

A Forgotten People in an Unstable Region

The Effectiveness of the United Nations
Interim Security Force for Abyei

Dr Andrew E. Yaw Tchie & Dr Fiifi Edu-Afful



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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d

Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway

Internet: effectivepeaceops.net | www.nupi.no

E-mail: info@nupi.no

Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50

Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

EPON & TFP Report

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The Effectiveness of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei

Co-authors

Dr Andrew E. Yaw Tchie – Senior Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Training for Peace Programme.

Dr Fiifi Edu-Afful – Visiting Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the American University School of International Service and the University of Maryland Department of Government & Politics. He was formerly a Senior Research Fellow at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC).

Contributing authors

Christian Ulfsten – former Research Assistant with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Ruth Adwoa Frimpong – Project Consultant with the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) Nigeria.

EPON series editor

Dr Cedric de Coning, Research Professor – Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

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Photos: UNISFA.

1. Executive summary

In the volatile region of Abyei, on the border between South Sudan and Sudan, the United Nations Interim Security Force (UNISFA) plays a role in maintaining peace and security. Established in June 2011, UNISFA aims to foster peace, stability, and development in the disputed region. Focused on implementing the Abyei Protocol, the mission addresses border demarcation (through the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism of the Sudan-South Sudan boundary since South Sudan's independence in 2011) and security concerns and supports local governance through the engagement of the administrations.¹ By facilitating dialogue between communities, the UN seeks to create conditions for sustainable peace and enhance the well-being of Abyei's residents. However, since 2022, UNISFA's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate and protecting civilians has been questioned as sporadic and spontaneous violence remains very high. While the overall security situation in Abyei has shown signs of improvement, persistent conflict dynamics stemming from intra- and intercommunal tensions, hired armed elements, and humanitarian challenges continue to set the region back. Incidents of armed robberies, killings, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) persist. Notably, renewed intercommunal violence between the Misseriya and Dinka Ngok communities persists. However, this has also evolved into disputes between other communities due to a trust deficit. In addition, the rise of communal conflicts between new ethnicities and communities entering the "Abyei box" – often referred to as the Abyei area – has led to further tensions with the mission over its ability to protect civilians.

1 UN. (2004). Protocol between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) on the Resolution of Abyei Conflict. <https://peacemaker.un.org/sudan-protocol-abyei2004>

As a result, the past two years have witnessed a surge in local protests, peaking in 2022 but decreasing in 2023. The protests target UNISFA and call for a more robust response to deal with insecurity, which diverts the mission's ability to fulfil and support mandated tasks.² Equally, questions have been raised by communities in the box over the mission's ability to protect civilian populations, given the rise in new types of violent acts and communal clashes being experienced. Adding to this challenge, previous assessments have failed to shift the UN Security Council mandate from its military focus toward a multidimensional approach. The current UN Secretary-General proposes adapting the mission posture to address criminal threats in Abyei comprehensively.³ While the present mandate prioritises peacekeeping and, to some extent, peacebuilding, more attention should be given to challenges in peace consolidation and the question as to whether UNISFA should wind down or exit.

In recent years, large financial contributors have advocated for a substantial reduction in the UN peacekeeping budget, leading to discussions about the exit of specific UN missions. This proposal has added complexity to the situation surrounding UNISFA, especially considering the need for significant progress on the political front between Sudan and South Sudan. Despite recent positive developments in the bilateral relations between Sudan and South Sudan, this diplomatic improvement has yet to manifest in tangible actions, particularly in terms of resolving persistent issues, such as the final status of Abyei. The ongoing budgetary considerations, the stagnant political track, and the resolution of critical outstanding matters to some degree can contribute to uncertainties surrounding the future of UNISFA. All have combined in growing frustration as the parties involved still need to progress in establishing joint institutions, as outlined in their 2011 agreement. Additionally, disappointment arises from the delayed deployment of UN Formed Police Units (FPU-492 personnel) and the necessary equipment for troops, among other matters crucial for enabling the mission to fulfil its mandate effectively.

At the time of writing, the Amiet Common Market appeared to be the only place where the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities co-existed within the Abyei box. Security has grown ever more precarious for the people of the region since 2022.⁴ The mission continues to face legitimacy crises. Most local communities had a clear understanding of the mission's mandate and interpretation of what and how the mission should be implementing its mandate. However, this understanding did not align (from our assessment) with the mission's own perception of how it should carry out its mandate. This misalignment between the mission and civilians has degenerated into heightened tensions and frequent protests, spiralling into a wedge between the host communities and UNISFA and culminating in the growing mistrust between the local population and the mission. For missions mandated to protect civilians, local perceptions are crucial for effective collaboration, engagement, and the performance of mission-mandated tasks.

2 It is important to note that there has always been protest against UNISFA in one form or another. However, recent protests are more targeted.

3 UN. (2022). UNISFA Strongly Condemns the Surge in Criminal Incidents within Abyei Administrative Area and calls on for the Cooperation and Support from the Community and Abyei Administration. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/unisfa-strongly-condemns-surge-criminal-incidents-within-abyei-administrative-area-and-calls>

4 Ibid.

Closely associated with the issue of mistrust is a lack of effective communication. The success of a mission requires coordination, efficient communication, and a strategy to deal with mis/disinformation across multiple stakeholders and actors within the mission environment, with a particular focus on Ngok Dinka. The lack of effective communication has set off a chain reaction of consequences that reverberates throughout the mission environment. As a result, this report sets out to examine the situation in Abyei and assess the effectiveness of the UN mission in the Abyei box. The study aims to examine the transition from Ethiopian forces departing the Abyei box in April 2022 (S/2022/316 para. 24) and the arrival of the UN multinational force, which is divided across three sectors. The report aims to provide a detailed update on the situation in Abyei from 2021 until December 2023. The team interviewed over 50 UN personnel who were part of the mission before heading to Abyei in September 2023. Over 70 civilians and over 15 focus groups are featured in the study. The team also interviewed senior UN staff and diplomats in 2022 and African Union (AU) personnel. Thus, the report has been in the making for over two years to ensure that the analysis is current and accurately reflects the issues raised by all groups working in the box. This report attempts to provide an update on the situation in Abyei. It assesses the effectiveness of the mission in meeting its mandate and pivoting to deal with new challenges emerging inside the box. The report examines whether the mission's response is appropriate and adequate, given these emerging challenges.

The report calls for the mission to pivot its response in the following areas:

1. Move towards more people-centred, community-led peacekeeping that is adaptive to the environment and emerging challenges (situation and crisis), with a focus on reaching out to the community. This should include a better explanation of the mandate, how the mission will engage with the mandate, and how it can involve the community as part of that process. Additionally, improved communication between the mission and the community and more focus on engagement beyond community leadership to a valued-based exchange between the mission, its forces, various Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs) and the community are needed. Lessons from how the mission engages through the UN Police (UNPOL) in the box and, more broadly, through female staff members must be utilised.
2. There is a need for the mission to improve its communication with the community and internally. Effective communication in a timely manner is crucial to the mission's engagement with the communities and, more broadly, its approach to dealing with emerging security challenges. In addition, better communication about the mandate and emerging situations would help the mission pivot its response to one that focuses on utilising community information and using this as part of UNISFA's overall response.
3. The mission needs to move from simply counting to being better with the use of data that it collects and how it incorporates this into its overall response to emerging challenges. For example, the report explores how data is collected and how the mission seems to lack awareness of how mission-led data should inform accurate analysis and early-warning responses and help the mission plan and deploy its existing capabilities more effectively.

The data should also inform the mission capacity and adaptability to emerging situations. In essence, the mission needs to reflect on what types of changes it wants to see and be clear on how the data currently collected helps inform planning and its response.

4. Countering mis/disinformation narratives to enable effective communication with communities is crucial to engaging with the community. Moving to a more people-centred mission that is adaptive in its response to the community is also important. This extends to rebuilding the perception that the community has of the mission leadership and, more generally, the effectiveness of the mission overall.
5. The mission needs to work on modifying its patrols beyond surveying main roads to more robust and adaptive responses that instil trust in the community by demonstrating a more flexible response to violence witnessed in the box. The types of patrol need to be informed by a broader understanding of the needs of the people and the new types of violence being used in the box, as well as its spread across the different sectors where the mission operates. This point should also include the need for the mission to improve its overall response time. This extends to the follow-up being done by the mission, either as part of an investigation or to address the failures that have occurred when the mission has been unable to engage. This is important because as the nature of violence continues to evolve and impact communities, what the mission cannot do is continue to respond by hiding behind its walls, as this creates a negative perception among the community and hinders the mission's engagement with critical community groups, such as women and youths, who are key to the mission's strategy when it comes to information, types of patrols, early warning, early response, community intelligence and engagement long term.
6. Despite the delays in the deployment of the Ghanaian Battalion (GHANABATT), Indian Battalion (INDBATT), Nigerian Base Defence Company's Contingent-Owned Equipment (COE), and Chinese Quick-Reaction Force (QRF),⁵ there is a need for the mission to pivot towards a more robust Protection of Civilians (PoC) focus where the mission's show of force acts as a deterrence to violence but also supports other local mechanisms that have been put in place.⁶
7. Given the situation in Sudan and the rising tensions in South Sudan's Warrap state, with the possibility of additional violence due to the upcoming elections, the mission needs

5 UNSC. (2012). Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei, S/2012/777. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/situation-abyei-report-secretary-general-s2023777-enarruzh>. UNSC report S/2012/777 para. 15 states: "On that basis, UNISFA immediately deployed a quick-reaction force to the area and provided an escort to community members as they fled to Wayeng village in Marial Achak, Sector South". Para. 17 continues: "A Chinese quick-reaction force deployed an advance party of 20 personnel, and the deployment of the remaining 130 troops is pending the arrival of their contingent-owned equipment, which is awaiting the dry season to complete its movement". The end of para. 17 notes: "Contingent-owned equipment of the Chinese quick-reaction force and the Nigerian base defence company was rerouted from the initially planned route through Port Sudan".

6 COE of the Chinese QRF and the Nigerian base defence company was rerouted from the initially planned route through Port Sudan. UNSC. (2012). Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei, S/2012/722. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/report-secretary-general-situation-abyei-s2012722>

more frequent communication, joint planning, and a broader strategic framework that engages with authorities and UN counterparts in the respective countries.

8. The mission has done some work to engage with the community leaders and their respective counterparts in Sudan and South Sudan, especially through the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Horn of Africa. More political engagement is needed from the UN, with critical input from the AU and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The latter two actors have been largely missing, and this absence has, in part, allowed for the political impasse to continue and creep into new areas that were not a concern previously in Abyei. As a result, more needs to be done politically over the final status of the box. While we do not pin this on the mission, we think that politically, the mission's leadership needs to do more with the support of the AU through the various channels.
9. The UN Security Council (UNSC) needs to be more aware of the impact of unclear and confusing language in past and current mandates on the mission's efforts and the local political dynamics which hamper the efforts of the mission on the ground.⁷
10. Finally, linked to the previous point, our observations over the last two years from UN senior staff, mission staff, diplomats, humanitarian actors, and communities on the ground show that as part of our suggested pivot, the mission needs to balance its approach to one rooted in the traditional UN doctrine of being people-centred. The mission also needs to be aware of its long-term impacts on the communities, especially when it comes to the delivery of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) and Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) activities, which can blur the lines and create new path dependencies which in the long run will only hinder the mission's ability to deal with these challenges. Furthermore, the communication around this needs to be better signalled and transmitted to the intended audience.

⁷ Several respondents indicated that UNSC Resolution 2630 (2022) created many political challenges for the mission.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchie.

2. Introduction

On 27 June 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) authorised the deployment of a peacekeeping force to the disputed Abyei area, which links northern and southern Sudan and is claimed by both sides. On 14 November 2023, the UNSC members voted to renew the current mandate authorising the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) until 15 November 2024.⁸ The UN Secretary-General (UNSG) has previously described the mission as “one of the best-performing peacekeeping missions”.⁹ However, UNISFA’s latest mandate renewal was crucial for over 280 000¹⁰ inhabitants within the disputed oil-rich Abyei area between South Sudan and Sudan.¹¹ First, Sudan and South Sudan were both undergoing political transitions. Sudan, in particular, continues to battle sustained and escalating political tension with hundreds of people on the streets of the capital, Khartoum, following the takeover by the military in 2021 after the removal of long-term president Omar al-Bashir.¹² A transitional government was put in place, but a coup then occurred, along with further challenges and an all-out war between two factions of Sudan security actors (the Sudanese Army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)). Second, the territorial competition and continuous presence of security actors¹³ from both Sudan (police presence) and South Sudan (military presence) within the Abyei area have facilitated and exacerbated

8 The renewal of UNISFA’s mandate is the 12th in a series of mandate renewals over a decade since the mission’s inception.

9 UNSC. (2018). Letter dated August 20, 2018, from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/264/95/PDF/N1826495.pdf?OpenElement>

10 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023). South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-issued-november-2023>

11 Based on UN OCHA statistics, there were 250 000 inhabitants by November 2022 and 280 000 by November 2023.

12 African News. (2023). Demonstrators return to the streets in Sudan. 5 January. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/01/05/demonstrators-return-to-the-streets-in-sudan>

13 For Sudan, there has been the deployment of the police while South Sudan has deployed the military.

the militarisation in Abyei. Third, the humanitarian situation in Abyei has been exacerbated by frequent outbreaks of violence and insecurity in Abyei town and the surrounding areas, especially Sector South during different seasons.¹⁴ The fourth and arguably most important reason was the request by the Sudanese government, which the UN agreed to, for the withdrawal of its Ethiopian peacekeepers deployed in Abyei. This led to uncertainty surrounding the reconfiguration of the mission from a solely Ethiopian-led force, with the head of mission also being Ethiopian, to one that is multinational and multidimensional in nature and scope.¹⁵

Outside of the current escalation of incidents, while the general security situation in the Abyei area seems to have relatively improved and calmed down (particularly the traditional conflicts of the past between the Misseriya and Dinka Ngok communities), the conflict dynamics occasioned by intra- and intercommunal tension, presence of armed elements, humanitarian difficulties, displacement and economic struggles persist.¹⁶ The Abyei administrative area is still battling with incidences of armed robbery, targeted killings, criminal and communal violence, animal rustling, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In January 2024, an attack by gunmen¹⁷ left 54 people dead, including two peacekeepers (one GHANABATT and one Pakistan Battalion (PAKBATT)) and 64 wounded.¹⁸ The violent conflict dynamics appear to be changing compared to previous years, triggered mainly by a 'trust deficit' between the communities and the void left due to the absence of a state and overall under-development in the area.¹⁹ Over the last two years, there has also been a rise in local community protests against UNISFA, the emergence of new armed actors from neighbouring states, attacks targeting UNISFA to prevent the mission from carrying out its mandate tasks, etc. UNISFA thus immediately deployed a Quick-Reaction Force (QRF) to the area and provided an escort to community members as they fled to Wayeng village in Marial Achak, Sector South.

The current UNSG proposed that given that the threat that confronted Abyei was criminal in nature, the mission posture needed to be changed to respond comprehensively and appropriately to that threat.²⁰ Despite the overarching attention given to peacekeeping and, to some extent, peacebuilding in the current mandate, more attention should be placed on the political and developmental challenges that confront peace consolidation in case of a winding down or an outright exit of UNISFA.

14 UN News. (2022). Security Council hears of 'trust deficit' in disputed Abyei region. 21 April. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1116602>

15 UNSC. (2021). UN Interim Security Force for Abyei: Vote on Mandate Renewal Resolution. 14 December. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/12/un-interim-security-force-for-abyei-vote-on-mandate-renewal-resolution.php>

16 *Sudan Tribune*. (2023). UNISFA condemns renewed intercommunal violence in Abyei. 2 February. <https://sudantribune.com/article270268>

17 It is claimed that this was an attack by Nuer fighters hired by the Ngok Dinkas.

18 AP News. (2024). 52 killed in clashes in the disputed oil-rich African region of Abyei, an official says. 28 January. <https://apnews.com/article/abyei-south-sudan-violence-land-dispute-0506a1ac748d897dd9957616c79c63fd>

19 *Sudan Tribune*. (2022). UN peacekeeping chief says concerned over "trust deficit" in Abyei. 22 April. <https://sudantribune.com/article257931>

20 UNSC. (2018). Letter dated August 20, 2018, from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/264/95/PDF/N1826495.pdf?OpenElement>

The unpredictability of conflict situations has made the ideal position of defining an exit strategy now nearly impossible. Although the strategic review of 2021 could not propose a clear exit strategy, it identified several emerging elements that could contribute to formulating a future strategy. Nevertheless, the strategic review did not fully envision some of the challenges between the Ngok Dinkas and Twic with the involvement of the Neurs. Key among them is the political negotiation between Sudan and South Sudan. However, it is important to note that the mandate did not envision these new developments. The strategic review acknowledged that there was already clear momentum for peace consolidation, but both countries needed more support from the international community. Finally, the reorganisation of UNISFA (with the incoming troops from Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs)) and suitability of incoming troops were raised as concerns by Sudanese and South Sudanese officials and civil society organisation (CSO) leaders who remarked that there was now “a fear that when UNISFA becomes a multi-national force, it will not be able to deploy rapidly and effectively in a coherent manner”, citing failures in Darfur²¹ and other UN missions.²² Thus, this report provides an opportunity to assess whether these claims hold weight, especially in a period when we see fewer UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) being deployed.

In this Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) study, the authors set out to explore the effectiveness of UNISFA in meeting its mandated tasks in several areas. This includes: 1. Protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence; 2. Support to the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism; 3. Provide de-mining assistance and technical advice and provide security; and 4. Humanitarian aid to humanitarian personnel and oil infrastructure in the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA), respectively. The report examines how effective the mission has been in meeting its core mandate, what we can understand from the mission’s success and challenges, how flexible the mission has been to the ongoing crisis in Sudan and South Sudan, and its impact on Abyei, which has strategic and broader implications for the mission. In addition, the study explores how the broader mission has transitioned from deploying TCCs that originate from one nation-state to transforming UNISFA into a multidimensional mission with multiple TCCs while also dealing with local violence, tension and backlash against the mission. It asks what lessons we can draw from a UN mission operating on the continent where the structures of the mission are different from traditional UN PKOs. Finally, the report outlines some strategic priorities the mission needs to consider for the following mandate renewal process before 15 November 2024.

The report is divided into the following chapters: the first chapter provides a brief general overview of the history of the Abyei area, tracing it from the colonial period to the current situation. It discusses the transfer of the Abyei area to the Kordofan Province and how this metamorphosed from a local dispute to an international problem. The report then provides a brief history of UNISFA, highlighting the context and motivation for setting up the mission and the evolution of the mission from a TCC to a diverse multinational multidimensional peacekeeping

21 Interview 005. CSO leader.

22 Temporary operating bases (TOBs).

operation. The second chapter focuses on assessing the effectiveness of the mission through the lens of the mission mandate, including assessing the structure and strength of the mission, the transition from a single force to a multinational force, PoC, responsiveness of the mission to insecurity, and the ability of the mission to monitor the border between the north and south and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. The third chapter focuses on the political impasse between UNISFA and the UNSC and the implementation of the mission mandate. It also examines UNISFA's partnership with the AU and IGAD by focusing on the mission's interactions, coordination and strategic engagement with the different regional partners. The fourth chapter examines the current political situation, zooming in on the mandate priority areas, including some interaction with the community, policing Abyei, the rule of law, early warning, and deriving credible data to back the trend and analysis that inform the mission's responsiveness to the changing dynamics on the ground. The final chapter discusses the implications for UNISFA's mandate renewal and future positioning of the mission by looking at critical issue areas like benchmarks and exit strategy, humanitarian targeting, human rights and the rule of law, and the possibility of restructuring UNISFA to address the rising insecurity.

3. History of Abyei

The contested area of Abyei is located on the border between Sudan and South Sudan. In 1905 (under the Dinka chiefdom or kingdom), the area was separated and transferred to Kordofan state, Northern Sudan – impacting the current local dynamics in Abyei. When Sudan gained independence from the British Colonial Empire, the area was reversed back to Sudan as part of the independence agreement but never recognised as part of southern Sudan, despite the large number of Dinka subclans and other southern ethnic groups residing in the area.²³ As a result, a people’s revolt occurred in 1955, which was suppressed by the state until the ushering in of the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972.²⁴ The infamous Addis Ababa Agreement stipulated within its articles the opportunity for communities in Abyei to choose to be part of the Bahr El Ghazal region in the southern parts of Sudan. The Machakos Protocol, signed in 2002, defined the area according to independence and the agreed barriers set in 1956, as well as principles on governance, the transitional process, and government structures.²⁵ It establishes the principle of self-determination for the people of South Sudan. During this period, Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) agreed to continue negotiations on the outstanding issues of power-sharing, wealth-sharing, human rights and a ceasefire. However, discussions excluded the SPLA strongholds in Abyei, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile, known collectively during the talks as the “Three Areas”.

23 Ngok Dinka and Paramount Chief who support the inclusion of the Ngok Dinka into Northern Sudan. See Johnson, DH. (2008). Why Abyei Matters: The Breaking Point of Sudan’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement? *African Affairs*, 107(426), 1-19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27666996>

24 Sefa-Nyarko, C. (2016). Civil War in South Sudan: Is It a Reflection of Historical Secessionist and Natural Resource Wars in “Greater Sudan”? *African Security*, 9(3), 188-210.

25 UN. (2002). Machakos Protocol. https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SD_020710_MachakosProtocol.pdf

The subsequent agreement in 2004 granted “special administrative status” to the Abyei region under the Protocol on the Resolution of the Abyei Conflict (Abyei Protocol). The Protocol refers to the area as “a bridge between the north and the south, linking the people of Sudan.”²⁶ The ownership of Abyei continues to be disputed by both Sudan and South Sudan, mainly over the large oil reserves in the area. Abyei’s location on the border of Sudan and South Sudan has historically led to disputes over civilians’ rights, ethnicity, and cultural and linguistic claims.²⁷ The Ngok Dinka community, which principally supported southern Sudanese rebels during the second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), has traditionally inhabited the Abyei area. Northern Arab nomadic Misseriya (Falaita and Ajaira) herders, who largely supported and fought for the pro-Khartoum militia during the Second Civil War, settled in Abyei for half the year as part of the transhumance movement.²⁸ The lack of agreement on who should be considered residents of the region has led to continuous tensions between the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya Humr (Falaita and Ajaira). While tensions peak and dip, recent activity suggests issues are again beginning to flare up in the disputed area, but this is mainly outside the two rival groups as peace between Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya Humr (Falaita and Ajaira) has mostly held.²⁹

While the second Sudanese Civil War officially ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Kenya on 9 January 2005 between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and SPLM/A, the agreement granted Southern Sudan “semiautonomous” status. It allowed the southern part of Sudan to hold a referendum for independence six years after signing on 9 January 2011.³⁰ The CPA included the Abyei Protocol, which stipulated that residents of the contested Abyei area could hold a referendum concurrently to decide if they wanted to retain its administrative status in the north or be part of Bahr al-Ghazal in South Sudan.³¹ After signing the CPA, the Abyei area experienced intense tensions between southern-supported Ngok Dinka and Sudan-supported Humr Misseriya (Falaita and Ajaira) as the Sudanese government rejected the Abyei Boundaries Commission’s (ABC) proposal for demarcation of the borders of Abyei.³² Following the GoS’s rejection of border definitions, hostilities between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF),

26 UN. (2004). Protocol between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). op. cit.; Naivasha, Kenya.

27 Zapata, M. (2013). Enough 101: What is the Abyei Area and Why is it Disputed? 15 January. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/enough-101-what-abyei-area-and-why-it-disputed>

28 IRIN News. (2013). The Roots of Abyei’s Dangerous Impasse. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/roots-abyei%E2%80%99s-dangerous-impasse>

29 Zapata. (2013). Enough 101: What is the Abyei Area and Why is it Disputed? op. cit.; UN OCHA. (2022). Abyei Flash Update No. 1 – As of 15 February 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/abyei-flash-update-no-1-15-february-2022>; UN OCHA. (2022). Statement by Ms. Sara Beysolow Nyanti, Humanitarian Coordinator in South Sudan on attacks on civilians and aid workers. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/statement-ms-sara-beyso-low-nyanti-humanitarian-coordinator-south-sudan-attacks>; *Sudan Tribune*. (2022). Warrap governor, Abyei leaders regret Ngok-Twic clashes over land dispute. 13 February. <https://sudantribune.com/article255267>; Radio Tamazuj. (2022). Abyei community calls for intervention in recent clashes. 16 February. <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/abyei-community-calls-for-national-govt-intervention-in-recent-clashes>

30 Ottaway, M. & Hamzawy, A. (2011). The Comprehensive Peace Agreement. 4 January. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/01/04/comprehensive-peace-agreement-pub-42223>

31 UN. (2004). Protocol between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). op. cit.

32 Gebrekidan, GZ. (2021). Tribal Conflict over Natural Resources on Sudan – South Sudan Border. <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/tribal-conflict-over-natural-resources-on-the-sudan-south-sudan-border-the-case-of-the-abyei-territory>

with support from Misseriya Humr and the SPLA – backed up by the Ngok Dinka – tensions escalated in the Abyei area. In May 2008, armed clashes between the two states erupted, leading to almost 200 battle-related deaths, 60 000 people displaced, and Abyei town being destroyed.³³

Between 2008 and 2023, there have been periodic and spontaneous eruptions of violence mainly motivated by land disputes, communal and criminal conflict, and resource-sharing disputes between the communities inhabiting the region. The Amiet Common Market appears to be the only place where the Misseriya (Falaita and Ajaira) and Ngok Dinka Communities co-exist within the Abyei box without significant violence. However, security has grown ever more precarious for the region's people. Another layer of the growing conflict within the Abyei area is the continuously heightened tensions between Ngok Dinka and Twic Dinka in the southern part of the Abyei Area (Sector South) and the northern part of Warrap state of South Sudan. The continuous presence of security forces from both countries within the Abyei box, particularly the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and the South Sudan National Police and Sudanese police in northern Abyei, continues to hinder the progress towards the achievement of sustainable peace within AAA and is in clear violation of the terms of agreement over the management of Abyei.

UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)

Due to the ongoing violence in the disputed area, other political issues, protracted violence, escalating tensions and population displacement in Sudan's Abyei region, in the spring of 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) responded by authorising the establishment of UNISFA. Prior to the UNSC's actions in 2011, a referendum was held as planned on 9 January, which led to South Sudan being declared an independent state on 9 July 2011; however, the referendum on Abyei statutes has yet to transpire.³⁴ Meanwhile, in May 2011, new violent confrontations erupted, causing about 100 deaths and 60 000 displacements during that year.³⁵ This later led to an agreement between the GoS and SPLM/A in Addis Ababa on 20 June 2011. The agreement stipulated that SAF and SPLA forces were to withdraw from Abyei ("the box") and proposed the deployment of a UN PKO to be deployed as an impartial force (as per the principles of PKOs) in the area.³⁶ The UNSC supported this proposal and subsequently authorised the deployment of UNISFA under Resolution 1990 of 2011, including 4 200 military peacekeepers, mostly Ethiopian troops.³⁷ The mission was authorised to monitor the demilitarisation and

33 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). (2010). SUDAN: Rising inter-tribal violence in the south and renewed clashes in Darfur cause new waves of displacement. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4bfe5d332.pdf>

34 Kelly, S. (2010). Abyei holds the keys to peace in Sudan. 21 December. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/abyei-holds-key-peace-sudan>

35 Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). (2022). Sudan: Abyei.

36 UN. (2011). Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement on Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security of the Abyei. 20 June. <https://peacemaker.un.org/sudan-temporary-arrangements-abyei2011>

37 UNISFA. (2022). Background. <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/background>

withdrawal of SAF and SPLA forces in Abyei and reaffirmed the importance of implementing the Abyei Protocol signed during the CPA. Welcomed by the agreement's signatories on 20 June 2011, UNISFA was deployed to Abyei in June 2011. In addition to monitoring and verifying the withdrawal of the SAF and SPLA from Abyei, UNISFA was mandated to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, strengthen the capacity of the Abyei Police Service, and ensure the security and protection of civilians (PoC) under the imminent threat of physical violence.³⁸

UNISFA initiated various mechanisms to support the demilitarisation of the area. For example, to ensure security and PoC, UNISFA promoted inter-community dialogue between Ngok Dinka and Misseriya members and focused on monitoring and early warning support. The mission conducted regular patrols to strengthen security in the Abyei region and engaged in dialogues with officials from the GoS and Revitalised-Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TRoNU) or the Government of South Sudan (GoSS).³⁹ UNISFA assisted and advised in coordinating and supporting the Joint Border Verification Monitoring Mechanisms (JBVMM), which the GoS and R-TgoNU/GoSS jointly established in July 2011.⁴⁰ The mission was mandated to contribute to the JBVMM with observers, force protection, logistics, and air support.⁴¹ However, in 2020, amidst worsening regional tensions, relations between Sudan and Ethiopia became largely interconnected, with tension over the development of the Ethiopia Grand Dam and the Al-Fashaga border strip between Sudan and Ethiopia. As a result, Sudan requested the UN to replace the Ethiopian soldiers. In 2021, the UN agreed to withdraw the Ethiopian contingent from the Interim Security Force in Abyei within three months. At the time, Ethiopian forces made up the vast majority of UNISFA forces deployed under UNSC Resolution 1990 before the withdrawal of the mission's 4 190 personnel – 3 158 Ethiopian soldiers and seven Ethiopian police officers.

38 UNSC. (2011). Security Council resolution 1990 (2011) on establishment of the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), S/RES/1990(2011). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/707088?ln=en>, pp. 2-3.

39 UNSC. (2012). Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei, S/2012/722. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/516/57/PDF/N1251657.pdf?OpenElement>, p. 4.

40 UNSC. (2011). Letter dated August 5, 2011, from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2011/510. <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/1372>

41 Ibid, p. 3.

4. Assessing the Effectiveness of UNISFA

In this section, the report sets out to assess the effectiveness of UNISFA through various methods. Firstly, the analysis draws on the research methodology developed by EPON.⁴² In addition, the report draws on 18 months of desk research conducted by the team, which includes online data and internal UNISFA resources, as well as existing reports and analyses conducted by scholars in the field and policymakers. The team conducted interviews with over 50 UN personnel serving in the mission. Many of those with whom the team interacted were in strategic positions within the mission; several had years of experience in UNISFA and previous missions and provided a strategic and historical understanding that allowed the researchers to appreciate and accurately assess the UNISFA. Many of these interviews took place over Teams and WhatsApp over 16 weeks. The team also interviewed over 20 academics, CSOs and politicians from both Sudan and South Sudan, many of whom represented the various interests of their states but were also able to provide a more rounded understanding of the challenges occurring. These interviews were conducted over WhatsApp. The team interviewed high-level UN and African Union (AU) diplomats and policymakers to gauge their broader analysis and thoughts on the mission. Finally, in September 2023, the team visited Abyei (all three sectors according to the UN demarcations of operations) to conduct interviews with various groups. This included the senior mission leadership team, officials from Juba appointed to the local administration, local ministers, traditional chiefs of the chiefdoms, youth unions and associates, women representatives, internally displaced peoples and their representatives, other civil society

42 EPON. (2019). About. <https://effectivepeaceops.net/#about>



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchie.

groups, local/international non-government organisations (NGOs), Community Protection Committee (CPC) team, local stakeholders (administrations, chiefs, etc.), Joint Community Peace Committee (JCPC), JCPC sub-committees, joint courts, Joint Peace Committee (JPC), and Sector South, North and Centre commanders and mission chiefs.

The Structure and Strength of UNISFA Forces

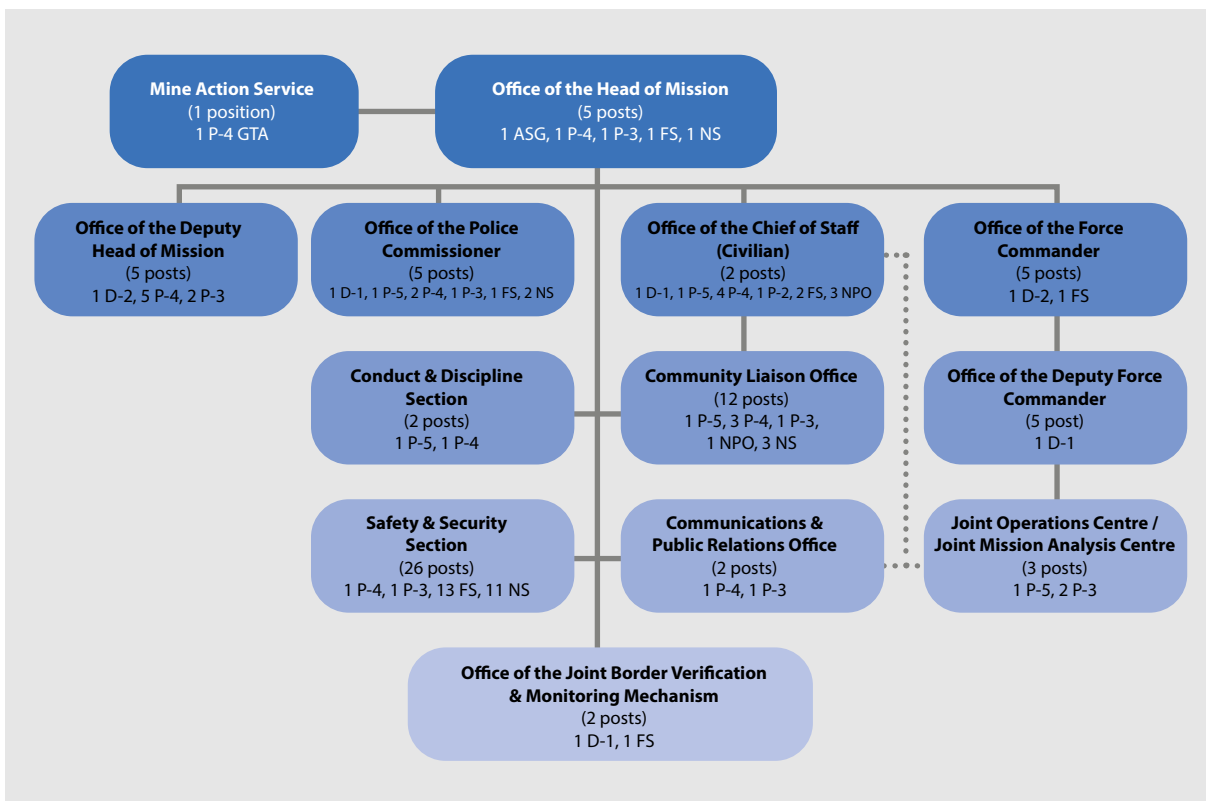
UNISFA is headquartered in Abyei town and has three operational sectors: Sector North, Sector Central, and Sector South, with sector headquarters at Diffra, Abyei town area, and Athony, respectively. The mission's operating bases are deployed at Diffra, Goli, and Todach in Sector North; Dokura/Rumajak, Noong, Abyei, and Highway in Sector Centre; and Marial Ahcak, Athony, Banton, Tejalei and Agok in Sector South.⁴³ The UNISFA total expenditure amounted to almost USD 1.4 billion from 2016 to 2021, with the mission's proposed budget for 2022-2023 being USD 263 374 800,⁴⁴ reflecting a 2.6% reduction compared to the preceding 2021-2022 period. UNISFA will only receive 90% of its approved budget for 2023-2024 due

⁴³ See Figure 2, a map of UNISFA Sectors.

⁴⁴ UNSC. (2022). Budget for the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei for the period from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023, A/76/699. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967855/files/A_76_699-EN.pdf

to UN cashflow issues.⁴⁵ Notably, the most significant budget reduction occurred in 2017–2018, amounting to over USD 13 million, attributed to a reduction in troop size by 535 personnel, in contrast to the 2016–2017 budget. Over time, the mission has faced significantly high vacancy rates across its different components partly due to delays in the issuance of visas but more so related to the number of staff on temporary job opening (TJO) contracts (see the figure on UNISFA organisational structure and staffing).

Figure 1: The UNISFA organisational structure and staffing (source: UNISFA)



Source: UNISFA

As of March 2023,⁴⁶ UNISFA had 3 322⁴⁷ personnel deployed against the authorised strength of 4 206. Deployed personnel included 285 civilians, 3 047 military personnel, and 50 police (over 90% of the personnel are contingents). No progress has been made on deploying the three Formed Police Units (FPUs), totalling 492 personnel mandated by the Security Council (see Table 1). Although some progress has been made, the mission has not yet achieved full gender parity across all components. Of the deployed personnel, women represented 24% of the civilian component, 8% of all military peacekeepers, and 49% of the police component.

45 Interview with UN personnel on Teams, 2024.

46 UNSC. (2023). Report of the Secretary-General on Situation in Abyei, S/2023/305. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/117/86/pdf/n2311786.pdf>

47 The number is currently at 3 382. UNISFA email correspondence (5 September 2023).

Table 1: Estimated personnel of the UNISFA as of March 2023

S/No.	Category	Authorised	Deployed	Vacancy Rate
Military Personnel				
1	Contingency Personnel	2,990	2,815	6%
2	Military Observers	136	114	16%
3	Military Staff Officers	124	118	5%
	Total Military Personnel/Vacancy rate	3,250	3,047	6%
Police Personnel				
4	Individual POLICE Officers (IPO)	148	50	66%
5	Formed Police Units (FPU) personnel	492	0	100%
	Total Police Personnel/Vacancy rate	640	50	92%
Civilian Staff				
6	International Staff	186	168	10%
7	National Staff	93	85	7%
8	United Nations Volunteers (UNV)	37	32	13%
	Total Civilian Staff/Vacancy rate	316	285	10%
	Grand Total/Vacancy rate	4,206	3,382	20%

Source: UNISFA



Source: UNISFA

The Transition from Single TCC to UN Multinational Force

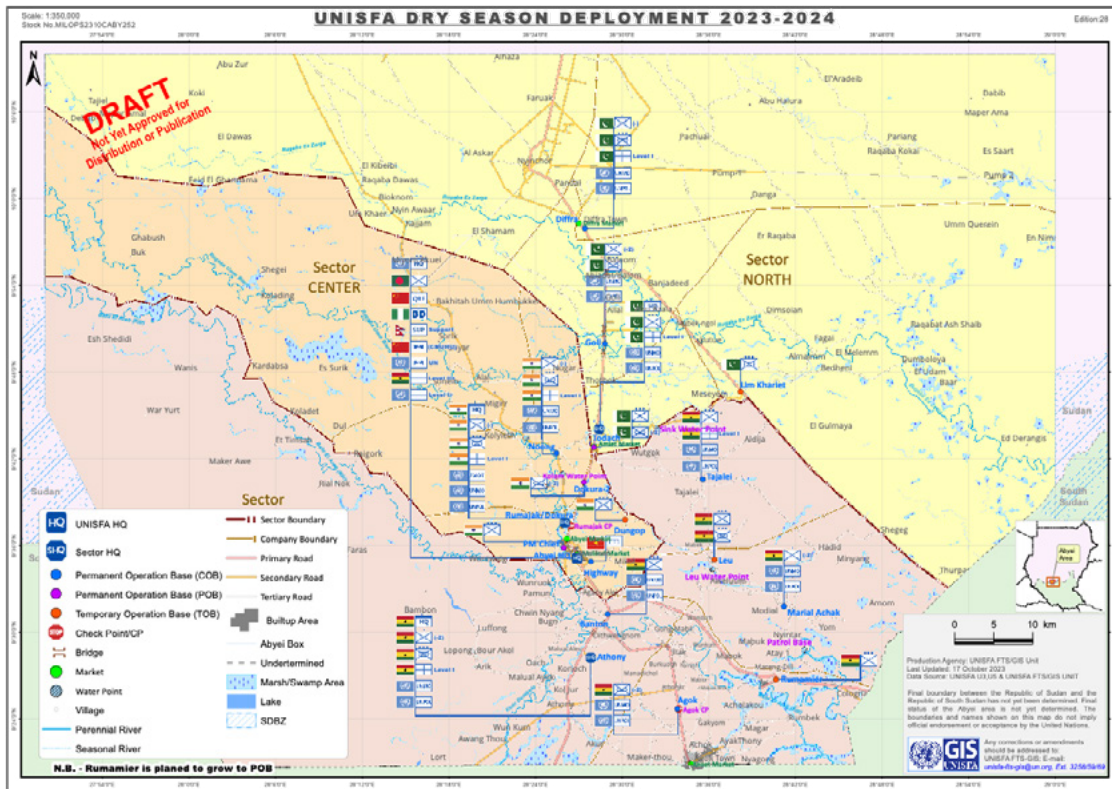
Before the team's visit to Abyei, there was a clear split apparent among the personnel who felt the mission was meeting its mandate, those who felt the mission was failing to meet its mandate, and those who felt the mission was doing a good job to try and fulfil its mandate but needed a realignment in focus and strategic direction. During the team's time in Abyei and before the teams' visits, there was a clear sense that beyond the departure of the Ethiopian forces, the mission hit a stumbling block regarding its overall direction and effectiveness. One consistent theme from people in sectors Centre and South was that the Ethiopians, from a single TCC, were more unified in their approach to insecurity and criminality and had the adaptability to respond to insecurity and arising challenges if and when they emerged. One respondent remarked, "Ethiopians went out of their way to deter and would not make excuses even during the rainy season."⁴⁸ Another respondent similarly remarked, "With the Ethiopians, they were a unified force; civilians and the wider community did not push the barrier as they knew Ethiopians did not take nonsense. People also knew that hurting an Ethiopian meant hurting all."⁴⁹

In essence, the Ethiopians deployed to Abyei may have appeared to have worked as a deterrence against insecurity, criminality and other forms of potential violence against civilians. A similar sentiment was apparent in the South Sector, where the Ghanaian Battalion (GHANABATT) is placed. When asked about the time when the Ethiopian forces were deployed versus now, respondents noted that they could see that the GHANABATT located in the South Sector were doing their best to respond to insecurity and patrol with limited resources and without equipment. However, the Ethiopians were far more direct and responsive to insecurity and incidents linked to PoC. Several dimensions were mentioned when the team asked what created this sense of robustness. First, the Ethiopians, come rain or sunshine, would go out on patrol and deter criminals, and they would also act as a deterrence against any illicit behaviour. Second, the Ethiopians were also noted for being deployed to areas that required them to be placed on patrols overnight, which meant patrols were not only static but in strategic hotspots based on assessments and hotspots linked to community information. Third, like the Ghanaian force currently positioned in Sector South, the Ethiopians, when an incident arose, would deploy their forces to the trouble hotspot either as a rapid forward force or strategically and collectively deploy to deal with insecurity. Despite the GHANABATT forces only being at 30% capacity, the overall sense from everyone that we spoke with was that the forces in this sector were trying their best despite their low numbers and equipment problems.

48 Interview with youth and women leaders in Abyei.

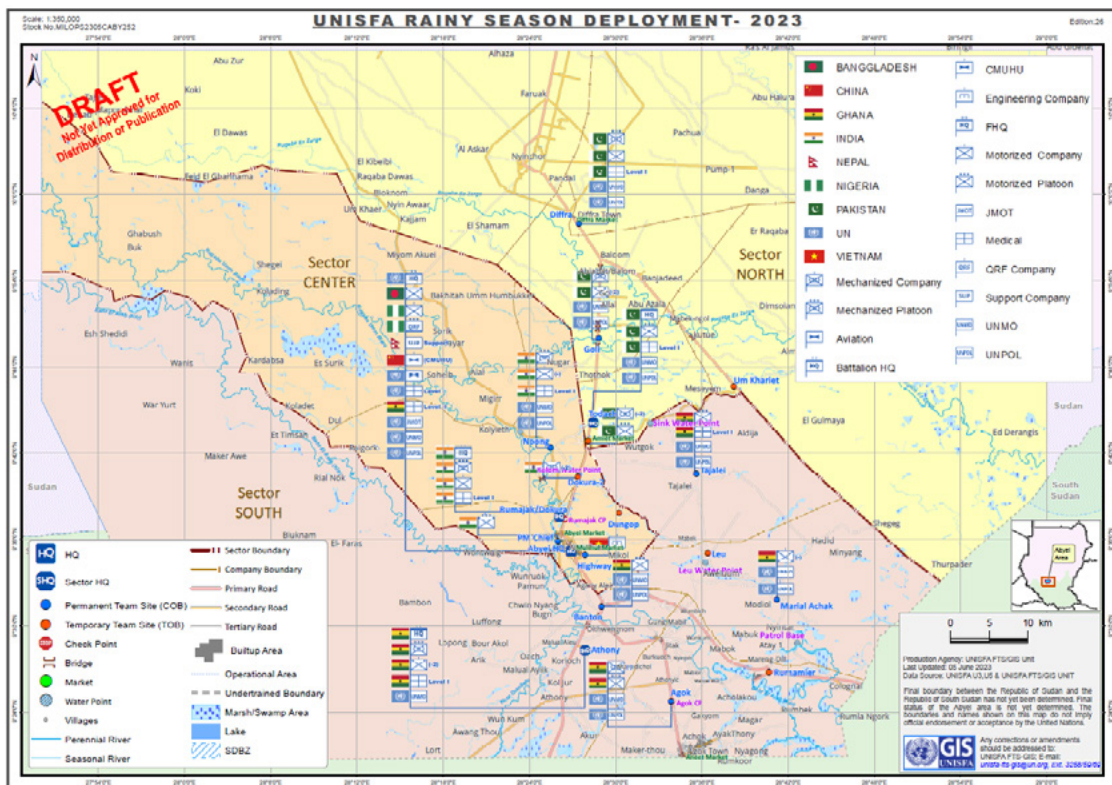
49 Interview with community respondents in Abyei.

Figure 2: UNISFA TCC composition and location (2023-2024)



Source: UNISFA

Figure 3: UNISFA TCC composition and location (2023)



Source: UNISFA

A significant number of respondents indicated that in Sector North, the force tended to patrol up and down the main street, hiding behind their vehicles, and very rarely came out to side areas where incidents occurred.⁵⁰ When the teams further discussed patrolling, one respondent remarked that overall, there was a clear difference between now and before, whereby the Ethiopians in Sector North and Centre would get out of their vehicles and, where possible, would often move on foot to muddy and difficult areas away from the main roads.⁵¹ One respondent remarked that “the issue of violence is not limited to what you can see but what is beyond the main road.”⁵² Figure 4 demonstrates that despite respondents’ views, the mission is carrying out many patrols. This was something that the team noted as an issue and will return to later in the report.

The force in Sector South was claimed to operate at 56% capacity. There was no sense from several community members that we engaged with that more equipment for Sector Centre and North would mean they would become more effective in their efforts as in Sector South. However, one intervening factor that the team felt influenced the perception of the forces’ abilities was the use of mis/disinformation to discredit the TCCs. The rhetoric and influence of politicians abroad and in the diaspora were capitalising on incidents where the UNISFA force was unable to anticipate or respond to incidents of violence.

Adding to this challenge was the influence of these actors abroad who would utilise the increased deployment of Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) and Quick Impact Project (QIP) activities that the TCCs were carrying out – many under pilot projects but with no clear, sustainable end goal – as part of their tools to spread negative rumours about the mission’s desire to change the demographics of people in the area. For example, as will be discussed later, in the Sector Centre, one of the TCCs had taken the initiative to build a school near the market, which required continued manning and a base for the TCCs to patrol. However, on the same street, an already existing school with infrastructure was not being used. In this same sector, TCCs had built a bunker that people could flee to, but the bunker had one entrance and no exit and was housed inside the TCCs base near the main entrance. This also included a pilot project to grow food and local crops just outside the TCCs’ base, which required TCCs to protect the areas. Thus, these efforts for the community were not seen as supporting the general peace or contributing to providing security and protection for affected civilians.

While the efforts by the TCCs were met with suspicion, more broadly for several respondents, these diverted activities move the sector and the mission away from its mandate, increasing the perception that the mission is here to serve its own interests and not those of the Abyei people. Thus, the mission suffered since civilians and respondents we engaged with felt it had lost its focus. Civilians felt the mission was not doing enough to engage with the challenges of

50 Interview with community leaders, youths and women groups.

51 Interview with respondent in Abyei.

52 Ibid.

insecurity, protect civilians as per the mandate – especially near UN camps – or even do enough to show the necessary forms of robustness to deter violence.

While this appears to be a challenge, almost all the respondents that we engaged with stated that since the new force, the mission did have a new life but that its focus needed to change. One respondent remarked: “The transition from a single TCC to multidimensional force energised the force... the Ethiopians were disliked by Sudan and thus by Masaderi tribes.”⁵³ Some UN personnel within the mission that we spoke with said the transitional period allowed a gap in which the new forces were not prepared and equipped to deal with security challenges as there were changing dynamics in the box. However, one of many respondents noted: “I do not think it was the transitional period, but a lack of deterrence from the mission. We should not blame the transitions as that is a weak position to take”.⁵⁴ Another respondent from within the UN and previously part of other missions with a more robust civilian dimension noted: “the mission TCCs sometimes run away or give an excuse for not engaging with groups. We have three battalions, but there is no deterrence.”⁵⁵ For these respondents, this adds to a loss of relevance for the mission and the broader UN and its work within the box. Several others went further, stating that the type of forces and their deployments were crucial to contributing to or impacting this problem. For example, Rwandan forces were referred to in several interviews as being more robust due to their understanding the “African” context (for example, their presence in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)) and taking a “no-nonsense approach to insecurity and violence against civilian which shaped its rapid approach to PoC matters”.⁵⁶ One military personnel not deployed as part of the TCC but a part of the UNISFA planning team added, “I appreciate the work being done by the mission through a ‘hearts and minds’ campaign... however, there is a need for the forces to be more robust... I think here is where credit to the Ethiopian forces must be given.”

In other sectors the team visited, civilians mentioned that during the transitional period, the mission could not “fully deploy its forces to deal with insecurity”. For one respondent, the transition period when the force switched over often led to more attacks on civilians, so we cannot say it was solely the Ethiopians’ position that prevented this. The Ethiopians have a reputation for not allowing misbehaviour, but civilians used the transitional period “to test the resilience of the incoming forces”, especially once they knew that the Ethiopian forces were going and opportunities “to get away with things and push the boundaries were allowed.” This means that some civilians in the different communities “knew that the mission’s deterrence capabilities were not as strong as the previous force”, resulting in “people knowing they can get away with things”.⁵⁷ However, this perception might be more associated with the Ethiopians’ Contingent-Owned

53 Interview with mission personnel in Abyei.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Interview with mission personnel on Teams.

57 Ibid.

Equipment (COE) (compared to the multinational forces) rather than their efficacy and at the time, Ethiopian forces were greater in numbers than the current forces in Abyei. There are also clear operational advantages of deploying directly from a neighbouring country, and the Ethiopians were present during a time when new conflict dynamics did not exist.

The mission transition to a full multidimensional force appears to have been marred by delays, which indirectly impacted the mission's ability to respond. However, they also allowed a space where non-state actors from neighbouring regions outside the box would push the boundaries to "see how far they could go". One respondent within the UN remarked that each time there is an incident, it erodes the trust in the UNISFA force and increases the negative image and perception of the UN as being unable to fulfil its role as a protector of civilians. More people from within the UN and communities that the team engaged with emphasised that the Ethiopian forces were more effective than the current force. However, our findings, from a more holistic perspective, are that the transitional period from Ethiopian TCC to multidimensional forces was marred by challenges, many of which were not the responsibility of the TCC but the more comprehensive UN system and they related to its ability to find new ways around these challenges. One challenge that the team observed was the mission's lack of flexibility in adapting to emerging events by drawing on existing resources from other sectors, given the fluidity of the situation on the ground. For example, when inquiring about the issue of GHANABATT not receiving its equipment on time (the battalion is yet to receive the full COE at the time of writing), the mission responded that the fighting in Sudan blocks the opportunity to bring in the remaining equipment. The Ghanaian Battalion was at 56% and the Indian Battalion at 30.5%, as of April 2023.⁵⁸ However, a deeper look into the numbers reveals that Ghana was at full strength of their troop deployment as of 3 July 2022. However, the battalion is short of their COEs, especially Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs). COE helps TCCs to execute their mandate as a motorised/mechanised infantry and ensures greater safety. However, in UNISFA's case, Ghana TCCs are still provided by UNISFA-UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) with ten APCs that were demobilised with the collapse of Sector 1 (JBVMM). Currently, APCs are still provided and distributed, with ten APCs to GHANABATT and five APCs to the Indian Battalion (INDBATT). These APCs were distributed to the TCC as of March 2022.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, there were no innovative solutions, like rotating TCCs from other sectors to support the forces in the South sectors, which at the time of writing was one of the most impacted areas in Abyei. Here, the team found that the UN could and should be exploring new ways to utilise neighbouring states to bring in the needed equipment or, despite the financial challenges of stipends, have other TCCs provide back-up or plug into capacity gaps for those in Sector South. Another challenge was the structure of the TCCs. Several of the military experts we spoke to mentioned that the formation and types of forces, i.e., their structure, were inadequate for the types of response needed to deal with the emerging insecurity. This included a

58 UNSC. (2023). S/2023/305, op. cit. para. 19.

59 However, interviews conducted from the field suggest that these ten APCs are not combat APCs and, as such, they are not useful for the task intended.

mechanised company and the wrong types of motorised infantry battalion forces. For instance, the full complement of the strength of a battalion should be 850 in all ranks. However, in the case of the Ghanaian Battalion, the current strength is 570 in all ranks, which is significantly less than the number needed to dominate the area of responsibility. One respondent stated that when the Ethiopians were deployed, there were more soldiers than the current Ghanaian Battalion, and they were thus more effective in dominating their area of responsibility.⁶⁰ One other interlocutor stated that, for instance, looking at the threat that the Ghanaian Battalion is confronted with, having one mechanised company instead of two motorised infantry companies does not help. They will be more effective if they add a mechanised company with its full complement of armoured vehicles.⁶¹ When this was suggested to the responsible strategic heads, this suggestion was rebuffed. Instead, a focus emerges on “what is mine and mine only”, with a lack of flexibility to go outside the box and support a broader mission-wide agenda.⁶²

Patrolling Abyei

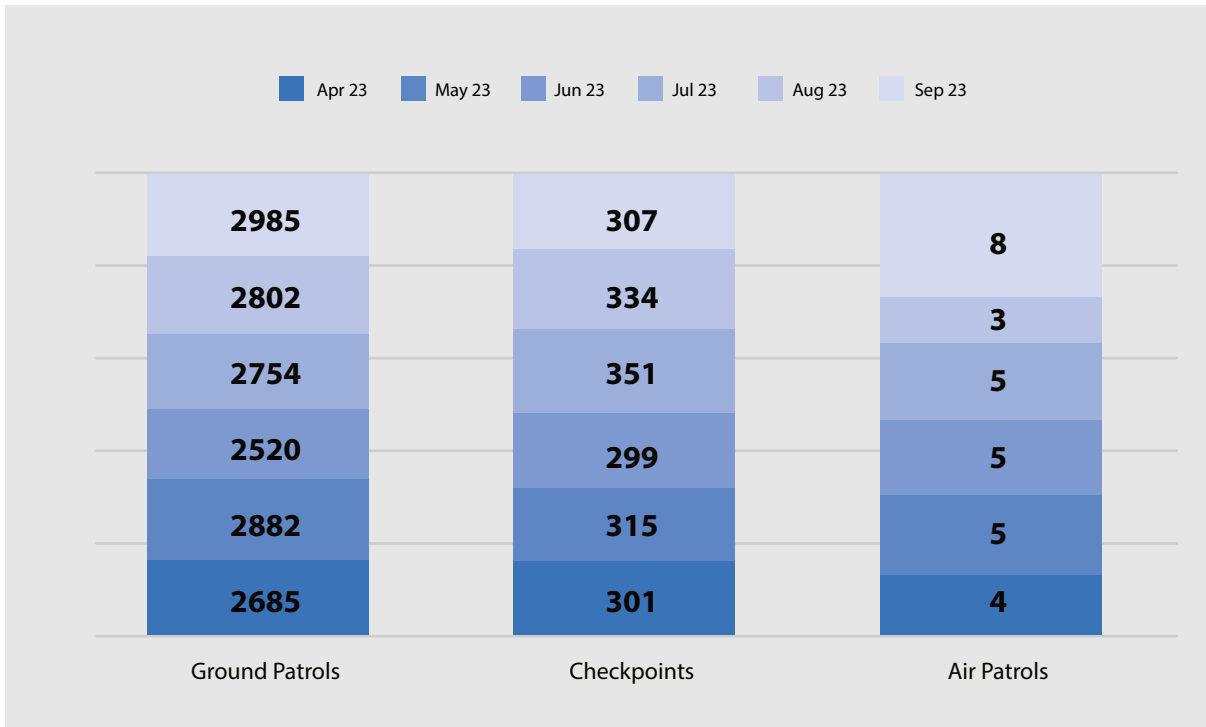
Another persistent issue was the types of patrols conducted outside the main roads where TCCs currently patrol. As mentioned earlier, many community leaders and civilians said they needed to see the mission doing patrols. However, when pressed on the matter in more detail, it was easy to see that while the Ethiopians patrolled along the main roads or corridors, the Ethiopian forces, unlike current forces, would also go the extra mile by changing the type of patrols and accommodating the communities they served by patrol not only in hotspots but in areas where civilians would conduct daily activities. When the team raised this with the mission, there seemed to be a perception from within the mission that this was impossible. Our assessment is that the mission’s inflexibility to pivot towards a people-centred approach, i.e., changing its approach to reflect the needs of the people, is leading to challenges to the mission’s ability to demonstrate force and act as a deterrence locally. This meant for many civilians that the attacks during the transitional period changed from more “traditional” forms of violence known in Abyei to new forms of emerging violence which were not only criminal but also morphed into a new type of bloody and reprisal attack supporting a new political economy of violence where new groups can be hired as militia forces and deployed by the highest bidder. This is not to say that these forms of emerging violence did not occur before the multidimensional forces were deployed. However, the mission’s inability to respond to some incidents adequately has allowed this pattern to continue and be a contributing factor to violence in the box. When the team put forward these observations and dynamics of the missions’ local responses through patrolling to UNISFA, the broader response was, “They like to complain and compare the differences between the Ethiopians and us, but this is not true”.

60 Interview with respondent in Abyei.

61 Ibid.

62 Interview with mission TCCs in Abyei.

Figure 4: Data on the number of UNISFA patrols (April-September 2023)



Source: UNISFA

However, the voices calling for a different approach are clear, with several sharing their concerns over the future responsiveness of the mission to a possible attack, noting, for example, that “my confidence in the mission’s ability to respond to the growing use of violence by actors was lacking in a negative direction.”⁶³ All but two of the civilians we spoke with said they were worried that the mission could not effectively respond to a crisis if and when it did occur. One UNISFA personnel remarked, “When the Ethiopians left, we had control of the box... now we do not have control of the box... and the mission has taken a step back from this situation; meanwhile, the population feels they are not protected”. Another senior UNISFA personnel mentioned that “given UNISFA’s structure as a mission, the mission is not always as effective as it could be... we are in a different scene now than when the Ethiopians were here, but this situation has been self-imposed by allowing the two neighbouring states to have forces in the box”. A respondent went as far as to blame the missions’ leaders for “being tricked and played by the South Sudanese government which resulted in the forces being allocated in the box”.⁶⁴ Finally, as will be discussed later, there was a growing sense that while the mission had changed its multidimensional aspects, it lacked the ability to understand that many of these issues were political, linked to land ownership or, more widely, the lack of a political process, which was needed to address the overall political challenges instead of focusing on military means.

63 Interview with mission personnel in Abyei.

64 Ibid.

While the current direction of the mission is supported by increased capacity and has brought in new energy and impetus, the broader civil-political aspect rooted in a people-centred approach and UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) best practices and lessons learned was missing from the mission's broader scope and approach. For example, several respondents in and outside the mission noted, "The mission is not patrolling south of the box, and we do not have a presence there or know what is happening there. We have no say about what happens, and the SPLA is acting as a peacekeeper or a supplementary force".⁶⁵ Another added that even "aid gets blocked from the SPLA in the south".⁶⁶ This suggests that the mission and TCCs are unable and being stopped from going further south of the box, while the UN Headquarters (HQ) in New York know about this and cannot do anything.⁶⁷ Thus, our assessment of the transition period from an Ethiopian-only TCC to a multidimensional force is that while the mission has done well to cope with the transitional period, the mission is "not doing well compared to two years ago". Part of this challenge lies within the transitional period and the need to be robust in the response by the TCCs to demonstrate its ability to posture and respond rapidly to incidents. There also seems to be a broader over-focus on "hearts and minds" campaigns, which may work with an insurgency but, within the current context, is insufficient for the ongoing and emerging challenges.

Thus, our assessment of the transition period from an Ethiopian-only TCC to a multidimensional force is that while the mission has done well to cope with the transitional period, the mission is "not doing well compared to two years ago". Part of this challenge lies within the transitional period and the need to be robust in the response by the TCCs to demonstrate its ability to posture and respond rapidly to incidents. A broader over-focus on "hearts and minds" campaigns may work with an insurgency but, within the current context, is insufficient for the ongoing and emerging challenges.

Nevertheless, while expectations for the mission are high, the mission is still not operating at the full capacity outlined in the mandate. For example, on 27 June 2011, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1990 (2011) established, for six months, UNISFA and authorised a Police Component comprising a maximum of 50 personnel. The UNPOL's primary mandate was to help establish the Abyei Police Service (APS). In the absence of the APS, UNSCR 2205

65 Interview with mission personnel in Abyei.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

(2015) authorised UNISFA to enhance the capacities of the CPCs/JPCs to enhance Law and Order. Strategically, the UNPOL Component operates in eight Team Sites evenly distributed within the Abyei area, with a minimum of four UNPOL officers at each site. According to UNSCR 2575 (2021), adopted on 14 May 2021, the UNISFA Police strength should be 640 personnel, including 148 Individual Police Officers and three FPU, each with 164 members. However, it does not operate near this capacity and is still waiting for these forces. Similar observations in the failure of African-led Peace Support Operations that focus only on “hearts and minds” campaigns were made in a recent report by EPON on the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin region, where the focus needed to be broader and absorbed and embrace wider perspectives.⁶⁸ The authors of that report and more recent research have pointed towards the primacy of politics and the ability of the mission to lead from behind as crucial to deal with these challenges.⁶⁹

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Civilian aspects of the mission

Each peacekeeping mission has a military component specifically designed to fulfil the mandate and operational requirements of that mission. It is a fact that civilian personnel play an ever more critical role in stabilisation and integrated peacekeeping operations. Their roles often connect political, humanitarian, development and military activities to assist the host country’s transition from conflict to sustainable peace.⁷⁰ Besides, adequate protection of civilians requires a careful complement of both military and civilian personnel and communication and collaboration between the two entities. After many years of the existence of the UNISFA and the presence of a seemingly sizeable military component, there appears to be no significant civilian

68 EPON. (2023). *A quest to win the hearts and minds: Assessing the Effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force*. <https://effectivepeaceops.net/publication/mnjtf>

69 De Coning, C. & Tchier, AEY. (2023). Enhancing the Effectiveness of African-led Peace Support Operations through an Adaptive Stabilisation Approach. *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 26(4), 266-292. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-26040001>

70 SIPRI. (2010). Civilian role in peace operations. <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2010/03>

mission support integrated well enough to match the mandated tasks. Essentially, UNISFA's current military capabilities outweigh the civilian and police components, and the mission reflects a wartime footing. The lack of strong civilian and police functions could be traced to the original mandated mission, which focused primarily on security and the use of force to protect civilians and humanitarian workers but also to keep forces from Sudan and South Sudan out. Considering that the mission has a Chapter VII mandate that requires it to take coercive actions concerning threats to peace and security, the military was better placed to undertake those functions, explaining why the mission framework appeared military-heavy. Over the years, the challenges confronting the operational environment have evolved. The response has also changed from one primarily focused on internal security to the current atmosphere bedevilled by multidimensional risk factors accentuated by numerous political, social and economic issues. Much as UNISFA remains essential to the stability of the border regions between Sudan and South Sudan, the progress over the years has demanded the creation of a robust civilian unit to support those multidimensional risk factors and tasks that the mission is confronted with.

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Many of the respondents the team interacted with agreed that creating an adequately integrated civilian unit within the mission, with all its complements, would help support and contribute to progress towards political resolution of the dispute. What was clear from the interaction was that with the 285 civilians (not all focused on mission-specific tasks) against a military and police strength of 3 097, the civilians available could not carry out the vast, mandated task expected of civilians within the mission. Given the scale and gravity of the changing security landscape in Abyei, the mission requires a joint collaborative effort of components, especially civilians, to address the security challenges proactively. Lessons learned from other UN operations have repeatedly demonstrated the importance of having a multidimensional peacekeeping operation with unambiguous guidance on their tasks.⁷¹ Particularly for UNISFA, the number of civilian-mandated tasks has increased dramatically in the last five years.⁷² From the rule of law to protecting human rights, fostering political and reconciliation processes, promoting mine awareness, and ensuring effective and efficient public information, the task of the civilian component has quadrupled. Yet, these increasing mandated tasks are inconsistent with the required civilian numbers and expertise. The UNISFA example demonstrates the operational

71 Gilder, A., Curran, D., Holmes, G. & Edu-Afful, F. (2023). *Multidisciplinary Futures of UN Peace Operations*. Germany: Springer International Publishing.

72 See UNISFA's current mandate: <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/mandate>

challenges in filling and sustaining the civilian component of peace operations and how the lack of conceptual clarity can affect the mission's overall efficacy. Although the military force has a critical deterrence and response role to play in the face of attacks on civilians, protecting civilians also depends primarily on the activities of civilian personnel, particularly human rights specialists and civilian police, especially in supporting local-level accountability mechanisms.

The modest shift in the mission's role and mandated tasks requires leadership that reflects the very nature of the tasks on the ground, particularly considering the many political engagements. However, in the case of UNISFA, one of the thorny issues is the reluctance to weigh in on the mission leadership structure. These aspects and issues profoundly affect the Force Commander's capacity to act with the full support of the mission components but are often considered too sensitive to discuss. Many local interlocutors accused the mission of not being people-centred and refusing to listen to the people it is designed to serve and care for. Several respondents laid the fault on a mission rooted in a military culture⁷³ that uniquely focuses on preventing failures and ensuring success. As was recounted by an interlocutor, "The Juba administration is not happy with the mission; they say we want a civilian head of mission, and they want a change, and the mission is not seen as listening much."⁷⁴

The lack of listening to civilians and chiefs during the mission appears to be one of the major hurdles hampering the smooth operation of the mission. Many see the greater civilian presence and the need for a civilian head of mission as the best way to bridge the relationship between the mission leadership, the political class and the local communities. There are also clear expectations regarding the appointment of a civilian deputy head of mission, which is robust enough to reflect the current mission status but also has emerging future challenges. Some of the interlocutors argued that a strong civilian deputy head of mission would complement the military efforts and contribute to the use of political advocacy and good offices to troubleshoot complex and challenging situations, such as local politics, community engagements and reconciliation.

Rising Insecurity in and around Abyei Town and Amiet Market

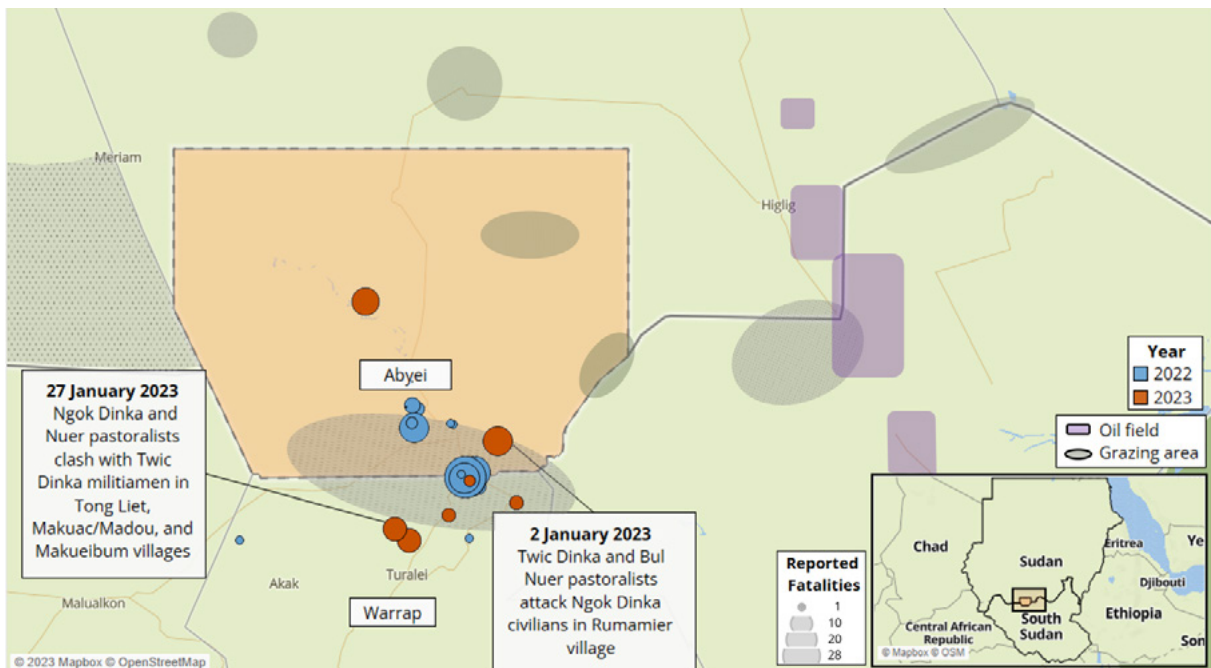
Across many parts of the African continent, just like many other parts of the world, the importance of markets as a catalyst for social, political and economic growth and development cannot be underestimated. Communities, start-ups and innovative social entrepreneurs depend on markets to sell their products, receive supplies of all kinds of products (food and manufactured), finance their investments with the income they earn there, and insure themselves against certain risks. In Abyei, the Amiet Market, located between the north and the south, is the main market

73 Important to note that the mission was set up as an interim force designed to keep actors out of the box.

74 Interview with CSO and former administration head in Abyei.

for both sides. The locals from the two communities depend on this market for their goods and services. Amiet Market and the surrounding villages have a long and challenging history of stagnation, insecurity and conflict that invariably influences the livelihoods of those living there. Because of the constant clashes between the two communities, investing in farms, shops, or even cattle rearing has become difficult as the communities are quick to burn these investments once provoked, leading to reprisal.⁷⁵ Despite regular patrols and constant presence along the route by UNISFA troops, tension has consistently remained high among the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities, and these are displayed through smaller clashes, robberies and murders. Throughout the UNISFA’s lifespan, the security situation in Abyei has varied.⁷⁶ Reports by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reveal that between January and March 2023 alone, attacks by Twic and Misseriya militias against civilians from the Ngok Dinka clan resulted in over 50 fatalities.⁷⁷

Figure 5: Event type in Abyei (January-March 2023)



Source: ACLED

In 2019, UNISFA faced a fragile security situation, with continuous intercommunal tensions and increased localised criminality.⁷⁸ In 2020 (and up to May 2022), there were reports of armed

75 Interview with Senior UN official/diplomat.
 76 Rolandsen, ØH. (2019). Trade, peacebuilding and hybrid governance in the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(1), 79-97.
 77 ACLED. (2023). Situation Update March 2023 Sudan: Deadly Violence in the Disputed Abyei Area. 17 March 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/03/17/sudan-march-2023-situation-update-deadly-violence-in-the-disputed-abyei-area>
 78 UNSC. (2019). Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Abyei, S/2019/817. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/309/17/PDF/N1930917.pdf?OpenElement>, p. 3.

clashes between Ngok Dinka and Misseriya militias, kidnappings, and armed attacks against civilians, as well as four reported attacks against UNISFA personnel.⁷⁹ In 2024, ongoing violence in Abyei's Rumameer county and Twic county in South Sudan's Warrap state led to many injuries and deaths, including the death of two UN peacekeepers.⁸⁰ Although generally the violence has calmed down, respondents all agreed that the nature of the violence and insecurity has changed, and new types of violent incidents were occurring. While there has been a marked increase in communal clashes and criminal attacks, there has also been increased protest against UNISFA, much of which is accompanied by mis/disinformation. While the UNISFA continues to manage and control the overall security situation in and around the Amiet marketplace, the mission's capacity and ability to deal with the tensions and security challenges remains limited. Although UNISFA has established a station in the market and undertakes routine patrols, its ability to patrol outside the market continually is limited. Similarly, the inability of UNISFA to handle significant crimes and its lack of authority to prosecute perpetrators have weakened its deterrent effect. Even though the mission has worked diligently to demilitarise the area, there has been a proliferation of small arms in the region from both Sudan and South Sudan. The continued presence of armed elements poses challenges to the mission's mandate implementation.

Several respondents noted significant incidents in 2022, one of which involved armed criminals who were arrested by the TCCs and their guns were seized. The TCCs transferred them to their camps, but the armed criminals were blindfolded,⁸¹ which created a massive issue for the more comprehensive due diligence processes internally. This would later lead to an internal investigation into the conduct of the TCC, who blindfolded the armed criminals but, more widely, the mission's procedures when capturing and detaining criminals. As one respondent noted, "While this was the correct thing to do, it also impacted the morale of the TCCs and created resistance from some TCCs to engage in this area." The detainees were then sent to Sudan but were later released and given a "hero's welcome on return." When looking further into the matter, the consensus from respondents was that the forces were not even aware they were wrong, and this uncertainty is particularly concerning because while the mission has its challenges, the forces are required to police the area, which has also raised new concerns. It has equally also worked to undermine the "deterrence aspect for the TCCs as everyone is now scared to interact or act when needed".

Our observations indicate that the mission needs to be better adapted to the context-specific situation and also have the necessary training and support, or this risks other challenges arising, such as the TCCs being reluctant to engage or respond to insecurity out of fear, resulting in the mission facing criticism over its legitimacy and a lack of trust. Respondents thus noted, for example: "While the mission was trying and committed to the mandate, it is treading carefully, and it does not want to cause problems." From several respondent interviews, it became clear

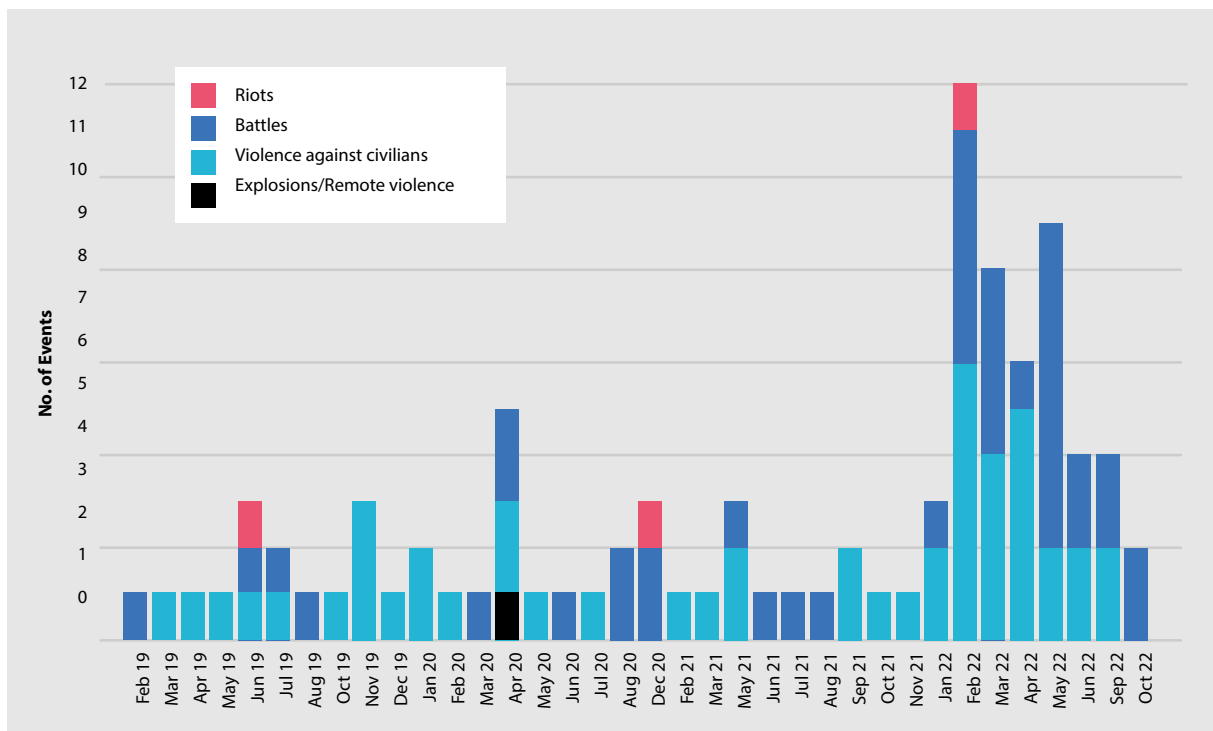
79 UNSC. (2020). Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Abyei, S/2020/1019. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/260/29/PDF/N2026029.pdf?OpenElement>, p. 3.

80 AP News. (2024). 52 killed in clashes in the disputed oil-rich African region of Abyei. *op. cit.*

81 It is claimed this occurred in the helicopter only to prevent the detainees putting the captain and staff at risk.

that this has contributed to the mission’s over-focusing on the “hearts and minds” campaign, resulting in the mission pivoting significantly to an “unclear” focus on delivering humanitarian aid but discounting crucial do-no-harm aspects. As one respondent said, the mission has a “confused emphasis on humanitarian activities for the most part.” This was backed by most of the military respondents we spoke to. They highlighted an over-focus on the number of patrols and delivery of goods (in a very robotic manner, lacking a more holistic approach and considerations), which, according to them, acted as a deterrence. However, the team observed that several of these activities were not sustainable, had overridden the role of humanitarian agencies, and, to some extent, destroyed any developed local capacity that could be utilised once the mission departs. Thus, while the mission was trying to do its best to adjust, what was clear from many respondents was that the type of patrols did not act as a deterrence or divert incidents.

Figure 6: Political violence in Abyei (2019-2022)



Source: ACLED

Outside of the TCCs that the team engaged with, several respondents noted that the work on UNPOL, although limited, was an area where the mission had done well to respond to emerging and existing community challenges and crises as well as deploying “new and innovative” mechanisms at the local levels designed to respond to insecurity.⁸² For example, according to several respondents, UNPOL did exceptionally well in empowering, training, and partially resourcing the CPC. While the CPC did not have the authority, it also lacked the workforce and capacity

82 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

to deal with local challenges – and was often seen by communities as weak and unable to deter or deal with incidents of violence. There was a consensus that UNPOL's work with the CPC was instrumental and should be scaled up. While it was evident that this was a way for the mission to demonstrate its community-based focus, it was also clear that the CPC was not the centre of power. Therefore, they would not be able to deter or deal with incidents of mass violence. Our observations from the field and through interviews reveal uncertainty over how successful these efforts were beyond the daily interactions and sustainability of these efforts.

As a result, our assessment of these areas suggests that the mission focuses on why the violence is occurring instead of trying to implement semi-demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) activities. This was echoed by several police and civilian experts who remarked that “UNPOL is working with the community and our relationship with CBC and CPC to 53 areas”.⁸³ However, the effort on the “ground to confiscate weapons and prevent incidents in the box is still lacking since our focus is on military means, but military means is not the major reason behind the crime and criminal behaviour but economic limitation.”⁸⁴ Part of the suggested pivot will require the mission to adopt a holistic approach focused on *community*-based demobilisation and *reintegration* support. This approach is focused on supporting civilians of all types (male and female ex-combatants, child combatants) and persons associated with armed groups as they reintegrate into communities and simultaneously strengthen their resilience and ability to absorb these same groups. In effect, such an approach aims to minimise re-mobilisation and initial mobilisation into armed groups. At the core of this approach is the ability to create local reintegration plans that engage each community's diverse range of actors. These local reintegration plans can serve as the basis for improving overall coordination and establishing the local legitimacy of reintegration support. It also includes understanding the critical role of infrastructure improvements in increasing local security. Investments in infrastructure, such as streetlights in insecure areas, improved roads to strengthen commerce and other community development projects that improve access to services and resources, can have important short-term effects on stability. It must also include better awareness of traditional livelihoods, such as agriculture, livestock, and fishing. While the mission is doing a lot around livestock, a more holistic approach to this can be used to create local opportunities for sustainable reintegration. Finally, the mission as part of this response should move to ensure the participation of female combatants, as well as women and girls associated with armed groups.

83 Interview with mission staff on Teams and in Abyei.

84 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

Responsiveness of UNISFA to Insecurity and the Situation on the Ground

Despite the relative effectiveness of the mission (in comparison to the ability of the departed Ethiopian TCCs to act as a deterrence against violence), the situation in Abyei remains fragile. While UNISFA has done its best to engage through an ad hoc approach and, at times, resolved traditional local tensions strategically, these tensions existed before the emerging challenges today. The political instability in Sudan and South Sudan is linked to political transitions^{85, 86} and the ability to deploy, hire, and resource local militia from actors within the box, but outside of the box and in western states, it is negatively impacting UNISFA's ability to deliver on its mandate effectively. More recently, this hindrance has, on several occasions, reduced UNISFA's ability to function successfully as a deterrence to local violence and cross-border criminality from neighbouring communities in Sudan and South Sudan. This has made it difficult for UNISFA to sustain peace after intervening or patrolling in Abyei. Our observations from the field show that when an incident occurred, the mission would deploy force, but this was often several hours, if not a day after things had calmed down. As several youths and community leaders noted concerning a recent incident two days before the team visited Abyei, "the mission leadership observed the situation from a distance and decided to run back to its base." This challenge is magnified in an era of online mis/disinformation and messaging platforms. It was also clear that the mission did not have a long-term strategy to deal with these types of issues, which can interact with existing frustration or be weaponised by certain people in the community. There has been a generally weak response from the mission to counter these problems because it did not have enough language assistance to deal with this or, from our observations, an understanding from within the mission of who should report to whom, when and where.

While we note that UNISFA occasionally acted as a solid hindrance to violence (between two warring actors), there was confusion about how it would deal with or is dealing with existing insecurities.

While the mission personnel on several occasions mentioned "early-warning mechanisms" set up by the mission, it was not clear from any of the personnel whom we spoke with what these mechanisms were, how the mission measured and used them, their success rate, how they feed into its theory of change or broader PoC strategy, and crucially how it leads to a reduction in

85 A coup ousted the transitional Government of Sudan on 25 October 2021. There was a slow pace in implementing the provision in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) by the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU).

86 EPON. (2022). *Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)*. <https://effectivepeaceops.net/publication/unmiss-2022-mandate-renewal>

violence in the box. It was also unclear how these mechanisms informed the mission's strategy to patrol, deploy and prevent violence. In essence, the mission's early-warning mechanism advocated to the team as a critical component of how it responded to violence seemed to be only a theory. As one local staff member mentioned, "I told the TCC several times that there were new people in the box,⁸⁷ and they were acting suspiciously and scoping the area before the incident in August 2023." When the teams put this to several respondents, they responded that while the mission boasts about using early-warning mechanisms, these "mechanisms are still in their infancy and still not operationally per se". Several respondents within the mission that the team engaged with were unclear on the mechanisms, how they were being used, how effective they were, the main structures of these mechanisms, and how to deploy them as part of the mission's preventative processes. It was also apparent that not everyone was aware of these mechanisms or knew how to use them.

Additionally, the mismatch of resources and logistic capabilities continued to be a major hindrance impacting UNISFA's long-range PoC capabilities. Respondents noted that UNISFA had been somewhat crippled by the existing unsatisfying and complex circumstances that were essentially political and meant there was very little peace to keep.

While we note that UNISFA occasionally acted as a solid hindrance to violence (between two warring actors), there was confusion about how it would deal with or is dealing with existing insecurities. It was clear from our observations and the respondents we spoke with that it had become challenging to maintain peace and deter violence over a long period. Additionally, the mismatch of resources and logistic capabilities continued to be a major hindrance impacting UNISFA's long-range PoC capabilities.⁸⁸ Respondents noted that UNISFA had been somewhat crippled by the existing unsatisfying and complex circumstances that were essentially political and meant there was very little peace to keep.⁸⁹ It was further observed that the UNSC mandates often have minimum agreements or over-ambitious tasks which are not necessarily transferable to the context in which UNISFA was tasked to operate on the ground.⁹⁰ For example, several respondents we spoke with kept pinpointing the UNSC's confusing use of language in past mandates, which contributed to confusion and further political challenges for the mission. This dynamic adds an additional layer of complexity for UNISFA, which the mission is not capable of dealing with because it is not set up or designed to function as a multidimensional

87 The 2024 humanitarian response plan puts the population of Abyei at 280 000 and this includes returnees who have fled the Sudan conflict. UNOCHA. (2023). Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. op. cit.

88 Interview 001. Senior UN official/diplomat.

89 Interview 003. Senior UN official/diplomat.

90 Interview 002. Senior UN official/diplomat.

mission, but it has been converted into a multidimensional mission with all the existing challenges. Thus, while the mission wants the support to scale up and have the trimmings of a multidimensional mission which focuses on broader holistic issues such as political and civil challenges post-conflict or an agreement, it is limited. In the case of UNISFA responsiveness, the mission has been doing what is humanly possible with limited resources and political will to achieve peace in Abyei. Nonetheless, it must be noted that before the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir, some progress and consensus had been made in breaking the political impasse in Abyei.⁹¹ However, this was very limited to the traditional conflict in the box and unrelated to the new challenges arising over the last two years.

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For many whom the EPON team engaged with, there was a sense that the mission had also moved into a mode of keeping the status quo, which, broadly, is indirectly designed to focus on continuing oil production and the transfer of oil through Sudan’s pipeline – designed to benefit both Sudan and South Sudan. Several respondents inside the mission and outside among the communities noted that “the responsiveness of UNISFA is very weak”, and this might be due to the “vastness of the area”, but while it is “effective in one area, it is not in all other areas.” For one senior Abyei official, the mission needed to reassess how it engages militarily and from a broader UN perspective. The same respondent noted that “the mission is not making use of all equipment and the fighting helicopters to deter attacks”, adding that the mission has “not done well to respond to the emerging crisis and challenges that exist.” While the mission is not centred as a political mission but designed to deter armed actors in the box – and to some degree considerable violence – the team’s observation was that the mission needs to pivot its responsiveness and overall focus in this area.

One UN diplomat whom the team engaged with stated that UNISFA does have a place to support peace, and this can be expanded with adjustments to the mission’s overall strategy. They also noted that “the primary responsibility is with the governments” that do not do enough to engage on the issues of Abyei. They added that both capitals (Khartoum and Juba) seem to be focused on other political matters within their respective capitals. In contrast, it was noted that the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in South Sudan had done more and hinted at its willingness and the need to move things forward. However, the R-TGoNU still has limited engagement and is politically divided within and from the SPLM on what to do on Abyei, hindering UNISFA’s efforts. While the R-TGoNU had recently

91 Interview 004. Senior South Sudanese diplomat.

appointed an Abyei administrator with a serving cabinet of ministers (in December 2023, the Deputy Chief Administrator, Hon Noon Deng Nyok, was killed in an attack on his convoy),⁹² their scope was not always clear to the people which the team engaged with. In addition, the absence of the two governments in the form of a joint governance structure also meant that civilians in the box (all three sectors) were dependent on or treated UNISFA as the de facto state. Thus, while it is fair to say that the mission was trying to provide broader security through a very dissimilar PoC approach not necessarily linked to its PoC strategy or interconnected to broader parts of the mandate, the mission could not move the political situation forward due to the crisis in both capitals, which limited any effort carried out by the mission and hampered its ability to reach full effectiveness. Thus, the political impasse was creating a slowly emerging violent crisis, further displacing large swaths of the population to the north and south. As a result, the 2024 UN humanitarian response plan puts the population of Abyei at 280 000, which includes returnees who have fled the Sudan conflict.⁹³

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There was growing frustration among respondents and CSOs about the level of violence, the lack of government involvement, and the states' and UNISFA's failure to protect communities. As a result, communities or small defence militias – fuelled by elites in Khartoum and Juba, local politicians, and hired militia civilian groups – are encouraging other groups or neighbouring communities to resort to violence to protect themselves.⁹⁴ This increase in self-protection has resulted in a rise in indiscriminate violence, displacement, and the formation of new local militia groups. This makes the peacekeeping force's context multifaceted and even more complicated when sustaining peace and security dividends. As noted by one respondent, the TCCs “are doing things, but they find themselves being criticised by the people they serve”.

92 Republic of South Sudan. (2023). Press release, 31 December. Abyei Special Administrative Area, Office of the Ministry of Information, Culture, Youth and Sports. <https://dr.211check.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/press-release-on-kill-ing-of-abyei-administrative-area-deputy-chief-administrative.pdf>

93 UN. (2023). Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. op. cit.

94 Interview 005. CSO and a displaced individual from Abyei.

The current impasse, mixed with outstanding issues, has meant that communities have become increasingly frustrated, especially the youth, “resulting in warnings and the mobilisation of small forces to use violence to not only get the attention of politicians but as a way of trying to defend themselves from criminal violence, regain control and economic revenue”.⁹⁵ The lack of leadership from both capitals has resulted in inadequate trickled-down engagement at the local levels. This has continued to polarise communities, increasing the tension and violence. While the Sudanese-Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) did allow both countries to have constructive dialogue and form Abyei committees, neither country has been able to meet and agree on outstanding issues. For one diplomat, it appeared to be more of “a priority for South Sudan than Sudan, and it has largely been difficult to engage with the GoS on this matter before the recent conflict.”⁹⁶ As a result, civilians from these communities have transferred their grievances, “people just see wealth passing through the area... and this creates a situation where violence is used to highlight their issues.”⁹⁷

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The lack of political focus and overall engagement and strategy from the mission and the respective governments for many of the communities in the Centre and South Sectors that the team interacted with meant that “attacks were ongoing, and people are still being killed with no long-term plan to resolve this issue”.⁹⁸ Many referred to the “final status of the area being determined” and its link to the rise of violence continuing. They added that “the dynamics of the box politically is changing and unless it is resolved, then the mission will only be faced with ongoing insecurities which it will not be able to deal with or cover in terms of its reach and scope of challenges in the box.”⁹⁹ Several UNISFA respondents that had also worked in other UN missions noted that “the mission is still very sleepy on this aspect, and it is not unique to UNISFA but a wider UN PKO challenge”. The mission needs to be “better with technology as a means to integrating, as part of its response and solution to existing and emerging chal-

95 Interview 001. Senior UN official/diplomat.

96 Interview with Senior UN official and AU official.

97 Interview 003. Senior UN official/diplomat.

98 Interview with senior government official in Abyei.

99 Interview with senior community leader.

lenge[s].” For one respondent, the mission has traditionally been a mission where some staff work, but others see it as a “sleepy mission where people get lots of money.” In essence, its approach to insecurity in the box is very much outdated and typical of a large-scale UN PKO in Africa that is not adequately resourced or set up to deal with context-specific challenges that often require peace enforcement tools or in the African-led PSO context where force is used to achieve strategic objectives. All respondents that the team engaged with noted that while there was “on-the-surface action”, which was argued to be a response by the military personnel, the problems still exist largely because “deep-rooted challenges within the communities are not being tackled by the mission through its respected good offices.” Finally, while the number of incidents of traditional forms of violence in Abyei appears to have dropped, there is a clear rise in locally driven crime, criminality and protests linked in part to the movement of communities, dynamics in the box, outstanding political issues, the inability of the respective governments to intervene and deal with the final status, and a lack of broader economic development in the area. These ongoing and emerging challenges present the mission with several problems “as the mission is not designed to deal with this, let alone the TCCs.” Thus, we find that the responsiveness of UNISFA is largely linked to military capabilities and more broadly, the mission’s ability to engage in a broader political project is absent. This means the buy-in is missing and cannot be replicated because it is challenging to get buy-in from the leaders who are not present.

Responsiveness of UNISFA to Protection of Civilians (PoC) Matters

The PoC responsibility includes all parts of a peacekeeping mission, including civilian, military, and police functions. In many cases, peacekeeping missions are authorised to use all necessary means, including the use of deadly force, to prevent or respond to threats of physical violence against civilians. This is often in line with the mandate of Chapter VII, which allows for the use of force within capabilities and areas of operations and without prejudice to the responsibility of the host government. UNISFA’s key mandate centres on PoC. The newly developed Mission Concept for 2022-2025 articulated the strategy for implementing the mission’s mandate. In addition, the UNISFA 2020-2022 PoC Strategy focused on a whole-of-mission approach with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. While the mission has 12 years of experience in PoC, managed by single TCCs, the multinational force provides a new way of doing PoC. The 2022 Mission Concept paper also prioritises PoC as Strategic Priority 1 alongside facilitating humanitarian assistance. However, due to the absence of government, UNISFA is the sole institution responsible for protecting civilians. The mission has set up five strategic priorities linked to PoC. There are: Strategic Priority 1: Physical protection of civilians and facilitating humanitarian assistance; Strategic Priority 2: Support to the political process between Sudan and South Sudan; Strategic Priority 3: Local-level mediation to address intercommunal conflict; Strategic Priority 4: Peacebuilding activities to address the root causes of conflict; and Strategic Priority 5: Support to the Rule of Law (RoL), promoting accountability and access to justice.

The proliferation of arms in the Abyei box, the changing security dynamics with the arrival of new ethnic groups from South Sudan and Sudan, the increased communal violence, and the formation of a youth self-defence group (Tit Baai) speak to a broader issue on the matter of PoC.

Several respondents indicated that PoC was a priority, but there was a different understanding of what the PoC strategy was and how each person was working towards achieving it. While it was clear that the mission has an approach, one respondent noted that “forces are deployed and designed to meet this aspiration of PoC, and thus, we can say that the mission is achieving this 100% with limited manpower.” The respondent added that there is “heavy rainfall, which makes it difficult to move around and patrol, but we are making great efforts.”¹⁰⁰ However, for one respondent, “the mission’s presence is not enough to police every area, and this means armed groups frequently exploit these areas.”¹⁰¹ Adding to this dynamic is the increased number of arms and armed elements in the box, resulting in PoC becoming a difficult task to implement and maintain. For another military respondent, “things have returned to normal. There is a population explosion, and people are happy to return to Abyei, stay on or go onto South Sudan, or people from other countries are happy to stay, [which] indicates some level of security that we provide is working.”¹⁰² When asked further about what is working to ensure PoC is sustained within Abyei, several of the military respondents indicated the “use of patrol on the main routes and escorts to safe areas.”¹⁰³

However, a different perception emerged when the team engaged with civilian staff. One respondent noted that “the mission does ok in the area of PoC and does its part, but the fact that the peacekeepers are not deployed to different parts means that the mission is limited when it comes to PoC matters.” Another respondent noted that the “TCCs are focused on Abyei town and some stretch north, but it has a limited reach which allows militia etc. to sneak in and cause violence.” For another UN respondent, the mission has “military dominance” or is “military heavy and unclear [about] who and what their efforts were designed to complement.” While it was observed from several respondents that we engaged with that there were early-warning teams and a CPC who “do report on the rule of law” and the mission’s “use of female engagement teams that deal with the communities, aerial and land patrols etc.”, this was “all intended to support the mission’s wider PoC strategy”. However, as mentioned previously, for the most part, this mechanism is understood in the way it is intended to be as a concept and a wider strategy, but it is not implemented fully in practice. For example, aspects like the rule of law were non-existent or, in the case of female engagement teams, there was very little PoC strategically or coherently as part of a broader approach. Nevertheless, all communities the team engaged with noted that the “women within the mission” have worked hard for the community.

100 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

101 Ibid.

102 Interview with mission staff on Teams.

103 Ibid.

The respondents that the team engaged with were able to articulate the activities that the mission was doing under PoC, for example, stating: “we have the country teams operating and PoC strategy is near our COB; this allows us to provide immediate assistance, healthcare, shelter and food support. We do not expect an outbreak of war because we have the capabilities to deal with this through our PoC strategy.”¹⁰⁴ It was still not clear how the mission has used the five-year strategy to avert recent violence, especially given that many communities felt the mission was inept in this area. For example, one respondent from the military said, “The type of force with deterrence capabilities, and our armed vehicles, etc., all help to support this show of force and protect against issues arising.” This respondent added that “TCCs do direct engagement with the communities, lots of hearts and minds campaigns. We have a good community liaison team that carries out frequent engagement with locals, all designed to prevent the situation from escalating.”¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, from all the communities that the team engaged with, particularly in the Centre and South Sectors, it was clear that the mission was not doing enough to tackle the PoC matters and, for the most part, was focused on the “hearts and minds” campaign designed to conduct several activities often linked to humanitarian actors’ work or CIMIC.¹⁰⁶ As one respondent mentioned, “UNISFA is very effective in their mandate in regards to conducting humanitarian activities, but they have not been effective around PoC, and some of the attacks have happened close to where the UNISFA forces are based... those very TCCs did not react in time.”¹⁰⁷ A military respondent stated that “the everyday issues are more theft, crime and petty issues; this is not PoC, but more policing matters, etc. ... I am not sure if the mission can respond if something is to happen.”¹⁰⁸ Some respondents working with the mission indicated that:

There is discussion on how to access remote areas in the rainy season, and this has led to a very partial response to PoC during the rainy season.... It also has contributed to an attitude from ranks within the mission that “if the mission cannot pass, then non and armed actors will not”, and this raises serious doubts about whether the mission even has the willingness or capacity to react in the rainy season and dry season.¹⁰⁹

The ability of forces to act as a deterrence was flagged in the last section as an area where the mission needs to do more, especially given that there was a sense that the mission was not willing to go out on foot patrols during the rainy season. Given the fact that “locals move via foot”, the team found it difficult to understand why a small group of forces was unwilling to go out and patrol on foot. It is important to note that these observations were not made across all sectors, as some TCCs were positioned overnight outside their primary operating base.

104 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

105 Interview with mission staff on Teams and in Abyei.

106 Interview with senior mission personnel.

107 Interview with community leaders, women’s group and youths.

108 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

109 Ibid.

For one respondent, it was important to take some of what was being reported “with a pinch of salt”, noting that “we get reports of armed men moving around, and when UNISFA deploys, they cannot find anyone during the patrol.”¹¹⁰ This challenge speaks to how the PoC strategy and patrolling connect and become part of a more mission-wide approach. This reflection was highlighted by a respondent who noted that, while the mission has a PoC strategy, it needs to look at things “more holistically with a multidimensional lens and develop a whole-of-mission approach to PoC, which goes beyond what is on paper. It is implemented in practice but continually adapted to the context in which we operate”. The respondent further noted that “it could be a good mission. Still, it needs to have the systems in place and the ability to deal with things as and when they occur”, which is currently lacking.

The need for a whole-of-mission approach that is strategic but uses a blended approach was something that the team noticed from interacting with mission respondents. Firstly, staff needed to be better plugged into a matrix of collecting data, which feeds their analysis and approach and, more broadly, is used to inform and adjust the mission’s approach to PoC. As a result, we observed a mission whereby most people seem to be in a pattern of “mundane reporting with staff operating from an automatic standpoint.”¹¹¹ In addition, the mission, to some degree, has stagnated in its PoC approach and was unable to utilise data best and integrate this with technology to make informed decisions about how the mission could be more effective at PoC and adjust its approach to meet its mandated tasks and the mission’s broader PoC strategy. Further hampering this effort was that “staff were not entering data correctly, which means the mission’s ability to also use data to draw from a common system and a common approach is lacking.”¹¹² While the mission is conducting many activities, the team’s observation was that mission staff often did not fully grasp the needs or concerns around PoC. Here, it would be important for the mission to consider conducting in-depth and independent perception surveys that allow it to take another look at its overall approach and activities to realign its PoC strategy with the findings. Since the mission is military-led, the “turnaround time for staff is short, which can result in limited impact.”¹¹³ The military appointments should be seconded posts, instead of short-term positions that often lead to an inconsistent approach, uncertainty over the overall PoC strategy, imbalances in onboarding staff and, to a large extent, everyone going at it alone mentality. This also increases incoherence and adds further challenges to the ability of the mission to sustain its efforts on PoC and ensure its activities are structurally linked to its PoC strategy.

On staffing, another challenge noted was the lack of civilian staff, especially in an area like Abyei, where civilians are migrating from Sudan to South Sudan or, previously, from South Sudan to Sudan. This means the capacities needed for UNISFA to be effective are lacking because “UNISFA does not have the civilian staffing like civil affairs [it does have civil liaison officer] and human rights.” As noted by one respondent, “We do not have a PoC officer but... a

110 Ibid.

111 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

112 Interview with senior mission staff on Teams.

113 Interview with mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

traditional justice person [who] works on PoC.”¹¹⁴ On the UNPOL side, two or three people are working in this area, which is thus limited, meaning the mission cannot carry out a more robust mission-wide approach. A respondent said, “We have one human resources person and a new human rights person, but this person is overstretched and trying to work on the UNISFA rule of law strategy.”¹¹⁵ This means UNISFA is not optimally designed or geared to do PoC as per its mandate and to deliver adequately on its PoC strategy. While there is a difference in how the TCC deals with PoC matters, one respondent noted that “we do see that Sector South TCC, which are dealing with a multitude of challenges, are trying to do PoC, while Sector North is working to deter violence”.¹¹⁶

Overall, the team found that the mission needs to focus on changing the situation on the ground and address the root causes of violence and avoid meetings and briefings focused solely on the number of patrols. Some internal reflection is also needed for the mission to reassess whether the increased numbers of activities are having the intended impact and whether they link to the mission’s PoC strategy. For example, one senior respondent described the mission’s PoC strategy as a three-dimensional approach, including: 1. PoC through dialogue and a monthly joint peace protection committee; 2. Rolling out economic wealth programmes, taking civilians outside their homes and placing them in interest groups to generate household income. 3. Empowerment: Helping to prepare food or chicken rearing helps reduce domestic violence cases. While these efforts are a step in the right direction, it was unclear how the respondent understood this to link to the broader strategy of PoC. What emerged when pressed further on the matter was the fact that this respondent and others “were not given any clear handover instruction” and were told to “read the document online to get up to speed on PoC-related matters.” In our view, this speaks to a systematic problem with onboarding and, more specifically, how the mission ensures continuity of its PoC agenda when staff exit and enter the mission and whether the approach is holistic and has buy-in from all mission staff. Finally, mission personnel often spoke about “supporting the focal person in the communities in the area of rape, forced marriage, violence etc.” through the deployment of a UNPOL gender officer in all the sites who also reports to the CPC or JPC. The engagement of UNPOL and women within the mission is where communities continually indicated areas where the mission was working smartly and should increase this area of support. The success of this effort extended to ensuring that “a referral pathway takes them to the nearest clinic, and the perpetrators are held up, and they can use the penal or the traditional route.” This is important because the current mission efforts are not seen by the populations as effectively delivering “on its PoC mandate, given the frequency of incidents, which are clear examples of these challenges.” Part of the mission’s ability to achieve this success is in ensuring it can alter its strategy to the context it is working in and, as the two examples have demonstrated, that they are linked to forms of justice for the communities that the mission serves. This notion of justice came up in several interviews and we will touch on it later in the report.

114 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

115 Interview with mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

116 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

Responsiveness of UNISFA to Mitigating Emerging Violence and New Insecurity

Despite the mission's challenges, the mandate has helped over the years to play a positive role, and without the mission, there would be higher levels of violence. The presence of UNISFA has, to some degree, reduced the number of victims in the area, but the mission has struggled over the last few years to mitigate emerging threats. As one respondent noted, "the militia is being pushed by the politician in Juba, Warrap state of South Sudan and Sudan, and this is agitating the situation in Abyei."¹¹⁷ People in the "north and south" are "encouraged by the two capitals, which influences local dynamics".¹¹⁸ One challenge noted by several respondents was the dynamics of Neur militia in the box, which "have taken different sides in communal and local violent incidents", and while some have left, "this has created tensions",¹¹⁹ especially more recently with the increasing outbreak of violence in the southern and centre sectors. For one senior respondent from the UN, "the increase in new violence is directly related to... the mission not being prepared for the current violence, as it does not have full situation awareness or a grasp on how violence is spreading".¹²⁰ Another respondent spoke of how "the upcoming performance report shows that Abyei was largely free [of] arms. However, reviewing the data in the budget reports, you can see that in 2021, there were 58 incidents; in 2022, 17 incidents; and in 2023, it jumped to 126".¹²¹ This means the incidents have "increased, and there is now a proliferation of small arms in the box."¹²² The data is not conclusive, but all civilian respondents that we spoke to, as well as mission civilian staff, confirmed that there appeared to be more weapons and more local posturing, which may have led to violence, which could lead to more violence down the line.

When this observation is paralleled with the short turnaround of military staff "after a year or so", "projects cannot be not consistently applied." A respondent stated that by the time "I get in, I understand the context after six months. I implement my programme, but then I have to leave the mission". Other respondents also mentioned how this hiring process negatively impacted the mission's effectiveness in responding to incidents, noting, "certain key appointments should not be one-year limited roles. Still, these should not be given to selected pre-agreed countries". The respondent felt that "Some appointments should be two years, and they should have an overlap." Key portfolios should be long term and go through a more robust UN recruitment process because "having the wrong person can lead to very bad problems" for the mission and in the local context. Several respondents also mentioned how "troops are left alone... with these issues that they are not trained to deal with." This includes political and developmental issues,

117 Interview with civilian community leaders in Abyei.

118 Interview with mission staff.

119 Interview with mission staff, community leaders, women's groups and youth groups in Abyei.

120 Interview with mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

121 Interview with senior mission staff.

122 Interview with senior staff member on Teams and in Abyei.

etc. While there has been less violence between the Misseriya and Dinka Ngok communities, “intra-Dinka violence has risen.” “The massacres that took place in January 2021 made the communication between two fighting actors hard.” There was even acknowledgement that “the meeting with the Pakistani force led to a drop in attacks, but the Nuer siding with one over the other created an additional problem.” However, it must also be noted that the mission did play a significant role in moving the needle¹²³ when it came to bringing the traditional conflicting groups together in Uganda in May 2022.¹²⁴ “While it was not ground-breaking, they did meet, and the mission tried to have them agree on some things, but it was very vague.” For some respondents, the mission’s unwillingness to adapt and respond to emerging challenges reflects “a position of not rocking the boat, but to try and keep things stable.” Consequently, many respondents noted that the mission is “not firm with things, which has led to people saying [the] Ethiopian TCC were better”, which may reflect the degree of “increased violence in the box.”

Despite this negative criticism, as mentioned previously, the mission has effectively responded to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) challenges within the community. According to one respondent, “under the Ethiopian [TCC], there were several SBV [sexual-based violence] incidents in the box”, but currently, “we have not had any reported cases.” However, the team could not verify this. What we did hear of was the need for the mission to support the community by stopping women from being abducted, which the communities in Sector South mentioned as an issue. All the women, youth and community groups that the team interacted with mentioned that “people felt they could report SEA [sexual exploitation and abuse] and SBV if anything was to arise.” This was reaffirmed by several female military personnel who mentioned, “When we visit the medical facilities, we listen to the women and engage with the communities. We have discussions with them, and women do not seem reluctant to report it but would also feel ok to report it to their community focal point.” Here, the mission’s deployment of female personnel in the medical facilities as female focal points should be capitalised on.

Political Situation

As noted previously, the severity of the security situation only slightly improved, and little progress between the parties in settling the political crisis was made. The slow pace of negotiations and reaching consensus and the persistent presence of security personnel from Sudan and South Sudan, in contravention of the 20 June 2011 agreement, have stopped the efforts towards the statutory border monitoring assistance role.¹²⁵ By 2015, the UNISFA mission advanced its strides in restoring security by facilitating peaceful migration throughout the Abyei area and supporting conflict prevention, mediation and deterrence. According to the UN, 2% of the 516 658 people

123 Additional recent efforts include a four-day high-level visit to Juba, led by the Acting Head of Mission and Force Commander Major General Benjamin Sawyerr, which took place from 8 to 11 January 2024.

124 UNISFA (2022) Available at: <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/high-level-engagement-unisfa-delegation-visits-juba>

125 UNSC. (2012). Consultations on Abyei. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2012/04/consultations-on-abyei.php>

that crossed the border from Sudan to South Sudan went through the Abyei Administrative Area since mid-April 2023.¹²⁶ In addition, in 2015, UNISFA convened a community dialogue on border management in Aweil, South Sudan, between multiple ethnic groups and a meeting on the location of a potential joint market on 7 October in Todach, Abyei between the Ngok-Dinka and Misseriya communities.¹²⁷ However, insecurity in Abyei is heightened by the prolonged border dispute between the governments of Juba and Khartoum. The UNSC passed Resolution 2024 in 2012, expanding the mandate of UNISFA to include a border monitoring support mechanism.¹²⁸ The resolution gave UNISFA several new responsibilities in support of the JBVMM, including assisting the parties in adhering to prior security commitments regarding a secure demilitarised border zone and assisting the JBVMM with operational tasks, like monitoring, verification, reporting, information sharing, and patrols. Similarly, Resolution 2046 provided both parties with a three-month opportunity to engage in dialogue and resolve issues on oil wealth sharing, border demarcation, and the final status of Abyei.¹²⁹ Notwithstanding all these provisions, the exemplary implementation of the JBVMM further handicaps UNISFA and the broader mission's ability to create a politically stable Abyei. Khartoum's unwillingness to accept the map the AU presented to the parties as a basis for discussing the geographical parameters of the buffer zone between the two countries worsened the political deadlock. This became a prominent reason for delaying the establishment of the JBVMM, leading the UNSC to suspend the mission's role and reduce troop deployment.¹³⁰

The UNSC authorised UNISFA under Chapter VII to protect UN personnel, facilities, installations and equipment. The execution of this mandate was challenged in June 2021, when traditional chiefs in the area sent a letter to the Sector One headquarters at Gok Machar demanding the withdrawal of UNISFA and the JBVMM and threatening violence.¹³¹ This notice was not treated with the urgency and attention it deserved. It later resulted in an attack in August 2021 by protesters outside Sector One headquarters in Gok Machar. The attack led to the destruction and looting of UN assets. Similar protests took place on 13 August outside the War Abar (TS 12) team site, forcing UNISFA to relocate from TS 11 and TS 12 to Sector HQ in Gok Machar to prevent an escalation of the situation. On 30 August 2021, the local community of Aweil North County demanded in writing the complete withdrawal of UNISFA and the JBVMM from Sector One headquarters in Gok Machar "within 48 hours".¹³² Local communities then accused UNISFA of being biased in patrolling activities and siding with the GoS and Sudanese

126 *Sudan Tribune*. (2023). 516,658 people crossed Sudan's border into South Sudan: OCHA. 24 January. <https://sudantribune.com/article281651>

127 UNSC. (2015). The Council to Vote on Draft Resolution on UN Interim Security Force for Abyei. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2015/12/council-to-vote-on-draft-resolution-on-un-interim-security-force-for-abyei.php>

128 Ibid.

129 UN. (2012). Security Council Calls for Immediate Halt to Fighting Between Sudan, South Sudan, Resumption of Negotiations, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2046 (2012). <https://press.un.org/en/2012/sc10632.doc.htm>

130 UN Peacekeeping. (2017). UNISFA's JBVMM pushes Safe De-militarized Border Zone operations to end deadlock. 9 October. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/unisfas-jbvmm-pushes-safe-de-militarized-border-zone-operations-to-end-deadlock>

131 UNSC. (2021). *Sudan/South Sudan: Meeting under "Any Other Business"*. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/10/sudan-south-sudan-meeting-under-any-other-business.php>

132 Ibid.

communities to annex part of the territory. These incidents did not augur well with the ongoing efforts by the UNSC to address Abyei's insecurity.

One senior official noted the so-called bias in patrolling. They said that while the mission was doing well in meeting several aspects of its mandate, "the mission is not covering the whole area of Abyei, and it is only focused on Abyei town."¹³³ While the study did not uncover evidence of bias in patrolling, it did find challenges, as discussed previously, with the limited reach and the types of patrols, which resulted in the mission suffering losses, being unable to deliver on the PoC and human rights aspect of its mandate or in some cases, patrolling "up and down" the main route but never accounting for or "refusing to patrol" where new or potential incidents could and would occur, leaving civilians to "fend for themselves."¹³⁴ Three variations were given when the team placed these claims in front of each sector commander. In Sector South, links were made to the limited equipment and that the forces were at 30% capacity. In the Sector Centre, the response was more measured and analytical but centred on the force's inability to move during the rainy season and the lack of language interpretation and intelligence to move and act when needed. The functionality of the early-warning systems was also mentioned. In Sector North, there appeared to be a denial of the situation and, for the most part, a deflection of the problem. A respondent stated: "we cannot do it all, and we are doing more than enough given our limited resources."¹³⁵

There was a growing sense that these structural problems were linked to the politics of both Khartoum and Juba. The political impasse indirectly left some communities better protected than others. The over-focus on humanitarian needs also appears to have contributed to this problem. However, there was no evidence of an initial effort to avoid civilian protection. For one senior diplomat, UNISFA's limited patrols have meant "Dinka groups have not been able to return to other parts of the box because UNISFA gives no... security provision."¹³⁶ For many whom the EPON team engaged with, there was a concern that states like the United States (US) and France at the UNSC were pushing for a reduction in troops and a change in strategy, and this could also further force the mission to rethink its response to the political impasse that continues to impact on PoC needs. A few respondents suggested that UNISFA needed to engage more with both neighbouring missions politically. One aspect that was touched on during the interview process for this study was the need for lessons to be adopted from how UNMISS – force commander and sector command – uses TCCs under the Area of Responsibility (AOB) through Temporary Operating Bases (TOBs) as an early-warning system that had allowed people to return to the far north, east and central parts of the area over time.¹³⁷

133 Interview 006. Senior South Sudanese diplomat.

134 Interview with community leaders, youths, women's groups, and mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

135 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

136 Interview 004. Senior South Sudanese diplomat.

137 Interview 004. Senior South Sudanese diplomat.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchie.

5. The Political Impasse: UNISFA, the UNSC and the Mandate

It was believed that the lack of progress, the political impasse on the final resolution of the Abyei situation, and the uncertainty over the UNISFA exit strategy were adding to the ever-growing sense of fatigue with the UNSC. Many of the respondents that we engaged with stated “that politicians were now weaponizing grievance in Abyei,”¹³⁸ creating new dynamics within the box which could place the mission in a challenging position in the future. In the same vein, the US appears to be concerned that UNISFA is staying longer than intended for an interim force and that Sudan and South Sudan are capitalising on the relative stability that UNISFA provides to derail and prolong efforts to resolve the final status of Abyei.¹³⁹ Arguably, the lack of unanimity and internal politics between members of the UNSC on the best way forward to resolve the crisis and conflict between Khartoum and Juba negatively impacted the execution of mandates. For instance, concerning the operational length of the mandate, the US proposed a mandate of five months, which was retained in the draft in blue, despite Russia’s preference that the mission be authorised for an additional six months. This was later changed to a yearly mandate, in line with the recommendation from a UNISFA report by the UN Secretary-General.¹⁴⁰ Another instance is related to the differences in negotiations on the activities of CPC, which form part of the mandate of providing some relative security in Abyei in cooperation with the APS. Lithuania, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK) argued to maintain UNISFA’s role of community policing in the central and southern

138 Interview with senior mission staff, youth and women’s groups and community leaders.

139 UN. (2022). Security Council Extends Mandate of Interim Security Force in Abyei for Six Months, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2630 (2022). <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14888.doc.htm>

140 UNSC. (2015). Council to Vote on Draft Resolution on UN Interim Security Force for Abyei. <https://www.security-councilreport.org/whatsinblue/2015/12/council-to-vote-on-draft-resolution-on-un-interim-security-force-for-abyei.php>

areas (i.e., Ngok-Dinka areas). However, Russia did not support this reference, given Sudan's concerns about delayed security provision in northern parts of Abyei, where Misseriya reside.

The strong mindset of carrying out CIMIC and QIPs activities means the general approach has become one-dimensional through a “hearts and minds” campaign.

By assessment, the mandates of UNISFA were largely skewed towards restoring security in the contested area and less focused on assisting in political processes mainly targeted at organising the stalled 2011 Abyei Referendum. In the words of the UNSG, UNISFA “lacked the civilian tools to keep the parties engaged in the advancement of their dialogue politically”.¹⁴¹ To resolve the final status of Abyei, the UNSG recommended the appointment of a civilian Deputy Head of Mission to function as the main focal point on political matters, expanding UNISFA's civilian component. However, this has resulted in little or no significant improvement in resolving the political impasse between Sudan and South Sudan, and the status of Abyei remains unresolved. For instance, regular meetings between senior Sudanese and South Sudanese officials (the Joint Political and Security Mechanism, or JPSM) have been less successful as talks on Abyei's final status are undetermined. Politically, sensitive subjects such as the issue of whether the area will be part of Sudan or South Sudan and discussions on border demarcation have been relegated to the back of the field amid more pressing bilateral challenges in the region, like the violent conflict in the Sudan and the upcoming elections in South Sudan.¹⁴² CSOs that the EPON team engaged with noted that due to the regional insecurity, political impasse – in Sudan and South Sudan – and the broader regional challenges in the Horn of Africa, the UN Country Teams (UNCTs) were not engaging or supporting UNISFA on cross-border matters and challenges, adding additional levels of strain that the mission has to deal with, incapacitating UNISFA's ability to live up to every priority.

One respondent noted that “the Country Teams do not seem to interact with each other, and the Country Teams are refusing to adopt steps to meet their mandate in this area.”¹⁴³ Another mentioned, “The teams do meet, but this is not as frequent as it should be”,¹⁴⁴ and neither the UNCTs nor the humanitarian organisations are trying to address the issues within the box. This means, for the most part, that there is a very small operation carried out by a limited number of humanitarian actors, but UNISFA TCCs are doing the bulk of the work through their CIMIC project. The Country Teams work in silos, and there is no strategic direction to resolve these challenges. As a result, UNISFA is seen as the state or de facto government, impacting the

141 UNSC. (2018). UN Interim Security Force for Abyei Mandate Renewal. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2018/11/un-interim-security-force-for-abyei-mandate-renewal-2.php>

142 Pradhan, A. & Copeland, C. (2018). Keeping the Hotline Open Between Sudan and South Sudan. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/keeping-hotline-open-between-sudan-and-south-sudan>

143 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

144 Interview with mission staff in South Sudan and interview with UN official.

mission's ability to do work in other areas as its limited capacity is channelled into this area daily. In addition, the strong mindset of carrying out CIMIC and QIPs activities means the general approach has become one-dimensional through a "hearts and minds" campaign.¹⁴⁵

The diversion of attention also means that the mission sought to provide security assistance and facilitate necessary political processes between Sudan and South Sudan. Community militia remains involved in violence, including armed attacks on villages and UNISFA personnel, derailing the mission's efforts to protect civilians and UN staff as part of its mandate. For example, a violent armed attack on the Ngok Dinka village in January 2022 claimed the lives of six natives and a member of the Misseriya armed group.¹⁴⁶ The attack was effectively contained due to the vigilance and swift action of UNISFA troops on the ground, which led to the arrest of perpetrators and the confiscation of arms and weapons.¹⁴⁷ However, this increased violent activity, movement of persons from Sudan, and other factors previously discussed have meant that an increasing number of activities are being carried out by UNISFA.

Community militia remains involved in violence, including armed attacks on villages and UNISFA personnel, derailing the mission's efforts to protect civilians and UN staff as part of its mandate.

Despite the UNISFA mandate extension, the mission struggles to find a lasting solution to its exit from Abyei. This is partly because less attention was given to grassroots problems, and the mission's mandates have been limited in tackling tensions between the two ethnic groups – Ngok Dinka and Misseriya. This has been somewhat exacerbated by the new dynamics in the box, which have bypassed existing challenges and created new unforeseen challenges for the mission. Thus, restoring the overall political and security landscape of the Abyei has become a colossal task where the mission civilian capacity to deal with this is approached to a large degree by a military focus, which has done well to deal with the traditional conflicts or grievances that occur in the box yearly, but is inadequate for the more criminal aspects emerging and evolving in the box which the mission finds itself at odds with. Finally, despite the differences between the people the EPON team engaged with, there was consensus that UNISFA had done all it could politically within its mandate (and with limited civilian capacity) to maintain peace by trying to secure broader agreements between the Sudan and South Sudan.

145 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei, mission staff in Abyei and community leaders.

146 UN. (2022). UNISFA Condemns the early morning attack on Dungup village.

<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/unisfa-condemns-early-morning-attack-ngok-dinka-village>

147 Ibid.

Interaction with Communities

Overall, the mission's interaction with the communities appeared to be at a pivotal point, where for communities, the mission did not do enough engagement, and if it did, it often tended to be the civilian staff and not all members of the mission leadership outside of UNPOL. This relationship was weakening, and the interaction with key stakeholders happened "when something occurred". The team also found that the mission leadership frequently engaged with the communities, senior UN personnel, and even the military. The challenge that seemed to arise was a lack of listening from both sides, which appeared to add to existing tensions. This stemmed from the UN, in many ways, being seen as the state that needed to provide resources and goods to the people through a significant number of CIMIC programmes (often with no consideration for doing no harm or the sustainability of these projects), which stemmed from internal competition between the various sectors. These actions not only raise questions about the sustainability of the CIMIC projects and the dependency on the mission in the future but also contribute to a massive risk of diminishing local capacity and the sustainability of local infrastructure.

Nevertheless, senior mission staff said that the "mission had been playing a mediation role and was effective in their approach and proactive in 2022."¹⁴⁸ This includes its ability to bring together the two traditional conflicting parties in the box in Uganda. However, some noted, "Amiet market town witnessed civilians returning in 2023, and the mission provided service, but there have also been an increased number of attacks."¹⁴⁹ This new type of violence, as previously mentioned, had led to "the youth taking up arms and the groups openly carrying arms",¹⁵⁰ but it appears the mission did not have any capacity to deal with this. "Armed youth groups of the Twic by all accounts is a direct response to the Ngok Dinka violence."¹⁵¹ It was a re-formalisation of self-defence groups in Abyei, but they did not have a presence or were armed in the same way. Overall, "the mission response is cautious, and the mission does try to engage in weapons confiscation."¹⁵² While we did note from different UN respondents the increased number of weapons seized by the mission, there seems to be a lack of a broader strategy to deal with the influx of weapons. Adding to this was the arrival of other groups, and some believed the mission should be doing more to prevent their entry. It was acknowledged that there has been some mediation effort by President Kiir to stop the violence, which led to some reduction of violence. The mission did not capitalise on this enough, however.

148 Interview with senior mission staff on Teams and in Abyei.

149 Interview with mission staff.

150 Interview with senior UN official in Ghana.

151 Interview with mission staff on Teams and in Abyei.

152 Interview with senior mission staff.

Policing Abyei

While it is evident that the challenges in Abyei need to be dealt with using a whole-of-mission approach, it is also clear that UNPOL's "current strength and a staff of 44" presents the mission with a challenge as policing also then falls to the mission's TCCs. However, many respondents noted that the absence of law-and-order institutions and working with two governments contributed to the current situation. This also raised other issues for the UN, like the use of traditional laws versus more contemporary laws, and *blood money* was mentioned as a local mechanism to diffuse and deal with the challenges of policing in Abyei. Some respondents felt that the UN should not get involved in this aspect or be seen as supporting methods that promoted blood money, etc. For others, given the lack of state institutions and the rule of law from both states, this provides an opportunity for the locals to deal with things through their customs instead of trying to build Western institutions, which would take decades and often defer justice in their eyes. One respondent used the example of the CPC, which for them can be seen as a Western model imposed by the mission but which "cannot be effective without the right equipment, mandate and political buy-in".¹⁵³

Crime in Abyei is higher in the dry than and in the rainy seasons (March-September). In the dry season, the migration patterns change, which is an additional aspect the mission must deal with. Often, this can mean an increase in crime, murder, shooting, killing, and petty crime.¹⁵⁴ One person remarked, "The mission only has crime data for the last three years." While JMAC was still being formed during our visit, it was not entirely clear whether the mission was aware of how it could use this data to inform its decision-making processes and responses to insecurity. For one respondent with whom we raised this matter, the simple response was: "the mission works on the ground with the local communities and manages 19 sites and three sectors. Each team site has two to four IPO [individual police officer] colleagues in these areas with wider responsibilities."¹⁵⁵ Essentially, there are not enough resources, and there seems to be a mindset of "we are not working at full capacity as we do not have FPUs".¹⁵⁶

153 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

154 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

155 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei and on Teams.

156 Interview with mission staff on Teams and in Abyei.

Table 2: UNPOL Strength per presentation in August 2023

	Male	Female	Total
Director & professional staff	3	3	6
IPO	23	16	39
Language assistant	14	6	20
International civilian staff	0	1	1
Total	40	26	66

Source: UNISFA

While we believe that the recommended FPU would help support the mission’s approach, we do not believe this would change many existing structural challenges. However, the required number of UNPOL personnel have not been deployed, and this means the military is dealing with more than just the armed threat but also internal issues (criminal, humanitarian, justice, rule of law, governance, mediation, conflict resolution, agricultural, etc.) and many of these “challenges” are in the grey zone. The grey zone here reflects the mission’s use of TCCs to deliver services that would often be delivered by experts in humanitarian work, but due to structural challenges, the mission is left with no choice but to engage. Our observation is that this is a contributing factor to the overall position and approach of the mission in that many military staff “have [a] different doctrine, understanding and do not always serve in the UN for a long time”.¹⁵⁷ We also found that in the current context, the military capacity of the mission has been overstretched but the mission has done well to adjust and provide the missing resources needed to get it to where it is today. However, the mission needs good policing in the area, and this means ensuring it is active at the grassroots levels and has effective intelligence gathering.

Nevertheless, the mission was increasingly being asked to do more but with very little resources and capacity, which is also impacting the mission’s perception and is a strain on its already limited resources. For example, using QIPs, the mission does projects with programmatic funds on training, workshops and procurement of essential uniforms, rainboots, torches, lights, belts and trousers, etc., but the mission “does not provide transport support to the CPC”.¹⁵⁸ “Other teams have been exploring the use of bicycles to help communities to reach the network towers and report crimes.” Thus, the mission is trying to support community policing, but its resources are constrained. In addition, despite these challenges, one UNPOL personnel argued, “the CPC

¹⁵⁷ Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei, one WhatsApp and on Teams.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with community officers, CPC and youth groups.

is not effective with larger crimes, but with petty crimes, the CPC does well.”¹⁵⁹ However, this needs to be backed by a stronger UNISFA force. More human rights and rule-of-law officers who work solely as experts on this matter are needed. In the next subsection, we discuss the findings on matters related to the rule of law.

The Issue of the Rule of Law

The current structure of UNISFA means that as things stand, “there is no rule-of-law section as it is done through an advisor who sits with UNPOL.” Another respondent within the mission mentioned, “There is a rule-of-law strategy drafted,” but there is a need for a standing support capacity and a rule-of-law office. While the mission also has a PoC focal point, the significance of this role was limited. In many cases, the structures within the civilian aspects of the mission were often passed onto personnel without formal training or staff straddling two to three roles. Adding to this challenge is the increasing number of civilians entering from Sudan during the conflict, with the “south administration feeling that the UN should put up a barrier, as more people coming in changes the demographic and makeup... but also could mean clashes with other groups.” These additional clashes would require better resources on significant aspects of the rule of law. However, due to the nature of the crisis in Sudan and the significant displacement, the mission often supports incoming people, which can create further challenges for the mission and local community dynamics. With no form of justice to give, people tend to resolve issues themselves through arms. This leaves “the mission in a confusing situation, especially given that the south is partly developing its rule-of-law aspects and the north has not been able to”. Inadvertently, the mission is seen as biased because, on one side, especially the Centre and South Sectors, the mission can send people south to the authorities to be properly convicted, but the mission does not have a proper arrangement of the sort in the north, impacting public views and perception of the mission.

The Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC) Data, Historical Trends and Analysis to Inform Smart Peacekeeping

As noted throughout the report, the mission’s ability to use data systematically and to its advantage holistically was missing. While the mission has been able to recruit a new JMAC head and officers to lead the mission’s collection of data, there still is a lack of understanding among key mission personnel about how data can support the mission’s own goals and objectives and

¹⁵⁹ Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

enhance its strategic thinking. The mission lacks its own data-driven analysis, which impacts how the mission moves forward.¹⁶⁰ The team also noted that while different personnel were collecting and entering information and data, “there is no real understanding of how this data is fully understood, feed[s] into how UNISFA responds, and how it strategically plans for the future, but also adapts itself to emerging challenges.” In several of the briefings that the team sat in, it was clear that some of “the teams had never seen the data and visualisation” or that SAGE was not being used properly, which impacted the mission’s ability to support their analysis and long-term strategic thinking. While our analysis on this matter is still preliminary, largely because JMAC was only just being set up during the period of observation, it will be important for a future assessment to examine whether the enrolment of JMAC has led to more systematic changes within the mission and its approach on the ground. Finally, significant aspects that are missing include “systematic data collection of conflict actors” and a more historical analysis that is continually updated.¹⁶¹ When the team inquired about some conflict actors, most of the analysis lacked historical context, which did not help the mission know how to address the long-term root causes of conflict. This missing information seems to “vanish once staff move on.”¹⁶²

Early Warning: The Preparedness of the Mission in and out of Season

As mentioned, the mission was designed and set up to deter violence in the box mainly from two warring parties. One aspect that should be working and feeding into the mission’s early-warning mechanism is the JBVMM. The mandate of the JBVMM is to ensure peace and safety in the demilitarised zone along the border between Sudan and South Sudan. Many whom we engaged with felt that the mission did well in “playing a role in supporting the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism [JBVMM]. If there is a meeting between the parties, UNISFA lends a hand and provides security updates where it can, but the last time this structure met was in 2017.”¹⁶³ Therefore, it was unclear how useful it is as an early-warning mechanism.

160 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

161 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

162 Ibid.

163 Interview with senior mission staff.

“We are aware of the arms problems from our sources in the community. The arms are being traded on a massive scale, and it seems that the Ethiopians had a handle on this matter”. The team also noted that there are issues with small arms in Sector South. It appears that the weapons are coming from the south and the Nuer, Twic Dinka, and others are fighting for control.

Most respondents inside and outside of the mission felt TCCs are focused on Abyei town and some parts of the North, but they have a limited stretch, and this allowed the militia, etc. to sneak in and cause violence. The mission is trying to adjust to these new challenges with some difficulties. The team was able to talk with communities from these affected areas, many of whom mentioned that the peacekeepers are not deployed to different parts, and so the mission is limited. One military respondent noted, “We are aware of the arms problems from our sources in the community. The arms are being traded on a massive scale, and it seems that the Ethiopians had a handle on this matter”.¹⁶⁴ The team also noted that there are issues with small arms in Sector South. It appears that the weapons are coming from the south and the Nuer, Twic Dinka, and others are fighting for control. However, our observations are that as the rainy seasons have got worse due to climate change, this requires better and smart mobility from the mission to not only act but, as part of the mission’s approach, to catch and avert incidents before they occur.

In [the] UN, we talk about early warning, but it needs to be increased... at the moment, it is weak... In my sector, we do not have mobile network coverage, and this is important given the communication networks are limited, but it also acts as a way for us to receive information in advance if people cannot come to us.

Despite this, all respondents we engaged with mentioned that the missions’ senior officials had done more to engage with the issues and carry out peacebuilding and mediation efforts in Entebbe.¹⁶⁵ A respondent noted that “the mission had troubles with getting the groups together due to mobility issues and the question of location of the meeting sometimes holds them back,

¹⁶⁴ Interview with senior mission staff, community leaders and women’s and youth groups.

¹⁶⁵ <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/unisfa-brokers-peace-accord-between-two-communities-abyei>

but they usually discuss pre-migration issues and challenges.”¹⁶⁶ However, our assessment also finds that the most the mission can do is to “set up parameters that are designed to protect the areas, but we cannot prevent people from coming in and better protecting these areas from criminality”. This resulted in situations where TCCs from Sector South are near a “situation but cannot deploy because they did not have air support.”¹⁶⁷ Communities have thus become frustrated with the mission’s ability to provide protection and respond promptly, let alone to react to early-warning signals provided to the mission in terms of intelligence. This places the mission at a crossroads because if the mission is unable to work with and adapt to its early-warning mechanisms, then “If there was a large violent outbreak, the mission and specific TCCs would not be able to deal with these threats”,¹⁶⁸ especially if they occur on multiple levels and areas. For one respondent:

In [the] UN, we talk about early warning, but it needs to be increased... at the moment, it is weak... In my sector, we do not have mobile network coverage, and this is important given the communication networks are limited, but it also acts as a way for us to receive information in advance if people cannot come to us.¹⁶⁹

A friendlier community intelligence approach to how the mission conducts operations is needed.

Another respondent’s assessment was more critical: “The mission is only counting fatalities, which [are] increasing, but the number of people getting shot and killed means the mission is not doing well.”¹⁷⁰ For this respondent, the issue of early-warning mechanisms comes down to “the aspect of configuration and the mission’s ability to deal with these issues”.¹⁷¹ Our observation from some of these incidents is that a community of people often fights over limited resources; this becomes more of a problem when one incident leads to another, and people start to arm themselves. A friendlier community intelligence approach to how the mission conducts operations is needed. As one respondent put it, “the military is not well equipped to deal with these challenges and [is] occupied by CIMIC activities, which means the forces are doing too much and need to pivot.”¹⁷² Our observations seem to confirm this as the team noted that the force patrols and use of early warning are not intelligence-led. Not enough foot patrols are done to access difficult areas, and not enough overnight patrols are done. In some ways, this reflects a clear strategic response to insecurity, but there needs to be a real plan for enforcement. The

166 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

167 Interview with a former senior government official in Abyei.

168 Interview with senior mission official.

169 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

170 Interview with community leader.

171 Interview with mission staff in Abyei.

172 Interview with senior humanitarian actors’ in Abyei.

mission has become reactive, and there is a response each time well after the event and not proactively beforehand.

Many also attributed this challenge to the types of training that forces received before they were deployed from their home countries and the lack of contextual and comprehensive knowledge of the environment. One respondent noted, “there is nothing proactive about how the TCCs operate, and this creates a difference in the approach... this means the troops deployed and the capabilities of the forces are not utilised, and TCCs do not follow up on operations.”¹⁷³

173 Interview with mission staff, senior staff and senior UN diplomat.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchibie.

6. Implementing the Mandate in Practice and Challenges Between the Two Communities

As mentioned throughout the report, there has been success, but there are also challenges that the mission is grappling with. When it comes to the mission’s capacity to implement its mandate, a few areas generally need resolving. For example, UNISFA’s focus on “burying bodies is not the mission’s role; neither is measuring the size of the burial site, [which] may end up doing more harm than good.”¹⁷⁴ There are a few things the mission needs to refocus on. First, while the mission has struggled with general insecurity, it has been unable to push back the two key states and their forces outside the box, which goes against the mission’s mandate. The mandate language on the presence of state actors is clear, but the SSPDF and Sudan actors are in the box, and state actors should not be in the box. Thus, the mission needs to be firm on whether it is a demilitarised area and then decide on the best course of action to move these actors outside the box, militarily and politically. Second, linked to the first, is the effect this has on criminality in the box and other challenges in the box and the mission’s ability to address this. This concerns how the UNSC chose to repower the mission, given the challenges of deploying the FPU and equipping the mission with resources to deal with this challenge. Third, the team noted that with the arrival of the multinational force, there is a need for the mission to engage strategically with traditional stakeholders in both areas and across each sector. Part of this means bringing back pre- and post-migration and traditional leader’s conferences and allowing people to come together where they talk and engage with each other. This, we note, is crucial for information exchange, rebuilding confidence in the mission, acting as a preventive measure to help stop conflict and an additional means of intelligence gathering. During the team’s interactions, it was made known to us that in some sectors, civilian engagement occurred, but was not frequent enough to enable the mission to use this as a source of data for conflict prevention, early

174 Interview with mission staff.

warning or information-gathering. Fourth, almost all respondents we interacted with noted the challenges with arms within the box. Clearly, the mission needs to find innovative ways of dealing with arms flow. One way of doing this, some believed, was to increase the number of TCCs to have a more “sufficient military force.”¹⁷⁵ However, given that the mission has Ghanaian and the Indian Battalion not at full COE capacity,¹⁷⁶ it seems premature to have more troops, given the mission is not yet at full capability. Therefore, as suggested, having a holistic approach, which includes utilising community-based reintegration support that draws on an understanding of the cycles of insecurity, re-mobilisation, and violence, would help the mission to diffuse some of the tension while also dealing with the rise of insecurity.

There is the perceived imbalance of support for one community over another, which the mission denies but needs to find a way of handling. This, to some degree, has meant the Juba administration is not happy with the mission and wants changes and for the mission to enter a proactive listening mode. While there was no systematic or institutional evidence to suggest the mission is supporting one group over the other, what is clear is that for many communities in the box, the mission is seen as being pro-Sudan and providing more programmes for the Misseriya communities to settle in the box.

Fifth, there is the perceived imbalance of support for one community over another, which the mission denies but needs to find a way of handling. This, to some degree, has meant the Juba administration is not happy with the mission and wants changes and for the mission to enter a proactive listening mode. While there was no systematic or institutional evidence to suggest the mission is supporting one group over the other (contrary to popular belief), what is clear is that for many communities in the box, the mission is seen as being pro-Sudan and providing more programmes for the Misseriya communities to settle in the box. However, our analysis did not uncover any such evidence of wrongdoing or favouritism by the mission, but the use of mis/disinformation campaigns has now broadened and is used against specific mission personnel and the mission. Campaigns directed at the leadership have also come to define politics in the box, and direct protest, online campaigns and mis/disinformation and troubling language are lobbied against individuals in the mission. These allegations extended to rumours linked to senior mission personnel allowing violence against civilians to occur while serving in Darfur

175 Interview with senior staff.

176 See UNSC. (2012). Report of the Secretary-General, S/2012/777. op. cit. para. 15 and 17.

with the UN mission. For the team, this reflects another area the mission must deal with more effectively. We suggest that the mission mandate include language that extends to the use of hate speech mis/disinformation, but we caution against adding new mandate language without the mission receiving the necessary finance, resources, expertise, and timely deployable staff to support any new mandating language or strategic policy that guides the mission's approach to this issue. Finally, the mission's overall stance and approach to protection need to be adjusted. While we note that the mission had a significant number of operations designed to deter and protect civilians, this approach is proving difficult and impacting the mission's ability to deliver on its mandate effectively. The challenge, as mentioned earlier, is the types of patrols that are not adequate for protection and the static deployment, which are intended to be a show of force but end up being less effective and lead to a perception of laziness to the people that the mission is designed to protect.

The mobile deployments designed to interact with civilians based on intelligence and to ensure PoC need to be reviewed.

Additionally, the mobile deployments designed to interact with civilians based on intelligence and to ensure PoC need to be reviewed. The data obtained from the mission demonstrates that “the graph of violence has gone down remarkably, and this is not being fulfilled with full confidence.” Adding to this is the perception from the communities the team engaged with that they are at odds with the mission's thinking on this matter. Many felt that the mission had become a humanitarian agency with its tasks and implementation of CIMIC activities, but the mission also had a negative relationship with humanitarian actors on the ground.

Factors that Enable Activities to Achieve their Intended Impact and Challenges to Implementation

While the mission went through a transitional process on the ground, the context was changing primarily due to the February 2022 Dinka crisis in South Sudan, which resulted in a shift in the overall dynamics in the box. As noted, there has not been as much violence between the traditional groups, the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya – to the north – and the Twic – to the south. There has been an increase in localised violence, often involving the Neur in cattle rustling and farming. The team observed the need for the mission to lead on the civilian aspects of its engagement with the communities by bringing the various communities and groups of people together. Several respondents noted that the mission had a number of “civilian elements, but the mission is not good at justifying their existence.”¹⁷⁷ This also extends to the need for supplementary engagement, where a civilian approach could help deliver this missing aspect. However, to

¹⁷⁷ Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

allow this to occur, the mission needs to improve the flow of information between teams and the wider organisation. This means that different aspects of the mission speak from different perspectives, often without joint thinking. For several respondents, the lack of information sharing means the mission has built a “culture where information is seen as power.”¹⁷⁸ More widely speaking, there also seems to be friction between the civilian and military aspects of the mission and within civilian groups, and there were no section meetings with all the civilian staff from Juba, Khartoum and Abyei that took place.

Firstly, the mission must prioritise activities strategically to support a process that ensures TCCs fully commit to the mission, the mandate, and the resolution of conflict.

Firstly, the mission must prioritise activities strategically to support a process that ensures TCCs fully commit to the mission, the mandate, and the resolution of conflict. Second, there is a need for additional support from UNHQ beyond the current staffing levels and financial support that the mission needs to deliver on its tasks. Third, the mission must have a broad strategy to stabilise the situation in the box, including the cooperation of the Ngok Dinka and buy-in from this community that fully supports the mission. Fourth, the mission must be more present and dominant in the area. While we note that the mission has done well to ensure that road connectivity has increased, allowing for some limited reach, this expansion has not resulted in the patrols connecting with several villages and locals. For some respondents, the simple expansion of the road network was seen as the solution: “once we increase the roads, the number of patrols increased, and we are using more TCCs and UNPOL on these deployments to support our early-warning mechanisms.”¹⁷⁹ However, it is not clear how the mission would be able to manage a road expansion or network if it is already struggling to manage the current direction of travel and conflict. One senior staffer remarked, “There is a plan, but the early warning is only theoretical and yet to be implemented fully.”¹⁸⁰

The mission must have a broad strategy to stabilise the situation in the box, including the cooperation of the Ngok Dinka and buy-in from this community that fully supports the mission. Fourth, the mission must be more present and dominant in the area.

178 Interview with mission staff on Team, in Abyei and in UNHQ.

179 Interview with senior staff member.

180 Ibid.

Table 3: Current Status of Implementation (source: UNISFA)

Early-Warning System (EWS) Focal Points (FPs)	Community representation	Date of induction	Location	Total men	Total women	Equipment	
						Mobile phone/ radio	Bicycle
CPC Abyei	CPC	Oct 2022	Abyei town	26	7	11	0
Youth	Youth	Nov 2022		17	0	17	5
JPC	JPC	May 2023	Amiet Market	13	0	9	4
CPC Goli	CPC	May 2023	Goli	3	1	0	1
Joint Federal Police Command (JFPC)	Abyei Women	May 2023	Amiet	0	2	2	0
Women	Abyei Women	6 May 2023	Various	0	26	14	6
IDP	Abyei Women	6 May 2026	IDP sites	0	4	2	2
Total				59	40	55	18

Coordination with UNMISS, UNITAMS and International Partners (AU and IGAD)

Several respondents we spoke with mentioned that the mission had tried to reach out to other UN missions in Sudan and South Sudan,¹⁸¹ IGAD and the AU but had been somewhat unsuccessful. As one respondent stated, “To some degree, the mission is talking with other missions, but for the longest time, this was not happening as the missions worked in silo[s].”¹⁸² Another respondent mentioned that the current coordination between the missions occurs once a month, but added, “The mission should be having more coordinated meetings with the two missions,” at least “twice a month to update each other.”¹⁸³ We also noted from several respondents that

181 Recent visit by UNISFA senior leadership to South Sudan (2024). Available at: <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/high-level-engagement-unisfa-delegation-visits-juba>

182 Interview with mission staff on Teams.

183 Ibid.

the mission head had helped to energise the mission, turned things around, and engaged with the UN Special Envoys for the Horn of Africa Office and the Force Commander for UNMISS. As one respondent remarked, “A lot has been done to bring together their efforts and the head of UNISFA.” However, these are mostly bilateral discussions, and the substantial aspects of the engagement and how it informed the mission’s thinking and strategic focus remain unclear.

We also noted from several respondents that the mission head had helped to energise the mission, turned things around, and engaged with the UN Special Envoys for the Horn of Africa Office and the Force Commander for UNMISS.

While the AU is not mentioned in the mandate of UNISFA, UNSC Resolution 2575(2021) indicates the role of the UN and AU towards a unique partnership that:

Encourages the African Union, the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP), and the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Horn of Africa to intensify their mediation roles with the R-TGoNU/GoSS and GoS to strongly encourage them to establish temporary administrative and security arrangements for Abyei as stipulated in the 2011 Agreement between the GoS and the Sudan People.

Respondents described how the position of AU and IGAD was missing from the current situation and seemed to have given up on or surrendered their input to allow the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AU HIP) to engage on the matter. While the analysis above demonstrates that UNISFA had done its best to engage on the ground in and around Abyei town and the market area, there was not enough engagement between the communities, UNISFA, the broader UN (limited civilian staff and UN agencies), AU and IGAD to help facilitate peace. On the AU and IGAD side, there was a different observation. On IGAD’s side, involvement is non-existent, and there has been a “failure of the CPA to deliver on stipulations within the agreement, which is an IGAD-led initiative”.¹⁸⁴ Observations concerning South Sudan’s Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) led by the regional body demonstrate that IGAD may have capacity challenges to sustain and lead the process.. As one senior diplomat recounted, the “AU and IGAD should be doing more jointly with the political process”. While acknowledgement was given to the AU HIP for taking some steps, it was noted that “the AU Commission was not doing enough or placing more effort to fully engage with the political leadership in Sudan and South Sudan despite the rising insecurity.”¹⁸⁵

184 Jok, JM. (2021). *Lessons in Failure: Peacebuilding in Sudan/South Sudan*. In: McNamee, T. & Muyangwa, M. (Eds), *The State of Peacebuilding in Africa*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

185 Interview 001. Senior UN official/diplomat. Interview 003. Senior UN official/diplomat.

The current political polarisation – between both capitals in internal matters – has allowed the AU to take a back seat on its engagement with UNISFA as the leading partner, allowing more local political figures to light the flames for new tensions. According to one respondent, “UNISFA lacks the resources and is also working in a polarised situation, where the UN and AU engagement at the senior regional level is well placed, but at the local level, this similar type of engagement is missing”.¹⁸⁶ ¹⁸⁷ As noted by a senior diplomat, there is a sense that the UN and AU work well at the AU HIP, with joint meetings and consultations to highlight and tackle the issues. Here, the “AU steps up [and] interacts with the UN directly and engages somewhat with the mission and regional actors”.¹⁸⁸ While the UN mandate does not explicitly express the AU’s role with regards to UNISFA, the findings from interviews with stakeholders suggest that at the strategic high level, a relationship based on mutual respect had (in the past) emerged and was working well and led to the “leadership’s engaging more on emerging issues”. The peak of this partnership appears to be from 2018-2020; it was also around this time that both countries chose to improve relations, notably through the constructive roles played in each other’s peace process.¹⁸⁹

The current political polarisation – between both capitals in internal matters – has allowed the AU to take a back seat on its engagement with UNISFA as the leading partner, allowing more local political figures to light the flames for new tensions.

While the AU indicated its intention to convene the Joint Border Commission and has encouraged both countries to resume high-level meetings, such as the Joint Security Commission and the Joint Political and Security Mechanism (JPSM), there does not seem to be much movement.¹⁹⁰ However, based on various UNSG reports, the JPSM meetings seem to have been convened with the participation of UNISFA, the AU and the Office of the Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. The JPSM held meetings in January 2023, May 2022, October 2021, September 2021, October 2020, February 2020, March 2019, and September 2018, but there were no meetings in 2017. Respondents noted that the leadership of Thabo Mbeki and his involvement “had been by far the best effort to date in the region.”¹⁹¹ Many recounted that the strategic appointment of Mbeki had allowed the AU to be seen as a unifying body with authority, with one diplomat adding that “Mbeki worked very hard to move things forward”, but despite this engagement from the former South African President, there had not been much movement

186 Interview with mission staff.

187 See also, Tchie, A, E, Y (2023). Convenience or complementarity: the African Union’s partnership with the United Nations in Sudan and South Sudan, *Politikon*, 50(3), 254-272.

188 Interview with senior AU staff.

189 UN. (2020). Citing Escalating Violence, Challenging Landscape in Abyei Area, Peacekeeping Chief Recommends Security Council Extend United Nations Interim Force. <https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14171.doc.htm>

190 Ibid.

191 Interview 001. Senior UN official/diplomat; Interview 003. Senior UN official/diplomat.

by the parties towards resolving outstanding issues, since both parties are “just kicking the can down the road” which equates to a lack of “political ownership and leadership”.¹⁹² This, for many, meant that UNISFA’s ability to counter future tensions with the AU was limited, impacting its ability to be more effective on the ground.

Another emerging dynamic between the partnership was how the two organisations juggled priorities and emerging crises, which mixed local political issues with regional underdevelopment and uncertainty. This coordination and cooperation meant both organisations worked as a “united front that allowed them to work towards a suitable solution for all groups.”

Nevertheless, one senior AU figure felt that the success of the UN-AU partnership stems from the fact that Abyei is a small region where the UN and AU can work together more strategically, unlike in Sudan and South Sudan, where the UN engagement is overstretched and under-resourced.¹⁹³ At senior AU and UN levels, the AU Commissioner and UNSG have made partnerships a critical aspect of their engagement. One senior UN official noted that this cooperation had also created internal resistance from some older UN colleagues, who saw this partnership between the UN and AU as the UN giving up its rights to the AU. Nevertheless, the team’s observations are that there is a need for better working relations between the AU and UN on the ground and a move to a smarter type of engagement between the two organisations. The UN and AU have good relations at the high diplomatic level, but more needs to be done by the two organisations to break the current impasse through joint analysis, coordination, diplomatic steps, and joint mechanisms. Existing mechanisms seem to be working well, or they are non-existent or lack synergy. Other dynamics that emerged from interviews on the UN-AU partnership was an odd and misplaced understanding of the UN as a service provider and often using its “authority and role to get things done with the AU, or nothing gets done”. One respondent recounted that “we must push and create incentives for some AU colleagues at HQ to get things done”.¹⁹⁴

Another emerging dynamic between the partnership was how the two organisations juggled priorities and emerging crises, which mixed local political issues with regional underdevelopment and uncertainty. This coordination and cooperation meant both organisations worked

192 Ibid.

193 Interview 009. AU diplomat.

194 Interview 001. Senior UN official/ diplomat; Interview 003. Senior UN official/diplomat.

as a “united front that allowed them to work towards a suitable solution for all groups.”¹⁹⁵ Agreements can always fall apart, but the follow-up was vital, which occurred with the “previous leaders.” Despite this, both capitals seem to have prevented the UN and AU from being able to effectively move things forward politically, leaving UNISFA trying to fill in the gaps on the ground, but unable to do so since UNISFA was not structured with the same resources as other multidimensional UN missions. This has left the UN, and to some extent the AU, “at the mercy of both governments who are not taking the issues as a priority but are focused on future extraction of resources from the area”.

Overall, the team’s observation is that the Head of Mission has been active in pushing TCCs to go out and has turned the mission around, leading to more engagement with the communities. However, what is missing is a broader civilian aspect of the mission. While there have been some challenges with TCCs, it is also clear that now is the time for greater proactivity from the TCCs to engage with the communities.

Orientation of UNISFA Towards Supporting the National Government and the Local Population

Overall, the team’s observation is that the Head of Mission has been active in pushing TCCs to go out and has turned the mission around, leading to more engagement with the communities. However, what is missing is a broader civilian aspect of the mission. While there have been some challenges with TCCs, it is also clear that now is the time for greater proactivity from the TCCs to engage with the communities. While the team noted changes since the arrival of the multidimensional forces, there also seems to be some perception of bias that the mission struggled with. For example, some civilians were seen as “never being happy”, “complaining about every small thing”, or could never appreciate the mission’s efforts.¹⁹⁶ Despite this, the mission’s reputation as a credible actor was raised in every meeting with the communities the team engaged with. In addition, there was a sense that more needed to be done by the mission to understand these perceptions, their impact on the mission, and how mis/disinformation, protests, etc. had come into being. This will require the mission to pivot, be more self-reflective and self-considerate, and undertake an independent perception survey that helps the mission

¹⁹⁵ Interview with senior staff member.

¹⁹⁶ Collective interview with senior mission staff.

realign its priorities with those of the UNSC and the communities it is designed to serve. Part of the process will require the mission to re-evaluate what it means to be “the only actor where you are not supposed to be the only actor.” This self-reflection also means that the repetitive process of operating as a mission, which led to further frustration on both ends, needs to be revisited. The mode of operating impacts the morale of mission staff. There are repeated claims that stakeholders are not happy with them, but the staff are stuck, which can impact the broader effectiveness of the mission.

As a result, the mission ends up in a “negative spectral time-lapse”, where the mission faces challenges such as the community not being satisfied, not having buy-in or legitimacy from the people, or the community feels the mission is not fulfilling its mandate in areas such as protecting civilians, but it continues to push forward. There is a broader range of challenges and evidence that is demonstrated through indicators related to time, space, and behaviour within an open environment, as well as other specific indicators, showing that things are not working. However, the mission continues to view things as two-dimensional.¹⁹⁷ This produces a situation where people “within the mission think that their presence is useful; however, civilians and communities know the mission is not protecting civilians”. As a result, tasks are being “dissolved, and people are resorting to traditional mechanisms to protect themselves”. This often will include rebellion from the youth groups and political elites who encourage the youths to step up to protect their communities.

The impact of negative spectral time-lapse was also highlighted by another respondent who indicated that the challenge is that communities decide to make their own efforts alone and chase people away, resulting in a massive outbreak of violence, which catches the UN off guard and leads to further “repeated violent incidents”.

In other cases, it results in traditional leaders asking for or eventually seeking organic means of protection or an emphasis on diverting back to old procedures. Several respondents highlighted these conditions, but one respondent noted, “I fear that what is happening will spread, but people living in the UN mission compound become a people of the compound”, with no one being concerned about the long-term impact of the negative spectral time-lapse on the sustainability of the mission. Similar observations were made concerning UNMISS, leading to the Malakal attack and the outbreak of conflict in Juba between 2015 and 2017. The impact of negative spectral time-lapse was also highlighted by another respondent who indicated that the challenge is that communities decide to make their own efforts alone and chase people away, resulting in

197 Tchic, AE, Y. (Forthcoming, 2024). The negative spectral timelapse effective on United Nations Peacekeeping in Africa.

a massive outbreak of violence, which catches the UN off guard and leads to further “repeated violent incidents”. The over-focus on structural challenges like roads, schools, farms and bunkers moves the mission away from focusing on peace and security; thus, the current efforts should be given to development agencies. There needs to be a change from where the mission is to what it wants to be to avoid regrets over what the mission could have been or what lessons should have been learned.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchibie.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchibie.

7. Implications for UNISFA's Mandate Renewal and Future Positioning of the Mission

As mentioned throughout the report, the perception of the mission among the community needs to be improved. Internally, within the mission and between the different units, there also needs to be better synergy, cohesion, and a holistic approach to what the mission does that is not simply restricted to a slogan like “hearts and minds”. Additionally, it is clear from a number of respondents that the team engaged with that the mandate has not been adequate for the situation on the ground, and the mission has not been staffed adequately to implement its mandate. Given that UNISFA's structure is designed to manage a buffer zone, it is very military-heavy. It uses outdated approaches that do not always align with the UN's guidelines and procedures. However, placing this all at the mission's feet would be a disservice. The responsibility lies with the mandating authority and the various departments at UNHQ, where more resources and staffing are needed for the mission to flourish. Part of this realignment will require the mandate to encourage UNISFA to protect civilians and be proactive, taking a more preventative stance instead of operating from a reactive position. While we observe that the mission is doing its best, the challenge now is that if significant steps are not taken to reform the process, the mission risks being a burden on the UN instead of being part of or supporting solutions. For example, there is a need to be specific about how the TCCs should engage through an activity-based structure, especially where the TCCs are taking up more work with the communities, which circumvents the humanitarian actors on the ground.

Additionally, the coup followed by the conflict in Sudan has contributed to a lack of clarity over the last two years, which has placed the mission in an odd position, especially regarding the status of Abyei but also with who is the authorising state. For example, UNSC 1990, which established UNISFA, has a reference to Sudan (in coordination with South Sudan). Many, however, felt that this has allowed Sudan to capitalise on the situation, placing a condition on everything

to do with Abyei and making Sudan the principal player in Abyei, which even extends to the challenge of issuing visas, resident permits, etc. for UN staff. Subsequent UNSC mandates also need clarifying as they are creating confusion on the ground over the wording used in article 34 of both Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs), which many read as making both Sudan and South Sudan host countries to the mission. The UN will have to rethink how it does peacekeeping in this space. Adding to this challenge is the lack of preventative peacekeeping and the inability to create stability in the box. This means the security aspects of the mission are not meeting their mandate, and the infrastructure is not there.

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Additionally, we noted that the mission's budget needs to change regarding the requested tasks and the lack of resources. It is not about money, but resources, aviation equipment, Internet connection, operational challenges, rotation of TCCs, etc., all of which need to be institutionalised adequately across the mission. For example, one issue the team noticed was that if a major crisis impacts the mission with the need to evacuate personnel, the mission only has four large helicopters and one additional helicopter, which would need to fly to South Sudan to evacuate. If there was a major security relapse, the impact would be devastating. Given the non-existence of institutions in the box, the mission is finding itself doing aspects of humanitarian work often designated to humanitarian actors, which raises concerns over the responsibility of the mission and the ethical challenges that exist with doing no harm, especially in the long term. Coupled with this is the political issue over land ownership, the final status, and the new emerging challenges, which the mission is not geared for, especially in the areas of broader stabilisation where counterinsurgency tactics are used.

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While several respondents we spoke with referred to the need to increase troop size, our assessment is that increasing the TCC number will only work in the interim period but will not work

as a long-term solution unless the mission repivots and strategically refocuses on its priorities holistically. Additionally, Ghana TCC were already at full strength of their troop deployment as of 3 July 2022. GHANABATT were short of their COE, such as APCs, which helps them to execute their mandate as motorised/mechanised infantry. However, to enable the TCC to execute their role safely, they were and are still provided with UNISFA-UNMAS Mine Protected APCs that were demobilised with the collapse of Sector 1 JBVMM. Currently, APCs are still provided and distributed, with ten APCs to GHANABATT and five APCs to INDBATT. These APCs were distributed to the TCC as of March 2022.

This partly means that the mission needs to re-examine how it conducts humanitarian activities that result in the communities always coming to UNISFA and not their community leadership. This creates a problem for the mission regarding sustainability and empowering the communities to support themselves once the mission has ended.

Thus, part of this will require that the mission re-examine its broader strategic thinking to reach full effectiveness. A re-examination of the configuration of troops is crucially needed. Traditional mechanisms, such as the JPM, which are ineffective need a new approach to engage community leaders and members of Abyei. Overall, the mission needs to reflect more on where it is and the problems the area is experiencing. It should also include a more strategic but practical response to low-level insurgency because infantry troops on the side of the road are not working. This needs to include and factor in how the mission can be community-based, drawing on community intelligence, which is then adapted and applied to the mission's thinking. This partly means that the mission needs to re-examine how it conducts humanitarian activities that result in the communities always coming to UNISFA and not their community leadership. This creates a problem for the mission regarding sustainability and empowering the communities to support themselves once the mission has ended. Finally, in the areas of security, there needs to be a strategy from the mission on how it intends to demilitarise the box. Knowing who the mission is disarming and what the impact will be when people cannot protect themselves is crucial to the mission not ending up in a negative spectral timelapse. This will mean that more thinking is needed to address the lack of legal structures in place and proper policing capacity in the box with a force that knows what it is doing and uses this to support the mission in security intelligence. It will, in part, require the mission, with the AU, UNHQ and the communities in Abyei, to revisit the agreements with both the Sudan and South Sudan counterparts and agree on what political solutions are needed for the Abyei region and what the long-term goal of this region will be.

Restructuring UNISFA

The UNSG's strategic review has given clear guidelines, and this study adds to this by arguing that UNISFA works towards the strategic objectives by ensuring that the mission guarantees that TCCs adopt a more flexible approach to the fluid changes on the ground. Despite these concerns, our observations are that the mission has tried to adapt but in some selective areas. The upcoming mandate renewal process needs to empower the mission to deliver for the young people, but strategic engagement from the UNCTs and other UN agencies (in the wider UN family) is needed. The report also finds that community-to-community dialogues between the two tribes and those within Sudan and South Sudan must be a priority for the mission. However, this would only produce the needed outcomes if the region's status was decided and a final agreement was possible.

While the EPON team agrees with the UNSG report quoted above, we diverge in our views on the downsizing of troops (and instead advocate for restructuring the types of forces) as this could place TCCs in harm's way and impact UNISFA's ability to deliver on its PoC mandate, affecting UNISFA's long-term effectiveness as well as its adaptive capacities which are needed for the type of incidents noted in Abyei.

While the authors are not in favour of increasing the number of TCCs, as previously mentioned, the team understands there will be concerns about TCCs being downsized for some. For example, how would UNISFA work with limited resources to facilitate displaced people returning to their homes and places of origin safely over a long time? One workaround would be for the mission to understudy how UNMISS TOBs have worked, what the challenges have been, and how they have been successful in various advanced operating bases within an area of responsibility by different forces. A similar assessment was provided by the UNSG in September 2021: "A more mobile, responsive and agile United Nations multinational force is also dependent on enhanced command and control functions, necessitating an increased communications capability within and between different force units and locations."¹⁹⁸ While the EPON team agrees with the UNSG report quoted above, we diverge in our views on the downsizing of troops (and instead advocate for restructuring the types of forces) as this could place TCCs in harm's way and impact UNISFA's ability to deliver on its PoC mandate, affecting UNISFA's long-term effectiveness as well as its adaptive capacities which are needed for the type of incidents noted in Abyei.

198 UNSC. (2021). Letter dated 17 September 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2021/805. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4F-F96FF9%7D/S_2021_805_E.pdf

Finally, the team is not of the view that converting the mission into a transitional or political mission, like that of the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan (UNITAMS), would benefit the people of Abyei. We suspect it would only result in long-term complications and an inability to stop violence against civilians, as is being witnessed in Sudan, which has led to deep confusion and a lack of coherence from UNITAMS and the wider UN. This concern was also shared by diplomats from Sudan and South Sudan, who strongly vocalised concerns over the mission being converted into a political mission. We find that joint analysis, thinking, coordination, and engagement from the UN, AU and IGAD focused on the idea of shared sovereignty are most needed and should draw on shared administration or decentralised governance models. UNISFA should play some role during a transitional period in Abyei going forward,¹⁹⁹ despite some members of the UNSC calling “on members to begin to consider a future that does not require a peacekeeping operation in Abyei”. Finally, there is a need for the UN and the AU to consider a framework agreement where the UNCT and the AU revisit past interactions and work towards a dedicated programme to promote and establish shared interests and a better partnership through a shared liaison office in a non-integrated mission setting.

Human Rights and the Rule of Law

Within the Abyei area, in the absence of the authorities tasked to ensure the rule of law, like the police, prosecution, courts and prisons, UNISFA, together with traditional authorities and community protection committees, has delivered some level of law and order in the past. Together, this tripartite body has supported the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities with traditional justice mechanisms by performing legislative and judicial functions to ensure peaceful coexistence. Additionally, this body, in the past, has settled grievances regarding land disputes, cattle rustling, and migration, among other conflict drivers. In the absence of functioning and recognised joint law enforcement institutions in Abyei, UNISFA has become the major axis around which issues of justice and accountability have been addressed. Any coherent exit strategy for Abyei in the future must indeed focus on human rights and the rule of law, as they are two of the leading solutions to peace consolidation in the area. The mission should try to have aspects that examine the rule of law and work with authorities to ensure this happens. For one respondent, for the most part, “the mission has been making it up as we go, but this brings challenges.” Instead, the mission needs to “long term ensure that the people are leading and not UNISFA taking control”. The area needs more community-focused programmes where the mission engages with the people, but the process is “owned by the people and not by the mission.” At the moment, these operations are mission-led and focused on recorded numbers internally and not on programming that is people-centred. In essence, the mission, in the area of human rights, “has become an over-subscriber of counting and demonstrating its work in report(s) but nothing on how this translates into the mission work with the community on the ground.”

199 UN. (2020). Governments of Sudan, South Sudan Should Leverage Improved Bilateral Ties to Resolve Disputes over Strife-Torn Abyei Border Region, Speakers Tell Security Council, SC/14335, 22 October. <https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14335.doc.htm>

Socio-economic Recovery

The immediate effect of UNISFA's exit from Abyei would be felt on the economic front. It will likely disrupt public services and impact agriculture activities, eventually leading to dramatic price increases for staple foods. Geographically, the resurgence of violence and intra- and inter-communal attacks have mostly occurred around two types of areas, namely, areas of intense economic exchange between the communities, such as the Amiet common market, and areas that the communities perceive as inherently theirs and where they fear invasion by others. The temporary closure of Amiet market brought untold hardship and economic crisis to both communities. The disproportionate impact of these market closures on women has been enormous, as they are the ones who dominate activities in these markets. Essentially, the Amiet common market is indispensable in the daily lives of the people of Abyei and the surrounding villages – both for the Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka. As was discovered by the strategic review, the Amiet common market (a centre of exchange of goods and services) and its environs, owing to their commercial attraction, have become a hotspot for criminal activities. Over the years, UNISFA has facilitated discussions between communities to develop an agreement on recommencing trading activity and on several issues on the market's operations, including restructuring its layout, accommodation of traders, and the security situation along the road from the north and south leading to Amiet. As was recounted by one respondent, "Without the full support of UNISFA, we could not have reopened the market when it closed for a long period". In essence, UNISFA's key role in safeguarding the villages, the market, and the highways leading to Amiet cannot be underestimated in the mandate renewal process in 2024. However, this must not focus on CIMIC-only activities, like building a school where existing infrastructure exists.

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Humanitarian Targets

Although UNISFA is not a recognised humanitarian mission, over the years, it has made giant strides with special efforts to meet some of the local population's basic needs through its QIPs and CIMIC activities. The QIPs have become particularly useful and popular in the past five years, with an implementation rate of nearly 100%. However, a few challenges, including local

ownership and sustainability, exist.²⁰⁰ In most situations, these projects cover a range of areas, including livelihoods, the rule of law, social gatherings, traditional justice, and basic needs such as water projects. The strategic review team identified the humanitarian crises in Abyei as one of the precursors of the tensions and conflict within the disputed area. To de-escalate the tensions at the community level and to lay the foundation for a smooth implementation of the future political agreement on Abyei, UNISFA has been working with the UNCTs of Sudan and South Sudan by scaling up humanitarian assistance and supporting livelihoods and resilience activities. The mission needs to balance this, consider providing more support to the humanitarians to take over, and avoid too much engagement, which could do more harm to the mission. For example, one respondent noted that “a mission broadcast on programmatic funding on SMS on a regular budget comes out and IOM [the International Organization for Migration] had used the funding to do an early-warning network”. However, this never connected with other aspects of what staff teams were doing or as part of an integrated approach.

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200 See UNISFA. (2023). Community Liaison Office. <https://unisfa.unmissions.org/community-liaison-office>



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchie.

8. Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

Generally, the long-standing patriarchal system, adhering to norms impacting social structures like gender roles and decision-making, has led to biases against women and girls in the Abyei area, limiting their involvement in community-level decision-making roles. In the Abyei area, the entrenched belief that women should stay at home and out of the public sphere remains a barrier to gender equality. The separation of roles for men and women, where women are expected to take care of the home and family while men work outside of the home, have contributed greatly to gender inequality. UNISFA’s specific mandated task in successive renewals, like many other UN peacekeeping operations, lacks explicit WPS language, thereby constraining the Head of Mission from taking the WPS agenda to a much more appreciable level.²⁰¹ Women are heavily underrepresented in the Abyei mission, a situation described by one mission interlocutor as partly due to the harsh conditions and the lack of appetite by TCCs to deploy women. The environment is generally considered unfavourable to the needs of women.²⁰² Women’s representation at all levels of the mission is inadequate overall and needs urgent attention. There are only three women at the senior level of the mission. This is not indicative of a mission that wants to be seen as encouraging the deployment of women at all levels. The mission is working at meeting the three key pillars²⁰³ of the WPS agenda (participation, protection and prevention), focusing on supporting women’s participation in peace processes, integrating gender perspectives in the day-to-day community engagements, and increasing the number of women in peacekeeping. However, women’s participation in formal peace processes remains very low.

201 S/RES/1990 (2011) references relevant bodies of WPS Resolutions.

202 Interview with mission staff.

203 The fourth pillar on relief and recovery has been excluded because it is not relevant to the mission’s mandated tasks.

Ensuring gender balance within the mission is an ongoing challenge, despite increased efforts. To address this, the mission leadership appointed focal points across various TCCs, provided training, and encouraged the integration of gender perspectives into daily activities. Patrolling teams were urged to include women, fostering a more inclusive approach.

Generally, the mission is focused on empowering women and creating gender equality and peace in the box. The conflict and outbreak of recent violence in Abyei are disproportionately affecting women and girls, including those displaced from areas outside Abyei. Incrementally, women and girls are experiencing increased poverty, violence, displacement, and limited access to essential services, healthcare and opportunities. The deteriorating security situation has hindered numerous women from reaching markets, moving freely and securely, and organising within their communities. Despite the opportunity that the market presents, many of the women interviewed stated how unsafe it is, even posing a danger to their lives. They mentioned sexual violence as a weapon of war to subjugate, break and punish women and girls and as a means of punishing specific communities.²⁰⁴ Frequent attacks on women, both in the market and on the roads to and from the market, are part of the many crimes that target them. Many of the interviewees mentioned that reports of sexual violence have skyrocketed since the conflict erupted.

The current situation reveals a lack of coordination, with everyone working independently. Despite expressing ideas for broader initiatives, the scope remains limited to female troops and some community engagement. Establishing a central coordination unit is crucial to overcome these constraints and enhance effectiveness.

In Abyei, women's participation in peace and political processes increased with UNISFA's strong support. Generally, the mission is focused on empowering women and creating gender equality and peace in the box. However, like many African societies, the culture and tradition of the people in the box take the form of male superiority and female subjugation and are mainly grounded in patriarchy. The mission lacks a grand gender strategy, and the internal gender imbalance is challenging due to broader societal issues occasioned by the background of the mission staff. The

204 See UNICEF. (2023). Sudan: Top un officials sound alarm at spike in violence against women and girls. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/sudan-top-un-officials-sound-alarm-spike-violence-against-women-and-girls>

mission's gender advisors, for instance, are not part of the Community Liaison Office (CLO), a substantive component of UNISFA under the Office of the Principal Officer tasked with the responsibility of supporting community dialogue and efforts by the Misseriya and Ngok Dinka communities through the JPC. Many of the meetings have no women representative in attendance. However, since the beginning of 2023, the CLO doubled the number of corridor meetings that hitherto were attended by few women and lacked discussion of issues that concern women. Through its rapid response window for women's participation, UNISFA has provided targeted and flexible support to women groups to elevate their work for peace, de-escalate violence, and address the barriers to women's participation in peace processes. However, there is a need for some substantive engagement at all levels to increase the discussion of women's participation in decision-making at the CLO level.

Despite achievements like a female engagement officer winning an award, recognising the existing gap calls for continuous efforts to bridge it. Cultural barriers persist, affecting activities where women are primarily responsible for tasks like obtaining firewood and building materials.

Ensuring gender balance within the mission is an ongoing challenge, despite increased efforts. To address this, the mission leadership appointed focal points across various TCCs, provided training, and encouraged the integration of gender perspectives into daily activities. Patrolling teams were urged to include women, fostering a more inclusive approach. The mission seems to be making progress in achieving gender-related goals, with TCCs establishing engagement platoons and contributing to women's education. However, challenges persist, such as the perception that gender is solely a woman's responsibility. Relocating the gender unit's advice to the force chief of staff is proposed for better alignment with command-and-control structures. Despite a low count of women in TCCs, collaboration with UNPOL and civilian components has enhanced engagement and trust in the mission.

The mission lacks a grand gender strategy, and internal gender balance is challenging due to broader societal issues. The link between civilians and the military on gender issues is limited, with some challenges related to hierarchy and community perceptions. Smart camps for women have improved, addressing privacy and accessibility concerns.

The current situation reveals a lack of coordination, with everyone working independently. Despite expressing ideas for broader initiatives, the scope remains limited to female troops and some community engagement. Establishing a central coordination unit is crucial to overcome these constraints and enhance effectiveness. While progress has been made in aspects like accommodating uniform sizes, addressing privacy concerns and providing better facilities for women remain a priority. Daily patrols engage with women in the community, emphasising the need for improved welfare and dedicated spaces. Although the battalion has shown positive efforts, there is room for enhancement, particularly in creating separate areas for women. Initiatives like a successful women-only programme around Mother's Day have faced criticism but also received support, showcasing the importance of addressing cultural barriers and promoting gender-inclusive activities. Despite achievements like a female engagement officer winning an award, recognising the existing gap calls for continuous efforts to bridge it. Cultural barriers persist, affecting activities where women are primarily responsible for tasks like obtaining firewood and building materials. Additionally, this cultural barrier prevented women from taking a leading role. Coordination and representation of women in meetings are improving, but there is a need for a central coordination unit. Despite these efforts, there is a lack of clear strategy, and data collection is just beginning. Daily patrols engage with women in the community, and there are initiatives for women, but again, cultural barriers persist.²⁰⁵ The mission lacks a grand gender strategy, and internal gender balance is challenging due to broader societal issues.²⁰⁶ The link between civilians and the military on gender issues is limited, with some challenges related to hierarchy and community perceptions. Smart camps for women have improved, addressing privacy and accessibility concerns.²⁰⁷

Benchmarks and Exit Strategy

Exit strategy in peacekeeping operations is a complex issue and a significant challenge for all interventions. Many concerns have been about the vagueness of what, in principle, should constitute the indicators or key benchmarks necessary for withdrawal or an outright exit. In May 2021, at the insistence of the UNSC, but especially the penholder, the US, there was a premature push to the UNSG to provide recommendations and options for the reconfiguration and the ending of the mission. That task could not be achieved by the stipulated time due to the intransigence and the different posturing between the two countries. As was stated by the UNSG Guterres, the lack of trust between the two parties thwarted the push towards the desired end state of peace consolidation. South Sudan, for instance, rejected the establishment of joint institutions with Sudan, arguing that previous attempts had resulted in two wars. The intransigence and disagreements were mainly due to the unresolved ownership of the oil-rich Abyei area. The absence of ownership made it challenging to ensure acceptance of what appeared to be an

205 Interview with mission staff.

206 Interview with senior mission staff in Abyei.

207 Ibid.

externally driven transition suggestion. Whereas Sudan supported the proposed transition plan, with the phased withdrawal beginning with the immediate drawdown of UNISFA strength and the handing over to a successor operation led by either the AU or regional group IGAD, South Sudan insisted that the security concerns in Abyei and the neighbouring Kordofan warranted UNISFA's continued stay in the area.²⁰⁸ This view was broadly supported in the past by the primary TCC, Ethiopia, and the AU.

Nevertheless, transitions are not merely administrative or technical processes but essentially political undertakings. According to the UN, “the overarching goal of a successful transition is to prevent relapse into conflict and ensure that the host country is on a pathway towards sustainable development”.²⁰⁹ In April 2019, the UNSC launched its Planning Directive to “develop consistent and coherent UN transition processes”.²¹⁰ Crucially, this directive calls for transition calendars that outline transition milestones and objectives with a view to adequate preparation for mission withdrawal and UN reconfiguration. This allows missions and UNCTs to plan transition well before the Security Council requests an exit strategy. In line with this directive, almost all UN peace operations have submitted their integrated transition calendars to UN headquarters in consultation with UNCTs. Briefing the Council on 18 July 2019, the UN Secretary-General identified the facilitation of successful transitions as a priority for the entire UN system. This is echoed in the Secretary-General's Action for Peacekeeping Plus (A4P+), which outlines the eight priorities of peacekeeping reform in 2021 and beyond.²¹¹ The Secretary-General also convenes biannual meetings on transitions of his Executive Committee, which brings together senior UN management and the Deputies Committee chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination.²¹²

From our observation, there is a need for the mission to revisit critical objectives that need to be fulfilled for a successful transition – namely, consolidating security, improving governance, and promoting economic and social rehabilitation and transformation – but there is a lack of practical guidance for managing transitions.

208 AP News. (2021). UN seeks proposals to end force on Sudan–South Sudan border. 21 May. <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-south-sudan-middle-east-sudan-africa-3d49c99618fce83d67abb8c5abb5356b>

209 UNDP. (2022). UN Transitions Project, Mid-Term Evaluation. 27 June.

210 UNSG. (2019). Secretary-General's Planning Directive for the Development of Consistent and Coherent UN Transition Processes, in Line with Executive Committee Decision 2018/38. 25 February (internal document).

211 UN. (n.d.). A4P+ Priorities for 2021–2023. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/a4p-action-peacekeeping-priorities-2021-2023>

212 UNSC. (2019). Meeting records of the 8579th meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. 18 July.

According to Resolution 2594, the UNSG submitted a report to the Council on 29 June 2022, providing an update on the status of ongoing and recently completed transitions since September 2019 – including in the DRC, Guinea Bissau, Haiti, and Sudan – as well as early transition planning in CAR and South Sudan. However, no formal report has been done for UNISFA that we are aware of.²¹³ In fact, with the ongoing conflict in Sudan and a request by the authorities that UNITAMS depart, the mission is hanging in the balance. With the upcoming election in South Sudan, supposedly scheduled for 2024, the situation over Abyei is looking more dire. While transition planning has been initiated for UNMISS (and several other Special Political Missions (SPMs) have submitted transition calendars in line with the UNSG’s 2019 planning instruction), we are unaware whether such an assessment has been done for UNISFA, which could present a challenge for the mission. In the current climate, especially with increased protests outside the UNISFA base over the effectiveness of the mission, the mission may not have the luxury of a gradual and phased drawdown and exit. It could be forced to leave under pressure from host governments without fulfilling the minimum conditions for their withdrawal.

From our observation, there is a need for the mission to revisit critical objectives that need to be fulfilled for a successful transition – namely, consolidating security, improving governance, and promoting economic and social rehabilitation and transformation – but there is a lack of practical guidance for managing transitions. One way the mission could address this would be to conduct an assessment which draws on the UN-developed policies and practices of the 2013 Policy on UN Transitions in the Context of Mission Drawdown or Withdrawal.²¹⁴ The policy document critically outlines principles that underpin all UN transition processes, which include the following:

- Early planning that anticipates different scenarios;
- Integration of the whole UN system at headquarters and in the field in planning and managing transitions;
- National ownership of the host country through high-level political engagement, as well as the support and participation of a wide range of national stakeholders;
- National capacity development to ensure an effective and sustainable handover of responsibilities to national partners; and
- An effective communications strategy to manage the expectations of national and international stakeholders.

The policy defines the roles and responsibilities of various UN departments at headquarters, missions, and UNCTs in planning and managing transitions. For UNISFA to meet the

213 UNSC. (2022). Report of the Secretary-General on Transitions in United Nations peace operations. 29 June. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3979852?ln=en>

214 UN. (2013). Policy on UN Transitions in the Context of Mission Drawdown or Withdrawal, endorsed by the Secretary-General. 4 February.

necessary benchmarks, it must also move from a passive mission to a mission that plans for its exit. Here, the mission can draw on several UN secretariat departments, such as the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the UN Development Coordination Office (DCO), and a UN agency, the UN Development Programme (UNDP). This joint initiative focused on transition has, in the past, supported transition processes in Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, Liberia, and Sudan, among others.²¹⁵ Supplementing this effort was the deployment of transition specialists who support the mission with integrated transition planning processes.²¹⁶ Thus, UNISFA must start factoring into its approach the necessary transitional planning instead of finding itself in a situation where it is pushed out, leaving unfinished mission tasks to the host country. While the reconfiguration of the UN presence has increasingly become geared towards peacebuilding, while working earlier at securing national ownership of transition processes, this needs to be added to UNISFA's approach to dealing with challenges. The joint development of exit strategies and peacebuilding plans with the host governments needs to be improved. This is where the UN, AU and both host states should be doing more to address this issue constructively.

Finally, while insecurity in the Abyei box has continued, the mission will need to ensure that it can adequately fill the existing resource gap that hampers the effectiveness of the mission, especially with the civilian aspects. This is vitally important, especially when the expectation is that the area and local community security initiatives are expected to shoulder greater security and peacebuilding responsibilities, which can limit national peacebuilding efforts. Then there is the security issue and how it is dealt with by both states and within the box. An extension to this is the readiness of host country institutions to assume security roles. If this is not addressed, there is a likelihood that the new emerging and ongoing violence will have heightened risks for the protection of civilians, particularly in disorderly and complex mission terminations. This impacts not only security but also civilian populations, the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the implementation of past or new peace agreements.

215 UN DCO, UN DPO, UN DPPA, & UNDP. (2021). UN Transitions Project: Sustaining Peace and Development Beyond Mission Withdrawal, Annual Report July 2020-June 2021. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-08/UN%20Transitions%20Project%20Annual%20Report%202020-2021%20%282%29.pdf>

216 UNDP. (2022). UN Transitions Project, Mid-Term Evaluation. op. cit.



Abyei. NUPI. Photo: Andrew E. Yaw Tchibie.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Recent security breaches in the Abyei box that have resulted in casualties, including those of peacekeepers and civilians, reveal a stark reality of the fragility of the situation in the Abyei area. The political and security context continues to remain unstable, with the region experiencing frequent bouts of violence between the Dinka ethnic group – Twic Dinka from South Sudan’s neighbouring Warrap state – and Ngok Dinka from Abyei. Again, amidst the Sudan conflict and persistent instability in South Sudan, Abyei finds itself in an ambiguous state between two uncertain nations. Ongoing fighting in Sudan disrupts UNISFA’s deployment routes and hampers the mission’s logistics. Our preliminary findings centre on the challenges associated with the real meaning of PoC, a coherent understanding of how to implement the mission mandate and lack of effective communication between the mission and the people, mission lead data on early warning, patrols, countering mis/disinformation and hate speech, response time to security challenges, balancing QIPS, and the robustness of forces, among others. Generally, the findings indicated that the mission appeared to be in distress and needed urgent attention to retool, restructure and recalibrate to be more adaptable in its response to the growing threat of insecurity and violence. With the current fragile security situation in Abyei, calls for talks to determine the final status of Abyei will be difficult to conduct.

Focusing on mandate priorities

The November 2023 mandate renewal addressed some of the pertinent issues identified from the study that needed urgent attention. Key among them are:

- The Governments of Sudan and South Sudan providing full support to UNISFA in implementing its mandate and deploying its personnel, including facilitating the smooth functioning of all UNISFA bases and the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism's (JBVMM) team sites;
- The demilitarisation of the Abyei area, removing any forces, including armed elements of the local communities; and
- Support to the JBVMM.

Regarding the mission's priorities, this study recommends the following:

- The mandate properly focuses on PoC and peacebuilding, and the mission should continue to work on this and deliver on these aspects. Peacekeeping missions will have limited success implementing their mandates on PoC without adequate and appropriate force protection for the threat environment in which they are operating. Therefore, there is a need for the new mandate to support the mission to reach its projected and full capabilities (as per the current mandate S/RES/2708(2023)) to enable the mission to confront the growing diverse protection challenges. This is important given that the Chinese Quick-Response Force (QRF) deployed an advance party of 20 personnel, and the deployment of the remaining troop of 130 depends on the arrival of their Contingent-Owned Equipment (COE), which is awaiting the dry season to complete its movement;
- The primacy of politics is missing and UNISFA is struggling to deal with the political concerns related to both Sudan and South Sudan in its efforts. Even at this soft level of peacekeeping, there needs to be more political and peacebuilding efforts. The mission needs to look more broadly to engage in these aspects, but the UN does not engage with all these matters because they are too much. The UNSC should put pressure on the parties. The mission should not be deployed forever, as this does not help the situation. The mission should have a limited period, which is linked to a systematic exit strategy. The UNSC highlights peacebuilding efforts and supports understanding the dynamics in Sudan. It should continue to note these efforts and do more to try and support this aspect.
- Considering that the constantly changing context in which demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) were taking place in Abyei is the main challenge, the new mandate should adopt a holistic approach focused on community-based demobilisation and reintegration strategy. This strategy should be focused on supporting civilians of all types (male and female ex-combatants, child combatants) and persons associated with armed groups as they reintegrate into communities and strengthen their resilience. This would

help to minimise re-mobilisation and initial mobilisation into armed groups. Linked to this is the need for UNISFA to support the creation of local reintegration plans that engage each community's diverse range of actors. These local reintegration plans can serve as the basis for improving overall coordination and establishing the local legitimacy of reintegration support. However, this must be done in conjunction with the community and the two states, as UNISFA cannot disarm if the host government is not involved.

- The mission needs urgent restructuring to confront the growing threat. One way of doing this is to have an integrated mission with established civil affairs and human rights components, a strong deputy head, and a change in the mission leadership structure.
- The mission needs to do more to draw on CPAS and better integrate mission-wide data to ensure UNISFA can centralise data collected by different sections and components and use this data to assess the progress made in implementing its mandate. Consequently, data influences the day-to-day running of the mission's operations outside and its strategic medium- to long-term thinking within the mission. The new mandate must reflect the need to strengthen mission communication. Strategic communication keeps the population well-informed and prevents unnecessary tensions in the wake of disinformation and misinformation.
- The new mandate must demand proactiveness from the TCCs. The TCCs must be encouraged to do more to engage in deterrence. Robust forces with the right logistical capabilities and active strategic patrolling would be crucial in delivering on the mandated tasks.
- The civilian staff of the mission cannot carry out the currently assigned tasks and their numbers need to increase. Also, the civilian component was heavily reliant on the military to move about the area and support efforts focused on local conflict resolution, human rights engagement, early warning of threats, and peacebuilding activities. Without mobility or effective force protection, these activities were limited in reach, hampering efforts to deliver on the mission's PoC mandate.

Ensure that the concept and pillars of WPS are understood, and they should have a target and be assessed to see if they are meeting the requirements. Women should be represented in all sections, which is currently the case at the Chief Military Personnel Officer (CMPO) level.

Annexure: The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) Project summary

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network produce a series of reports that are shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. All the EPON reports are available via <https://effectivepeaceops.net>. The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TfP) programme.

Contact

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Cedric de Coning
Research Professor
NUPI Center for UN and Global Governance
cdc@nupi.no | @CedricdeConing | +4794249168

Established in June 2011, UNISFA aims to foster peace, stability, and development in the disputed Abyei region. Focused on implementing the Abyei Protocol, the mission addresses border demarcation (through the Joint Border Verification Monitoring Mechanism for the Sudan-South Sudan boundary since South Sudan's independence in 2011) and security concerns and supports local governance through engagement with administrations. However, since 2011, UNISFA's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate and protecting civilians has been questioned as sporadic and spontaneous violence remains very high. While the overall security situation in Abyei has shown signs of improvement, persistent conflict dynamics stemming from intra- and inter-communal tensions, hired armed elements, and humanitarian challenges continue to set the region back. The rise of communal conflicts between new ethnicities and communities entering the "Abyei box" – often referred to as the Abyei area – has led to further tensions with the mission over its ability to protect civilians.

In this Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) study, the authors set out to explore the effectiveness of UNISFA in meeting its mandated tasks in several areas. These include: 1. Protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence; 2. Support the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism; 3. Provide de-mining assistance, technical advice, and security; and 4. Provide aid to humanitarian personnel and oil infrastructure in the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA), respectively. The report examines how effective the mission has been in meeting its core mandate, what we can understand from the mission's success and challenges, and how adaptive the mission has been regarding the ongoing crisis in Sudan and South Sudan and its impact on Abyei, which has strategic and broader implications for the mission.



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