

Legitimacy in Peacekeeping: Civilian Support Hinges on Peacekeeper Behavior, Not Outcomes

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Summary

As international support for United Nations (UN)-led peacekeeping declines, and missions increasingly shift toward regionally led operations—particularly under the African Union—the question of peacekeeping legitimacy has become more urgent. Peacekeeping is often characterized as legitimate by international organizations if it is effective in its mission, with an emphasis on material capacity, mandate strength, and troop numbers. But what do civilians on the ground think? Given that peacekeeping is meant to serve and protect civilians, what factors explain why some missions retain civilian cooperation even under severe constraints while others experience distrust and disengagement?

Drawing on original experimental evidence from Somalia and South Sudan, this brief demonstrates that civilian evaluations of peacekeepers are shaped by perceived normative alignment rather than protection outcomes alone. Civilians assess whether peacekeepers' observable behavior aligns with local expectations about effort, priority, and responsibility. When peacekeepers are perceived as acting in accordance with these expectations—even when protection fails—legitimacy and cooperation remain resilient. When behavior signals normative misalignment, legitimacy declines sharply, even in the absence of abuse or overt failure.

These findings have direct implications for how peacekeeping missions should train personnel, design patrols, communicate constraints, and assess mission performance in an era of declining international backing.

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The Changing Peacekeeping Landscape

Peacekeeping is entering a period of structural transformation. Major political and financial supporters—most notably the United States—are increasingly sceptical of UN-led peacekeeping and have moved to reduce funding, political backing, and operational scope.¹ At the same time, peacekeeping responsibilities are increasingly shifting toward regionally led missions, particularly under the African Union (AU), often operating with fewer resources, more limited mandates, and heightened exposure to civilian scrutiny.²

In this environment, peacekeeping missions can no longer rely primarily on material capacity or formal authority to sustain effectiveness. Instead, civilian cooperation—including information sharing, compliance, and engagement—remains central. But civilian cooperation depends fundamentally on whether civilians view peacekeepers as legitimate protectors—or not. Understanding how legitimacy is formed and sustained under constraint is therefore essential for the future viability of peacekeeping.³

The Case of Somalia and South Sudan

Somalia and South Sudan offer analytically powerful contexts for studying peacekeeping legitimacy. In both settings, civilians are routinely exposed to multiple security providers, including UN/AU peacekeepers, national armed forces, regional or U.S. troops, and non-state armed groups. This allows civilians to make direct, comparative judgments about who prioritizes civilian protection and who does not.

Both missions operate in high-risk contexts marked by weak host-state capacity and limited state control, where peacekeepers face structural constraints on mobility, intelligence, and enforcement.⁴ In such settings—where protection outcomes are inherently uncertain—civilians must rely more heavily on observable behavioral cues to evaluate peacekeepers. These are precisely the conditions under which perceived normative alignment becomes central to sustaining legitimacy.

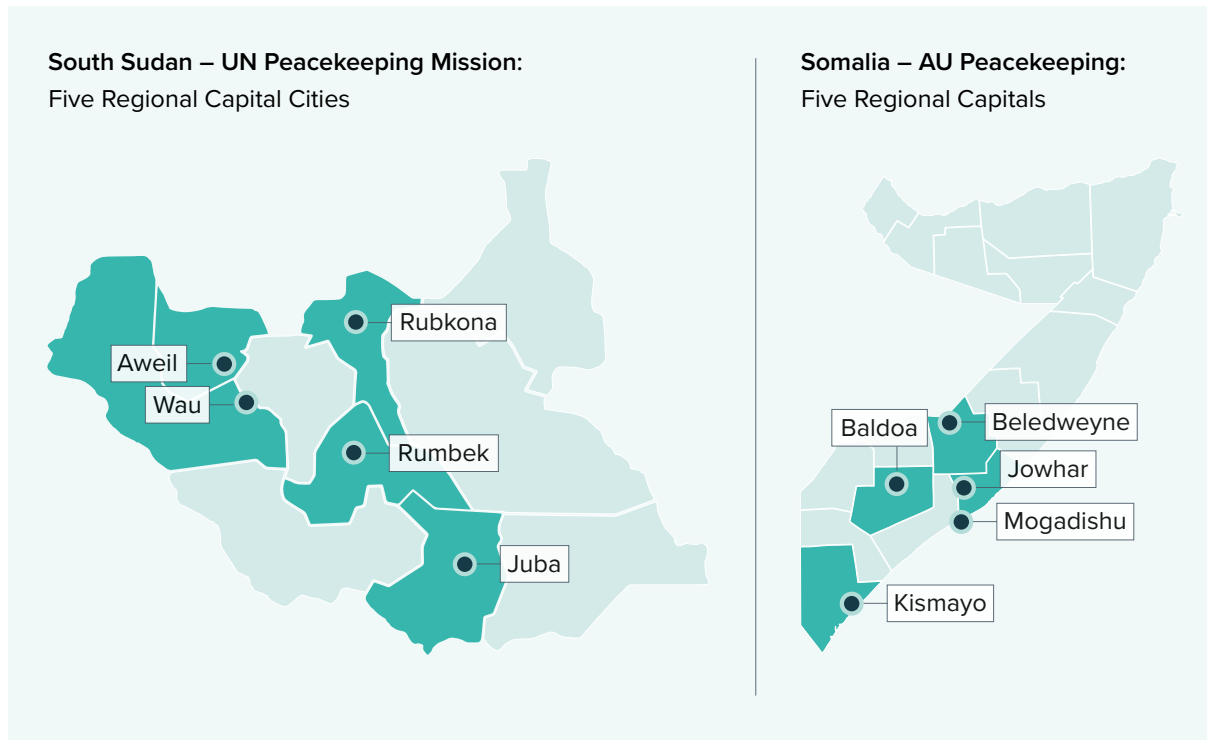
To understand how civilians evaluate peacekeepers, we conducted three survey experiments, each capturing a different dimension of civilian judgement. Working with local partners, we conducted in-person surveys of approximately 3,000 civilians across Somalia and South Sudan in communities where peacekeepers operate. We asked civilians not just about peacekeepers, but about other security providers—armed groups and government forces. This approach lets us see broader patterns in how people view the institutions responsible for their safety, rather than treating each community's experience in isolation.

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1. Farnaz Fassihi, "U.N. Says It's in Danger of Financial Collapse Because of Unpaid Dues," *The New York Times*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/world/americas/un-finances-collapse-debts.html>
 2. Allen, Nate, and Nicole Mazurova. "African Union and United Nations Partnership Key to the Future of Peace Operations in Africa." Africa Center for Strategic Studies. April 30, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-union-united-nations-peace-operations/>
 3. For a detailed literature review on where peacekeeping stands, please see: Walter, Barbara F., Lise Morje Howard and V. Page Fortna. "The extraordinary relationship between peacekeeping and peace." *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2021): 1705–1722.

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4. See: Gelot, Linnéa, and Prabin B. Khadka. "Combat Legitimacy and Robust Peace Operations: Calibrating Military Protection of Civilians." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 20, no. 1 (2026): 90–113.

FIGURE 1.

Survey Locations in South Sudan (UN Peacekeeping Mission) and Somalia (AU Peacekeeping Mission)



The first survey experiment aimed to identify which attributes—such as patrol frequency, civilian engagement, and use of force—guide preferences when respondents consider trade-offs between peacekeeping units. The second experiment examined how civilians assess peacekeepers' behavior, focusing on the gap between what peacekeepers are perceived to do and what they are expected to do. This signals perceptions of under- and over-enforcement. The third compares peacekeepers by asking respondents to evaluate their trust in the peacekeepers in their area relative to other actors like government or rebel forces. Taken together, these experiments help to explain the underlying factors that shape civilian perceptions and peacekeeping legitimacy.

Key Findings

Figure 2 displays how independent variables patrol frequency, use of force, and interaction with civilians shape peacekeeper preference. Two patterns emerge. First, increased patrol presence is associated with higher peacekeeper support in both countries. In South Sudan, preference increases substantially from 37.9 percent (“Never”) to 59.4 percent (“Always”), while in Somalia it increases from 45.5 percent to 53.2 percent.

Second, the effect of use of force differs between countries. In South Sudan, greater use of force is associated with higher support (42.5 percent for “Never” to 55.9 percent for “Always”). In Somalia, the opposite is true: support for peacekeepers declines from 53.2 percent to 47.6 percent as force increases.

FIGURE 2.
Civilian Preferences for Peacekeepers—UN (South Sudan) vs. AMISOM (Somalia)

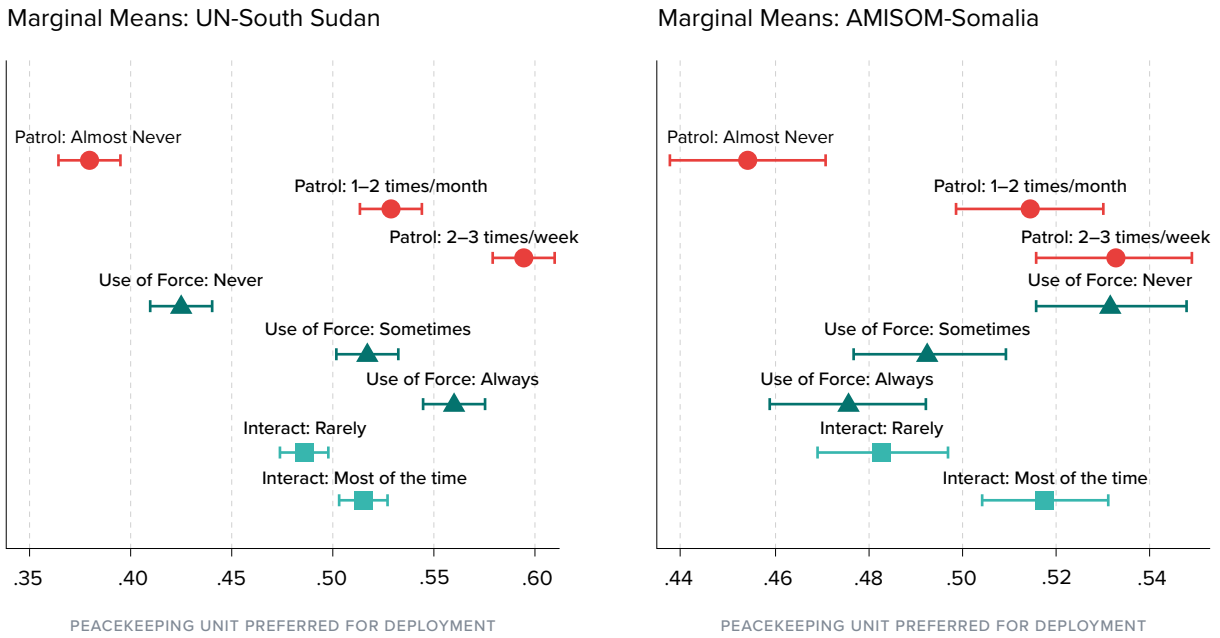


FIGURE 3.
Peacekeeper Performance: Observed Actions vs. Civilian Expectations

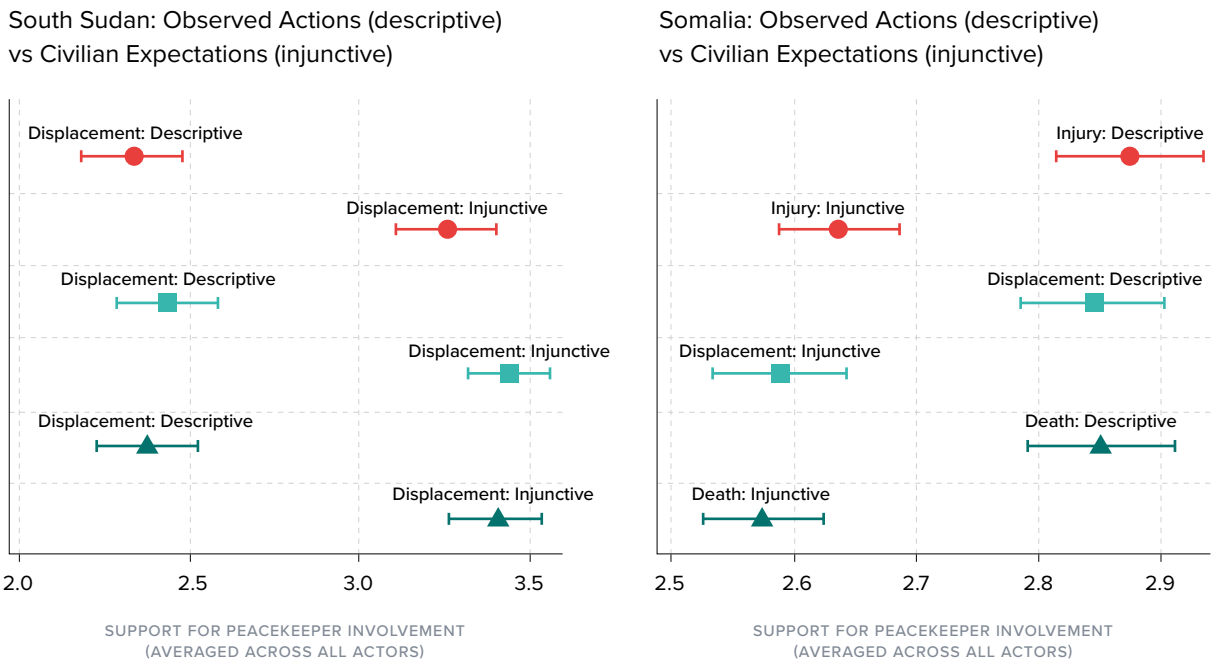
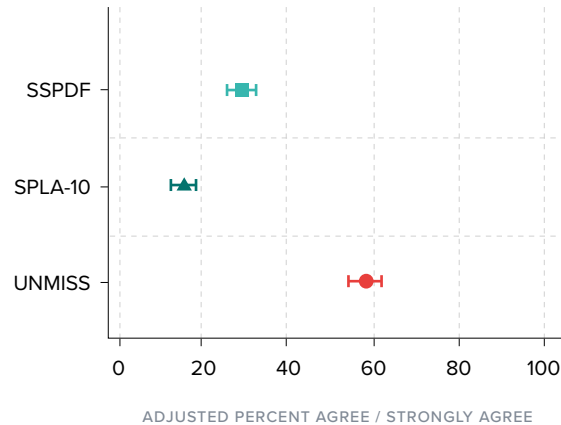
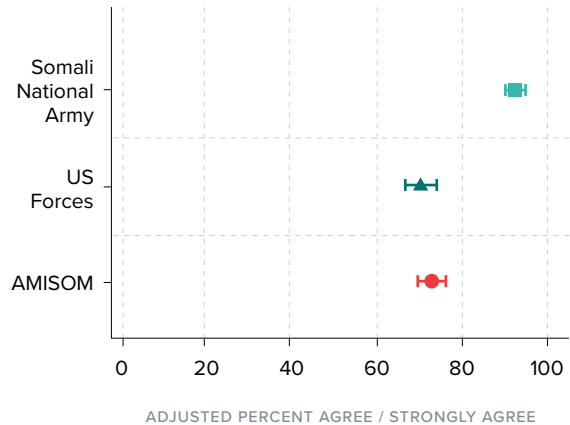


FIGURE 4.**Benchmarking Trust in Security Providers (average outcome on a 0–100 scale)**

South Sudan: Trust (SSPDF/SPLA-OI/UNMISS)
in Protection of Civilians (adjusted)



Somalia: Trust (SNA/US/AMISOM)
in Protection of Civilians (adjusted)



Only small increases in support are observed in both cases from civilian interaction—South Sudan: 48.6 percent for “Never” to 51.4 percent for “Always”; Somalia: 48.3 percent to 51.8 percent. Figure 3 compares how civilians perceive peacekeepers actually respond to violence with how they believe peacekeepers should respond. The difference between these two views reveals an important gap between practice and expectation. In South Sudan, civilians consistently feel that peacekeepers are not doing enough. Across incidents involving injury, displacement, and killing, respondents indicate that peacekeepers should respond more strongly than they currently do.

In Somalia, the pattern is reversed. While peacekeepers are seen as actively responding to violence, civilians express a preference for more restrained use of force. In this case, peacekeepers may already be exceeding what communities view as appropriate.

This divergence points to a key operational challenge. Peacekeepers do not operate in a context where stronger responses are always rewarded.

In settings like Somalia, overreaction—particularly the use of excessive force—may generate community backlash and undermine local support. Calibrating responses to align with local expectations is therefore critical since acting too little risks ineffectiveness, but acting too much may carry equally significant costs for legitimacy and mission success.

Figure 4 displays results from our third experiment—the predicted support for key security actors (South Sudan on the left and Somalia on the right). In South Sudan, respondents show a clear statistically significant hierarchical preference: the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has the highest support (57.9 percent), followed by South Sudan People’s Defense Force (SSPDF) (28.9 percent), and South Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) with the lowest support (15 percent). In Somalia, support is highest for the Somali National Army (93.02 percent), which significantly outperforms both the United States (70.59 percent) and AMISOM (72.90 percent).

Interpreting These Findings

Taking these three experiments together, the results paint a picture of how civilians evaluate peacekeepers. Civilian evaluations can be distilled into the following three patterns:

1. Civilians Differentiate Between Types of Conduct, Not Just Outcomes

The experiments show that civilian trust does not move uniformly in response to all forms of peacekeeping activity. Instead, civilians distinguish between different types of conduct. Increased patrol presence and engagement are associated with higher levels of support, while greater reliance on force is associated with lower support. This pattern suggests that civilians do not equate protection with escalation. Rather, they respond positively to visible presence and engagement and negatively to conduct perceived as heavy-handed.

Policy implication: Legitimacy is shaped by how protection is delivered. Visible presence and restraint can strengthen trust, whereas coercive overreach can undermine it—even when undertaken in the name of security.

2. Legitimacy Is Conditional on Behavioral Alignment, Not Formal Authority

The findings indicate that peacekeepers' legitimacy is conditional and behavior dependent. Formal mandates, international status, and institutional authority alone do not sustain trust. Rather, civilians evaluate peacekeepers based on whether their conduct aligns with expectations of protective presence, responsiveness, and proportionality. When behavior diverges from those expectations—particularly through the perceived overuse of force—trust declines, regardless of formal authority.

Policy implication: Institutional authority does not guarantee public confidence. Missions must ensure that operational practices align with civilian expectations about appropriate protection.

3. Observable Signals Drive Perceptions of Commitment

Across the experimental designs, civilians rely heavily on visible, interpretable signals—such as patrol frequency, responsiveness, and enforcement practices—to infer peacekeepers' priorities and intentions. Because civilians rarely observe mandate language or internal operational constraints, everyday conduct becomes the primary basis for judgment. Importantly, different signals are interpreted differently: visible presence tends to increase support, while frequent or aggressive coercion can reduce it.

Policy implication: Operational behavior forms reputation. Missions should manage the signals their activities send, strengthening those associated with protective commitment and minimizing those that generate perceptions of heavy-handedness.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three experiments formalize a common logic: civilians evaluate peacekeepers less by policy success and more by whether observed behavior aligns with normative expectations about effort and priority. Legitimacy emerges when peacekeepers are seen as trying to fulfill their protective role under constraint; it collapses when behavior signals heavy-handed or misaligned priorities. This framework helps explain why missions with similar mandates and resources can experience markedly different levels of civilian cooperation and trust.

Evidence from everyday electoral politics reinforces this underlying mechanism. In a recent *New York Times* article,⁵ polling analyst Nate Cohn discussed findings from a national poll showing that voter dissatisfaction with political leaders—particularly President Trump—often stems not from unmet outcomes, but from perceptions that leaders are not visibly prioritizing or attempting to address key issues.

Many voters expressed frustration not because affordability problems were fully solvable, but because President Trump was not seen as trying hard enough or focusing on the right priorities. This mirrors the pattern observed in peacekeeping contexts: when authority figures are perceived as aligning behavior with public expectations, legitimacy endures even under constraint; when they are not, legitimacy erodes.

As peacekeeping adapts to declining international support and greater reliance on regional leadership, legitimacy will increasingly determine whether missions succeed or fail. This brief shows that legitimacy does not hinge on perfect protection or overwhelming force, but on whether civilians believe peacekeepers are trying to protect them in ways that align with shared expectations. Understanding and operationalizing this insight is essential for sustaining peacekeeping effectiveness under constraint.

5. Nate Cohn, “The Voters Who Have Taken a U-Turn on Trump,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/22/upshot/trump-poll-analysis-times-siena.html>

Authors

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