concept behind the MTF and the Swedish troops was to be mobile and provide security in remote areas, the Swedes – similar to other European

[62]United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali, S/2014/692*.
[63]Boutellis, "Can the UN stabilize Mali?"
[64]Jézéquel and Maïga, "Ensuring MINUSMA's Smooth Departure from Mali."
[65]Koops and Tercovich, "A European Return to United Nations Peacekeeping?"
[66]Sezgin, "The European Union's Role."
[67]*Svenska FN-styrkan i Mali avslutas 2023 – Försvarsmakten*.
[68]*Svenska soldater beskjutna i Mali – Malibloggen*.

troops – were known to be more risk-averse that some other troop-contributing countries. At the same time, the Swedes underwent six months of contingent-specific training before their deployment. This training was in many ways extensive compared to other countries. However, only a minimal portion of the pre-deployment training provided information and knowledge about the Malian context and local actors. The training on the local context and actors was reported to last only a couple of hours. Instead, the focus was on practising operational tasks. However, also lectures about the UN, its mandate in Mali, and the rights and responsibilities of UN peacekeepers were included in the training period. These training factors are expected to affect the perceptions of the peacekeepers on local actors and will be further analysed in the discussion.

The Gao region is, together with Timbuktu and Kidal, part of Northern Mali whose largest city is the city of Gao.[69] The Swedish contingent was based in Camp Castor in the city of Gao. Despite being part of the MTF that was created to respond to threats at a geographically wide area, the Swedish unit was less mobile than initially intended operating primarily in the area of Gao.[70]

The formation and dissolution of alliances between armed groups in Mali, and elsewhere, is frequent,[71] and the territory controlled by the armed groups is constantly changing.[72] During 2022, the most important NSAGs using violence around Gao were the jihadist group JNIM (Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and GATIA – a pro-government Tuareg group.[73] While JNIM was formed in 2017 as the main jihadist groups active in Mali affiliated to al-Qaeda merged, ISGS was formed in 2015 and was officially recognized by IS in 2016.[74] It then emerged as an independent 'province' of IS in March 2022. GATIA was not originally part of the negotiations on the peace agreement but later joined the Platform alliance. It has links to the Malian army but has its own political and economic logic.[75] In addition to these groups, CMA, an alliance of northern armed groups that had signed the peace agreement in 2015, has maintained full control over the Kidal region, north of Gao.[76]

Especially in rural areas in Northern Mali, insecurity is widespread, local administration often absent, and the presence of state security and defence forces sporadic or largely non-existent. Despite the insecurity,

[69]Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Northern Mali at a glance*.
[70]Hellquist, *Mobility in United Nations Peacekeeping*.
[71]Desgrais, Guichaoua, and Lebovich, "Unity is the Exception."
[72]Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."
[73]Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2022."
[74]Desgrais, Guichaoua, and Lebovich, "Unity is the Exception."
[75]Maïga, "Armed Groups in Mali."
[76]Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are important local actors delivering basic services that civilians rely on, in addition to their own personal network of friends and family.[77] While traditional leaders have historically played important roles in the communities when it comes to conflict resolution as an example, armed actors increasingly have power in many areas of Mali[78] and often supplement the role of traditional authorities.[79]

Although the armed groups around Gao cause insecurity, and especially IS and JNIM indiscriminately target civilians,[80] they also cultivate relations to civilians to gain local legitimacy.[81] For instance, JNIM has managed to create a support network among the local population, provide services to locals, and have significant influence in the country.[82]

5. The Data

I conducted a survey and in-depth interviews with Swedish military personnel deployed to MINUSMA to investigate how the UN peacekeepers understand local actors and their inclusion, focusing on both local civilian actors and NSAGs in Mali, within the framework of MINUSMA's mandate. Both the survey and the interviews were conducted in Swedish.[83]

In the survey, the respondents were asked to define which actors they consider as local actors in Mali and to specify whom they consider as civilians. To capture their views on the inclusion of local actors, questions about local civilian actors and NSAGs were posed separately. The questions focused on information provision of local civilian actors, its contribution to the peacekeepers' protection activities, and the general possibility of local civilian actors to contribute to the UN forces' security. When it comes to NSAGs, the focus was similarly on information provision and the general possibility of the groups to contribute to the UN forces' security. Also questions about the roles of NSAGs were posed. Furthermore, the survey included questions about the peacekeepers' views on impartiality and their mandated tasks. In addition to these questions that aimed to capture the views of the individual peacekeepers on local actors, MINUSMA, and their tasks, the survey included questions that focused on the peacekeepers' knowledge about armed groups and MINUSMA's mandate.

[77]Schmauder, *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances*.
[78]Ibid.
[79]Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."
[80]Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2022."
[81]Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."
[82]*Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*.
[83]The project was approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Board in 2021 (Nr. 2021-01617). The participants were informed orally and in writing of the study's general purpose after which their consent for participation was asked. Participation was voluntary and the all participants were ensured complete anonymity. No inducements for participation were given.

The survey was conducted in April and May 2022 before the contingent's deployment. The number of respondents was 100. The survey was conducted in person and does not represent a random sample of the Swedish contingent deployed in June 2022. Instead, it includes the perspectives of those individuals from the specific rotation who were willing to participate and take the time to share their views and knowledge. However, based on the characteristics of the respondents, the sample is expected to resemble recent Swedish MINUSMA contingents. Among the respondents, 65% were infantrymen, 20% worked in logistics, and only a few of the respondents had prior experience with a mission abroad. 83% were under 30 years old. 75% had no formal education beyond high school.

When it comes to the interviews, they were conducted by the author, primarily in-person.[84] They took an open-ended format encouraging the participants to freely narrate around their views on local actors and their tasks.[85] However, the participants were asked to define local actors as well as share their views on anticipated and experienced interactions with different actors. Questions probing the peacekeepers' views on impartiality, MINUSMA's mandate, and the tasks of the peacekeepers were posed as well. In total, ten interviews were conducted both before (seven) and after the deployment (three). The interview participants were chosen in cooperation with the contingent's leadership to identify individuals who were willing to participate and who had different perspectives on the topic. The participants represent individuals with different tasks and ranks. Those interviewed before the deployment had previously been in Mali deployed to Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) task force based in Timbuktu. Through the deployment to ISR task force between 2015 and 2019, Sweden contributed to a pioneering peacekeeping intelligence function that aimed to improve the mission's operational planning. While the experiences in the ISR are unique to a small number of Western military personnel and may lead to peacekeepers highlighting information collection, processing and reporting tasks in the interviews, previous research shows that the Swedish ISR peacekeepers also acted in a more traditional peacekeeping roles.[86] Thus, the previous experiences of the interviewees may not be as unique as the intended roles of the ISR peacekeepers would indicate.

It has been argued that 'the case of MINUSMA provides important insights into the opportunities for a wider participation of European countries' in UN peacekeeping.[87] Examining the views, knowledge, and experiences of Swedish MINUSMA peacekeepers is expected to contribute

[84]One of the interviews post-deployment was conducted online as requested by the participant.
[85]The linterviews varied in length from 30 min to 1 h and 14 min.
[86]Wiklund Hull and Lackenbauer, *Insatsuppföljning Mali 04/05*; Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *Reconnaissance to Protect Civilians and Troops?*
[87]Koops and Tercovich, "A European Return to United Nations Peacekeeping?" 601.

to broader insights about Western military personnel in UN peacekeeping operations. It could also inform military interventions beyond peacekeeping that increasingly highlight the importance of collaborative relationships with local actors.[88] By focusing on personnel deployed to implement peace operations' mandated tasks on the ground, instead of high-ranked officers or staff mainly doing working at the UN camps, the data provides information on how European troops with common peacekeeping tasks may view local actors and their roles in relation to different local actors in contexts such as Mali. While there are important differences across European military peacekeepers in how they view their operational context,[89] and generalizing the findings from one contingent to others of different nationalities and deployment periods is challenging, the data provides insights based on which the views and knowledge of the Swedish peacekeepers could be compared to those of other European contingents or those with less cultural distance to local populations.[90]

6. How Do UN Peacekeepers Understand Local Actors and Their Inclusion?

6.1. Who are the Locals?

Based on the survey, the Swedish contingent's understanding of local actors primarily focuses on armed groups and state actors. As shown in Figure 1, the most commonly named actors considered as local actors were local state actors, NSAGs, and Malian soldiers. Only approximately half of the respondents considered civil organizations as local actors. The definition of local actors appeared to be clearly distinct from the definition of civilians. Civilians were most often defined as those who do not carry weapons, but less than half of the respondents linked that definition to local actors. Furthermore, in the interviews, the definition of civilians as unarmed individuals was problematized particularly due to the prevalence of weapons among the local populations. The interviewees stated that it is very difficult to distinguish between armed groups and civilians since carrying weapons alone does not mean they are part of an armed group.[91]

Approximately 80% of the survey respondents did not consider it easy to differentiate between civilians and armed groups in practice (see summary statistics on survey variables in Table 1). Thus, instead of focusing on the element of arms, some interviewees emphasised the importance of interpreting the actors in the given situation to differentiate between armed groups

[88]Ekman, "Local Ties that Bind?"
[89]Ruffa, *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations*.
[90]Bove and Ruggeri, "Peacekeeping Effectiveness and Blue Helmets' Distance."
[91]Interview 4, Interview 10.

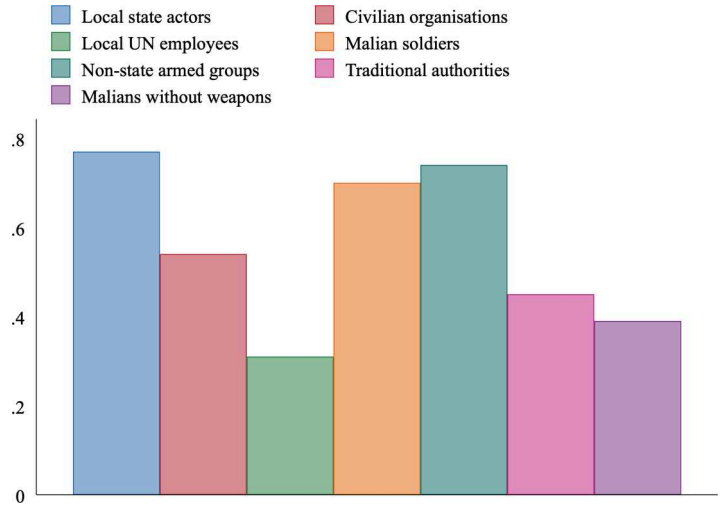

Figure 1. Share of respondents considering specific actors as local actors.

and civilians. Experience, perception of threat, fear on both sides in the given situation, and the level of organization of the individuals involved were considered important in making this distinction.[92] Also specific local knowledge occasionally facilitated differentiating between civilians and armed groups. One interviewee explained that it was once possible to recognize IS members because they cut their pants so that they would not get stuck when they were driving their motorcycles. 'But then the group understood that the UN had recognized this pattern and cut the pants from all villagers'.[93] These findings highlights how identifying civilians and distinguishing them from armed groups takes place in the operational context based on situational assessment and case-specific knowledge.

The interviews further highlighted that the concept of local actors is complex and hard to specify. However, it was often linked to authority or power that the actors have as well as the tasks of the peacekeepers.[94] For the peacekeepers working with providing security, the most relevant local actors were those engaged in similar types of tasks and influencing the peacekeepers possibility to conduct their tasks, such as NSAGs and Malian armed forces. This aligns with the perspectives highlighting the importance of agency of local actors. Even when asked about local civilian actors specifically, the respondents often framed their the reflections in relation to armed groups and the power that civilian actors, such as religious leaders

[92]Interview 4.
[93]Interview 9.
[94]Interview 4, Interview 7.

Table 1. Summary statistics for variables measuring the views of the peacekeepers on local actors and their tasks.

	Count	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
It is easy to differentiate between civilians and different armed groups	97	2.092784	1.208326	1	6
Local civilian actors can provide important information to the UN	100	6.26	.894653	4	7
If local civilian actors provide us information it is easier to protect them	100	6.06	.9081005	4	7
Local civilian actors can contribute to the UN's security	98	5.571429	1.209925	1	7
NSAGs can provide important information to the UN	98	5.285714	1.139723	2	7
NSAGs can contribute to the UN's security	99	3.989899	1.366471	1	7
Different NSAGs should be managed in different ways	96	5.302083	1.36204	2	7
It is easy to differentiate between groups in practice	100	2.05	1.266308	1	6
NSAGs are my enemies	97	3.721649	1.24785	1	7
All NSAGs in Mali have destructive political goals	96	3.135417	1.47698	1	6
NSAGs can contribute to civilians' security	99	4.585859	1.421483	1	7
My task in Mali is to support the Malian state	99	3.939394	1.448561	1	7
It is difficult to be impartial in the Malian context	96	5.09375	1.407335	1	7

The respondents were asked to indicate the number that best describes their view on the statements on a scale from completely disagree (1) through neither agree nor disagree (4) to completely agree (7).

or elders, may have overarmed groups.[95] The clear inclusion of NSAGs in the definition of local actors and the blurred lines between civilians and armed actors further underlines the importance of incorporating these actors into the analyses of local peacekeeping and peacebuilding. It also highlights the challenges of in practice limiting the 'local' to specific actors accepted from a normative point of view.

6.2. Inclusion of Civilian Actors

The survey responses highlight that information provision by local civilian actors is important for the work of the peacekeepers. Over 90% of the respondents to some extent agreed with the statement that local civilian actors can provide important information to the UN and almost as many respondents expressed that if local civilian actors provide information, it makes their protection easier (see Figure 2). Nearly half completely agreed with the first statement and close to 40% with the second statement, as shown in Figure 2.

Duringf the interviews, a soldier who had previously served in Mali working in information gathering explained that, in connection to attacks, local civilians had often provided valuable information on the exact location of the attacks, the aggressors, and similar details. Gathering information from local civilian actors was one of the key duties in the mission and, based on the survey, was considered more important than supporting the Malian state or fighting NSAGs. The interviewees posited that, in addition

[95]Interview 7.

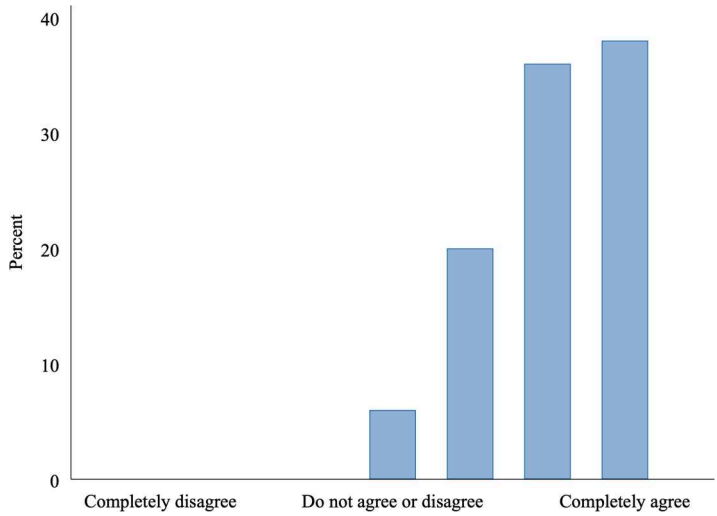

Figure 2. Respondents indicating on a scale from 1 to 7 the degree to which they agree with the statement 'if local civilian actors provide information, it is easier for us to protect them'. No respondent disagreed.

to the UN needing information from local civilian actors to adapt its operations and respond to needs, the local civilian actors also had an incentive to provide information, as it contributed to their security and humanitarian needs – unless they were afraid of reprisals from armed actors.[96] Local inclusion through communication was considered nearly impossible in cases where armed groups did not want the civilians to interact with the peacekeepers and had a strong control over the population. Such situation existed especially when it comes IS. In these contexts, the inclusion of local actors was considered a possible threat to civilians. The interviewees explained that they did not want to get involved in such situations and were generally conscious about the possible negative consequences that information gathering might cause to civilians. 'It is better for them to pay taxes to IS than to be shot because they have talked to internationals'.[97] Thus, the form of control that the armed groups exercise over the local populations affect the possibilities of the UN to communicate with local actors, gather information and, accordingly, operate among these populations.

Local civilian actors also seem to be important for the security of the UN. Vast majority (80%) of the respondents expressed that local civilian actors can contribute to the security of the UN forces. Based on the interviews, in addition to the relationship between civilians and armed groups, the

[96]Interview 7.
[97]Interview 9.

armed groups the relationship with the Malian state largely influences the local population's approach towards the peacekeepers. Thus, it also affects the possibilities of including civilians in the UN's work. When civilians support armed groups that are against the government (although they had signed the peace agreement) they may behave hostile towards the peacekeepers. This is due to the perception that peacekeepers are supporting the government instead of remaining impartial. 'When we are on the Malian government's side, then we are not all that neutral – it is difficult to gain the trust of someone who already distrusts the government'.[98] Conversely, when armed groups support the government, hostile interactions with civilians and the armed actors are to a large extent avoided, and there are better conditions for the local actors to be included in the UN's work.

6.3. Inclusion of NSAGs

The survey questions about NSAGs highlight that the role that NSAGs can play in providing information to the UN is also widely recognized among the peacekeepers (Figure 3). Approximately 70% of the respondents to agreed, at least to some extent, with the statement that NSAGs can provide important information to the UN. This aligns with experiences from the mission. One interviewee explained that the armed groups were very knowledgeable about the local environment as they could often move freely between different villages using unarmed vehicles. Some of the armed groups also shared information about their own capabilities, such as weapon storage and strategically important buildings.[99] However, as the main task of the contingent was not intelligence, they did not seek active cooperation with armed groups to the same extent as during previous missions or, possibly, compared to other contingents.

Nearly forty percent 40% appeared to believe that NSAGs can, in some ways, contribute to the security of the UN forces. It was stated in the interviews that the presence of NSAGs around UN camps might deter hostile groups of conducting attacks in the surroundings as bypassing them poses an additional hurdle to the hostile groups. Some of the interviewees highlighted that they did not want to take a stance on whether MINUSMA should cooperate with armed groups or not. However, they acknowledged that cooperation with all types of actors might be beneficial for the UN to succeed with small tasks and projects locally while building trust among the population.[100] Relationships with civilians could also be built through different types of powerful local actors.

[98]Interview 1.
[99]Interview 9.
[100]Interview 2.

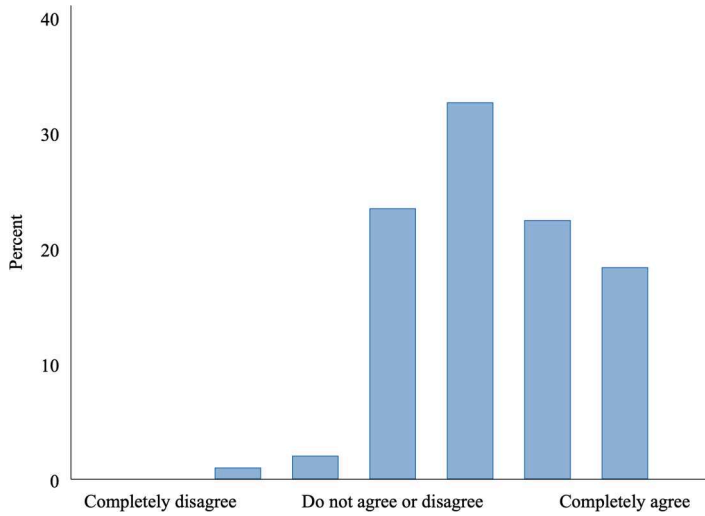

Figure 3. Respondents indicating on a scale from 1 to 7 the degree to which they agree with the statement 'NSAGs can provide important information to the UN'. No respondent completely disagreed.

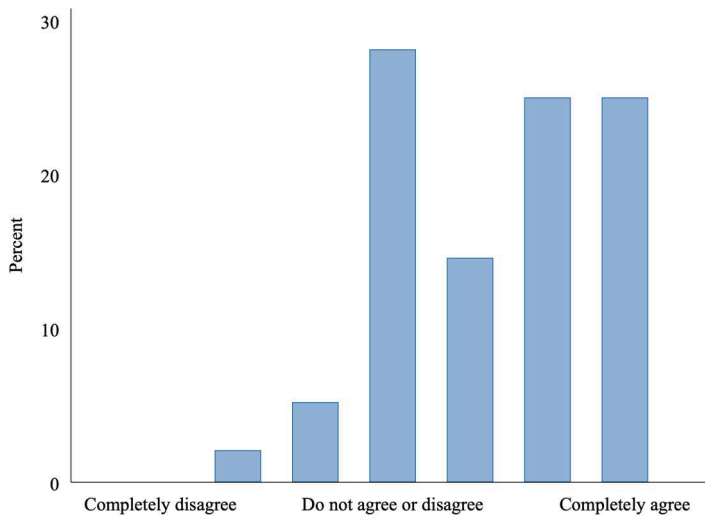

Figure 4. Respondents indicating on a scale from 1 to 7 the degree to which they agree with the statement 'Different NSAGs should be managed in different ways'. No respondent completely disagreed.

Although the respondents recognized that NSAGs as a whole can contribute to the UN's work, they had relatively little knowledge about specific groups before their deployment. The majority agreed with the statement that different armed groups should be managed in different ways (Figure 4), but

Table 2. Percentage of survey respondents placing NSAGs in the three categories mentioned in MINUSMA's mandate.

Participants placing NSAGs into group categories	
MNLA as a part of Coordination	11%
GATIA as a part of Platform	15%
JNIM as a terrorist group	80%
IS as a terrorist group	88%

struggled to categorise specific NSAGs especially beyond the so-called terrorist groups. As shown in Table 2, only 11%of the study participants identified MNLA as belonging to the coalition of Coordination mentioned in MINUSMA's mandate. More than half of the respondents admitted that they did not know how to describe the group and remaining participants categorized it wrong. Coordination is active around Gao and, for instance, has signed an Action Plan with the UN to end and prevent child recruitment, sexual violence, and all other grave violations against children.[101] Also only 15% categorized GATIA correctly, although the contingent later interacted with the group.[102] In the interviews, the peacekeepers often clearly recognized the differences between pro-government groups, so called terrorist groups and pro-independence signatory groups. However, they struggled to name specific groups even in cases where they had interacted with them. Part of the issue was that they did not know exactly which groups they had encountered. Since many of the groups were in conflict with the terrorist groups, the groups did not want to show any identifiers.[103] When encountering armed actors, the peacekeepers sometimes approached them asking who they were and the actors would claim to belong to Coordination or Platform, for instance.[104]

In the survey, over 80% of the respondents did not consider it easy to differentiate different groups from one another on the ground. During the mission, due to the active presence of numerous armed groups, including groups that were not hostile towards the mission, the peacekeepers adopted a pragmatic approach when conducting their activities. The interviewees explained that during interaction situations with armed groupings they could assess the level of organization and training of the group based on the individuals' postures, positioning, and their way of carrying weapons. Instead of relying on names or categories of actors, the assessments of them on the ground were often based on group symbols such as flags on vehicles, geographical location information received before patrols, and the level of hostility that the group shows towards the mission. One interviewee

[101] *Mali: CMA Coalition Signs Action Plan to End and Prevent Recruitment*.
[102] Interview 8, Interview 10.
[103] Interview 8.
[104] Interview 10.

explained that in addition to stopping and asking who the groups were: 'We did it so simply that we waived at them and smiled and observed if they wave back. If they waved back and looked happy they are probably friends. If they did not do that we are careful'.[105] This highlights the pragmatic approach the peacekeepers took when engaging with armed groups.

6.4. Local Actors and Their Inclusion in the Context of Stabilisation

In line with MINUSMA's stabilization mandate, one of the main tasks of the Swedish contingent was stated to be disrupting terrorist networks. As an infantry unit they were prepared to focus on maintaining security, protecting civilians, and fighting armed groups. The focus on addressing threats from terrorist groups is reflected in the peacekeepers' knowledge about the groups. The Swedish peacekeepers were better at categorizing IS and JNIM than GATIA and MNLA (as shown in Table 2). An interviewee explained that during the pre-deployment training there was a lot of focus on practising reactions to different types of attacks by armed groups. Thus, when the peacekeepers initially encountered armed groups during their activities early on in the mission, they acted in a hostile way, although the groups had not behaved suspiciously. According to the interviewee, this could be dangerous as it can provoke armed groups without a clear cause. Thus, the interviewee suggested that it could have been good to practiceinteracting with armed groups and that in such situations 'nothing really happens'.[106] This underlies the risks associated with a mission that is mandated to take a hostile stance against armed actors as a whole.

Despite the focus on terrorist groups, the peacekeepers had rather nuanced views on NSAGs as a whole. A minority considered NSAGs as a whole as their enemies (Figure 5), very few thought that all NSAG have destructive political objectives and close to half of the respondents recognized the role that NSAGs can have in providing security to civilians. However, many were generally hesitant to express their attitudes towards armed groups and neither agreed or disagreed with the statements.

Despite the stabilization mandate, only a minority considered it as their mission to support the Malian state (32%). However, a majority of the survey respondents experienced that it is difficult to remain impartial in the conflict in Mali and the interviewees explained how relations with the state affected the functioning of the mission on the ground. On the one hand, they stated that they in theory worked on the side of the government while opposing the terrorist groups. 'There is protection where they (the

[105]Interview 8.
[106]Interview 8.

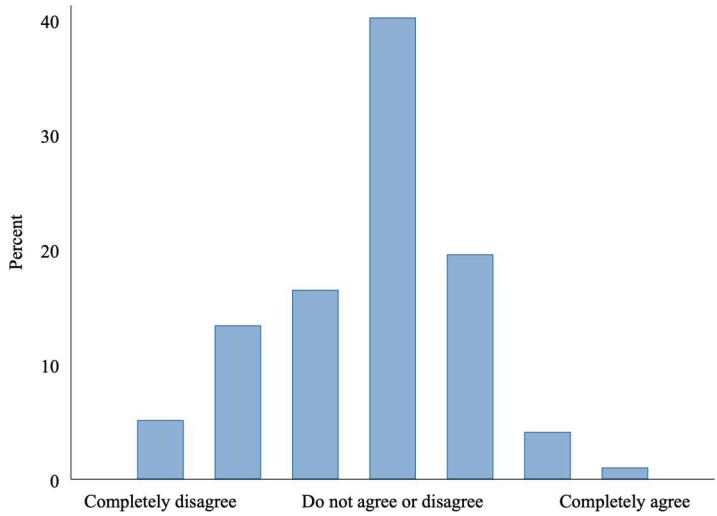

Figure 5. Respondents indicating on a scale from 1 to 7 the degree to which they agree with the statement 'NSAGs are my enemies'.

state) want it to be'.[107] On the other hand, the interviewees expressed that, in practice, there was little cooperation between the Malian government or the Malian armed forces and the contingent. One interviewee stated that the government was, in fact, hiding its activities from MINUSMA and another explained that the contingent avoided the Malian armed forces so that they did not need to take a stance. It was also stated that the government made it difficult for the UN to operate by cancelling visas, limiting travels within the country, and similar actions.[108] This reflects the deteriorating relations with the state during the contingent's deployment.

In line with the survey results, the difficulties in differentiating between local actors, including NSAGs, civilians and even Malian armed forces, came forth in the interviews. Although the Swedish contingent engaged in combat with NSAGs during their deployment, the interviewees were not sure what groups they had been. They were stated to be either JNIM or IS but it was not possible to identify groups from several hundred meters away.[109] While the peacekeepers can react to the tactics used by NSAGs, difficulties in differentiating between different groups hinders knowing how to approach armed actors when the groups do not take an initiative, and thus, having proactive nuanced approaches towards different NSAGs. This can be especially problematic in the context of stabilization. At the same time, it was stated that more knowledge about the names or

[107]Interview 8.
[108]Interview 10.
[109]Interview 10.

Table 3. Percentage of survey respondents recognizing tasks as part of MINUSMA's mandate.

Participants recognizing the mandated tasks of MINUSMA	
The first strategic priority of the mission is to support the implementation of the peace agreement	44%
MINUSMA is mandated to support cantonment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of armed groups in Mali	10%
MINUSMA's role is to facilitate the return of state presence, state authority and basic social services in the Centre	52%

characteristics of the groups before the deployment would have probably not helped as their location, leadership and similar changed constantly.[110]

In line with the limited theoretical knowledge of armed groups before deployment, the peacekeepers had limited knowledge of the mandate of mission. While close to half of the respondents recognized that the first strategic priority of the mission was to support the implementation of the peace agreement and to facilitate the return of state presence, state authority and basic social services in the Centre, only 10% were aware that MINUSMA was mandated to support the cantonment, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of armed groups in Mali as illustrated in Table 3. Although this aspect of the mandate is not directly linked to the tasks of the Swedish contingent to protect civilians and to disrupt the terrorist networks, it reflects the focus of the peacekeepers' training. This may partly explain why the peacekeepers had limited knowledge or appeared hesitant to express views on the mission's approaches or armed groups. One interviewee explained that there is little reflection on the fact that the activities are conducted on behalf of the UN mandate or the Malian government.[111] This lack of knowledge about the mandate and focus on it may also explain why the peacekeepers seem less affected by the stabilization narrative in their attitudes, but experience difficulties on the ground when it comes to engaging with civilians and armed groups when the mission is perceived as supportive of the government by the local populations and when they support the armed groups.

7. Discussion

The significance of interacting with different types of local actors has been recognized, both within the UN and in academic debates, as a crucial factor in ensuring the success of peace operations.[112] This article highlights the perceptions of military peacekeepers which shape their approaches to

[110]Interview 10.
[111]Interview 9.
[112]Campbell, "UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding"; Whalan, "The Local Legitimacy of Peacekeepers"; Newby, *Peacekeeping in South Lebanon*.

local engagement and may contribute to local ownership, legitimacy, and success of peacekeeping. The findings of this article show that military peacekeepers on the ground have a very operational and pragmatic security-driven views on local actors, combined with a rather limited understanding of the mandate from the UN Security Council.

The peacekeepers surveyed for this study included several different types of actors under the concept of 'local'. However, the focus was on actors directly connected to the tasks of the peacekeepers and who possessed the agency to affect them. For the infantry soldiers, this entailed above all local state actors, Malian soldiers, and NSAGs. This stands in contrast with previous research and a norm-driven approach to local engagement and ownership that have put an emphasis on civilian actors, such as NGOs and civil affairs personnel, both as the locals and as the internationals. The results underline the role that armed groups play in shaping the perspectives and work of peacekeepers beyond their use of violent tactics. Furthermore, including local actors in the UN's work requires engaging not only with high-level state political, economic, and military elites[113] but also with powerful non-state actors who have the capacity to contribute to the UN's objectives.

In the case of the Swedish contingent in Mali, the peacekeepers demonstrated rather nuanced views on the roles that different armed groups play in the local context, but struggled to distinguish between different groups. The analysis further shows that the peacekeepers to a large extent learned about and built their understanding of the different groups through interactions and observations on the ground. However, this does not mean that the stabilization mandate of the mission or the expected tasks of the peacekeepers were irrelevant to their approaches. As the empirical insights illustrate, while the surveyed peacekeepers lacked a comprehensive understanding of the mandate, both the expectations and associated training on violent interactions with armed groups shaped how the peacekeepers approached NSAGs on the ground. Similarly, the relationship between the state and the mission indirectly affected the peacekeepers' possibilities to engage with local actors. Thus, although peacekeepers may largely assess different local actors situationally in the operational context and be less affected by mandate formulations, the political dimensions of the mission can have indirect implications for their knowledge, assessments, and forms of engagement.

This article suggests that both civilians and NSAGs are crucial for the tasks of peacekeepers. Their roles are especially important for information gathering that enables the UN to respond to violence against civilians. 'If we do not know who actually needs to be protected, how could we then

[113]von Billerbeck, "Local Ownership and un Peacebuilding."

do it?', one interviewee elaborated on the link between information gathering and the contingent's task to protect civilians.[114] However, the relationship-between NSAGs and civilians can affect the capacities of the UN to interact with civilians and protect vulnerable populations. When armed groups exert strong influence over civilian populations and do not want them to cooperate with the UN, gaining access to information is challenging. These dynamics may be similar to governments limiting the UN's access as observed in this study, in Mali in general, and elsewhere[115] with severe consequences for the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping. As a result, it could be substantially harder for the UN to protect civilians in areas where armed actors hostile towards the UN have control locally. While the presence of UN peacekeepers may serve as a deterrent, particularly if they remain in specific localities for extended periods, their capacities to position troops and react to threats may be limited. Future research could investigate how peacekeeping works depending on the type and degree of control by armed actors.

Thorough knowledge and understanding of local actors would facilitate gaining access to reliable information and, thus, enable more effective operations. However, given the short deployment periods that limit on the ground learning, combined with the limited knowledge of the Swedish peacekeepers on different local actors prior to deployment, despite the relatively long pre-deployment training, expecting a comprehensive understanding of local actors and dynamics may be too much to ask for. Instead, one interviewee suggested that their experiences in cooperating with the UN's civilian pillars to address the needs of the civilians 'could be some type of future' for UN interventions.[116] While military personnel enables the activities of the civilian personnel by providing protection, especially locally recruited civilians have the necessary language skills, detailed knowledge of key locations and actors, and 'another type of respect than oneself in uniform and body protection –'.[117] Investing in such cooperation could provide avenues for more effective operations.

Previous research has found that there is variation in discourse, understandings, and practices of local ownership within the UN.[118] Incorporating the perspectives of military peacekeepers is crucial, not only because they form the majority of peacekeepers and maintain continuous interactions with local communities, but also because doing so broadens our understanding of local engagement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The results show that while local inclusion and engagement can adopt pragmatic or even

[114]Interview 8.
[115]Duursma and Müller, "The ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir and Its Repercussions"; Piccolino and Karlsrud, "Withering Consent, but Mutual Dependency"; Tull, "When They Overstay Their Welcome."
[116]Interview 9.
[117]Interview 9.
[118]von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership*.

instrumental forms, this does not necessarily entail that local actors have less influence over the UN's activities, quite the opposite. The results suggest that local actors shape the work of peacekeepers. The peacekeepers acknowledge the impact of both local civilian and armed actors when it comes to security provision and information-sharing despite the political challenges of inclusion. All in all, power, agency, and accessibility of local actors matter for their involvement in international actors' work. Local engagement built on violent and unequal power structures can undoubtedly be problematic, but same applies to externally imposed inclusion. The UN should carefully consider trade-offs between the benefits of pragmatic forms of local engagement or inclusion and the risks of strengthening politically problematic or potentially conflict-enforcing local structures.

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