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# Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of UNITAMS

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## STIMSON

On April 26, 2021, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). These discussions are part of a series of workshops that examines how the activities included in the peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in a political strategy. This meeting note was drafted collaboratively by IPI, the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report. It summarizes the main points raised in the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants. The project is funded with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office.

## Introduction

In June 2021, the UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) for the first time. In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop on April 26, 2021, to discuss UNITAMS's mandate and political strategy. The workshop offered a forum for member-state representatives, UN officials, and outside experts to develop a shared understanding and common strategic assessment of the situation in Sudan. The session was intended to help the Security Council make informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of UNITAMS's mandate and actions on the ground.

Participants highlighted that the mission's current strategic objectives—assisting the political transition; supporting peace processes; assisting peacebuilding, civilian protection, and the rule of law; and mobilizing economic, development, and humanitarian assistance—are areas where the UN can add value.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the renewed mandate, participants encouraged the Security Council to provide more focus within these ambitious priorities and to support a more inclusive Sudanese political transition.

## Context Analysis

Sudan's political transition, set in motion by the overthrow of the thirty-year government of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, continues to evolve at a steady pace. The political, security, and socioeconomic conditions informing the discussions on UNITAMS's mandate renewal are already different from those under which UNITAMS was created in June 2020. The signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in October 2020, as well as the endorsement of a declaration of principles between the transitional government and Abdelaziz al-Hilu's faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement–North (SPLM–N) in March 2021, mark important, albeit preliminary, steps toward comprehensive peace.

While the transitional government has implemented a number of governance and administrative reforms, key steps in the political transition have been delayed. And as the transitional government continues to affirm its responsi-

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<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2524 (June 3, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2524, para. 2.

### Box 1. Key considerations for UNITAMS's mandate renewal

Participants raised several points for consideration during the upcoming negotiations on UNITAMS's mandate renewal. On the mandate in general:

- Provide clearer focus within UNITAMS's strategic objectives (i.e., prioritize the priorities).
- Promote more inclusive political processes and governance systems.
- Maintain UNITAMS's flexibility to adjust its capacities in response to developments on the ground and requests from Sudanese stakeholders.

On the political transition and peace processes:

- Recognize recent progress in the transition process and the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement in the mandate.
- Prioritize the mission's work on increasing diversity and broadening participation in formal negotiation processes and civilian-led governance.
- Encourage UNITAMS to facilitate trust-building exercises between state officials and local actors, including between the center and the peripheries and with the involvement of women and youth.

On protecting civilians:

- Retain emphasis on advisory support to Sudanese security institutions, technical support for legislation on justice and accountability, and the reinforcement of community-based early-warning and early-response mechanisms.
- Specify areas where UNITAMS should focus its support to the transitional government's implementation of its National Plan for Civilian Protection.
- Strengthen expertise on local conflict management and civilian protection.

On peacebuilding:

- Emphasize collaboration on peacebuilding activities between UNITAMS and the UN country team.
- Expand support to strengthening the state's administrative capacities (national and local).

bility to protect all civilians, rising insecurity in parts of the country exposes the seriousness of the threats civilians face, particularly in Darfur. These dynamics only heighten the concerns of the Sudanese public, who have yet to see significant changes in their daily lives.

## Peace Processes

The transitional government affirmed the pursuit of a comprehensive, nationwide peace as one of its priorities for the first stages of the transition. This high-level commitment translated into the signing of the JPA in October 2020, as well as the government's ongoing peace negotiations with the SPLM-N's al-Hilu faction. Supporting all peace negotiations and the implementation of subsequent agreements is one of UNITAMS's mandated priori-

ties, which has enabled the mission to reach out to the negotiating parties since its deployment.

The JPA is a complex agreement comprising separate protocols negotiated between different Sudanese armed movements and the transitional government. It extends Sudan's transition period by thirty-nine months, starting in October 2020, and outlines the steps for a constitution-drafting process and power-sharing arrangement under a new federal system. Participants underscored the challenges confronting the JPA and its implementation. They highlighted that there is not complete public buy-in to the agreement, as a large portion of Sudanese society felt excluded from the negotiations. Participants also observed that only armed movements without active military presences or large political constituencies signed the JPA. By

contrast, Abdul Wahid al-Nur's faction of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA-AW) and the SPLM-N's al-Hilu faction remain outside of the agreement, limiting its potential to ameliorate security and political conditions in Darfur and the Two Areas (South Kordofan and Blue Nile). They also noted that implementing the agreement's many technical provisions will be costly and complex, even with unified political support.

These conditions highlight why recent negotiations between the transitional government and the SPLM-N's al-Hilu faction are important political milestones. The ongoing negotiations build on two separate declarations of principles signed in September 2020 and March 2021, as well as the unilateral cease-fire declared by the SPLM-N's al-Hilu faction (currently lasting through June 30, 2021), which provide a foundation for future engagement. Negotiations between the movement and the transitional government are expected to resume in May 2021. Participants emphasized that these negotiations were important for addressing unresolved political issues such as the separation of federal powers, the role of religion in the state, and the integration of armed movements into national security institutions.

## Political Transition and Governance

Participants underscored the complexity of Sudan's political transition from decades of autocracy toward civilian-led governance. Power is currently shared between the military and civilian leadership in Sudan's Sovereign Council, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the civilian-led transitional government, led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Participants emphasized that unresolved structural contest over power, diverse political and economic alliances, and widespread civilian aspirations for more democratic, effective, and inclusive governance all inform current debates on the future of the country.

Nearly two years following the peaceful revolution that overthrew the government of Omar al-Bashir,

Sudan's transitional government has made progress on certain reforms as envisioned in the August 2019 Constitutional Declaration. For example, Prime Minister Hamdok announced the formation of a new, expanded cabinet in February 2021 that is comparatively more inclusive of various political interests. The first technical workshop of the Higher Committee of the Conference on the System of Governance began on April 27<sup>th</sup>, serving as a precursor to the national constitution-drafting process that will inform decisions on the division of power between federal and state entities, as well as on the delineation of state boundaries.<sup>2</sup> One participant also highlighted that the transitional government had recently promulgated laws formally establishing Sudan's Peace Commission, Anti-Corruption Committee, and Transitional Justice Commission.

Some participants, however, underscored that these recent political developments risk expanding the influence of a relatively narrow set of political elites at the expense of a broad-based and inclusive approach to governance. This tension is epitomized by the ongoing delays in establishing Sudan's Transitional Legislative Council (i.e., parliament), a key constitutional body envisioned to be the most inclusive and representative body in the transitional government.

Participants also underscored that the transitional government will continue to face challenges. Many of these difficulties are linked to a historical lack of inclusive governance and a continued trust deficit between the transitional government and communities across the country. Nationwide protests in December 2020 were motivated in part by the ongoing absence of meaningful civilian representation in transitional decision-making bodies.<sup>3</sup> Participants also pointed to the persistent exclusion of large segments of the population from political processes, including traditionally marginalized communities on Sudan's peripheries, women's movements, youth activists, and civic organizations.

Some participants argued that although the transitional government has made notable political

<sup>2</sup> "Governance Workshop Kicks Off in Sudan Capital," Dabanga Sudan, April 28, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General: Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2021/199, March 1, 2021, paras. 5 and 49.

overtures in support of democratic rights, it has not yet translated them into tangible policy reforms. This dynamic can be seen in the limited progress on gender equality and women's representation, exemplified by delays in ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), delays in setting up gender-related commissions, and the unequal appointment of women and men to government posts.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, a participant noted that some of the challenges faced by the transitional government stem from its lack of capacity and, in some cases, its lack of commitment to the transition, particularly among the lower bureaucratic echelons of the administration. The participant noted the UN's important role in addressing this concern by building the capacity of the government.

## Security Situation

Addressing a volatile security environment continues to be a top priority for Sudanese stakeholders and UNITAMS, especially in light of the ongoing drawdown of the African Union–UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). Participants highlighted that the increase in armed clashes and intercommunal violence in Darfur since January 2021 underscores that insecurity is fueled by both political interests and poor socioeconomic conditions. Since the latter half of 2020, repeated episodes of violence in El Geneina, West Darfur, have only underscored the need for protection. More than 169,000 individuals are internally displaced in the region as of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 38 percent of whom were displaced in the month of April alone.<sup>5</sup>

As a special political mission, UNITAMS does not have either the mandate or the uniformed components to provide physical protection. Instead, its civilian protection mandate enables it to

provide “effective support to national and local authorities” through a range of measures. These include advisory and capacity support to various Sudanese security institutions, assistance to Sudan's rule of law frameworks and justice institutions, and crisis mediation, mobile monitoring, and early warning.<sup>6</sup> UNITAMS has also deployed twenty-one individual police officers to build the capacity of their Sudanese counterparts.

Sudan's National Plan for Civilian Protection offers a useful roadmap for government priorities in this area, and the government's recent updates to the UN Security Council demonstrate its rhetorical commitment to protection.<sup>7</sup> The plan calls for the establishment of a 12,000-person joint force to protect civilians, comprised of Sudanese police, army personnel, members of the Rapid Support Forces, and members of JPA signatory armed movements. Participants emphasized, however, that the ongoing threats to civilians have undercut the transitional government's credibility in the eyes of the population. They called on the UN and international community to build the government's institutional capacity for protection and to support the broader protective environment.

## Economic, Development, and Humanitarian Conditions

Sudan continues to navigate challenging economic and humanitarian conditions. Its annual inflation rate topped 300 percent in January following a sharp devaluation of the Sudanese pound to meet international conditions for debt relief.<sup>8</sup> Many of the economic reforms adopted by the transitional government—including agreement on an International Monetary Fund staff-monitored program and the repayment of all arrears to the World Bank—allow Sudan to access international development support. However, as some participants observed, Sudanese citizens continue to bear the burden of these reforms.

4 On April 27, 2021, Sudan's transitional cabinet voted to ratify the convention. See: “Sudan Government Makes Huge Steps Forward on Women's Rights,” Sudan Civic Space Monitor, April 27, 2021.

5 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Sudan: West Darfur Emergency Situation Report No. 1 as of April 2021,” April 27, 2021.

6 UN Security Council Resolution 2524 (June 3, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2524, paras. 2(ii)(b) and (c).

7 See: UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 21 May 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the Sudan to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2020/429, June 1, 2020; UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 14 September 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the Sudan to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2020/901, September 22, 2020; UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 3 February 2021 from the Chargé d'Affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of the Sudan to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2021/107, February 25, 2021.

8 “Sudan Annual Inflation Remains above 300% in February,” Reuters, March 11, 2021.

These economic challenges come on top of already pressing development and humanitarian needs. Participants highlighted that many communities outside of Khartoum continue to lack basic services such as electricity, sanitation, healthcare, and clean water. Recent protests across Sudan have been animated by frustration with the government's slow response to improve these services.<sup>9</sup> Humanitarian needs also remain significant, with over 13.4 million Sudanese in need of assistance. In addition, there are an estimated 2.6 million internally displaced persons across the country, and as of May, the UN's 2021 humanitarian response plan had been funded at only 10 percent.<sup>10</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these conditions and delayed the response of the transitional government and international partners alike. Sudan's healthcare sector has been especially impacted by the pandemic, with 78 percent of healthcare staff having tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>

## Regional Dynamics

Sudan's political transition is unfolding in an increasingly volatile neighborhood. The ongoing fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray region has led over 65,000 refugees to flee into Sudan. Political disputes among Sudan's neighbors have also escalated, including a decades-long dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia over the al-Fashqa area. Mediation efforts between Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have not yet achieved any tangible outcomes. Tensions have also spilled over into debates about the future of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), whose troops predominantly come from Ethiopia. The recent death of Chadian President Idriss Déby has further heightened concerns about regional instability, especially considering the late president's strong relationship with various Sudanese political leaders and armed movements.

Considering these fast-changing regional dynamics, participants noted the growing number

of countries engaged politically and economically in Sudan. Many members of the Friends of Sudan group—ranging from traditional partners like the Troika countries (Norway, the UK, and the US), EU member states, Russia, and China to new partners like Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia—are all pursuing bilateral and collective interests in a Sudan that is more open to international engagement. Support from regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have also supported the Sudanese peace process, albeit on a comparatively limited basis and driven by explicit requests from the Sudanese parties.

## Prioritizing and Sequencing UNITAMS's Mandate

Participants agreed that UNITAMS's current mandate (UN Security Council Resolution 2524) is relevant and offers the mission both the scope and the flexibility to navigate a fast-moving Sudanese transition. The mission is mandated and designed to scale up and scale down its efforts based on the evolving needs and demands of national stakeholders.

But some participants encouraged the Security Council to use the upcoming mandate negotiations to provide a sharper focus for each of the mission's strategic objectives. They highlighted that UNITAMS's ambitious mandate raises popular expectations that the mission may not be able to fulfill. Using the mandate renewal as an opportunity to "prioritize the priorities," based on the added value of the UN, will help make the mission an even more constructive partner in the political transition. Across the mission's various mandated priorities, participants underscored the important role it can play in fostering more inclusive political processes, building trust between different stakeholders throughout Sudan, and strengthening local capacity for peace and governance.

9 "Protests throughout Sudan," Dabanga Sudan, April 27, 2021.

10 OCHA, "Sudan: Key Figures," May 12, 2021, available at [www.unocha.org/sudan](http://www.unocha.org/sudan).

11 UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General: Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan*, UN Doc. S/2021/199, March 1, 2021, para. 33.

## Support to Political Processes and Peace Negotiations

Participants highlighted that the renewed mandate could offer more concrete direction on UNITAMS's support to political processes and peace negotiations. Resolution 2524 was adopted months before the JPA was signed or dialogue began between the transitional government and the SPLM-N's al-Hilu faction. The new mandate could codify the mission's support to implementing JPA provisions where UN support is explicitly requested or suggested or where the UN is one of the international guarantors. Some participants also encouraged the mission to explicitly reference the JPA in the upcoming mandate and to link its implementation with the benchmarks it prepares for the Security Council.

Participants also suggested that the mission's role in increasing diversity and broadening participation in formal negotiation processes could be reflected in the upcoming mandate as a key focus for the coming year. Many cited the exclusive nature of the JPA negotiations (in terms of gender and geographic representation), which should be corrected in future peace talks to avoid reproducing elite power structures. They highlighted that UNITAMS can use its convening power to engage all segments of Sudanese society, and the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) can use his good offices to include diverse perspectives in formal processes. Ideally, UNITAMS should be a conduit between different segments of society and formal negotiation channels.

Some suggested that UNITAMS could also support diversity and inclusivity in other governance processes. For example, UNITAMS could do so through its technical support to the constitution-drafting process and national dialogue efforts, as well as through planning for elections. Participants highlighted that UNITAMS's domestic credibility offers it leverage to help Sudanese stakeholders hold their political leaders accountable to their own public commitments. But participants also underscored that these processes need to be driven and owned by the Sudanese themselves. The UN will need to maintain a delicate balance between asserting these priorities and remaining flexible in

light of explicit requests from Sudanese stakeholders.

Finally, another participant emphasized that the Security Council and UNITAMS should continue to align their engagement in Sudan with that of other UN entities and regional organizations in the Horn of Africa. Beyond routine information sharing and coordination between the UN, AU, and IGAD, they highlighted the importance of consistent and dynamic dialogue between UNITAMS, the UN peacekeeping missions in Abyei and South Sudan, and the UN envoy for the Horn of Africa.

## Inclusive and Civilian-Led Governance

Participants emphasized that UNITAMS can play an important role in promoting inclusive and capable civilian-led governance, rooted in its strategic objective of supporting democratic governance, sustainable peace, and human rights. Participants highlighted that UNITAMS should analyze and address governance issues through holistic approaches, not simply through technical or legal responses, particularly in regards to the government's commitments to gender equality and women's representation.

Participants also highlighted that the mission could use the benchmarks and indicators it is currently drafting for submission to the Security Council to engage with government counterparts, whether through policy discussions, confidence-building exercises, or public efforts to hold the government accountable. Others implored UNITAMS to focus on benchmarks and indicators that are appropriate for the moment and that reflect both formal and informal political dynamics. Multiple participants shared the view that these benchmarks need to move beyond rhetorical "box ticking" to leverage civilian gains and lessons learned in order to bring substantive and citizen-centric peace dividends.

Some participants highlighted that UNITAMS can serve as a valuable entry point for citizens to engage with national and subnational government entities with whom they rarely interact. They also urged UNITAMS, the UN country team in Sudan, and international development partners to strengthen their investments in the state's administrative capacities. Others encouraged UNITAMS to take a

more prominent role in facilitating trust-building exercises between state officials and local actors, including between the center and the peripheries and with the participation of marginalized communities. UNITAMS is already attempting to do so; for example, the mission passes messages between different communities and relevant government departments to convey specific service-delivery needs. Participants highlighted that UNITAMS and the UN country team are well positioned to support the government in being more present and accountable to communities that historically have been marginalized. Others cautioned that UNITAMS's support in this space should always affirm Sudanese ownership and the primacy of the government's responsibilities.

## Strengthening National Protection Efforts

Participants emphasized the importance of supporting a holistic and people-centered approach to protecting civilians in Sudan, especially as the UN no longer has a traditional physical protection mandate. UNITAMS's work should prioritize support to the development of a robust protective environment in Sudan. For example, the mission's mandate already covers advisory support to Sudanese security institutions, technical support for legislation on justice and accountability, and the reinforcement of community-based early-warning and early-response mechanisms. These should remain clear points of emphasis in the upcoming mandate. One participant highlighted that UNITAMS and its partners should strengthen local expertise on conflict management and on protection, a practice that began with UNAMID during the mission's drawdown.

Participants also acknowledged that the mission's future trajectory on protection work will depend on how Sudanese stakeholders request international support. For example, the UN is planning to deploy more individual police officers to UNITAMS in response to a specific request from the Sudanese government. Participants also emphasized that the mission should be prepared to engage on sensitive issues such as security sector reform if so requested. The SRSG has already used his good offices to encourage the JPA signatories to

implement some of the more complex security provisions, including those related to the Joint Military High Level Committee and the Permanent Ceasefire Committee. But the mission's contributions on delicate issues related to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of armed movements into the national security forces, as well as security sector reform more broadly, will depend on the extent to which the parties themselves make progress and welcome international support.

The upcoming mandate could also specify the areas where the mission should prioritize support as the transitional government implements its National Plan for Civilian Protection, particularly given the accomplishments and shortfalls the government has mentioned in its updates to the Security Council. Some participants, however, emphasized that national stakeholders and the Security Council should not shy away from engaging the Sudanese government on its shortcomings in providing comprehensive civilian protection. They noted in particular the high risk of involving the Rapid Support Forces in civilian protection efforts, which puts documented perpetrators of violence in Darfur in the position of protectors.

## Amplifying Capacities for Sustaining Peace

Participants highlighted that the upcoming mandate renewal could strengthen the UN's contributions to peacebuilding efforts in Sudan. Much of this will be driven by continued collaboration between UNITAMS and the UN country team, which operate through an integrated structure. This collaboration is crucial, as UNITAMS has a smaller operational presence than many other UN agencies, funds, and programs. Participants highlighted how these entities are expected to work in complementarity, with one participant describing UNITAMS as a catalyst and the UN country team as the long-haul driver. Resolution 2524 requested that the two entities develop an integrated strategic framework (or the equivalent) to guide joint programming. They have also established the Sudan Peacemaking, Peacebuilding, and Stabilization Programme (SPPSP) as a basis for programmatic collaboration. Participants encouraged the Security Council to ensure that the mission and the UN country team have the

necessary flexibility within the mandate to coordinate their activities and responses.

Some participants also emphasized the mission's valuable role in supporting Sudan's mobilization of economic, development, and humanitarian assistance. They highlighted that UNITAMS is uniquely positioned to work with the Sudanese government across various international fora. This collaboration was also seen as important for aligning the priorities of donors with those of the Sudanese government and for navigating both UN and non-UN funding streams.

## Conclusion

Sudan's political transition is evolving quickly, and the UN's newest peace operation finds itself navigating a fluid domestic and regional environment. UNITAMS's current mandate broadly covers the substantive areas where the UN can play a constructive role in the political transition and peace processes.

Participants encouraged the Security Council and

the mission to begin articulating a clearer focus for UNITAMS's strategic objectives. They highlighted that UNITAMS's credibility and capacity to promote more inclusive political processes and governance systems remain its greatest added value. They also emphasized that the Security Council should allow the mission the flexibility to scale up or reduce capacities as needed, depending on emerging trends or specific requests from national counterparts. This approach should cut across all major issues confronting Sudan—whether the peace processes, inclusive approaches to protecting civilians, or the building of frameworks and environments for sustainable peace and the protection of human rights.

Finally, participants stressed the urgency of the current moment, with the Sudanese transitional government facing high expectations from the Sudanese public amid a rapidly changing environment. They urged the Security Council to provide UNITAMS with the political support, flexibility, and capacity to support the transitional government in making good on its promises and to meet the public's expectations to the extent possible.

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