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

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STIMSON

On January 25, 2023, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). This discussion was part of a series of workshops that examine how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in a political strategy. This is the fifth consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions in support of the mandate negotiations on UNMISS. The 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 and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

## Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in March 2023.<sup>1</sup> The upcoming negotiations among council members will unfold as South Sudan enters a crucial phase of its extended political transition, which is now expected to culminate in national elections by December 2024. Hot spots of localized violence persist across the country, which could escalate should political or security conditions deteriorate. Significant humanitarian concerns, multifaceted threats to civilians, and the limited presence of state institutions to provide basic services or security amplify the magnitude of the challenges confronting South Sudan.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted a roundtable discussion on January 25, 2023, to discuss UNMISS's mandate renewal. This roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN officials, civil society stakeholders, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in South Sudan in a frank and collaborative manner. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions on the prioritization and sequencing of UNMISS's mandate, as well as the mission's strategic orientation and actions on the ground.

Participants largely agreed that the Security Council's three-year strategic vision for UNMISS and the mission's priority tasks remain fit for purpose and that the mandate's broad structure is still valid in light of the current country context.<sup>2</sup> The dialogue focused on identifying ways to refine the mandate and ensure that UNMISS has both the direction and the flexibility needed to support the country over the coming year.

The following issues are likely to come up during the council's mandate renewal negotiations on UNMISS:

- Encouraging unified international support to South Sudan during this next phase of its political transition while communicating the urgency of South Sudan accomplishing critical legislative milestones before December 2024;

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2625 (March 15, 2022), UN Doc. S/RES/2625.

<sup>2</sup> The four pillars of UNMISS's mandate are: (1) protection of civilians; (2) facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance; (3) monitoring and reporting on human rights violations; and (4) supporting the implementation of the cease-fire agreement. See: UN Doc. S/RES/2625.

- Affirming the centrality of UN support to protecting civilians and encouraging UNMISS to continue prioritizing flexible and proactive approaches to the protection of civilians (POC);
- Expanding UNMISS's support to preparations for the upcoming electoral process in ways that are consistent with the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan's (R-ARCSS) provisions on free, fair, and peaceful elections;
- Continuing support to South Sudanese justice, rule of law, and security institutions, as well as considering the potential expansion of conflict-sensitive capacity-building assistance, in line with South Sudanese priorities; and
- Considering ways to integrate the emerging issues of climate change, misinformation and disinformation, and early transition planning into the mandate.

## Support for the Peace Process and the Political Transition

Participants acknowledged that the mission's mandate will need to be adapted to reflect the adoption of the August 2022 roadmap agreed upon by the South Sudanese parties to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) to accelerate the agreement's implementation, as well as the latest developments in the country's political process. Some speakers highlighted that the council would need to balance its expressed support for the transition and the continued political unity among the R-ARCSS signatories with concern over the missed transitional benchmarks that necessitated the transition's extension until December 2024.

Participants agreed that the mission should continue leveraging all its capacities—including its good offices, technical and capacity-building

support, and convening power—to support South Sudanese stakeholders in achieving tangible progress on the transition. They also welcomed the establishment of landmark institutions like the National Elections Commission and the Political Parties Council, as well as the deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF). Going forward, speakers addressed the need for South Sudan to continue tackling critical challenges like setting up the legal framework required for holding elections, developing the permanent constitution, and providing pay and basic necessities for the NUF.

Given the shrinking civic space in South Sudan, some participants suggested that the upcoming mandate could reinforce UNMISS's contributions to facilitating inclusive political dialogue. As part of its political and civil affairs work, the mission already helps link South Sudanese civil society organizations to the formal political process and works to mitigate local-level conflict, which is often interlinked with the national-level political process. However, such efforts will become even more important as electoral preparations get underway.

One participant mentioned that the mission's collaboration with the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) will remain an essential feature of its political work over the coming mandate cycle. The organizations' representatives in South Sudan already collaborate frequently on joint statements and consultations, some of which have aimed to help defuse national political tensions.<sup>3</sup> The proposed IGAD summit on South Sudan and the anticipated reconstitution of the AU High-Level Ad Hoc Committee for South Sudan may provide opportunities for council members to discuss ways that UNMISS can continue engaging with regional and international partners.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, one speaker noted the importance of the government's continued engagement with groups

<sup>3</sup> UN Mission in South Sudan, "Joint Statement by UNMISS and the International Community on Violence in Upper Nile and Surrounding Areas," press release, December 2, 2022; UN Mission in South Sudan, "UNMISS and International Partners Gravely Concerned about Escalating Violence in Greater Jonglei," press release, December 28, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The AU High-Level Ad Hoc Committee was established in 2014 pursuant to communiqué PSC/PR/COMM(CDLXXIV) to strengthen Africa's support to IGAD's mediation efforts. The committee is composed of the heads of state and government of Algeria, Chad, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa. See: African Union, "Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the AU Ad Hoc High-Level Committee for South Sudan," November 25, 2019, available at <https://afripol.peaceau.org/en/article/statement-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-au-ad-hoc-high-level-committee-for-south-sudan-c5-1>.

that are not signatories to the R-ARCSS and that are outside of the South Sudanese Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), a process facilitated to date by the Community of Sant’Egidio. Efforts to implement commitments from the 2020 Rome Declaration should be sustained to facilitate inclusive and sustainable peace over the long term.

## Protection of Civilians and Mission Posture

Participants affirmed that the protection of civilians should remain the top priority of the mission’s mandate, recognizing it as a central purpose of the UN’s role in the country. Mitigating the effects of intercommunal conflict is a key challenge with which the mission is currently grappling, with five main hot spots.<sup>5</sup> South Sudanese civilians, national authorities, and UN member states all expect UNMISS to effectively protect civilians and will likely continue to do so until South Sudanese security institutions demonstrate that they can reliably protect all people in their country.

The mission’s current mandate reflects how UNMISS has embraced flexibility in pursuing its multifaceted POC objectives. UNMISS has gradually pivoted away from predominantly static protection approaches centered on the UN-operated POC sites to supporting South Sudanese-run internally displaced people (IDP) camps with only one remaining UN-operated POC site. The mission now combines static approaches with enhanced community engagement and the deployment of integrated teams and temporary operating bases (TOBs) to identified hot spots. These flexible approaches have helped UNMISS improve its POC efforts not only by sending uniformed peacekeepers to where they are needed but by also supporting complementary dialogue and violence-

reduction initiatives. However, participants identified two recent challenges: first, striking a balance between static and mobile protection strategies is often difficult, particularly amidst high expectations and finite capabilities; and second, UNMISS has struggled to reposition or close TOBs because surrounding communities do not want to lose the UN presence.

The mission’s efforts to combat conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) came up as a recurring point of concern, as incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are not decreasing at the same rate as other forms of violence.<sup>6</sup> Despite UNMISS’s efforts to prevent and respond to SGBV, participants noted that the UN’s capabilities were inadequate to address the magnitude of the challenge. Some participants stressed that the upcoming mandate should continue to reinforce zero tolerance for CRSV by any party and that council members need to think creatively about ways they could convey the urgency of this concern to the R-TGoNU and South Sudanese security institutions.

## Electoral Support

Discussing the scope of electoral support to South Sudan will likely be a prominent focus of the upcoming mandate negotiations. Resolution 2625 (2022) was the first UNMISS mandate in recent years to include language on election-related support to South Sudan, including POC in the context of elections. It also referenced the need for free, fair, inclusive elections (as defined within the R-ARCSS) and requested that South Sudanese authorities make progress on key legislative and institutional milestones for conducting the elections.<sup>7</sup>

In January 2023, the R-TGoNU sent a formal request to the UN for election assistance from UNMISS, specifying the need for technical support.

<sup>5</sup> These hot spots are “Upper Nile, Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, the adjacent areas to Abyei, the legacy of the conflict in Tambura, and further the ongoing cattle-related violence in the Equatorias.” Nicholas Haysom, statement at the 26th Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) Plenary Meeting, January 26, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> UNMISS Human Rights Division, “January–March 2022 Brief on the Human Rights Situation in South Sudan,” May 10, 2022; UN Security Council, *Situation in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2022/689, September 13, 2022, paras. 80–81; UN Security Council, *Situation in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2022/918, December 7, 2022, paras. 81–83; UNMISS, “Brief on Violence Affecting Civilians: July to September 2022,” November 16, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> UNMISS’s election support in Resolution 2625 was based on the recommendations of the 2021 electoral needs assessment mission and reflected in UN Security Council Presidential Statement S/PRST/2021/20. UN Security Council, *Electoral Needs Assessment for South Sudan: Secretary-General’s Summary for the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2021/661, July 16, 2021; UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/PRST/2021/20, October 27, 2021.

Participants emphasized the importance of pushing for the R-TGoNU to accelerate progress toward achieving the milestones necessary to holding the elections.<sup>8</sup> Electoral preparations are already behind schedule, as per the timeline originally outlined in the R-ARCSS, and these milestones need to be reached before logistical preparations for the elections can begin in earnest. Others noted that UNMISS should prioritize efforts to help expand civic and political space across the country. Finally, some participants debated how the UN should respond should the R-TGoNU continue to fall behind in implementing the principles and commitments of the R-ARCSS, including potentially by withholding some forms of electoral support.<sup>9</sup>

## Human Rights, Rule of Law, and Security Institutions

Participants discussed various issues related to human rights, the rule of law, and security institutions that may be relevant for the upcoming mandate renewal. Monitoring, investigating, and reporting violations of humanitarian and human rights law continues to be an important pillar of UNMISS's mandate. There are, however, divergent views in the council on these issues, and this divide was reflected in the discussion. Some participants signaled the potential for this debate to continue during the upcoming mandate renewal negotiations, as some council members could push for weakening the human rights references in the mission's mandate.<sup>10</sup>

Participants also highlighted the current mandate's comparatively limited focus on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) and inquired whether these could be areas for elaboration.<sup>11</sup> South Sudan's DDR and SSR commitments are broadly outlined in Chapter 2 of the R-ARCSS and are

primarily the responsibility of the R-TGoNU. One speaker highlighted that SSR-related planning has progressed further than DDR-related discussions; in October 2022, the South Sudanese Strategic Defence and Security Review Board (one of the transitional institutions under the R-ARCSS) began early planning for a security sector transformation roadmap.<sup>12</sup>

UNMISS's current mandate enables the mission to engage with and provide technical assistance to South Sudan's transitional institutions, including the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Participants discussed the potential for expanding capacity-building support to South Sudanese security and rule of law institutions. Some participants noted that the R-TGoNU desired more technical assistance from UNMISS but worried that this assistance might come at the expense of a collective focus on national accountability mechanisms and support to South Sudanese justice institutions. Other participants felt the mandate should avoid over-specification, arguing that the current language allows UNMISS to respond flexibly to developments on the ground while providing a clear stance on accountability measures. One point of reference was that the upcoming mandate should account for the graduation of the first batch of NUF members and that additional UNMISS capacity-building support to security institutions should be linked to milestones related to the deployment and operations of the NUF.

Some speakers noted reductions in the number of status of forces agreement (SOFA) violations over recent mission reporting periods following the government's establishment of a dedicated high-level coordination committee with UNMISS.<sup>14</sup> It was suggested that the upcoming mandate could acknowledge this progress while further

8 Haysom, statement at the 26th R-JMEC Plenary Meeting.

9 The current mandate language prescribes for the review of UNMISS's electoral assistance contingent on the progress made by South Sudanese authorities on holding free and fair elections. See: UN Doc. S/RES/2625 (2022), 3(c)(v).

10 UN Doc. S/RES/2625, paras. 3(d)(i)-(iv).

11 Previous government-led attempts at implementing DDR policies, including forced disarmament, have led to further violent outbreaks. See: Guy Lamb and Theo Stainer, "The Conundrum of DDR Coordination: The Case of South Sudan," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7, no. 1 (April 2018), p. 9.

12 UN Doc. S/2022/918, para. 42.

13 UN Doc. S/RES/2625, para. 3(c)(iv).

14 UN Doc. S/2022/918, paras. 93-95.

reinforcing the imperative to prevent and deter SOFA violations.

## Emerging Issues

Security Council members may also have an opportunity to incorporate (or expand upon) new substantive issues in their upcoming negotiations on UNMISS's mandate. Participants highlighted three areas that may merit further exploration: climate change, misinformation and disinformation, and early preparations for the mission's eventual transition.

Climate-related changes and environmental degradation have exacerbated conflict dynamics and humanitarian needs across the country. Bentiu—one of the mission's sector headquarters and host of the country's largest IDP camp—was specifically flagged due to massive and unprecedented flooding.<sup>15</sup> Some speakers suggested that the upcoming UNMISS mandate could more explicitly address how climate and environment-related issues are impacting mandate implementation and could propose additional capacities to engage on climate-related issues.

Another part of the discussion highlighted the potential for expanding mandate language on UNMISS's response to misinformation and disinformation. While UNMISS has not confronted the same level of misinformation and disinformation as some other missions, some participants noted that the mission could be mandated to proactively build its capacity to manage this potential future challenge. Mandate language on misinformation and disinformation that the Security Council has developed for other peacekeeping operations could help inform relevant language in UNMISS's upcoming mandate.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the council could request that the mission begin regularly reporting on disinformation campaigns against the mission and develop a strategy to address misinformation and disinformation within the conflict environment.

A third line of discussion focused on possibly reinforcing UNMISS's leadership on UN-wide

integrated planning, mandate delivery, and early preparations for a mission transition. Some participants noted that the mission's future drawdown should be linked to realistic benchmarks and assessments of the government's political will and capacity to protect civilians and deliver essential services to the population. One participant suggested that the UN's engagement in internal contingency planning may help ensure UNMISS is prepared to respond to a variety of scenarios should progress stall on the political and POC fronts. Another speaker mentioned the importance of avoiding perceptions that the mission's eventual exit from South Sudan is linked to the success of the election process. Nonetheless, multiple participants highlighted that continued emphasis on transition planning would help the mission strengthen its preliminary planning efforts.

## Conclusion

UNMISS continues to be an important partner to South Sudan, and its support to the country will only become more critical as national stakeholders advance toward upcoming elections and the end of South Sudan's political transition. The past year of UNMISS's mandate cycle has proven challenging considering the R-TGoNU's delays in achieving key milestones in the R-ARCSS and the increasing intractability of intercommunal conflict, the continued occurrence of CRSV, and the growing impact of climate change.

Workshop participants agreed that UNMISS's three-year strategic vision (2021–2024) and four-pillar mandate remain valid and help position the UN's expansive support to the country. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that the upcoming year is pivotal for ensuring South Sudan gets closer to meeting the ambitions of its transition and achieving a more durable and inclusive peace. Absent clear leadership from the South Sudanese government and tangible progress on mutually agreed political and institutional benchmarks, as outlined in the R-ARCSS, South Sudan may continue to confront significant challenges, making it harder for UNMISS to implement its mandate.

15 UNMISS, "UNMISS and Humanitarian Partners Battling Floods in Bentiu, South Sudan, to Protect IDPs," press release, October 12, 2022.

16 Albert Trithart, "Disinformation against UN Peacekeeping Operations," International Peace Institute, November 7, 2022, annex.

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